Cover Letter Guide

Colby Career Center

Eustis 107
Waterville, Maine
Matt Yellowstone
(207) 859-4140

Cover Letter Guide

Making the Match

What is a cover letter?

Put simply, a cover letter is a one page letter that allows you to express interest in a posted position or an organization in general and show that you are the perfect match. Depending on the employer, a cover also may serve as the key to persuading the reader to take a long look at your resume. Cover letters (also known as application letters or letters of introduction), are an integral piece of your job search strategy. They highlight your key accomplishments and your fit for a specific position as well as showcase and expand on your resume. Importantly, they introduce key themes you will emphasize in interviews.

Two Types of Cover Letters

Solicited

A solicited cover letter is written in response to an announced internship or job opening. Solicited cover letters tend to be easier to write because you will know the qualifications for which an employer is looking, as well as to whom you should send it.

Unsolicited

An unsolicited cover letter is sent to an organization at which you are interested in working and/or learning more about. An unsolicited letter does not have a formal job opening.

DID YOU KNOW?

Two of the most common mistakes when writing a cover letter are leaving typos and using a generic template.

Each letter should be unique and personal. Make sure at least one other person reads the letter before it gets sent in.

Where do I start?

- ✓ Do your homework!
  - Scour the employer's career website to find out more about the department or topic the position primarily focuses on (such as an issue area).
  - Determine some of their defining characteristics (their competitive landscape, their customers, their distribution channels, their product mix, their innovations). Use news aggregators (e.g., paper.li, pocket and Google News search) to see if they or their competitors have had any recent press.
  - Understand their mission and values as a whole as well as any individual department/section related to the position. Look at their website and their advertising and follow them on social media (e.g., view top tweets and content they share with Riffle) to learn what's important to them and how they present themselves to the world and to their job candidates.
  - Find a connection with the employer that you can highlight in the letter; that might be their mission, a recent report they issued, a product or service utilized, a charity they support, etc.
- ✓ Mule check!
  - Does a Colby alumnus work at the employer you're looking at, or did they previously? Talking to someone who is or used to be an employee is the best way to get a good feel for what the employer might be looking for in the cover letter. The alum may even allow you to mention them as

someone who referred you to the position (always ask for their permission to mention them). Reach out to them directly or come in to the Career Center for help contacting them.

- ✓ Salary Expectations
  - In general, you should never include salary ranges or expectations in your cover letter. Unless the application instructions specifically ask you to, do not include them. If you must include them, make sure you do your homework to know what a reasonable range should be.

What do I write?

Introductory paragraph

What/Where/Who

Make sure you state the position you're applying for and where it was listed (i.e. "analyst position posted in the Colby CareerLink database."). If you were referred by a specific person this is where you should mention it (i.e. "Joe King of the marketing department suggested that I apply.").

Why you?

This is where you have to convince them to get down to the second paragraph where you're going to give more detail about your qualifications. You just want to give a preview that shows you meet the standards for the job but you also stand out from the pack. Focus on what makes you unique.

Why them?

With few exceptions, dozens, maybe even hundreds, of other equally qualified applicants will be vying for the position. It's also true that most people send out dozens of job applications. You have to prove that not only are you unique in terms of your qualifications, but you have a connection with the employer and this is not just one more generic letter out the door. That connection might be through a topic or project they work on, a mission statement, experience with the people who work there, or how the employer has impacted your life. This is courtship—they want to be certain you know them AND want them before they'll take you seriously as a candidate.

Middle paragraph(s)

Matching Your Skills

Once you have a position description, go through and highlight what you think are the most important skills the employer is looking for. Then take a look at your resume and ask yourself where you have demonstrated those skills. Focus on connecting each one of your experiences to a skill mentioned in the position description. The more an application reviewer can make a mental checklist of the position qualifications as they go through your letter, the better.

PRO TIP: MASS CUSTOMIZE!

You can save a lot of time by preparing in advance a bank of 5-8 skills, strengths or experience, each with supporting examples. For each cover letter you create, choose the 3-4 which relate to the job you are applying for and pop them into your middle section—as paragraph(s) or bullets.

Don't forget topic sentences!

Just like you would when writing a paper, make sure you give some indication of where you're going with the letter.

What value do you bring?

Sure, the cover letter is about you but don't forget about the employer. What is it you're going to bring to the employer? How are you going to be an asset? Just as in the first paragraph, make that connection to the employer and make your case for why you are the perfect fit.

Conclusion

In your final paragraph you need to remember the following:

Summarize your "why you/why them" section to remind them of why you're the perfect fit
Leave contact information and show your appreciation!
Use a professional closing; the most common is "Sincerely,"

Formatting

Paper attributes

Size (8 ½ x 11 inches)
Color (neutral colors like white, ivory, and gray) to match resume paper

Appearance

Margins (0.7 to 1-inch all around)
Spacing (single spacing), with a break between each section of information
Print (use laser printing for best quality)
If submitting the letter electronically, save file as a PDF, not a Word document

Other

Left-align format (Each letter part begins at the left margin—no paragraph indentation)
Font (10-12 pt. font in the same style as your resume)
No longer than one page
Allow room for your signature

Please see the next page for a sample job description and corresponding cover letter layout.

Cover Letter Checklist

- ✓ *Update date and address lines*
- ✓ *Address the letter to a specific person*
- ✓ *Include referrals*
- ✓ *Make a connection with the employer*
- ✓ *Emphasize your accomplishments*
- ✓ *Match your experiences to skills needed*
- ✓ *Don't duplicate your resume*
- ✓ *Remind the employer why you're the best fit*
- ✓ *Include your contact information*
- ✓ *Sign your name*
- ✓ *One page only*
- ✓ *Proofread!*
- ✓ *Convert to PDF*
- ✓ *Follow up with a referral source to let them know you submitted the application*

Sample Job Description:

Employment Specialist Assistant, Refugee Services JVS Boston

Founded in 1938, JVS delivers a broad range of educational and vocational services to over 15,000 clients annually to help them and their families reach financial independence. Lifelong career supports include job search training, educational testing, career counseling, skills training, English for Speakers of Other Languages, GED classes, Adult Basic Literacy and Adult Diploma Program instruction, support for entry-level workers, microenterprise training, and financial assistance.

Refugee Services Comprehensive Job Search Services: Cultural orientation, English language training, interview preparation, job search assistance, job placement, and post-employment support are available through JVS' refugee service programs. The Refugee Services Employment Specialist Assistant will support the team with both administrative and client-related work.

Responsibilities

Interns will assist newly arrived refugees with finding gainful employment by working closely with a team of Employment Specialists and to support case management, job preparation, client learning, and administrative tasks toward this goal, including:

• Conducting job searches tailored to the clients' needs.

• Assisting clients to complete online and paper job applications.

• Expanding JVS' network of employers by doing research on companies.

• Providing one-on-one and small-group job-related English language training, mock interviews, job application completion, resume development, job search techniques, basic computer training, and financial literacy.

• Teaching clients how to use public transportation and locate other necessary case management resources.

• Providing administrative support including data entry, copying, and filing for the Refugee Services department.

• Other responsibilities and short-term projects as assigned to support goals of Refugee Services Department

Requirements

• Related experience is welcome, but training will be provided.

• Interest in working with people of various linguistic, cultural, religious, ethnic and national backgrounds.

• Commitment to learning techniques for providing effective services to support job outcomes refugees and immigrants.

• Ability to speak other languages not required, but is welcome.

• Ability to work in dynamic and often changing work environment.

• Ability to work as part of a team with staff and other volunteers/interns.

• Good communication and organizational skills.

• Attention to detail.

Corresponding Cover Letter Sample Layout:

Opening Paragraph: Introduce yourself in 1-3 sentences.

Why are you writing? What is your objective? *Example:* I am writing to apply for the Employment Specialist Assistant in the Refugee Services department. I was encouraged to apply for this position by John Smith, Assistant Director of Refugee Services.

Who are you? College program? *Example:* I am a senior at Colby College majoring in anthropology and minoring in Environmental Studies.

Why are you interested in this position/company? How will it enhance your career path? Why should they read further? *Tip:* Highlight the skills you gained in your previous experience that are relevant to this position, such as communications, ability to work with people from different backgrounds and cultures, international experience and language skills.

Paragraphs 2 & 3: Highlight your skills and the benefits that you bring to the position/organization. Tailor this to the specific job posting and don't forget to use topic sentences.

Where did you develop the skills and/or attributes required for the position? (e.g. education, summer jobs and/or internships, student clubs, athletics, etc.) Use **specific** language gleaned from the job description. *Tip:* You might use teaching and language instructor positions to show you gained relevant skills to the position. Even summer camp positions would be relevant here in terms of working with groups of people in a dynamic environment.

List specific accomplishments that demonstrate the skills required. *Tip:* Use descriptors like numbers to highlight accomplishment. Anyone can say they have great presentation skills but if you can mention you presented to a diverse group of 300 people or even to a room full of executives gives evidence that you have used those skills.

Why should they hire you? Summarize your personal attributes and illustrate how they would allow you to contribute to this organization or optimally perform in the workplace.

Add any additional aspects (from your research) about the organization that entices you and that fits wells with your background. *Tip:* You might use the mission statement of the organization, and tell how their mission fits your interests and concerns in life. You could use your research assistant experience to show that you have already been working in this area. While this is listed last, make sure it's not actually buried in your letter. This can show you've done your homework on the organization.

Closing Paragraph: Indicate your interest, request an interview, and thank the reader for his/her time. Always include your contact information.

Reiterate your interest and why you make a great candidate (in a sentence).

State what your next step(s) will be. *Tip:* You may include if you want to have an informational interview on skype or phone

If requested, address salary history or requirements.

Do not forget to provide your phone number(s) and e-mail.

Show appreciation. Thank the employer for their time and consideration.

Anatomy of a Cover Letter

MATT YELLOWSTONE

(555) 555-5555 | Yellowstone@gmail.com

April 18, 2016

Ingrid Bergman
Human Resources Manager
AirFarms Express
252 Valencia Street
Princeton, NJ 07100

Address the letter to a *SPECIFIC* HR recruiter:
--person who posted the position OR
--search LinkedIN "COMPANY NAME Talent Acquisition" to find a university recruiter

For bonus points: he could show that he knows how to evaluate companies by making reference to the early financial backers of Airfarms

Say what you want

Dear Ms. Bergman:

I am writing to express my interest in the Corporate Development Analyst position posted on your company website.

Show you know them

I've been impressed by AirFarms' original thinking and disruptive approach to scaling the production and availability of healthy food in a way that also benefits local economies and the environment. I would love an opportunity to be part of a team that blends entrepreneurship, business fundamentals, technology and altruism to change the way we eat. With my substantial financial analysis background, communication skills, and commitment to mission-driven work, I think I would be a good fit for this role and for AirFarms:

Showcase 3 relevant skills, qualities or experiences

- **Financial analysis background**. As an investment analyst intern at Small Hedge Fund, I have generated investment ideas by analyzing financial statements, conducting market research and building financial models. I also have direct experience covering agricultural companies and am familiar with the main business drivers of the industry.
- **Communication skills**. While at Small Hedge Fund, I cultivated relationships with senior management at current investment and target companies to understand their key business drivers and contributed to a monthly investor performance update for current and prospective investors. I am adept at speaking to people at all levels of their organization in order to fully understand the market, the state of their business and its future potential.
- **Commitment to mission.** I share AirFarms' mission of making money while doing good. In fact, in 2014, I founded a nonprofit which pays low-income students to tutor other low-income students. Inspired by my experience as a fourth grade tutor in Waterville, I launched The TutorZone to address the poor quality of tutor training and high overhead of similar youth tutoring programs.

I believe my experience in finance, coupled with my strong communication skills and desire to improve my surrounding community will make me an asset to AirFarms.

Attached is my resume and you can contact me via email or phone for any additional information you may require.

Thank you kindly in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Matt Yellowstone