

## The Basics of the Cover Letter



Vault  
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*Wondering what goes on a cover letter? Here's a step-by-step guide.*

Your Name  
Your Street Address, Apartment #  
Your City, State Zip  
Your Email Address  
Your (h) PHONE NUMBER  
Your (f) FAX NUMBER

Contact's Name  
Contact's Title  
Contact's Department  
Company Name  
Company Street Address, Suite #  
Company City, State Zip  
Company PHONE NUMBER  
Company FAX NUMBER

Date

Dear Ms./Mr. CONTACT,

The first paragraph tells why you're contacting the person, then either mentions your connection with that person or tells where you read about the job. It also quickly states who you are. Next it wows them with your sincere, researched knowledge of their company. The goal: demonstrating that you are a worthy applicant, and enticing them to read further.

The second and optional third paragraph tell more about yourself, particularly why you're an ideal match for the job by summarizing why you're what they're looking for. You may also clarify anything unclear on your resume.

The last paragraph is your goodbye: you thank the reader for his or her time. Include that you look forward to their reply or give them a time when you'll be getting in contact by phone.

Sincerely,

Sign Here

## Date

Placement of the date, whether left justified, centered or aligned to the right, is up to your discretion, but take the time to write out the entry. If you choose to list the day, list it first, followed by the month, date, and year, as follows: Tuesday, July 7, 2000. (Europeans commonly list the day before month, so writing a date only in numbers can be confusing. Does a letter written on 4/7/00 date from April 7, or July 4?)

## Name and address

Your name and address on the cover letter should be the same as the one on your resume. Uniformity in this case applies not only to the address given, but the way the information is written. If you listed your street as Ave. instead of Avenue on your resume, do so on your cover letter too.

Your header can be displayed centrally, just like the resume header -- including your name in a larger and/or bolded font. But in most cases, the heading is either left justified or left justified and indented to the far right hand side of the page.

If you choose to list your phone number, make sure that you don't list it redundantly somewhere else on the page.

Next comes the address of the person you are writing. In many circumstances you'll have the complete information on the person you're trying to contact, in which case you should list it in this order:

- Name of contact
- Title of contact
- Company name
- Company address
- Phone number
- Fax number

However, in many cases, you have less than complete information to go on. This is particularly true when responding to an advertisement. If you have an address or phone or fax number but no company name, try a reverse directory, such as the on-line GTE Superpages (<http://superpages.gte.net/>), which lets you trace a business by either its address or phone number.

When you're trying to get a name of a contact person, calling the company and asking the receptionist for the name of the recipient (normally, though not always, head of HR) may work. But usually, companies don't list this information because they don't want you calling at all. So if you call, be polite, be persistent, ask for a contact name, say thank you and hang up. Don't identify yourself. If you have questions, wait until the interview.

If you don't get all of the info, don't worry. There are several salutations to use to finesse the fact that you've got no idea who you're addressing. Some solutions are:

- To whom it may concern:** A bit frosty, but effective.
- Dear Sir or Madam:** Formal and fusty, but it works.
- Sirs:** Since the workforce is full of women, avoid this outdated greeting.
- Omitting the salutation altogether:** Effective, but may look too informal.
- Good morning:** A sensible approach that is gaining popularity.

### *Format*

Unlike the resume, the cover letter offers the writer significant room for flexibility. Successful cover letters have come in various different forms, and sometimes cover letters that break rules achieve success by attracting attention. But most don't. Here's some basic guidelines on what information the body of a cover letter should deliver.

### *First paragraph*

To be successful, this first paragraph should contain:

- A first line that tells the reader why you're contacting them, and how you came to know about the position. This statement should be quick, simple and catchy. Ultimately, what you're trying to create is a descriptive line by which people can categorize you. This means no transcendental speeches about "the real you" or long-winded treatises on your career and philosophy of life.
- Text indicating your respect for the firm's accomplishments, history, status, products, or leaders.
- A last line that gives a very brief synopsis of who you are and why you want the position. The best way to do this, if you don't already have a more personal connection with the person you're contacting, is to lay it out like this:

I am a (your identifying characteristic)

+

I am a (your profession)

+

I have (your years of experience or education)

+

I have worked in (your area of expertise)

+

I am interested in (what position you're looking for)

And thus a killer first paragraph is born.

### *Middle paragraph(s)*

The middle paragraph allows you to move beyond your initial declarative sentences, and into more expansive and revealing statements about who you are and what skills you bring to the job. This is another opportunity to explicitly summarize key facts of your job history. The middle paragraph also offers you the opportunity to mention any connection or prior experience that you may have with the company.

Tell the employer in this paragraph how, based on concrete references to your previous performances, you will perform in your desired position. This does not mean making general, unqualified statements about your greatness such as "I'm going to be the best you've ever had" or my "My energetic multi-tasking will be the ultimate asset to your company."

Comments should be backed up by specific references. Try something along the lines of "My post-graduate degree in marketing, combined with my four years of retail bicycle sales would make me an strong addition to Gwinn Cycles' marketing team."

Or: "Meeting the demands of a full-time undergraduate education, a position as student government accountant, and a 20-hour-a-week internship with Davidson Management provided me with the multi-tasking experience needed to excel as a financial analyst at Whittier Finance."

Many advertisements ask you to name your salary requirements. Some avoid the problem altogether by ignoring this requirement, and this may be the safest route ? any number you give might either price you out of a job (before you have the chance to negotiate face-to-face at an interview). Alternatively, you might be pegged at a lower salary than you might otherwise have been offered. If you must give a salary requirement, be as general as possible The safest bet is to offer as general a range as possible ("in the \$30,000s"). Put the salary requirement at the end of the paragraph, not in your first sentence.

Some cover letter writers use another paragraph to describe their accomplishments. This makes sense if, for example, your experience lies in two distinct areas, or you need to explain something that is not evident on your resume, such as "I decided to leave law school to pursue an exciting venture capital opportunity" or "I plan to relocate to Wisconsin shortly." Do not get overly personal &\$150; "I dropped out of business school to care for my sick mother" is touching, but will not necessarily impress employers.

### Final paragraph

The final paragraph is your fond farewell, your summation, a testament to your elegance and social grace. This should be the shortest paragraph of the letter. Here, tell your readers you're pleased they got so far down the page. Tell them you look forward to hearing from them. Tell them how you can be reached. Here's some sample sentences for your conclusion.

*Thank you sentences:*

Thank you for your time.

Thank you for reviewing my qualifications.

Thank you for your consideration.

Thank you for your review of my qualifications.

*Way too much:*

It would be more than an honor to meet with you.

*A note of confidence in a callback:*

I look forward to your reply.

I look forward to hearing from you.

I look forward to your response.

I look forward to your call.

*Over the top:*

Call me tomorrow, please.