COVER LETTER BASICS

A cover letter accompanies and introduces your résumé. It exemplifies how your experiences align with specific employers’ needs.

What is a cover letter and what should it include?

A cover letter is used when:
- you’re applying to a posted position
- you’re submitting your résumé to an organization that is not currently hiring (in this case, it’s sometimes called a “letter of introduction” or a “prospecting letter”)
- you’re applying for graduate school, a co-op program, an internship, scholarship etc.

In terms of content, you may include information like specific competencies, credentials, types of experiences or demonstrated accomplishments.

Cover letters responding to job postings should:
- Identify the organization, specific position and, if possible, the specific individual to whom you are addressing the letter
- Speak to the requirements of the position (look at the posting and outline how your experience matches the criteria)
- Describe how your experience and competencies will benefit the organization (if you have no direct experience, highlight your transferable experience)

Letters of introduction or prospecting letters should:
- Identify the type of position you’re interested in and explain how you know to contact them
- Outline how your experience and competencies will bring value
- Indicate when and how you’re going to follow up

What should your cover letter look like?

Keep your cover letter to one page unless otherwise specified, and match the font and style of your résumé. See the WHAT DOES A COVER LETTER LOOK LIKE? resource for visual samples, and take a look at the cover letter samples.

How should you break down the content?

Every cover letter is different, so this is just a suggestion of what you may want to include.

Introductory paragraph:
- State your purpose and why you are applying
- List the job title and organization name
- Show that you’ve researched the organization by referencing its mission/vision statement
- Indicate your enthusiasm and state what you’ll bring to the organization
Middle paragraph(s):
✚ Use an active voice and group information around the job requirements (e.g. your organizational skills)
✚ Avoid starting every sentence with "I"
✚ Use transition phrases (e.g. additionally, also)
✚ Give solid examples of your past experience and the competencies you bring to the organization as a result

Closing paragraph:
✚ Thank the organization
✚ Cover any “add-ons” (e.g. criminal record check, age limit, citizenship/residency, driver’s license)
✚ Provide your contact information (if applicable)
✚ Restate your interest in the position and express interest in an interview

Should all cover letters be specific, or can a general cover letter work?
Your cover letters should make it as easy as possible for the employer to see how you fit their needs. A general cover letter that doesn’t address the particular job posting won’t cut it.

What steps should you take when writing a cover letter?
✚ Assess the needs of the organization and how you can bring value (see the HOW TO DECONSTRUCT A JOB POSTING resource and then complete the DECONSTRUCT A JOB POSTING WORKSHEET)
✚ Choose your format and write your first draft
✚ Get feedback and make revisions
✚ Proofread and submit your cover letter