

# How to Write a Cover Letter That Stands Out

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## FULL TEXT

In brief

- \* The most effective cover letters tell a story about why you are qualified for the role.
- \* Familiarize yourself with the job description. Explain how your experience qualifies you for the requirements listed.
- \* Be concise: Hiring managers often skim cover letters.

Job hunting can sometimes be demoralizing, especially when unemployment numbers are at record highs. Looking for job postings , reformatting your résumé and sending follow-up emails are all draining tasks, but, for some, writing a cover letter can be the most overwhelming part of a job application.

I've edited hundreds of cover letters for family members, friends and acquaintances. They often ask whether spending time writing a cover letter is worth the effort. A survey by ResumeGo, which offers resume writing services, found that 87% of hiring professionals surveyed said they do read cover letters. A separate ResumeGo experiment found that, of 7,287 fictitious job applications between July 15, 2019, and Jan. 10, 2020, those that included cover letters tailored specifically to the job had a 31% higher callback rate than applications with generic cover letters. Applications with tailored cover letters also yielded 53% more interviews than those without cover letters.

Here are some tips from experts and my own playbook for writing a compelling cover letter.

Create a custom cover letter—even though it is time consuming.

It may seem easier to use a form letter and swap out the company and job title, but hiring managers will be able to see right through you. Jobseekers often rush while writing cover letters, says Dorie Clark, author of "Entrepreneurial You: Monetize Your Expertise, Create Multiple Income Streams, and Thrive," and a professor at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. "They're actually critical in terms of shaping your narrative because it's your opportunity to tell the world who you are, what you're about, and why you're qualified," Ms. Clark says. But it's OK to format your cover letter using a formula.

Think of a cover letter as a chance to sell yourself. Explain why your experience makes you a good fit for the position. Each sentence should help to persuade a hiring manager that you are the right pick for the job.

The structure can be simple. Your first paragraph should explain who you are and why you are interested in the job. Use the middle section of the letter to prove that you are qualified. (Read on for more about how to do that.) In the final section you can really bring home why you are a good fit for the position.

Reread the job posting and do your homework.

1. Take note of the skills the role requires. The goal of your cover letter is to explain how your experience will help you to fulfill the duties outlined in the job description.
  2. Be enthusiastic. If you are applying for an entry-level position, you might not have a lot of experience, but that is OK. Familiarize yourself with the employer's values and reflect why you want to work there in the cover letter.
- Top tip: As you are writing, keep the job posting and the company's mission statement open in separate tabs in your browser for easy reference. You can also copy and paste the job requirements you want to address at the top of the cover-letter document. You can then delete each one as you address it in the body of the letter. If you are not sure which requirements to address, remember that employers often list their top requirements first. Look out for

skills or other requirements that are mentioned more than once in the posting, too, as they are likely to be important to an employer.

Research who is hiring for the position.

If you can, try to personalize your cover letter by addressing it to the hiring manager. Professional platforms like LinkedIn, social media sites and search engines are good ways to find the names of hiring managers. While it is traditional to initiate a cover letter with, "Dear Mr./Ms. [insert surname]," you may want to avoid that approach if you are unsure about the recipient's preferred title and pronouns. Instead, use the person's first and last name. Even if you can't find the name of the person hiring, you should avoid using "To Whom it May Concern" as a greeting in your cover letter. Although it is formal, it is not very personal. Instead, try using something customized to the role or department you are applying to, such as "Dear Communications Assistant Hiring Manager" or "Dear Marketing Team."

Begin your cover letter with an attention-grabbing first paragraph.

Hiring managers want to see something that will stand out from commonly used introductions like, "I am writing to you to apply for the office-manager position." Instead, you could explain how a specific professional or personal experience inspired you to further advance your career. Perhaps you work in IT and like solving problems through coding, which inspired you to seek out opportunities as a developer. Or maybe you want to use your language skills in your next role. Make the connection personal and be brief. Keep the anecdote to two sentences. You can complete the paragraph by tying that story to the job: "It's because of this experience that I am excited to be applying for [insert job title here] at [insert company name]."

Avoid exclamation points and adverbs.

You should show enthusiasm, but you don't need to go overboard with unnecessary punctuation or adverbs such as "very" or "extremely." You can convey eagerness while maintaining a professional tone.

Writing a good cover letter involves differentiating it from your resume.

It can be tempting to copy and paste directly from your resume to describe your work history, but your cover letter is an opportunity to present your experience in relation to the job you want. Use one or two paragraphs in the body of the cover letter to demonstrate how your accomplishments have prepared you to meet each of the requirements of the role and take on the expected responsibilities.

Play up your skills.

When writing the middle section of your letter, identify the skills you have and how they would be useful for the position you are applying for. If you are applying for an entry-level position, or don't have a lot of experience, emphasize your strengths. Maybe you are a self-starter who can meet goals even while working independently in this era of widespread remote work. Or maybe you come from a nontraditional professional background, which you can frame as an asset due to the skills or perspective it has given you. "If you're able to make the case, like, 'Look I come from this different place, which is unusual in your field, and that's exactly what you need,' that can be really quite powerful," Ms. Clark says.

Emphasize what you can do for the company.

Use the latter section of your letter to tie together how your skills, experience and background make you an ideal candidate for the job. For example, after outlining some of your relevant professional history you could add: "These experiences have prepared me to jump right into the data-driven decision-making position at [insert company here], which would make me a valuable asset to the team." You could also expand on your previous work and motivations with a sentence like: "These experiences consistently inspire me to seek projects that give back to the community, which is why I identify so closely with [insert company]'s mission."

Consider other formats.

A typical cover letter includes the greeting, an introduction, a couple of body paragraphs, a closing paragraph and your signature. But there are times when using other formats might be appropriate.

Dana Leavy-Detrick, founder and director of Brooklyn Resume Studio, says it can be appropriate to use bullet points in certain circumstances, such as listing your skills. This format allows you to swap in key points more

easily, rather than rewriting entire paragraphs for each new letter. You could write one or two sentences outlining your interest in the role or organization, followed by a sentence saying: "At this point, in my career, I'm confident I can offer" followed by a list of bullet points describing your abilities.

If you want to show your creative side, an alternative to a cover letter may be appropriate, depending on the job, industry and employer. For example, Jenna Palek scored a job at TikTok in summer 2020 after she posted a video as part of her application, explaining her resume and qualifications, which went viral on the platform. This is a risky strategy but it can pay off in certain circumstances.

Finish the letter with why you want to work for the company.

The final paragraph is your last chance to say why you want the job. It is important to strike a tone that shows you are interested, but not too pushy. You can write a sentence or two that emphasizes your interest in the role or company, and say you hope to hear back soon. Avoid writing that you will follow up over the phone or reach out to schedule a time to talk. Even if the rest of your letter is great, an overly forceful tone in your closing paragraph can be off-putting to an employer. Before typing your name, end the letter with a tonally appropriate sign off, such as "Sincerely," as opposed to "Thanks," which may be too informal.

Take the time to review before hitting send.

Don't hit send without a few final checks. Hiring managers prefer cover letters that are less than a page long, so make some trims if necessary. Read the cover letter aloud and check for spelling and grammatical errors or typos. If you have the time, ask a friend or adviser to check it over. Then you can hit submit.

#### Resources

\* WSJ Jobs Summit on March 4, 2021 : Register for this free online event that provides recent graduates and workers looking for new opportunities with practical strategies and insights to navigate the competitive job market.

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Credit: By Allison Pohle

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