

COVER LETTERS

Hampshire College Career Options Resource Center

A cover letter is a standard professional letter with norms for content and format that are recognized by employers in every field, profit and nonprofit. 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.

The primary purpose of a cover letter is to persuade an employer to look at your resume and grant you an interview. A cover letter should:

- Briefly explain what position you seek 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 attractive and significant professional traits. It displays your writing skill and offers a sense of your individuality that isn't apparent in a resume. Its appearance gives employers their first impression of your organizational skills and attention to detail. That's why it is especially important to avoid spelling and grammatical errors.



Cover Letter Fundamentals

SALUTATION

Ideally, you will personalize the letter (see below, Making Your Cover Letter Stand Out). Be sure to spell the name correctly and use the proper salutation (e.g., Dear Ms. / Mr. / Dr. etc.). 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. Explain why you're writing, identify the job for which you are applying, and say how you heard about it. If you were referred by someone within/connected to the organization, mention that person's name and position/connection. Say why you are interested in this particular job and organization. (Avoid focusing on what you hope to learn or gain.)

BODY PARAGRAPH(S)

In the middle one or two paragraphs, summarize how your skills and accomplishments qualify you for the job or internship and how you can add value to the organization.

- What makes you a good candidate for this position? Mention specific experiences, accomplishments, and credentials – gained through course work, internships, work-study positions, field study experiences, extracurricular activities, and employment – that demonstrate skills relevant to the position (e.g., writing, leadership, multicultural awareness, public speaking, teaching).
- Focus on two or three key elements from your resume that most directly relate to the position and emphasize your potential value to the organization. Make an effort to avoid restating exactly what's on your resume. A cover letter should guide readers to what is most important about your experience, and add qualitative information.
- Mention transferable skills. These are skills acquired during any activity in your life – 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 ability to achieve goals.
- Convey a clear career goal or, if unsure about your ultimate career goal, an explicit short-term goal.

- 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.

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.)

CLOSING PARAGRAPH

- State that you have enclosed your resume and any supporting materials the employer may have requested (e.g., references, writing sample, portfolio, head-shot, etc.).
- Re-emphasize how enthusiastic you are about the job and how your skills can benefit the organization. Thank your reader for his/ her consideration and mention how much you look forward to an interview.
- Use an appropriate complimentary close such as “Sincerely” “Yours truly” or “Regards.”

If you haven’t had a response in 2-3 weeks, it’s a good idea to follow up with a phone call (or email) to make sure your application was received and to reinforce your interest. You may also ask if it would be all right to call back within a certain time frame, just to check on the status of the hiring process. There is a fine line between being assertive and being annoying, so pay attention to what is said – tone of voice as well as words. If the job posting specifies “No calls” you should respect that.

Making Your Cover 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 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 around for you.
- Show your understanding of professional standards by formatting your letter either in business (block) style or personal style. The difference is that in block style, all components of the letter begin at the left margin. In personal style, the return address, date and complimentary close begin at the centerline of the page, and paragraphs are indented 5 spaces. (See examples of both styles below.)
- 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 – 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.
- **PROOFREAD.** Ask someone you trust to proofread also. Don’t rely solely on your word processor’s spelling checker. Mistakes in spelling or grammar can send your application to the reject pile.
- Avoid overblown language and excessive use of adjectives.

Paper and Envelope Details

GENERALLY ACCEPTED STANDARDS

- 8 1/2" x 11" paper for both cover letter and resume, and #10 business envelope (Do not use your school or current employer's letterhead.)
- Stationery and envelopes in a neutral color such as white, cream, or light grey (not strong, bright colors)
- Stationery with no pictures or images in the background (This is commonly considered to be too casual for any resume, cover letter, or envelope, whether you are applying for a position as an artist, a pre-school teacher, or a business manager.)
- Typed (if possible) envelope addressed specifically to the contact person identified in your cover letter
- Handwritten signature in black ink

NICE TOUCHES THAT MAY GIVE YOU AN EDGE

- Quality stationery, not plain white copier/ printer paper
- Matching stationery for cover letter and resume, plus matching envelope
- Matching typeface and font size on cover letter and resume (Such coordination demonstrates planning and professionalism.)
- Terminology and buzzwords of the career field show familiarity with the profession – but don't overdo it.

Business (Block) Style

(Address)
(City, State, Zip)
(Telephone)
(E-mail Address)

(Date)

Name and Title
Organization Name
Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

In a **business style** letter, all elements of the letter begin at the left margin. There is one blank line between the return address and date. There are three blank lines between the date and the inside address.

Leave three blank lines for your signature.

Sincerely,

(Name)

Personal Style

(Address)
(City, State, Zip)
(Telephone)
(E-mail Address)

(Date)

Name and Title
Organization Name
Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

In a **personal style** letter, the return address and date start at the centerline of the page, and paragraphs are indented 5 spaces. There is one blank line between the return address and date. There are three blank lines between the date and the inside address, which is left aligned.

The complimentary close and writer's name also start at the center of the page. Leave three blank lines for your signature.

Sincerely,

(Name)

Emailing Your Cover Letter and Resume

When sending your cover letter and resume electronically, try to find out if the employer would prefer them as attachments or in the body of your email. **If you can't determine a preference, send them both ways in a single message.**

Although not usually required, you may want to follow up the email with hard copies of your cover letter and resume, (unless specifically asked not to). When submitting copies by mail, it's preferable not to fold them. It's also a good idea to bring copies of your cover letter and resume to any interview.

Sending as Email Attachments

- Create your cover letter and resume in a common word processing program such as Microsoft Word, or in RTF (Rich Text Format), or as a PDF. (Increasingly, employers are specifying format.)
- Make the cover letter and resume separate attachments. Give them names the employer will associate with you once they are downloaded, for example:

AustinJaneCvrLtr.doc	not	CoverLetter.doc
AustinJaneResume.doc	not	Resume.doc

- Be absolutely certain that your documents are free of viruses. Send them electronically to yourself and to a friend to make sure they're easy to open, the formatting stays correct, and they're virus-free.
- In the Subject line, put the name of the position for which you are applying. In your email message, briefly say why you are writing. Ask the employer to contact you about any trouble opening attachments. For example:

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 appear below, and are also attached; please let me know if you have any trouble opening the attachments. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Jane Austin

Sending in the Body of the Email

- Paste your cover letter a couple of spaces below your brief introduction. Set it up in Business (Block) Style, with everything justified to the left. A couple of spaces below the cover letter, paste in your resume.
- Your resume needs to be reformatted to send it in the body of an email message:
 - Justify everything to the left; do not try to center text.
 - Do not use bold, italics, underlining, bullets, fancy fonts, colored text, multiple columns.
 - To highlight text, use such means as spacing, all capital letters (for headings), asterisks (*), plus signs (+), dashes.
- Send the email to yourself and to a friend, to check for problems before sending to an employer.

SAMPLE COVER LETTER #1 (With comments in italics.)

(Do not include your name here.)

Hampshire College, Box 00
893 West Street
Amherst, MA 01002

June 10, 2008

David Davis, Director
Human Resources Department
Wild Places, Inc.
688 Powder Street, Suite 210
Howhigh, OR 06093

Dear Mr. Davis:

I am writing to apply for the position of field archaeologist, which was advertised recently through the Hampshire College Career Center. The position requirements fit well with my education, experiences and career objectives. I am especially interested in Wild Places' emphasis on assisting Native Americans in the effort to reconstruct their tribal history. **(Note the succinct expression of interest in the particular job/organization.)**

I graduated from Hampshire College in May with a concentration in Archaeology and Modern European Literature. At Hampshire, I completed coursework in archaeology, anthropology and geology. Most of these courses involved both field and laboratory work, with emphasis on surveying, mapping, data recording, and computer analysis techniques. I was able to further develop my field and laboratory skills during two summers as an archaeology intern at Pacific Legacy in Seattle, where I also gained valuable exposure to the daily operations of a contract archaeology firm. **(Note that "Modern European Literature" is mentioned and quickly set aside as the writer focuses on details about education and experience that are relevant to this particular job.)**

My background has prepared me to perform effectively as a field archaeologist. Moreover, I am genuinely interested in the opportunity to work with the founder of Wild Places, Dr. Paul Dwyer. Dr. Dwyer's book on midden sites of the Oregon Coast has made me eager to explore Pacific archaeology further. **(The writer shows special knowledge of the organization and expresses personal interest and enthusiasm.)**

I am confident that my qualifications will meet your needs for this position and I would appreciate the opportunity to interview. I will call you during the week of June 21st to follow up. If you need to reach me in the meantime, my telephone number is (413) 555-1234 and my e-mail address is ooo01@hampshire.edu. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to talking with you. **(He ends the letter by reiterating his interest, stating what action he will take next and providing contact information. The last two sentences express appropriate appreciation and self-confidence.)**

Sincerely,

Alex Miller

SAMPLE COVER LETTER #2 (With comments in italics.)

(Do not include your name here.)

Box OO
Hampshire College
500 West Street
Amherst, MA 01002

February 3, 2009

Ms. Barbara Underwood
Director, Center for Women and Children
866 Sunset Road
Mystic, IL 88188

Dear Ms. Underwood:

Thank you for speaking with me on the telephone about the internship position openings at the Center for Women and Children. Helping to raise money for the Center sounds like an incredible opportunity to both learn more about the fundraising field and benefit a wonderful organization. I first learned about the Center from Dana Fargo, a Hampshire graduate, who was employed there two years ago as Program Director. As Dana described it, working at the Center sounded uniquely interesting and rewarding. **(Note that the student mentions herself very little in the opening paragraph, choosing instead to focus on the Center. She also mentions an alumna, whom the Director of the Center would know. This first paragraph establishes the student's knowledge and interest.)**

My experience with fundraising for Hampshire has prepared me well for work at the Center for Women and Children. I have enjoyed making phone calls, training other volunteers and coordinating phone-a-thons, which involved finding space, scheduling workers and supervising them while they called alumni. Through my research and lab work in science courses, I have developed a strong sense of discipline, organizational skills, and the ability to solve problems creatively. As Co-Chair of the Harambee Dance Group on campus, I have acquired valuable experience managing groups and working with people. I am a dedicated, hard worker and feel that I can make a substantial contribution to the Center for Women and Children. **(Note how the student has tailored her letter to de-emphasize her concentration in science. She mentions it as an area in which she has gained skills that will transfer to fundraising work. Note also that she used the word "Co-Chair" rather than the less clear term "Signer." She expressed her interest, but focused mostly on how she could benefit the organization.)**

I wonder if you would consider arranging a telephone interview, to discuss the internship and my qualifications in more detail? I will call you during the week of February 8th to follow up on this possibility and perhaps schedule a time. If you need to contact me, I can be reached at the address above; by telephone at (501) 646-4000; or by e-mail at ooo02@hampshire.edu. Thank you again. I look forward to talking with you. **(She ends the letter by stating what action she will take next and providing contact information. The last two sentences express appropriate appreciation and self-confidence.)**

Yours truly,

Jane Forest