

Cover Letter Tips

What is a cover letter?

A cover letter is a letter you send with your CV to a potential employer. It is your opportunity to go beyond the CV and focus the employer's attention on the experience and skills you possess that are directly related to the position available. A cover letter is basically a sales letter: it promotes your abilities and is written with the potential employer's interests foremost in mind.

Should you write a cover letter to go with your CV when applying for a job?

Absolutely! Your cover letter will be almost as important as your CV. It will introduce you to a potential employer and summarize your specific qualifications for a given position. It is also a chance for the potential employer to inspect your writing skills.

Can you use the same cover letter for all the CVs you send out?

No. You should always customize the letter as much as possible to the needs of particular employer you are contacting. Customizing requires thinking about the health care company, their patients, and the work you see yourself doing. It means imagining yourself in the position and the situations you'd be facing, and figuring out the abilities and traits that you possess that are important for success.

For any position, there are two types of skills: core skills, which any serious applicant will be expected to have, and a much broader range of skills that would be useful to the employer but go beyond the basic requirements. You need to spend some time thinking about both types of skills. Having the first kind will get you considered; having the second kind will make you stand out from the competition. For example, all pharmacy interns can and will perform basic drug distribution (a core skill). A manager of a busy pharmacy will be especially interested in an intern with previous job experience as a waiter or receptionist, as these jobs require good public relations skills and involve a busy environment. The intern who emphasizes these broader skills to a potential employer will stand out from those interns presenting only core skills.

How should you organize your cover letter?

Cover letters should use standard business formatting, beginning with the date, a return address and the address of the company to which the letter is going. Once this information is presented, you can begin the body of your letter. A letter should have the following parts:

Salutation (Greeting)

Your letter should be addressed to a particular person if at all possible. The person's name should be followed by a colon (Dear Ms. Employer:). If you are unable to obtain a person's name, acceptable ways to address the letter include:

- Dear Pharmacy Manager:
- To whom it may concern:
- Dear Sir or Madam:

Never guess at a gender. If you do not know whether the person is male or female, simply address the letter using the person's full name.

Opening (First paragraph)

This identifies the position for which you are applying, states where you learned about the position, notes the enclosures (resume, application packet, etc.), and provides a bridge statement referring to your qualifications for the job. Sample openings include:

- “I am very interested in obtaining a position with your organization. Enclosed please find my resume for your review.”
- “In response to your ad in Pharmacist's Weekly, I wish to apply for the position of Clinical Pharmacist.”
- “Several things you mention in your ad for a pharmacist make me think you may be looking for someone with my experience. Let me briefly explain.”
- “Peggy Preceptor from Pharmacy Emporium suggested I contact you about ...”

Education, Skills and Experience (second paragraph)

You should identify briefly and specifically the reasons that you feel yourself uniquely qualified for the position. You need to outline previous work or rotation projects, special degree or certificate programs, or other experiences that you feel make you a good fit for the job. Providing a description about how the potential employer's pharmacy works and how you feel you could contribute to the success of that operation will raise the employer's opinion of you, as you have obviously taken the time to find out more about the job.

To write an eye-catching second paragraph summarizing your relevant skills and background, take your cues from the ad. Look carefully at the job description and the requirements for the position, then construct three to five sentences that show how your experience specifically matches what the employer is seeking. This will be fairly easy if the ad contains detailed information about the desired qualifications of the pharmacist or intern. It will be more difficult with a brief ad, since you will not have much of a job description to address. In this case it is best to contact the employer and obtain more details.

More relevant information (optional paragraph)

You may choose to list other qualifications that, though not specifically necessary for the job, may enhance your chances of job success. Examples of such qualifications may include non-pharmacy jobs that gave you transferable skills, or professional association or volunteer work that illustrates your ability to be a problem-solver or group worker.

Another use for this paragraph might be to show the employer your enthusiasm for the position. If this is your “dream job,” let him or her know! This extra interest might get you the interview. This approach will not work if the appropriate enthusiasm is not there, so try this only if you are sincere.

Concluding paragraph

If you are sending a letter of inquiry and not responding to a particular job opening, end your letter with a statement saying you will call them...then do it! You should contact the person you wrote to within three days of the letter's arrival (assume 3 days for arrival of local mail, and 4 for out-of-town.) When sending a letter for a specific opening, you may or may not want to follow up with a phone call. However, you should suggest a meeting to discuss your qualifications for the position.

Thanking a person for their consideration or time puts a positive and clear end to the letter.

Closing

End with "Sincerely," then skip 4 lines and type your name. Sign your letter between the "Sincerely" and your name.

What other things should you do when composing a cover letter?

Since your cover letter will be sent with your resume, the two should look similar.

- Use the same paper that you used for your resume. Consider using resume paper, which is a little thicker in texture.
- Margins should never be less than an inch: 1" or even 1.25" is better. Don't shorten the margins to squeeze your letter on to a single page. Either edit some material out or lengthen the margins and the space between paragraphs and go on to a second page.
- Use the same font type used on your resume (probably Times New Roman). Use 11 or 12-point size.

Cover letters are more casual and personal than resumes. You want to sound genuine and sincere, yet maintain professionalism. Below are a few more tips that may help:

- Use personal pronouns (I, you)
- Strive to portray a positive tone about yourself and your skills without sounding boastful.
- Never refer negatively to past or current positions.
- Keep your cover letter to one page in length whenever possible.
- Keep paragraphs short. No more than seven lines, and preferably five or fewer. Vary the sentence length.
- Be a real person — show some personality and enthusiasm.
- Avoid vague statements. Quantify what you can.

The format information outlined above is reiterated more concisely on the next page.

Adapted from “Cover Letter Tips Sheet” from the University of Washington

Basic cover letter format:

Date

Your Name
Your Address
City, State, Zip Code

Employer’s Name
Employer’s Title
Name of the Organization
Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Dr./Prof./Mr./Ms./Mrs. (name):

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH: State why you are writing, naming the specific position for which you are applying. If you are writing a solicited letter of application, explain how you found out about the opening. Note any enclosures either here or in the closing paragraph.

SECOND PARAGRAPH: Tell the employer what you can offer him/her. Demonstrate that the skills, experience and education that you possess will meet his/her needs. Use action verbs to emphasize your capabilities (e.g., planned, organized, designed). Refer briefly to accomplishments that are relevant to the job for which you are applying. Identify at least one thing about you that is unique—that makes you the best candidate to fill the organization’s needs.

If you are answering an ad or a job request, be sure to address all of the requirements the employer stipulated. For example, if she/he requires a computer language or hospital experience, indicate that you have these requirements.

THIRD PARAGRAPH: Include additional relevant information and/or explain why this organization and/or position interests you. Be specific, why do you want to work for this company!



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CLOSING PARAGRAPH: Open the door for an interview. Thank the person for their consideration. Request an appointment to discuss the opening. Provide your preferred contact information. Be confident!

Yours truly,

Your Signature

Your Name Typed