

A **cover letter** is a standard professional letter with norms for content and format that are recognized by employers in every field. When you apply for a job or internship, you attach your resume to a one-page cover letter that contains three or four short paragraphs. A successful cover letter persuades an employer to look at your resume and grant you an interview.

A COVER LETTER SHOULD:

- Briefly explain what position you are applying for and how you found out about it
- Highlight specific skills or accomplishments that qualify you for the position
- Show a bit of your personality and express your enthusiasm about the position and organization

An effective cover letter promotes your most relevant skills and experiences for a specific position. It displays your writing skill and offers a sense of your individuality that isn't apparent in a resume. It also gives employers a first impression of your organizational skills and attention to detail, which is why it's especially important to pay close attention to proper spelling and grammar.

COVER LETTER ESSENTIALS

SALUTATION

If possible, address the letter directly to the person responsible for hiring. For example, Dear Ms. / Mr. / Dr. etc. If you aren't sure of the person's gender, use their full name. This is a formal letter, so use a colon rather than a comma after the salutation.

OPENING PARAGRAPH

The opening paragraph should be brief and specific. Identify the position for which you are applying and where you saw it posted or how you learned about it. If you were referred by someone connected with the organization, mention that person's name, connection with the organization, and your relationship with them. Briefly state what attracted you to this particular position and organization, and identify 2-3 reasons why you would be an excellent match for the position. Those 2-3 reasons will frame the body of your letter.

BODY PARAGRAPH(S)

In the middle one or two paragraphs, expand upon the reasons you would be an excellent match for the position, which you identified in your opening paragraph. Summarize how your skills and

accomplishments qualify you for the position and how you can add value to the organization. Some possibilities for what to include are:

- **Mention transferable skills.** These are skills acquired during any activity in your life, including jobs, classes, projects, hobbies, sports, etc. that are applicable to the work you want to do.
 - Examples of transferable skills include: oral and written communication; research; logic; work ethic traits such as drive, stamina, diligence, initiative, and reliability; ability to handle multiple tasks and thrive under deadline pressure; research skills; and the ability to achieve goals.
- **Demonstrate some knowledge of the organization.** Find out about the organization's mission and accomplishments. Describe how these fit with your interests and ideals and how you can make a contribution to the organization.
- **Convey a clear career goal** or, if unsure about your ultimate career goal, an explicit short-term goal.
- **Don't be afraid to show passion** for the job, the organization, or the field in general. If a potential employer can sense your enthusiasm, you'll stand out. If your values align with the organization's, say so and say why. (Nonprofit employers often make passion for their mission a job requirement.)

CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

Re-emphasize your enthusiasm for the job and how your skills can benefit the organization. This is a great place to mention a life or career goal if it is related to the position. Thank your reader for their consideration and mention how much you look forward to an interview.

CLOSING

Use an appropriate formal closing such as "Sincerely" or "Regards." If you are sending a hard copy (which is rare these days), sign your letter with your name typed below your signature. When you are sending your cover letter by email, including a signature that you have scanned and pasted into the letter is a nice touch, but not absolutely necessary.

MAKING YOUR LETTER STAND OUT

Aside from excellent organization of thoughts and an engaging writing style, you can make your cover letter stand out in a number of ways:

- **Make every effort to address your cover letter to a specific contact person**, using their name and title. Avoid using "To Whom It May Concern." If you find it impossible to get a name, at least use a title that will direct your resume and cover letter to the right person, for example: "Dear Internship Coordinator" or "Dear Hiring Manager" or "Dear Outreach Director." Be creative about finding a contact name. Check the web site. Call the organization and inquire. Ask someone you know who works there to check for you.

- **Accentuate the positive.** Avoid qualifiers that might imply hesitation or lack of confidence. For example:
Before: I may not have all the experience you would prefer, but I believe that my enthusiasm and willingness to learn make me a strong candidate.
Better: I believe that my enthusiasm and willingness to learn make me a strong candidate.
- **Use strong, active verbs and avoid the passive voice.** For example:
Before: The presentation was given at last year’s annual meeting of the Independent Filmmakers Association.
Better: I gave the presentation at last year’s annual meeting of the Independent Filmmakers Association.
- **Keep it simple and specific.** Avoid overly complicated language and excessive use of adjectives. For example:
Before: I have extensive and multifaceted experience interfacing with youth in various capacities.
Better: I have experience working with youth in a wide variety of after-school and summer programs.
- **Proofread.** Read your cover letter slowly out loud. This helps you catch obvious mistakes and awkward sentences. Once you have edited as much as you can, ask someone you trust to proofread—don’t rely solely on your computer’s spell/grammar check. Mistakes in spelling or grammar DO matter, and can make or break your application.

SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION

APPLY DIRECTLY TO THE EMPLOYER

Whenever possible, apply directly to the employer via email or their own online application. If you found the job posting on a large job search website such as Indeed, Idealist, internships.com, or glassdoor.com, avoid using the “apply now” function. Instead, try to find the same position posted on the employer’s own website and follow the instructions there. While it’s not always possible to find the original posting, it is preferable to use those instructions if you can.

CAREFULLY FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS IN THE JOB POSTING

When an employer posts a position, they have a system in place for reviewing the many applications they receive. If you apply outside their system, you run the risk that your application will not be seen and considered. That said, if you have a connection with someone at the organization, DO email them your application separately, in addition to following any other instructions.

FORMATTING YOUR COVER LETTER FOR EMAILING AND UPLOADING

- **Title your document** using your last name and the words “cover letter,” For example: Jones Cover Letter.pdf
- **Save your document** as a .pdf to preserve your formatting.
- **Be absolutely certain that your documents are free of viruses.** Send them electronically to yourself and to a friend first to make sure they’re easy to open, the formatting stays correct, and they’re virus-free.

APPLYING BY EMAIL

- **When sending your cover letter and resume by email,** try to find out if the employer would prefer the cover letter as an attachment or in the body of your email. If you can’t determine a preference, send it both ways in a single message, also attaching your resume.
- **Some employers will tell you specifically what to write in the subject line.** If they don’t, be sure to include the title of the position for which you are applying.
- **In the body of the email, briefly say why you are writing.** Ask the employer to contact you about any trouble opening attachments. For example:

SUBJECT: Application for Grant Writer Position

Dear Mr. Rogers:

I am applying for the position of Grant Writer at Friends of the Earth, which I saw posted recently on Idealist.org. I’m extremely enthusiastic about this opportunity and believe I am well qualified. My cover letter and resume are attached; please let me know if you have any trouble opening the attachments.

Thank you for your consideration, and I’m looking forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Jane Austin

EXAMPLE 1

Eliot Story

Hampshire College Box 1234, 893 West Street, Amherst, MA 01002
413-559-1234 | ejs12@hampshire.edu

Heading is the same as the heading on the student's resume.

January 17, 2019

Lia Norton
Clarion Books
Houghton Mifflin Company
215 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10003

In his intro, the applicant notes the position he is applying for and how he found out about it. He explains his enthusiasm for the company and states why he thinks he would be a strong candidate.

Dear Ms. Norton:

I was excited to find the Editorial Internship position for the summer of 2018 posted on bookjobs.com. The internship seems like an excellent opportunity to learn about the variety of tasks involved in publishing and promoting books. I am enthusiastic about the possibility of working for a publisher of Newbery and Caldecott Award winners, such as Karen Cushman, whose books I have thoroughly enjoyed, and I believe that my strong work ethic and attention to detail would make me a valuable member of your team.

Currently I am a second-year student at Hampshire College, concentrating in children's literature, creative writing, and education. Through my coursework I have studied elements of award-winning children's books and learned about the importance of promoting literacy for children. As a peer editor in one of my courses, I had the opportunity to read and critique other students' writing, which helped me develop an eye for detail and the ability to meet deadlines. My work experience at camps and schools taught me about teamwork, taking direction, and problem solving, all of which I would apply to the Clarion Books internship.

This applicant does not have any direct experience in editing or publishing, so he uses his academic and job experience to show how he is qualified. He shows the transferable skills he would bring to the position.

I am very interested in pursuing a career in children's book publishing and would love to have the opportunity to contribute to Clarion Books while learning more about the field. I look forward to speaking with you about this internship position. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Eliot Story

The applicant reiterates his seriousness about the career field and enthusiasm for the internship, which are especially important since he hasn't gotten experience yet.

EXAMPLE 2

Mara Woods
 Hampshire College Box 1234
 893 West Street
 Amherst, MA 01002
 413-559-1234
 mjw10@hampshire.edu

January 25, 2019

Ms. Mary Kronenwetter, Education Director
 The Fells
 Route 103A, PO BOX 276
 Newbury, NH 03255

Dear Ms. Kronenwetter:

I am writing to apply for the Summer 2019 Historical Tourism Internship posted on Idealist.org. While exploring The Fells' website, I was struck by The Fells' unique blend of historical preservation and wildlife conservation. As an avid gardener, nature enthusiast, and student of history, I was immediately attracted to the exquisite gardens, hiking trails, and historical buildings. I believe that this internship would be a great learning experience for me, and that my academic and museum experience has prepared me well for the position.

I am a third-year student at Hampshire College, where I have created my own course of study combining comparative religion, American history, and museum studies. My specific interest has been the influence of religious experience on individuals and cultures, both ancient and contemporary. I have paid particular attention to the study and preservation of American history, and I would be excited to use my knowledge to add depth to my interactions with museum visitors.

For the past three years, I have worked as an interpreter at Canterbury Shaker Village. My responsibilities included engaging with school groups of various sizes and age levels as well as leading adult audiences on tours through historic buildings. In addition to traditional tours, I experimented with several techniques of conveying information to the public including cooking demonstrations, craft projects, period costume, and role-playing. I also handled the front desk in the Visitor Education Center, greeting visitors and managing sales. I would love to build upon these experiences as a member of your summer education team; however, I would also be interested in joining your staff in whatever capacity is most needed.

After graduation I am hoping to pursue a career related to historical preservation and museum education. I am passionate about the idea of bringing history to life and making it accessible to multiple audiences, and it would be an honor to pursue my passion as an intern at the Fells this summer. I look forward to meeting you and sharing some of my ideas. Thank you for considering my application.

Sincerely,

Mara Woods

In her introduction, the applicant notes which position she is applying for and how she found out about it. She explains her enthusiasm for the museum and how it overlaps with her interests. She states that she has something to offer and something to learn.

In her second paragraph the applicant explains how her academic interest matches with the position.

In her third paragraph the applicant shows the skills she would bring by describing her previous experiences.

In her concluding paragraph, the applicant mentions her career goal as it relates to the internship. She also suggests a next step, and thanks the reader for their consideration.

EXAMPLE 3

Hampshire College
 Box 1234
 893 West Street
 Amherst, MA 01002
 413-559-1234
 swriter@gmail.com

April 17, 2019
 Rhonda Davies, Director
 Duke University Talent Identification Program
 1121 West Main Street
 Durham, NC 27701-2028

Dear Ms. Davies:

I was excited to see the posting on your website for a Teaching Assistant for the Duke TIP Summer Field Study course "A Writer's Art: Creative Writing." In 2017, I participated in this program and was deeply affected by being in a community of peer writers, working with caring and helpful instructors, and writing in and about northern New Mexico, a place that creatively inspires and challenges my work. My familiarity with the TIP program combined with my subsequent writing, facilitating, and teaching experience would make me an excellent candidate for this position.

At Hampshire College, I am completing a self-designed major that includes religious studies, creative writing, and a year-long journalism project. My studies have included multiple courses and workshops on poetry, essay, and literary journalism. Currently I am a teaching assistant for an undergraduate course entitled "High Spirits: Reading and Writing about Spiritual Experience," where I lead group writing workshops and work with students one-on-one. I am experienced with workshops and peer critiques, both through my college courses and informally with other writers. Last year, I founded and led a campus poetry club where we shared our own work and discussed other poets' work. I maintain a steady practice of creative writing, particularly poetry, creative nonfiction, and the intersections between the two.

I have two summers of experience working with students, ages 11 to 20, as an Adventure Leader at Ghost Ranch. I facilitated high and low ropes challenge courses and guided students on canoeing, kayaking, and hiking trips. My second summer, I helped lead the Youth Service Corps program, managing groups of teens for a week at a time. We traveled into the local community to engage in both service projects and cultural activities, and I facilitated discussions with students about these experiences. As the program was in its second year, I also helped to design its curriculum.

In both positions, I very much enjoyed working closely and independently with the students. As I near graduation, I am looking for an experience that combines my passions for writing, working with high school students, and the southwest. I think I would be a strong addition to your leadership team and look forward to the chance to meet you in an interview. Thank you for considering me.

Sincerely,

Sarah Writer

Note that this cover letter is for a job, not an internship, so the applicant focuses more on what she can offer and less on what she would learn from the position.

In her intro, the applicant notes which position she is applying for and how she found out about it. She summarizes why she would be a good candidate for the job and highlights her connection with the program.

In her middle two paragraphs the applicant gives specific examples of her experiences. By describing her experiences, she shows the skills she will bring to the position.

In conclusion, the applicant summarizes her interest in the position and re-states that she would be a good match, then thanks the employer for their consideration.