

# Cover letters

## The purpose of the cover letter

Cover letters are vital marketing tools that clearly define what you bring to the table. Additionally, your cover letter is usually one of the first pieces of information a prospective employer sees about you. If a busy hiring person is unimpressed with your cover letter, they may not even bother reading your resume.

Put simply, your cover letter is a piece of persuasive writing. Together with a resume, the cover letter should generate sufficient interest on the part of employers to make them curious enough to meet you. A good cover letter:

- Introduces who you are—your skills, experiences, education, background, and interests—as it relates to *this* job
- Clearly articulates why you are interested in working for *this* specific organization
- Does not exceed one page

Writing a good cover letter involves thinking about why you want this particular job and forces you to consider your qualifications. It is crucial that you understand what the employer is seeking, and then reflect that understanding through your cover letter. Be especially mindful of the specific terminology used in the nonprofit sector while preparing your materials (see pages 132-133 and [Appendix One](#) for more information on nonprofit vocabulary).

Nonprofit employers are interested in good communicators and your cover letter highlights (for better or for worse) your writing and communication skills. Poorly structured cover letters, or those with typographical, grammatical, or spelling errors, are used as quick criteria to screen candidates out of the process.

If you succeed with this “on-paper presentation” you have a greater chance of proceeding to the next step in the job search process, which is the “in-person presentation”, better known as the interview. Bottom line: cover letters are much too important to take for granted.

## Cover letter content

### Talking points

Every job is defined by a unique combination of elements that the employer requires. Your work history, volunteerism, academic background, and even which issue areas you feel passionately about must all be presented in the context of what the organi-

### The sector switcher's cover letter

As a sector switcher, it is very likely that an employer will have some legitimate concerns about your willingness to do a given nonprofit job and your ability to fit into the organization. Whether your background raises flags around compensation issues (“Surely they won't be happy with the salary!”) or cultural fit (“How could someone who's worked in such a hierarchical, structured environment fit in here?”), the cover letter is the forum for you to address questions that you know your resume will raise, as well as to help the employer see where you are going professionally.

Think of the cover letter as a place not to dwell so much on where you have been, but rather on where you are going. Talk about what you are moving toward and not what you are moving away from. Negativity about former employers or disillusionment over being a “cog in the corporate wheel” can create a bad first impression. On the other hand, exploring how your career shift is helping you realign the aspects of your life about which you feel most passionate will help an employer understand your perspective and answer the two important questions about your willingness to do the work and your ability to fit in.

As you look at your resume, ask yourself, “What questions, concerns, omissions, or stereotypes does my resume create?” Then, use your cover letter to address all of those points. Remember, if you notice red flags in your resume, an employer will most likely notice the same issues. Fortunately, your cover letter is the tool you have to waylay those fears.

zation does and what they are looking for in a given candidate. For this reason, successful cover letters are *never* generic—they must be targeted to the set of required experiences and skills outlined in the job description. You can have several resumes ready to tweak and reorganize based on the position you are applying for, but you should write a new cover letter for each position. Experienced search committees can see right through a formulaic cover letter and will often quickly discard it.

Before you actually begin writing the cover letter, first identify the **required job elements**, and then consider which set of elements should be emphasized. Since cover letters should be just a few paragraphs long, deciding what to leave out will be easier if you put your energy into pinpointing what *must* be included.

In order to objectively extract talking points from a job description, you can approach the process analytically by taking the following steps:

### **Step one: Conduct research on the organization**

The goal of this research is to develop *organizational talking points* to which you can refer in the introduction and conclusion of the cover letter. A few places to look when conducting your research are websites, brochures, marketing literature, annual reports, organizational directories, and trade journals.

- Explore the organization's mission—what they do, how they do it, and why they do it. Even if you are familiar with the agency, find out how they describe what they do. First and foremost, the mission defines a nonprofit, so it is crucial to quickly demonstrate your understanding of the context of their work.
- Determine how the position connects with the mission.
- Find out how this agency is different from similar organizations in the field. Be able to answer the question: "What makes this organization unique?"

### **Step two: Deconstruct the job or internship description**

The goal of this step is to identify the raw description requirements and reduce them to manageable, refined description requirements. At this point, you should be able to answer the question: "What are the jobs, tasks, and responsibilities likely to be?"

- Identify and underline the required qualifications and skills in the description.
- Underline the responsibilities and task descriptions.

### **Step three: Consolidate and prioritize the key requirements you have extracted**

You should end up with a list of five to ten refined position requirements that will allow you to write a cover letter emphasizing qualities the employer is seeking.

- Infer what the employer considers most important among the requirements outlined in the job description.
- Usually, employers reveal their priorities by listing the most important tasks and job requirements first, by repeating the same tasks throughout the job description, or by highlighting similar elements in different ways.

### Step four: Plug yourself into the organizational and job requirements

Compare your background and draw parallels to the refined description requirements you have culled from the job description. Consider your relevant:

- Work experience
- Academic experience (degrees, program, specialization, and relevant coursework; other degrees; certifications; study abroad; etc.)
- Sector knowledge (your knowledge of: recent developments and trends in the nonprofit sector; the focus of organizations; influential people; etc.)
- Skill sets (managerial, financial, analytical, research, evaluative, public speaking, language, technical/computer, communication, team building, etc.)
- Beliefs/values (what commitments do you share with the organization?)
- Volunteer experience
- Leadership roles (awards, community organizations, work groups, etc.)

You should then arrive at a point where you can create a set of necessary talking points to use in the body of your cover letter that can also be used later during an interview.

If you follow these steps, you can objectively determine how qualified you will be in the employer's eyes based on the job description. It is unlikely that many candidates will have all of the required elements for a particular position. The closer you are, however, the better the fit.

**Remember, like the resume, the cover letter should answer: Can you do the job? Will you do the job? Will you fit in?** As a piece of persuasive writing, the cover letter is the primary place to convince the employer that the answer to all three questions is "Yes."

### Cover letter structure

A cover letter should not exceed one page or five paragraphs, and it should be written in concise, professional language. When considering whether to be short and sweet versus sophisticated and expressive, let relevance to the position be your guide. Usually, four paragraphs is sufficient but three paragraphs are even better. Remember, your reader is busy and too many paragraphs can be a strong visual deterrent.



**"AVAILABLE  
UPON  
REQUESTS"  
AND SALARY**

"Refer-  
ences/Writ-

ing Samples/Additional Information available upon request": One view on these components is that they are obvious and unnecessary to mention; of course these items are available if requested. However, these statements, which occur toward the end of a cover letter or resume, can also be seen as a visual signifier that there is no further information and that this is "The End." If the job description has explicitly requested references or writing samples, you should include these in your cover letter or in a separate, clearly labeled section. As another alternative, you could include online links to your writing samples.

#### Salary History or Requirements:

It is probably way too early in the game for this. This topic is best broached face-to-face during the interview rather than in writing. If the position description does not include a salary range, it is worth your time and the organization's time to make sure during an interview that the salary they are offering is one that you can accept. See [Chapter Ten](#) for more information on negotiating your compensation package.

For any and all aspects of your resume, be sure to consider both the position for which you're applying and your personal preferences. When it comes down to it, you're just not going to please every hiring manager with the multitude of style and content choices you'll make on your resume. The best you can do is be deliberate with your choices and try to make them relevant to the positions for which you're applying.

## First paragraph: Introduction

- Introduce yourself by stating the position for which you are applying and where you heard about the position. If someone referred you to this organization, mention that person's name in the first sentence (assuming you have asked for, and they have given you, permission beforehand).
- Refer to your organizational and necessary talking points—communicating elements of shared interest can hold the attention of the reader.
- State that you have the requisite combination of skills to be an asset to the organization. Your challenge in subsequent paragraphs is to back this up.

## Second paragraph: Professional and academic background

- If you anticipate your cover letter being longer than three paragraphs, it is important to concentrate on either your academic background or your professional background in your second paragraph. This will help you stay focused.
- Refer to your necessary talking points and highlight how you have the required skills to contribute to the organization. You should be expressing more here than stock sentences, like “I have strong research skills.” Instead, explain how and what you have researched. For example, “My Fulbright research on volunteer management in Canada and the United States was incorporated into several articles published in major industry newsletters.” You must draw a direct link between what you are referring to and what the employer is looking for. Give specific examples. Pull out a strong element or two from your resume. Remember, cover letters are not written in a vacuum.
- If you are writing a three-paragraph cover letter, it is fine to make this paragraph a combination of your academic and professional experience.

## Third paragraph: Professional, academic, or “wildcard”

- Again, refer to the necessary talking points, and highlight how you have the required skills to contribute to the organization.
- This is also an area where you can speak to skills you possess that are not necessarily professional or academic—wildcard elements that may need to be expressed. They may be industry-related or stand-alone: technical and IT skills, regional understanding, languages, communication skills, etc.
- If you can include your “other” skills in your second paragraph without making it too long, do so and omit this paragraph.

## Fourth paragraph: Synthesis/conclusion

- By way of conclusion, synthesize a number of elements already outlined

### Additional points on cover letters

- A resume should always be accompanied by a cover letter, even if it is not requested.
- Whenever possible, cover letters should be addressed to the specific hiring person rather than “HR” or “Personnel.” Pay close attention to spelling and job titles when addressing the contact person. A typo here could spell a quick trip to the trash for your application. When you cannot find a specific person to send your application to, it is still common practice to use the phrase “To Whom It May Concern” or “Dear Sir or Madam.”
- Typographical and spelling errors can cost you a job. Use spell check as you type (but don't trust it), proof-read your letter on paper at least three times, and ask someone else to look at it with a fresh eye.
- Don't forget to sign original letters and keep copies of all correspondence.
- Use good quality white or off-white paper for your resumes and cover letters.
- Make sure your name and phone number are on the cover letter in case it gets separated from your resume.
- If you are sending your cover letter via email, sending the letter as the text of the email message is acceptable. If sending your cover letter as an attachment, keep the text of your email message professional and brief. For example: “Attached are my cover letter and resume for the open \_\_\_\_\_ position with your organization. I look forward to hearing from you.”
- Remember to attach your resume to the email. It is pretty embarrassing if you need to send two emails because you forgot the attachment.
- If possible, convert your resume and cover letter to PDF format to ensure that you are not sending a document with “track changes” leftovers from the writing process.

in your cover letter. Keep in mind that synthesizing and repeating are two very different processes.

- Stress your commitment to what the organization does or your high level of motivation.
- Mentioning the agency's stature in the field can be effective, too.
- You may also reinforce your professional and academic qualifications as they relate to the employer's needs.
- Tell them that your resume is enclosed.
- Include your telephone number and email address.
- Thank the employer for their time and consideration and state that you look forward to hearing from them.

## Conclusion

Resumes and cover letters are the tools you use to market your distinct skills on paper. Since every employer and job opening is unique, your resume and cover letter must be customized and tailored for each position you pursue. By crafting resumes and cover letters that connect your *relevant* experience and abilities to those required by the employer, you can make your application materials “speak” to the people deciding which applicants to invite for an interview. The next chapter explores how to prepare yourself for an in-person presentation of the points you’ve made on paper in your resume and cover letter.

### What if I don't hear back?

Be sure to give the employer several days to review your materials, and check the job announcement to see if they've indicated when they'll respond to applicants or announce a decision. If you don't hear anything from the employer after that time, feel free to send them an email (much preferred over calling) to inquire about the status of your application. Unfortunately, some employers don't have (or take) the time to keep applicants updated on the hiring process.