

Writing a covering letter

To understand the idea of a cover letter, consider a few examples: you leave a package for your friend when you find him or her absent and you add a note - to say 'hi' and to explain the package. A lecturer asks for a copy of one of your earlier assignments and (ideally) you attach a covering note before dropping it in your lecturer's mail box. The fundamental role of the cover letter is to "cover" (or explain) the material you submit.

Covering notes and letters are practical (you indicate the circumstances), professional (you show you understand the receiver's need to be introduced to the topic) and courteous (you don't leave people guessing). At this point, you may be viewing job application cover letters as a breeze! After all, it's easy to write "Dear, please find attached my resume for your consideration. I look forward to an interview"!

Opportunity

Aside from just 'being courteous' and 'explaining', job application cover letters present a unique opportunity to draw special attention to your skills, attributes and interests relevant to the application - if you like, to market to the organisation the best you have to offer.

The letter also presents a great opportunity to show you're fussy! You don't just apply to any organisation; you've checked them out and you like what you've found!

Resume and covering letter

To place all this in context, your covering letter goes hand in hand with (or complements) your resume. Where your resume is a snap shot of YOU, your cover letter details and highlights skills and experience especially relevant to this application.

Another reason for a good cover letter is that it can impress. A concise, well-written letter can itself exert influence in your favour, bringing you a step closer to that all important interview.

Opening

Application cover letters by convention frequently commence with a fairly standard opening. See the insert for some examples of possible introductions. You should also refer (usually here or at the end of your letter) to the other paperwork (resume, responses to selection criteria) you have enclosed as part of your application.

Beyond this, you are out to capture the interest of the reader as quickly and as fully as possible in a strong first paragraph. Other text condensed into a tight, well-written statement to supplement your standard opening could include information from the following:

- A summary of your principal attributes which lead you to apply for the position, or/
- Your especially relevant previous experience, or/
- Your particular interest in the organisation which lead you to apply (if not included in your opening this will normally appear somewhere in your letter), or/
- Your present circumstances (you are in the final year of a degree / will finish your studies in ... eg month ... etc).

Body

The body of your letter is the “powerhouse” section. It takes you to the substance of your marketing approach. It should contain the following information in concise sections, though not necessarily in the order given here:

- A summary of how you meet their requirements, including the basis for any claims you make. (Moreover you could include other skills or attributes which, while not mentioned as required, would in your opinion also be useful.)

Most newspaper advertisements include a list of requirements for the position. On the other hand, if your application requires you to address selection criteria, you could make this section of your letter a very brief summary of the basis for your eligibility as outlined in your selection criteria responses.

- A succinct statement about why you are drawn to, or have a particular interest in this organisation.

Applicants frequently neglect to do this. Try to reflect some affinity with the organisational culture, or highlight something read in organisational literature (or elsewhere) that appeals to you. The value of doing this lies in the additional confirmation of your interest and the evidence shown of your research in pursuit of an excellent employer.

Close

Your letter could conclude by thanking the prospective employer for reviewing your application. You might also wish to indicate that you look forward to being interviewed, and / or you might suggest that you would be happy to provide further particulars if required. Some suggest a strong final statement confirming your interest.

The challenge is to do this in one page or less! Ideally your letter should not be more than a page of easy-to-read, type-written text.

The speculative letter

The so called “speculative” letter accompanies an application that is “unsolicited” (not sought or invited by advertisement); for example, your networking endeavours might yield a job lead and you decide to send your resume to an appropriate person in the organisation with a speculative cover letter.

The speculative letter can follow much the same form as the letter you write in response to an advertised position, with some minor differences to accommodate its exploratory nature.

Differences

The form of the speculative letter may differ in the following ways:

Your opening will necessarily be different and may take the form of “writing to explore employment options” or commence by indicating you are “writing about the possibility of ...” or indicate your “wish to be considered for (eg a graduate position)”.

The body of the speculative letter will differ in that you may be unable to address specific employment requirements. You could seek information on general expectations of employees by pursuing details in organisational literature; or highlight those skills you believe will be relevant in this case; or you could simply give a general overview of your attributes skills and experiences. The close while similar in tone to the close suggested above will differ in a number of significant ways: the wording concerning “an interview” is inappropriate there being no formal interview arranged. You may however “wish to seek a brief discussion” to pursue your interest further. You could foreshadow a follow-up phone call (in a week) to discuss the possibility of a brief meeting; follow-up is a critical part of this process and advanced warning of your intended call, to be made within a given timeframe may mean your letter receives more serious attention.

Finally, remember your letters should always be positive, powerful and persuasive. Review our article “Editing for Succinct and Persuasive Applications” for ideas about making your letter convincing and concise.

For more information visit our website: griffith.edu.au/careers

LETTER IN RESPONSE TO AN ADVERTISED POSITION

PO BOX 27
STRAWBERRY HILLS QLD 4012

30 April 0000

Mr John Smith
Manager, Human Resources
The XYZ Anon Company Pty Ltd
PO Box 8888
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

Dear Mr Smith

“Standard” opening and your present circumstances

I wish to apply for the position of _____ (*job title*) _____ with _____ (*name of organisation*)
Advertised in _____ on _____ (*name of source eg paper, and date*) _____. You will see from the
enclosed resume that I am at present _____ (details of what you are doing eg final-year / graduate /
postgraduate). I am extremely keen to _____ (perhaps a comment on your keenness to commence in a
particular field) _____.

“Match” what advertisement indicates as required with what you can offer (plus any other relevant skills you possess)

I note your interest in _____ **OR** Your advertisement indicates you are seeking _____ **OR** I believe I
am well suited to a position requiring _____ (*refer to stated major requirements of positions or attributes
company requires*) _____. I have completed _____ **OR** You will note my results _____ **OR** As
indicated in my resume, I _____ (*Sentence(s) supporting how you claim to be able to meet their major
requirements*) _____. I also _____ (*any other skills / experiences that, while not required may also
be useful*).

Indicate your interest in “this” organisation and “support” your interest

I would be particularly interested in obtaining a position with _____ **OR** I was genuinely impressed by your
stated attitude to _____ **OR** I was interested to read that you _____ **OR** I strongly believe in the importance
of (*your approach to*) _____ **OR** I first became aware of (*company activities*) _____ **OR** I read recently
that you _____ (*statements supporting your genuine interest in the organisation*) .

Closing remarks (contact details / final expression of interest etc)

I look forward to the possibility of discussing my interest in this position at an interview and would be pleased to
supply any other particulars you might require. I am excited by the prospect of _____ **OR** I relish the
opportunity to _____ (*final statement indication interest*).

Thank you for considering my application

Yours sincerely

John Brown

SPECULATIVE OR UNSOLICITED LETTER

PO BOX 27
STRAWBERRY HILLS QLD 4012

30 April 0000

Ms Jan Smith
Manager, Human Resources
The XYZ Anon Company Pty Ltd
PO Box 8888
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

Dear Ms Smith

The reason for your letter and your present circumstances

I am writing to explore (eg employment opportunities) _____ OR I write to express interest in _____ with _____ (company) _____ OR I am writing about the possibility of _____ (eg a graduate position) _____ OR I heard recently OR I am writing to you having been referred by Ms Claire White from _____ who suggested you might be recruiting _____. You will see from the enclosed resume that I am at present _____ (details of what you are doing, eg final-year / graduate / postgraduate _____). I am extremely keen to _____ (perhaps a comment on your keenness to commence in a particular field) _____.

“Match” what you have read they require / think might want with what you can offer (plus outline any other skills)

I have read (your annual report / graduate recruitment literature) and note your interest in graduates who _____ OR You consistently indicate an interest in (eg kind of grads, from paper adverts) _____ OR I believe I am well suited to a position requiring _____ (refer to stated attributes, skills etc they need or you think they would value) _____. I have completed _____ OR You will note my results _____ OR As indicated in my resume I _____ (Sentence (s) supporting how you can claim to be able to meet their major requirements) _____. I also _____ (any other skills / experiences that, while not required may also be useful) _____.

Indicate your interest in “this” organisation and “support” your interest

I would be particularly interested in obtaining a position with _____ OR I was genuinely impressed by your stated attitude to _____ OR I was interested to read that you _____ OR I strongly believe in the importance of (your approach to) _____ I first became aware of (company activities) _____ OR I read recently that you _____ (statements supporting your genuine interest in the organisation) _____.

Closing remarks (contact details / when you will phone to try for face-to-face discussion / final expression of interest)

I look forward to discussing further my interest in _____ (graduate position / kind of role) _____ with _____ (name of organisation) _____. I will phone your _____ (when?) _____ about the possibility of _____ (statements indicating your wish to make further contact) _____. I am strongly drawn to _____ (final statement indicating interest) _____.

Thank you for considering my application.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Brown