The cover letter is simply a letter that accompanies your résumé and serves as an introduction of your qualifications. Its main purpose is to interest employers in your résumé. An effective résumé will often lead to an interview invitation, which may result in a job offer. The cover letter, therefore, is extremely important and MUST communicate how you can contribute to the organization in a meaningful way. Forget about your needs: Employers are primarily interested in how your skills can fulfill their needs. Remember, a cover letter is a sample of your writing, so a well-written cover letter can earn you points!

Cover Letter Writing Tips

- The cover letter is an extension of your résumé. Both should be on the same kind of paper, have the same margins, and have the same font style and size.

- Each cover letter should be addressed to a specific person. If after doing some research you find no appropriate name, list a generic title (i.e. “Dear Search Committee or Hiring Manager for X position”, etc.) followed by a colon.

- Take the time to customize your cover letter to the position you are applying for. Specifically, use the keywords found in the job description within your cover letter. Above all, stress your skills, abilities, and what you can do as a result of your background, training, experience, or education. By stressing accomplishments you emphasize your potential value.

- Avoid flowery phrases about personal growth, challenge, advancement, etc. Flowery phrases often say nothing. Instead, speak directly about concrete reasons why the employer should be interested in you.

- Let your personality show. Be warm and personable. Most letters are dull and mechanical, so make yours the one that is different.

- Avoid repeatedly using the word “I”.

- Effective cover letters are short and concise, no longer than four or five paragraphs. The cover letter should be formatted like a business letter and not exceed one page in length. See the back of this sheet for formatting/content suggestions.

- Always end the cover letter with “Sincerely” and your name. If sending a hard copy, be sure to actually sign the letter.

- If you do not receive a response within seven to fourteen days, you may follow up with a phone call or another letter expressing your interest, unless the job posting indicated that you should not contact the employer.

Creating an Electronic Cover Letter

If you are emailing your cover letter:

- Include a descriptive subject line like “Application for the [name here] position.”
- Address the email to the recipient followed by a colon (i.e. Dr. Smith:). There is no need to list the mailing address, etc., as you would at the beginning of a printed cover letter.
- Paste your Word version cover letter in the body of the email.
- Limit each line of text to 60 characters to avoid hanging lines. Tip: email the cover letter to yourself, friends, etc. to assess how the email will appear to the employer.
- Consider also attaching a Word or PDF version of your cover letter to the email to ensure the appearance of the cover letter remains intact when printed.

If you are submitting a cover letter and résumé through an online application system:

- The same guidelines apply in this situation as in developing a “paper” cover letter.
Sample Format for “Paper” Cover Letter

UMW Box 1021
1701 College Avenue
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

October 18, 20XX

Ms. Amy Wallace
Director of Compliance
International Consulting
1234 Business Drive
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

Dear Ms. Wallace:

State what you are applying for. State where you heard about the open position. This information helps the employer know where to continue to advertise. The information is especially helpful to include when a prominent person has recommended you for the position, so include his or her name/title. Discuss why you are interested in the position by focusing on what you learned about the company through your research. Mention why you think the company is unique (i.e. awards they have received, their work environment, or their values/goals). Write about who you are, but keep it short. Mention your degree, anticipated graduation date, etc.

If you are applying for an advertised position, discuss two to three qualifications and/or skills that the employer is seeking. State that you have the skills and provide an example of a time when you obtained or used the skill. You may also briefly mention that you have three to four of the other qualifications that the employer is seeking without providing examples. Some employers prefer a story line of how your interests evolved interwoven with information about your background, experiences, and education. This is especially helpful if you are changing career direction. The middle section of the cover letter may be broken into two paragraphs.

Devise a statement that summarizes two or three skills that you have not mentioned yet and conclude that they will make you an excellent candidate for the position. Acknowledge what the next step will be: You will wait to hear from the employer or you will contact the employer. If you choose the second choice, provide a general date of contact. Thank the employer for reviewing your résumé, and note that you are looking forward to an interview. Provide your contact information such as an email address and phone number.

Sincerely,

Susan Smith