

Tips and Tricks: Resumes and Cover Letters

Writing Your Cover Letter

What a cover letter is: A cover letter is a personal, formal introduction. Think of it as a first impression—and the only chance you get to separate yourself from all the other students applying for internships. Cover letters are critical to the hiring process. Many employers will not even look at resumes that aren't accompanied by letters.

What a cover letter isn't: A cover letter is not a reiteration of your resume. It's not a boring, bland, meaningless document, and it should not read like anyone else's cover letter.

Do follow standard business letter format. There are two widely accepted formats for business letters: flush-left (all text aligned with left margin, spaces between paragraphs, no indents on paragraphs, sender's address flush left with signature) and indented paragraph style (recipient's address and sender's address in signature tabbed to center; all other text flush left, with indents on paragraphs but no line spaces between paragraphs). Follow one of these standard styles, but don't blend them together.

Do use a personalized greeting. Writing "To Whom It May Concern" at the top of your letter basically says "Hey, I'm Too Lazy to Learn Your Name." Use courtesy titles and last names. And for heaven's sake, spell people's names correctly.

Don't use stiff, stilted or passive language. Avoid being stuffy or unnaturally formal in your letter. "It is with great interest that I am applying for..." "With this letter, I would like to express my interest..." Instead, use an active voice. "I am writing to express my interest in a summer editorial internship position with Cincinnati Magazine."

Do clearly express your interest in the position or internship. While this doesn't necessarily have to be the first line of your letter (see the next tip about avoiding boring first lines), it should appear relatively early in your letter, so your intent in writing this letter is clear.

Don't lose your reader with your first sentence. Remember all the time we've spent in journalism classes talking about the importance of leads in stories? The same theory applies in everything you write for the rest of your life. If your opening sentence is drab, predictable or lame, it's a major turn-off, and it may prevent a person from reading the rest of your letter. This doesn't mean you need to shock the reader or open with a cheesy joke. But consider focusing on a really compelling, personal detail that sums up why you are a great fit for this opportunity. (Here's an example of a cover letter I could write if I applied for an internship at National Geographic: "Ever since I was 7, I've been hoarding back issues of National Geographic. I'd stay up after bedtime, secretly reading under my sheets with a flashlight, slowly flipping through the pages and dreaming about all the faraway places in the world where cultures so different from my own existed. Twenty years later, I still have stacks of those yellow-bordered magazines tucked away in my mother's basement, and I just can't seem to part with them. In fact, my longtime fascination with magazines, and particularly National Geographic, is what lead me to pursue a degree in journalism..." etc.)

Do be humble. While the goal is to highlight your skills, avoid boasting or grandstanding. Remember, you need an internship more than an employer needs you, so always keep your ego in check when dealing with a potential employer.

Do research the publication or company and illustrate a genuine interest in the subject matter. Show that you've taken the time to learn something about the publication you hope to work for, either by referencing specific content or by sharing your interest or excitement for the subject matter. Don't fake it. You do want to intern at this magazine, right? So explain why. What do you like about the reporting techniques, the way the magazine communicates with its readers? What columnists do you love to read in this particular newspaper?

Don't be self-absorbed. OK, John F. Kennedy didn't quite phrase it like this, but ask not what your employer can do for you, but what you can do for your employer. Don't fill your cover letter with all the wonderful benefits you'll get out an internship. Remember your audience: It's an editor who's thinking, "OK, so I know this kid wants to work here. But what's in it for us?" Highlight what abilities and characteristics you bring to the table, so an employer recognizes the benefits in selecting you as an intern.

Do elaborate on skills or accomplishments that may not be fully apparent in your resume. Let's say you've been an editor at The News Record for a year. Your resume briefly lists your responsibilities and accomplishments in that capacity, but your cover letter is where you can share a specific anecdote or example that illustrates your dedication and commitment to excellence. (Instead of saying, "I'm dedicated and committed to excellence" –which sounds as bland and meaningless in your cover letter as it just did here—be specific. Write about that 60-hour week at the News Record when you painstakingly obsessed over an innovative enterprise package that included four hard-hitting articles about recent administrative shortcomings, two of which you wrote yourself.)

Don't be generic or bland. Why even write a letter if you're not going to put some real energy into it? If you plan on writing a cover letter that copycats one you saw as an example on Monster.com, don't even bother applying for an internship. You're a writer, right? So you should be able to write a compelling, personalized and perhaps even persuasive letter about yourself.

Do be specific. Give examples—specific, personal, concrete examples—as often as you can in your cover letter. (Sound familiar? We talk about this all the time when you're writing articles for publication.). If you write that you're focused, hard-working, entrepreneurial, a great collaborator, etc., give specific examples to illustrate these skills. Concrete details are always more compelling and credible than generalizations.

Don't use attention-getting ploys to stand out. Colored paper, sparkles and a picture of you and your knickknack collection may make you stand out, but in a bad way. Stand out by writing a compelling, engaging cover letter and presenting your skills and accomplishments in a professional, clean format in your resume.

Do be professional. Don't litter your letter with smiley-face or winky emoticons. Don't use exclamation points, which are a telltale sign of an amateur writer. Don't threaten or plead with your reader, and don't include any inappropriate or sketchy details.

Do show conviction and passion. Enthusiasm is palpable, and you're a far more promising candidate for a job if you can demonstrate an energetic, genuine interest in the position. This doesn't mean using lots of exclamation points or making stuff up, but it does mean writing with conviction and passion.

Writing Your Resume: Content

Your name and address. If the application period overlaps between the academic year and summer, list both an academic/school address and a home/summer address, and make the distinction clear. Do list your email address, but not a personalized one like "sweetybabe14@yahoo.com," which is ridiculously unprofessional. Create a more professional-looking email address, such as John.L.Smith@yahoo.com.

Objective. Skip it. It's virtually pointless to include this on a resume, and it's an obvious space-filler, which may as well shout "Hey, I have no real skills or experience, but here's what I dream of doing." Your cover letter should state your intention, focusing on the specific position and company you're applying for. Your resume should focus on your work experience and skills. And objectives are often so generic and canned they're useless to an employer. What if your objective doesn't match the employer's need? Then you're eliminated.

Education. List your degree (B.A. in journalism), the institution (University of Cincinnati) and your actual or expected graduation date (expected graduation: June 2008). If your cumulative GPA is above a 3.5, it's impressive, so consider listing it on your resume. If you graduated summa cum laude or cum laude, for example, that's a notable achievement, so include it.

Work experience. List all your significant job experiences as a young adult, from most recent to least recent. Eventually, you won't include your making-ends-meet college jobs (Pizza Hut, Hollywood Video) on your resume, but for now, they might be the only evidence you have to show a potential employer that you know how to show up on time, follow directions, work under supervision, present yourself professionally to customers, etc. As you progress in your career, list only your most relevant professional experiences (getting rid of the make-ends-meet jobs as soon as you can). Keep in mind that job titles and responsibilities are more relevant and impressive to an employer than dates, so give visual emphasis to job titles or company names. When describing each job, be specific, but don't write something that reads like an ultra-bland employment ad for a job you once had. List what you accomplished and what specific responsibilities you had. Your brief elaboration of your duties of each job should illustrate how competent/successful you were at that job. Use active, concrete verbs as often as possible. (Example: Instead of "was responsible for creating marketing materials," write "Created, designed, wrote and edited more than 20 direct-mail promotions for a 30,000+ customer base.") Always be as specific as possible. Concrete details—in any kind of writing—are always stronger than generalizations.

Awards or accomplishments. Include them, particularly if they're relevant to writing/journalism or are academic in nature. Keep it brief. List the award title and year. If the nature of the award is unclear, you may need to briefly clarify (i.e., writing award), but be concise.

Additional interests. A prospective employer isn't really interested in your basket-weaving skills. However, if your interests are related to the field (i.e., digital photography), consider including them. But emphasize skills and work experience in your resume, not your hobbies or weird obsessions.

Publications. At this point in your life, you're not ready to include this section on your resume because you're probably not extensively published yet, but once your work has been published by several different notable publications, list them, alphabetically, on your resume. Don't list the title of every article. The idea is to show your versatility as a writer, and to illustrate that you've written for a variety of audiences and worked with numerous editors.

References. Unless you've been asked to list them, just put a simple "References available upon request" at the bottom of your resume. If you've been asked to include them (three is the norm), include a separate sheet of paper listing their full names, job titles, addresses and contact information.

Writing Your Resume: Format

Visual hierarchy. The overall look of your resume is important. The document should have a clear, recognizable structure. Don't over-design your resume, filling the page with too many eye-catching design elements. Use design elements (i.e., line rules, all-caps type, bold and italicized text) sparingly and consistently. The important thing is that there is a meaningful, logical hierarchy of information. The format should give impact to the most important text, while making it easy for someone to skim through your experience. Bullets, indentations and type enhancements (bold, italics) are fine, but don't go overboard, which results in everything being emphasized. Organize information in each section chronologically, from most recent to least recent. Your resume should look tidy and polished. Neatness always counts. Awkward line breaks, inconsistent tabs and funky margins look sloppy.

Length. Keep your resume at one page. At this point in your career, you should be able to present your professional and educational history in a concise, one-page document. This doesn't mean use 9-point type to squeeze in random details. Avoid repetition. If you have had two job experiences that focus on similar responsibilities and skills, then visually combine the two positions so you're not describing the same skill sets twice.

Consistency. This is critical. Don't switch fonts halfway through the document. Keep the point size consistent (no smaller than 10-point and no larger than 12-point) and avoid overly artsy/"cute"/curly fonts. Stick to Times, Times New Roman, Arial, Verdana, Helvetica or something subtle. No Brush Script or Broadway; no Snap ITC or Script.

Accuracy. Never, ever lie or exaggerate on a resume. Potential employers really do call your former employers, and you will lose all credibility if you have presented false information.

Conciseness. A person may look at your resume for less than five minutes, so you have a very limited chance to convey your skills and experience to someone. Your information should be clearly organized and concise while being specific and detailed.

Editing Your Resume and Cover Letter

Grammar. A single grammatical error in your resume or cover letter can be fatal. Know what run-on sentences, sentence fragments, comma splices and misplaced modifiers are, and never let them slip into your writing. Watch out for agreement problems between pronouns and their antecedents (number, gender) and nouns and verbs (number, tense, p.o.v.). When listing a series of examples, make sure they're all in parallel structure (i.e., either noun phrases or verb phrases, but not a mixture of both).

Consistency. Be consistent with number usage, abbreviation, dates, etc. Even though Microsoft Word and MS Word are both correct, you shouldn't have one style in your resume and another in your cover letter. Remember, you're applying for an internship that will involve editing duties. You can illustrate your editing skills by not having a single error in these documents that so poignantly reflect the abilities you claim to have.

Style. Follow AP style for capitalization, hyphenation, punctuation and preferred spellings/word usage (i.e., *adviser* instead of *advisor*). Don't use text shortcuts like ampersands, which look lazy and unprofessional (unless they're part of a company's formal name, such as AT&T). Make sure that hyperlinks, if referenced in your resume, are not underlined, bolded or in differently colored text.

Spelling. It's critical that you catch all spelling errors and typos. Don't rely on your computer's spellchecker, which will pass over "manger" when you meant to write "manager." And let's get real here. If you're consistently making spelling and grammatical errors in your writing, you're in the wrong field. Period. Don't kid yourself. An editor will notice spelling and grammatical errors and will absolutely care.

Punctuation.. Is there a period at the end of every job description? Do your dashes look like hyphens? Do you even know when to use a semicolon to separate items in a list? Know how to use punctuation correctly, and be consistent with your usage throughout the resume document. Follow AP style in both your resume and cover letter.

Typos. Check every your/you're, its/it's, their/they're, ever/every. Read your resume backwards to make yourself really look at every single word. Even extra spaces between words look sloppy. One letter left unitalicized in an italicized word shows you're not good with details. Use a microscope if you have to, but copyediting your resume should be an obsessively compulsive exercise. Remember, you're applying for a position where you'll be writing and editing. Your resume and cover letter should be flawless.