

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
 - your name.
 - your home address.
 - your phone number and fax number (if applicable).
 - 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
 - the name of the specific person.
 - that person’s title.
 - 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.
 - Introduce yourself.
 - State the position for which you are applying.
 - State the school you currently attend, your grade level, and your major.
 - 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.
 - Identify each special skill you have.
 - Describe how you have previously used this skill and how it has contributed to your work experience.
 - 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