



Career Development

Guide to Writing Effective Cover Letters:

Why are cover letters important?

Your **resume** details your education and experiences. The **cover letter** is your opportunity to make the connection between your experiences and a *specific position*. You are demonstrating that you are a great fit for the specific position, that you can communicate clearly, and that you have researched the organization. You are differentiating yourself from other applicants who may have similar qualifications.

What is the purpose of a cover letter?

1. To **introduce** you to the employer and clarify the position being applied for; when, where, or how you learned about the position and/or the organization; and why you are applying for the position.
2. To **highlight** your strengths and qualifications for the position. This is not a repeat of the resume, but a select review of specific areas from your background that are relevant to the particular position.
3. To **encourage** the next step in the application process: e.g. "I will contact you in a week or so" "I trust we can arrange for a mutual time to meet and discuss in detail my qualifications." "I can be reached at (773) 555-7656."

What should the overall structure be?

Section One (a brief paragraph):

Tell who you are, how you learned about the position, why you have an interest in the position and the organization. Be sure to indicate the specific position for which you are applying, as an employer may have several positions open at the same time. Additionally, if you have networked and have a personal contact within the organization, this is the point at which that individual's name should be mentioned, if you have that person's permission. Follow with a brief statement that you feel you are a strong candidate.

Section Two (text alone, or preferably some combination of text with a bulleted list or a table):

Describe your strengths and qualifications as they *specifically relate to this particular position*. Use the job description to identify exactly what qualifications they seek, and then describe how you are a good fit because you have many of those qualifications. Talk about what you know about the organization to enhance your argument that you are a good fit.

Section Three (a brief paragraph):

"Let's get together" is the goal of the final paragraph. Be sure to actively pursue the next, appropriate step; i.e. offer to telephone, leave your telephone number(s) and times or methods of reaching you, ask for an interview. Remember, the primary purpose of the resume and cover letter is to obtain an interview.

Remember to accomplish these three things in your cover letter:

1. Demonstrate your interest in *the specific position and organization* – why do you want to work there?
2. Highlight *two or three strengths* related to the position and reflect your unique experiences.
3. Express *your enthusiasm for the position and organization!*

Remember to accomplish these five things in your cover letter

1. Demonstrate your interest in *the specific position and organization* – why do you want to work there?
2. Highlight *two to four strengths* related to the position and reflect your unique experiences.
3. Express *your enthusiasm for the position and organization!*
4. This is not a restatement of your resume – *tell the story* of how what's on your resume makes you the best candidate.
5. *Don't include things that aren't on your resume* – if it's especially relevant to the position, find a way to add it.

Sample Job Description #1

Job Title	Elementary Teachers, Grades 1-5
Job Description	Casa Grande Elementary School District is seeking qualified applicants for Elementary Teacher, Grades 1-5, for the 2015-2016 school year. The teacher will create a positive learning environment to facilitate the personal, social and intellectual development of students. Will create and engage in events in and out of the classroom to incorporate parents and community members. In order to respond to the needs and abilities of the students, the teacher must work closely with other staff, the administration and other programs of the district. The teacher is responsible to the building principal.
Other Job Requirements	Must possess at least a Bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university. Must have a valid teaching certificate or proof of eligibility. Ability to fulfill requirements to be appropriately certified and Highly Qualified under NCLB. Must have at least one year of field experience (student teaching) or approved internship. General knowledge of curriculum and instruction. Excellent organization, communication, and interpersonal skills. Must be able to work cooperatively with all members of the staff and communicate effectively with parents.
Send application materials to	Ms. Anita Sheldon, Principal Casa Grande Elementary School 2323 School Drive Chicago, IL 60640

Note how the cover letter on the next page specifically addresses the qualifications listed in the job description with detailed, concrete examples.

SAMPLE COVER LETTER #1: Paragraph Format

Shakira B. Johnson
5225 Foster Avenue
Chicago, IL 60606

October 12, 2015

Ms. Anita Sheldon
Principal
Casa Grande Elementary School
2323 School Drive
Chicago, IL 60640

Dear Ms. Sheldon:

Standard Business Letter Format

The Applicant's Name, Address, Date, Employer's Name, Title, and Address can all be removed if sending resume via email – the body of the email will be the cover letter. Alternatively, you can attach the cover letter as a separate document to the email with a brief note that your materials to apply for the specific position are attached.

If you cannot find the name of the person responsible for the hiring decisions (after checking the job description, company website, LinkedIn, etc. first), use 'Dear Hiring

I chose to become an art teacher because I believe that art is a powerful tool that humans can use to express themselves, and I am eager to share this medium of expression with students. I am particularly interested in the available position in your elementary school for an art teacher, which I learned of from the Palatine School District website.

I will graduate from Northeastern Illinois University in December and will have an Illinois Type 10 certification in Art. I saw the article and pictures on your school's website from the recent sidewalk chalk event that was held in your community, and I would love to help expand that event in the future. My college courses have enabled me to develop my skills in using many different types of media, and I have thoroughly enjoyed putting those skills to good use during my time as a student teacher at Roosevelt Elementary School in Skokie, Illinois, where I focused on differentiated instruction to include all students in the creative process. I also volunteered as an organizer of arts and crafts projects at a local daycare that involved the children and also many local individuals and businesses, so I am prepared to help to further develop positive relationships within both the classroom and the surrounding community.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss my qualifications with you in person. I can be contacted at (312) 555-6754 or sbjohnson@neiu.edu to discuss the next steps in the hiring process.

Sincerely,

Shakira B. Johnson

Always close with 'Sincerely'. You do not need to add your written signature unless submitting a paper copy.

SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION #2

Healthcare Analyst

Position Description:

Analyst gathers insight from the industry through market research, presentations, and interviewing and networking with healthcare professionals. Manages existing software clients and provides support for business operations. This entry/mid-level position is dynamic and offers exposure to multiple departments and projects. Innovative, fast-paced, team-based environment for rapid professional development. Ideal candidate will be ambitious, personable and excited to learn. Strongly preferred background or experience in Public Health and/or not-for-profit organizations

Requirements:

- Bachelors
- 0-2 years work or internship experience
- 3.0 GPA minimum
- Excellent communication skills
- Research or phone experience
- Strong personable skills
- Exposure to healthcare industry beneficial
- Background in Public Health
- Background in not-for-profit organizations
- Willingness to travel

Organization Background:

Dorenfest & Associates supports healthcare and IT transformation initiatives for payer and provider organizations nationwide. Our experienced consultants and industry experts enable the profitability and longevity of organizations dealing with complex IT operations, federally mandated reform and intense security requirements. Primary offerings include consulting, talent management, and software.

SAMPLE COVER LETTER #2: "T" or Table Format

Mary Sanchez
9768 American Street
Chicago, Illinois 60600

July 1, 2015

Mr. Pilar Aquino
Dorenfest & Associates
9190 N. State St.
Suite 5012
Chicago, Illinois 60699

The "T" format is the same for all parts of the cover letter except for Section 2 where you connect your qualifications to the position description.

In the first section, be sure to include the official position title, as well as a statement answering the question "Why This Job?" What is it about the position, company, its mission or culture that makes you want to put the effort into applying? Why do you want this position beyond needing a job and a paycheck?

Dear Mr. Aquino:

I recently learned of a Healthcare Analyst position with Dorenfest & Associates from reviewing your website. This month I will be completing a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Justice Studies and a minor in Psychology. I am excited by the work your organization does for the community and the ways in which this position will expand upon my education and experience.

In a variety of full and part-time positions in business, military and non-profit organizations, I have acquired excellent time management, written and oral communication skills. I am extremely goal driven and motivated, as evidenced by pursuing my degree while holding full-time employment over the past several years. Below I have outlined my qualifications related to your position description:

Your Requirements

My Qualifications

Non-profit and healthcare experience	Interned for one year with the American Heart Association and served as a HealthCare Specialist for four years in the U.S. Army
Research or phone experience	Conducted extensive in person research as a part of a class project concerning socio-economic, sex, race, and education levels of youth accused of crimes between 1999 and 2001.
Strong written and oral communication skills	Successfully negotiated and resolved discrepancies or problems with defective merchandise / workmanship with customers, clients.
Gathering / analyzing data	Compiled a customer database based on demographic and income levels of prospective customers, resulting in a 25% increase in sales.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss further how my qualifications, energy, enthusiasm and willingness to learn can make a considerable contribution to Dorenfest & Associates. I can best be reached at m-sanchez4@hotmail.com or (773) 867-5309 and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Mary Sanchez

Questions to Keep in Mind When Writing a Cover Letter:

Introductory Paragraph:

- What position are you applying for? How did you learn about the position?
- Did someone refer you to the position? If so, mention them by name.
- What do you know about the company that might demonstrate your knowledge?
- Why are you interested in “X” company? Briefly give examples explaining (1-2 sentences).
- What are your specific qualifications, i.e. degree, years of experience?

Body Paragraph(s):

- What qualities were mentioned in the job posting? Address these with examples of your own skills and experiences. The body paragraph(s) should speak to the employer’s needs.
- Do you have a unique experience to share? What skills do you have that are relevant, but also make you an exceptional candidate? Do you have cultural or technological experiences?
- How can you sell yourself? What makes you the best candidate?
- Can you expand on your resume? Try not to just repeat what is already in your resume, but if you feel you can expand on an experience in a meaningful manner, do so.

Ending Paragraph:

- Who will contact whom? Let the employer know that you intend to follow up with them.
- Restate your interest and thank the employer for their time, without apologizing, at the end of your letter.
- Don’t forget to express your interest in interviewing for the position.

More to Keep in Mind:

- Make your cover letter personal to the company. Employers know a template letter when they see one and are generally unimpressed by them. Express not only who you are, but also why you would be perfect for their company.
- Find out who will be receiving your letter and title it to a specific person, rather than “to whom it may concern”, as this will prove your interest in the company and willingness to do research when necessary.
- Keep your words positive! You want to demonstrate to the employer that you are an optimistic person who will show not only yourself, but the company as well, in a positive light.
- Keep it simple. Try to keep your statements to the point and do not repeat your skills and qualifications unnecessarily.
- Have someone else read your cover letter over. They might catch a grammar or structure error that you missed. Spell check.
- Spell check. Spell check

Do's and Don'ts of Cover Letter Writing:

DO

- **Address the job announcement:** Understand the requirements and job details and responsibilities. Cover Letters should be specific for the job to which you are applying. One general cover letter will not be equal to multiple roles.
- **Speak to the needs of the organization:** Start with an opener that shows you understand the industry and can meet their needs. Make specific reference to the company's mission if appropriate to show that your goals align.
- **Highlight key words for the job posting:** Your cover letter could be scanned for keywords and dismissed immediately if appropriate words are not included.
- **Promise to deliver results:** Detail why past experiences and challenges make you the perfect fit for this position. If you've overcome specific obstacles to succeed, this is a great place to communicate those experiences.
- **Show your passion:** Hiring managers are looking for the person who will be enthusiastic and committed to the position and organization. Demonstrate why you are that person with concrete examples but avoid over-exaggeration.
- **Keep the letter short:** 3 – 4 paragraphs should cover what you need to say without overwhelming the recipient. Your cover letter should not exceed one page with 11-point font.
- **Use traditional formatting:** Research sample cover letters to learn where to place various required information, such as your contact information, the hiring manager's contact information, signature, etc. Be sure to use a professional font (ex. Times New Roman or Arial).
- **Address your reader:** Find out the name of the hiring manager if it is not already included in the posting. Avoid generalized greetings, such as "To whom it may concern".
- **Know what you are asking for:** State clearly that you are interested in interviewing for the position. Conclude your cover letter with this message to drive home your intentions.
- **Thank your reader:** Be sure to show your appreciation for their time and consideration.
- **PROOFREAD:** Spell check will not catch all grammatical errors. Proofread your cover letter several times as well as asking a professional to critique your cover letter for feedback and grammatical errors. If employers ask for a candidate that is detail-oriented and your cover letter has several mistakes, the reader could reject your letter.

DON'T

- **Reiterate your resume:** Make your cover letter a unique representation of why you are the perfect person for the job.
- **Use jargon:** Don't confuse the recipient by using industry or military lingo. Try to translate your skills to demonstrate why they make you the perfect fit.
- **Highlight your weakness:** Focus on explaining how your past experiences will translate to this new role.
- **Underestimate the importance of a good cover letter:** A bad cover letter can negate a great resume. Proofreading and customization are essential to making an impression.
- **Use colored paper, photos, add borders or abbreviate words:** Cover letters should be formatted and written professionally.
- **Submit your cover letter with typos:** Make sure you and another professional proofreads your cover letter before you finalize the document and submit.