The Cover Letter

A cover letter states your interest in a position at a company or organization and includes personal information, such as your previous work experience, personal strengths, special skills, and academic background.

What steps should I take before composing a cover letter?
Before applying for a job, you must familiarize yourself with the position and the company.

- **Background information**: Find the website for the company or organization. Read the mission statement and any other information that will help you further understand the position for which you are applying.
- **Interest and familiarity**: Do you find the position intriguing and challenging? Are you familiar with the tasks required of this position?
- **A good match**: Decide if your skills make you a qualified candidate for the position. The job may not suit you if your skills are in a completely different area of expertise.
- **Contact**: Review the website to find the correct contact information for the director or employee in charge of hiring.

How do I format a cover letter?

**Spacing**

- Use single-spacing throughout your cover letter.
- Align all paragraphs to the left or indent the first line of every paragraph to the right.
- Leave one space between your heading and greeting.
- Leave one space between each paragraph.
- Leave three spaces between your closing salutation and signature.

**Margins**

Use one-inch margins for all sides of the letter.

How do I structure my cover letter?

- **Outline**: A cover letter includes a *heading*, *introduction*, *body*, *conclusion*, and *signature*. Describe your experiences chronologically.
- **Audience**: Do not send out a general cover letter. Tailor your cover letter according to each specific job position.
- **Tone**: Adopt a personable tone. Your tone should be confident, courteous, and professional.

**Heading**

The heading includes your contact information, the information of the person whom you are contacting, and the date.
• At the top left corner of the page, state your contact information. Include
  o your name.
  o your home address.
  o your phone number and fax number (if applicable).
  o your email address, which should be professional and appropriate.
• Then, skip a space and write the full date (month, day, and year).
• After the date, skip a space and state the employer’s contact information. Include
  o the name of the specific person.
  o that person’s title.
  o the address of the company.

Introduction
The purpose of your introduction is to create an initial impression, display your intent, and give
the reader a basic understanding of your background.

• Include a salutation: “Dear (name of person).” If you are unsure of whom to contact, you
  may write “Dear Hiring Professionals” or “Dear Hiring Committee.”
• Tell the reader who you are and why you are writing the letter.
  o Introduce yourself.
  o State the position for which you are applying.
  o State the school you currently attend, your grade level, and your major.
  o Mention how you heard about the company.
• Create an overview of why your values and goals match those of the company. Highlight two
  or three of your qualifications and how they make you a match for the position.

Body/Argument
The purpose of your body, or argument, is to display your qualifications and convince the reader
that you are a match for the position.

• Elaborate on your qualifications mentioned in the introduction paragraph.
  o Identify each special skill you have.
  o Describe how you have previously used this skill and how it has contributed to your
    work experience.
  o Describe how you can apply this skill to your potential work position.
• Include specific awards, certifications, recognitions, or any other achievements if they are
  applicable to the goals of the company.
• Use examples to support your reasoning. For example, if you say you have good
  communication skills, be sure to say specifically how you use these skills (e.g., by working
  one-on-one with students during tutoring sessions).
• Do not include irrelevant or excessive details about your past, which may distract the reader
  from your main points.
**Conclusion**
The purpose of your closing is to restate your main points and inform the employer of your follow-up plans.

- Restate how you qualify as a strong candidate for the desired position.
- Inform your readers how and when you will contact them.
- Include your phone number and email address.

**Signature**
Sign your name. Include your name in type below your signature.

**How do I polish my cover letter?**
Before sending your cover letter, double-check that there are no mistakes. Proofread carefully—simple mistakes that could have been avoided are a red flag to your reader that you may lack professionalism.

- Proofread your letter for grammar and punctuation errors.
- Make sure you included the correct contact information.
- Share your cover letter with your friends and family and ask for constructive criticism.

The following page provides an example of a successful cover letter.
Mary Shelley  
1234 Almaden Expressway  
San Jose, CA 95120  
(408) 555-5678  
mary.shelley@sjsu.edu

January 2, 2013

Dr. Peter Parker  
Director, Writing Center  
San José State University  
1 Washington Square  
San José, CA 95192-0172

Dear Dr. Parker,

My name is Mary Shelley, and I am applying for the position of Writing Specialist. I am a junior Bachelor’s of Arts student studying English with an emphasis in Creative Writing at San José State University. I am currently enrolled in Professor Smith’s English 103 course, which is focused on grammar and mechanics. Based on my success in her class, Professor Smith mentioned I would be an excellent candidate for the position. I am interested in pursuing this opportunity.

My qualifications for this position include a thorough understanding of the rules that govern grammar and punctuation. In my own essays, I demonstrate clear theses, good organization, attention to detail, and efficient analyses using evidence from the texts. As a creative writer, I am also skilled in identifying elements of style in both narratives and academic papers. My skills would benefit the Writing Center because I am capable of helping others improve their writing.

With my degree, I hope to work as an editor for a major publishing house. Working as a Writing Specialist is the kind of experience that would help me achieve that goal. I also aspire to publish some of my own poetry and short stories. Eventually, I would like to obtain an MFA in my field and teach creative writing at the university level. I want to inspire students to develop their ideas for their own stories. The experience of working in the Writing Center would provide a solid foundation on which to build my career.

With all my qualifications in writing and my readiness to help, I can assist any student in writing a well-crafted paper. My phone number is (408) 555-5678, and my email address is mary.shelley@sjsu.edu. I look forward to having the opportunity to be a part of student success.

Sincerely,

Mary Shelley