

WHAT IS A COVER LETTER?

A Cover Letter IS...

- A chance to make a case for yourself and your candidacy to the employer so that they want to bring you in for an interview and learn more
- A targeted introduction to your application that relates specifically to the position
- An opportunity to make connections between your education, experience, and skills and the qualifications sought by an employer
- A sample of your writing skills

A Cover Letter is NOT...

- A general introduction to your application
- A list of accomplishments
- A summary of your resume
- Something to write quickly and without thought
- Less important than your resume
- Something you should skip. Even if the employer does not request a cover letter, we recommend you write one

Why is the cover letter important?

When employers scan through your resume, they are interpreting your skills and experiences through their own lens, and as much as you try to target your resume to a specific position, the employer may not understand what you have to offer the same way you do. The cover letter is your chance to connect the dots between your qualifications and what the employer wants or needs. You know exactly why you're qualified for the position, but the employer may need help understanding what makes you such a unique, strong candidate. In a cover letter, you can spell this out for them!

DEVELOPING YOUR COVER LETTER

Each cover letter you write should be distinct as you target it to a specific job with its own set of responsibilities and qualifications in a specific organization with its own culture and mission. For this reason, writing a cover letter takes time. Do not rush the process. Before you even start to write the letter, spend time doing the following:

- **Read the job description** and highlight skills you have and may want to address.
- **Do research on the organization** to get a sense of the culture, what they value, and what they might be looking for in candidates that is not explicitly mentioned in the posting. If you want guidance on how and where to do research, see the Conducting Employer Research handout.
- **List the skills and qualities you think the employer is seeking** based on the posting and your research.
- **Identify relevant past and present experiences or accomplishments.** The goal is to demonstrate specifically how you have developed skills or qualities that qualify you for this new position. The skills and qualities do NOT have to be directly related to the internship but should

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be relevant to the skills the employer is seeking. For instance, if you are applying for a scientific research position, but do not have direct experience, think about other positions in which you have developed your attention to detail, ability to work with others, additional research skills or scientific knowledge, etc.

- **Select two or three specific concrete examples of experiences or accomplishments** that you think are most relevant or important to highlight in your letter.
- **Use the *STAR* method to flesh out your examples with details.** The idea is to show how you developed the skills, not just to tell the employer you have them.
 - o **Situation** – Give background that will help provide context, i.e. title, organization, department, project, timeframe.
 - o **Task** – Describe what was expected or asked of you in terms of responsibilities OR the challenges or obstacles you had to overcome.
 - o **Action** – Detail the specific action steps that you took to handle the tasks or address the obstacle.
 - o **Result** – What impact did you have on the situation? What was the outcome or what did you learn? Quantify or qualify your results if you can. (E.g. Initiated a program that was attended by more than half the dormitory residents, far exceeding expectations.)

For example...

[S] This past summer I was a Teaching and Residential Faculty Intern at Philip Exeter's Summer Academy. [T] I had the assignment of co-teaching a Neuropsychology course – a subject I knew absolutely nothing about. Taking the challenge head on, [A] I worked with my co-teacher to develop a method of teaching where she taught basic concepts while I researched and shared the ways the concepts applied in the real world. For example, I found an engaging article about scientists who successfully implanted false memories in mice. I divided the students into two groups and had them debate the pros, cons, and future implications. [R] By having the students focus on the ethical side of the subject, I was able to keep all of them actively participating and excited about the complex subject of Neuropsychology. I fully plan to bring this innovative way of thinking to any collaborative work with my fellow peers as we strive to improve the products produced by Curriculum Associates, Inc.

WRITING & STRUCTURING YOUR COVER LETTER

Cover letters should follow standard business format and should not be longer than three to four paragraphs. Use 10-12 font but nothing smaller. Once you have completed a draft of your letter, meet with a Peer Career Advisor (PCA) or career advisor for review and feedback. Ask a friend to proofread and edit for grammar and spelling. See the next page for information about how to structure your letter.

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Cover Letter Structure

See the Handouts & Samples page of the
Loeb Center website for cover letter samples

Your street address
City, State, Zip code

Date

Contact Name
Title
Employer
Street Address
City, State, Zip code

Dear Mr./Ms. _____: (Write to a specific person when possible)

The opening paragraph should pique the employer's curiosity by stating enthusiastically why you are pursuing the position. Name the position and tell how you became aware of the opportunity. If you were referred by someone, or networked with someone extensively who would be relevant to the employer, mention that person's name. This paragraph should encourage the employer to want to read more so emphasize what you can do for the company rather than what you will gain. Reveal your knowledge of the employer. Finish your paragraph as if you are writing a thesis statement for the rest of the letter. Briefly cite the specific highlights of the body paragraphs you will discuss in greater detail.

The most effective middle paragraph(s) articulate specific examples of how your past experiences will be applicable to excelling in the position you seek. Provide concrete examples that outline your specific qualifications, skills, or accomplishments that match the job description. These will likely be past or current academic, extracurricular, work related or personal experiences. Refer to the key aspects of your resume, but avoid restating your resume's descriptions. Additionally, if your relevant personal qualities are not obvious from your resume, this is your opportunity to discuss them.

Close your letter thanking the employer, restating your interest, and asking for the opportunity to learn more about the position. If you say that you are going to follow-up, do it. (Following up is highly recommended for media, advertising, and publishing. It is NOT recommended for consulting and finance) Note that your resume is enclosed. Include your contact information (phone number and email).

Sincerely,

(Signature here)

Your typed name

Amherst College Loeb Center Cover Letter Guidelines*

Your cover letter is an important marketing tool that enables you to interpret the relevance of your experiences for a specific position, in your own words. It also reflects the strength of your writing skills. Your goal is to make clear, engaging connections between past experiences and the skills and qualifications associated with the desired position.

FORMAT
Appearance – Follows standard business format; no more than a page; no longer than 3-4 paragraphs; use appropriate font style (Times New Roman, Arial, Calibri), font size (10-12 point); standard margins are no more than one inch. Structured as a letter, with greeting (example: Dear Ms. X:), closing salutation, appropriate headings providing date, contact information of writer, employer.
Name and Contact Information – Includes your name and address at the top (match the heading on your resume), followed by the name and address of the organization. Name in closing salutation.
Grammar, Spelling & Punctuation – Error-free. Consider having another person read over your cover letter to catch any mistakes. Some employers won't consider applicants who have even a single error!
CONTENT
Knowledge of the Position & Organization – Shows evidence of knowledge of the organization and position. In order to achieve this, analyze the job description for qualifications the employer seeks and research the culture, values, and priorities of the organization – not all clues about what employers seek can be found in the job description. Research Sources: organization's website, informational interviews, annual reports, LinkedIn. (See Employer Research handout for more resources). If you have a contact at the organization with whom you have discussed the position, include it in the opening paragraph.
Target – Cover letter is targeted for desired position and/or industry; greeting includes name of person reading the cover letter; position explicitly stated in opening paragraph; middle paragraphs connect experiences to skills sought by employer; tone/style in which cover letter is written may match tone/style of job description.
Interest/Enthusiasm – Indicates why you are pursuing the position and how you became aware of it. Demonstrates your enthusiasm for the organization and position.
Highlighting Appropriate Experiences – Provides 1-3 concrete experiences (classes, jobs, internships, volunteering, etc.) that demonstrate specific qualifications, skills, or accomplishments matching the job description. Uses the STAR method to write about the highlighted experience, see instructions for the "STAR method" on p.2 of this handout. Avoid simply reiterating information that is on the resume.
COMMENTS:

*Cover letters do NOT need to be approved by the Loeb Center. The purpose of these guidelines is to provide constructive feedback, as well as to offer you a checklist of cover letter standards, so you can check them off as you go!