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WHY SHOULD YOU SEND A COVER LETTER?

A well-crafted cover letter is a necessary accompaniment to your resume. The letter highlights the qualifications you possess that are most relevant to the position at hand, and is an excellent means of demonstrating your written communication skills. In addition, a cover letter can be used to explain potential resume issues such as time gaps or lack of experience, and is a way to express your excitement about a position.

A cover letter should always be included when sending your resume to anyone for any purpose, unless explicitly instructed not to. The letter should:
- Explain why you are sending your resume
- Provide any requested information
- Call attention to your relevant skills
- Reflect a positive attitude, and
- Convince the reader to look at your resume.

TYPES OF COVER LETTERS

There are several different types of cover letters you may send.
- A *letter of application* is sent in response to an advertised job opening that you read or hear about.
- A *prospecting/blind cover letter* is sent to inquire about positions in an organization in which you are interested. These are far more effective if you have made a contact within the organization.
- A *networking letter* is sent to request assistance in your job search—for instance, to conduct an informational interview with someone to learn about what they do and the field, and *not* to obtain a position.

Your letter should be tailored for its purpose. If you send out a blanket form letter, it could be worse than sending none at all. Also be careful when editing an existing letter for a different position—it’s very easy to leave a reference to the former organization, which would automatically be a deal-breaker in most situations.

This guide will first provide advice about writing traditional letters of application, followed by some tips for writing blind cover letters.

PREPARING TO WRITE A COVER LETTER

The first step to writing a cover letter is *not* to simply start writing! You must first carefully evaluate the job description and research the organization. In evaluating the job description, highlight or underline the main qualifications the employer is seeking and the main duties of the position. Then examine your resume to determine where you have developed these skills. You will not have all of the desired skills, and that’s okay—it is good to have room to grow in a position. As long as you possess at least about 70% of the skills, it is a good idea to apply. In your letter, you will highlight those areas in which you have the greatest strengths.
Researching a company is key before sending a cover letter and resume, and even more so prior to an interview. Your first line of research, and the easiest, is to examine the company’s website. This should be sufficient for ensuring that your cover letter is tailored. Once you line up an interview you may want to do further research by examining annual reports or publications, and through networking.

PARTS OF A COVER LETTER

Part 1 – The introduction
The first section of your cover letter should address why you are writing and it may also address who you are.

It's best to address your letter to a specific person, so always research the company to find out the name of an individual in order to address your letter properly. Often the best person to contact is the head of the department in which the position is located or in which you want to work. The addressee is often listed on the job description itself in the “how to apply” or “send inquiries to” section of the job briefing. Whenever possible, always address the hiring person formally by their last name, e.g. “Dear Dr. Jones” or “Dear Mr. Jennings.” If no proper name has been provided and cannot be obtained by any means, then “Dear Recruiter” or “Dear Hiring Manager” is acceptable.

Be sure to identify exactly what position you are applying for, as there may be several available within an organization, using a requisition number when one exists. It's also a good idea to state where you learned about the position, such as a website or listserv.

If you were referred by someone you know within the organization or who knows the individual to whom you are writing, this is a strong addition to your resume and should come in the first sentence, e.g. “I was referred to you by John Smith regarding the Project Coordinator position.” Current employees are among the best sources of referrals. Many firms report that 40-50% of their openings are filled by candidates referred to by staff members. Moreover, companies view such candidates more favorably than those brought in through other methods, because they already know something about the organization and have a personal connection with it.

In your opening paragraph, or in the next paragraph, you may give a brief synopsis of your background (e.g. degree and area(s) of experience). You may also indicate here, or in the closing paragraph, that your resume is attached for their review.

Here are some tips for your introductory paragraph:

- Use an appropriate greeting in the salutation, such as “Dear” and use proper names whenever possible
- Use the professional title (Mr., Ms., or Dr…never Mrs.) followed by the last name – do not include the first name here
- Use professional language
- State why you are writing
- Be specific – name the position and organization
- Reference position number and/or advertising location
- May provide brief description of who you are here or in next paragraph
GOOD EXAMPLE

Dear Ms. Clemmons,

I am writing to express my interest in the Research Assistant position (Requisition #10209) currently open in the Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Attached please find my resume for your consideration.

POOR EXAMPLE

Hi Barbara Clemmons,

My name is Bob Smith and I want to apply for a position in your office.

The example above is poor because:

- The salutation is informal
- You need not state your name in the body of the letter as it is already in the header and signature. This is a formal letter, not a phone conversation.
- You must be specific in regards to the position for which you would like to be considered.

Part 2 – Demonstrating your qualifications

The majority of your letter should consist of a demonstration of your skills relevant to the position. You should not summarize your entire work history – rather, you should relay your key qualifications for the position.

You should demonstrate how you have developed the skills needed, instead of providing soft statements without any backup. Your primary purpose is to validate your competencies through relevant work experiences. Example:

- **Soft statement:** “I have excellent evaluation skills”
- **Strong statement:** “I refined my evaluation skills when serving as a graduate assistant with the Tobacco Technical Assistance Consortium, where I conducted phone interviews and entered and analyzed qualitative data as part of a process evaluation of a capacity-building program for state tobacco control programs.”

While you should use your own words in the letter, you should also include some of the key words from the position description, such as those you highlighted when evaluating the description. This is especially important if your materials are being sent to HR instead of the hiring manager, because they may not be familiar with the field and/or use scanning software to look for key words and phrases in your cover letter and resume.
Don't assume the reader understands the nature of your work, so refrain from using jargon or slang terminology specific to your position or organization. Also do not assume that the reader has already viewed your resume, so don't make references such as “as you can see on my resume…”

Here are some tips for the part of your letter demonstrating your qualifications:

☑ Relate key experiences to position requirements
☑ Highlight only those experiences that are relevant to the position requirements
☑ Do not regurgitate your resume or write your biography
☑ Replace “soft” statements with strong statements that demonstrate how you’ve accrued experience
☑ Use relevant terms and phrases from the description in order to respond to position requirements
☑ Keep this part of the letter to 1 or 2 paragraphs
☑ Don’t forget to mention that you’re a graduate student at RSPH and don’t discount your academic and school-related experiences

**GOOD EXAMPLE**

Within the Burkina Faso Ministry of Health I worked for over four years as an entomologist overseeing a nationwide vector control management program. In this role, I participated actively in planning and designing the integrated vector control management policy for the country in order to reduce malaria mosquito vector populations and limit vector human contact through the use of ITN/LLTN and larval control. In addition to promoting ITN use and overseeing ITN distribution throughout the country, I monitored and evaluated the sensitivity of malaria vectors to insecticide and utilized participatory approaches to empower communities to control malaria. In this position, I engaged in collaborative work with complex partnerships, including government staff, international agencies and NGOs.

**POOR EXAMPLE**

Through my education and work experiences, I have become skilled at monitoring and evaluation. I also have experience planning and designing programs and working in teams.

The example above is poor because it doesn’t provide examples to validate the individual’s skills and likely does not utilize some of the key words from the position description.

**Part 3 – The closing**

In the final paragraph of your letter, you should sound excited about the position, telling them why you’re eager to come work for them. This is where your research on the company and its mission can come in. You may wish to start with a statement expressing your eagerness such as:
"I am excited about the opportunity to contribute my research and quantitative skills to your work in infectious disease clinical trials..."

"I strongly believe in XYZ’s mission of advancing the ability of women to access affordable reproductive health care."

You can also provide a summary statement about the skills you have to offer them as a last pitch. You should keep the focus here on what you have to offer them, with the exception of when you are applying to an internship or other training program. For these programs, you may have to write a personal statement or a cover letter, and in those it would be appropriate to also mention how the program will help you reach your career goals.

In your final sentences, you should thank the individual for their time and let them know how they can reach you. It is also acceptable, although not necessary, to indicate that you plan to follow up to answer any questions they may have – but do not indicate this if they request no calls, and if you do state that you will follow up you must do it. Two weeks is a good time frame for follow-up on a letter.

Here are some tips for your closing paragraph:

- Disclose motivation – sound excited and tell them why you want to work for their organization/on their project
- Keep the focus on what you can do for them...unless you are applying for a training program, where it is understood that you will receive training and mentorship
- Provide contact information
- Thank them for their time
- May indicate will follow-up

**EXAMPLE**

I am excited about the opportunity to apply my skills in literacy program design, development and evaluation to the Health Communication Research Laboratory’s work in health communications experimental research and field trials. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss my qualifications with you further, and can be reached at (404)555-5555 or via e-mail at astudent@sph.emory.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Any Student
TIPS FOR BLIND COVER LETTERS

A blind or unsolicited cover letter may seem tricky but is a pro-active technique you may use when trying to find a job, internship or other opportunity. This approach is also a great networking tool and can often find unadvertised positions or even create positions. The most common situations in which you would write a blind cover letter are when:

1. Someone has given you the name of a professional to contact
2. You want to work with a specific organization but do not have any contacts
3. An organization is hiring but there are no current positions that match your qualifications

Understand that if you send an unsolicited cover letter (i.e.; a letter addressed to an individual or organization without the purpose of applying for a particular position) you should respect the reader's time by getting to the point quickly and maintain your objective throughout the letter. You must remain extremely polite and considerate throughout your letter – remember that you are essentially asking for a favor.

Even more so than with a traditional letter of application, a referral from someone connected to the organization and/or receiver will greatly strengthen your letter and likely guarantee it will receive more attention. You will also be far more likely to get results if you address your letter to a specific individual, rather than to Human Resources or an entire department.

As with a traditional cover letter, your first paragraph should indicate how you obtained the individual's contact information (e.g. from a referral, from a website, etc.) and your objective (e.g. to learn more about the organization, the field, etc.). If you want to set up a meeting or telephone call (which clearly you do), say so. Be explicit and brief.

EXAMPLE

Dear Dr. Brown,

I received your contact information from Dr. Robert Klein, my professor in my Epidemiology 101 course at the Rollins School of Public Health. Dr. Klein suggested I contact you due to my interest in working in physical activity promotion at the CDC. As a leading researcher within the Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity, I find your work on the build environment intriguing and would be very interested in setting up a time to meet with you to learn more about your career path and about potential internship opportunities in your branch.

Note how no information was assumed. We didn't assume that Dr. Brown knew who Dr. Klein was. We told Dr. Brown how we got her name and we indicated why we're writing (i.e., because we're interested in their work).
Follow your introduction with a brief overview of your background – typically this should be shorter than in a traditional letter of application as you are not responding to any qualifications. Resist the urge to provide your life story. Highlight a few key points in your background that you think would apply to the organization at hand. Be sure to stay on track with your overall objective, and provide just enough information so that the reader understands where your interests and expertise lie.

The closing paragraph should reiterate why you're writing or what action you hope they allow or take. Make yourself available. Reference your attached resume if they would like to review it.

**EXAMPLE**

An internship within the Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity would be an excellent springboard for my future career in the field. At your convenience, I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you about how best to secure a position working for you or one of your colleagues. I have attached my resume for your review or forward. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

In closing, sometimes even the best intended blind cover letters remain unanswered. You should not get discouraged if you do not receive a response. You should also not follow up on an unsolicited cover letter. At this point, if the reader doesn't want to contact you, there's not much you can or should do except to keep reaching out to additional contacts.

**FORMATTING YOUR LETTER**

Your letter should follow standard letter format (for more information, see [http://jobsearchtech.about.com/od/letters/l/bl_block_p.htm](http://jobsearchtech.about.com/od/letters/l/bl_block_p.htm)). Be sure to use the same header (name, contact info) as on your resume and same font as your resume for a nice match. Your letter should be one page maximum, and not too dense with text so as to discourage the reader. When sending your letter, it's a good idea to include it as the first page in the same document with your resume, so that the receiver need only open one document.

**IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS**

⇒ Watch out for spelling or typing errors. A sloppy letter will automatically take you out of the running.
⇒ Use language from the job description to describe your qualifications and experiences.
⇒ Think about the message you want to convey - organize your thoughts before creating a first draft.
⇒ Evaluate your word choices – avoid soft statements and back up your skills with evidence.
APPENDIX

SAMPLE COVER LETTERS
February 15, 2005

Attn: Hiring Manager
Center for Health Policy
XYZ University
456 Township Road, Box 789
Decatur, GA 30030

Dear Hiring Manager,

I am writing to express my interest in the Research Assistant Position in the Health Inequalities Program within XYZ University’s Center for Health Policy. I was referred to you by Jessica Lowy, a Career Counselor at Emory University’s Rollins School of Public Health, as she believes that my background and your requirements are a good match.

While much of my previous experience has been domestically focused, I have a strong interest in global public health issues and health disparities. In addition to having lived in Japan for two years, I have also traveled to rural areas of Thailand and the Philippines on a regular basis to stay with family for extended periods of time, and I have witnessed the effects of health inequities and the widening poverty gap in these developing countries.

While my time at the Rollins’ School of Public Health focused heavily on health policy and management, my undergraduate studies emphasized anthropological work and a community-based approach. During my study abroad experience in Khon Kaen, Thailand, I spent six weeks living beside and learning from displaced people, slum dwellers, commercial sex workers, and others to discover what defined their health needs and Thai identity. In 2002, as part of a medical mission, I performed an informal data collection from health workers and social workers to uncover hidden sexual and gender health issues to create a relevant class for nursing students in Naga City, Philippines. As a teacher’s assistant in Osaka, Japan, I learned to communicate with students about how they learned English most efficiently. Currently, in the summer of 2007, I plan to travel to Bangkok, Thailand to assist CARE Raks Thai in integrating avian influenza preparedness into emergency preparedness planning, which will require interviewing CARE faculty, public health authorities, as well as affected communities in high-risk areas of bird flu outbreaks.

My previous experiences have helped to develop my skills in areas such as writing, research, and forming effective collaborations with both individuals and groups with different agendas and different perspectives in order to complete projects and address program needs. My writing experience has included classroom policy memos, reports for CARE USA’s internal offices and donors, updates to country offices, web “blog” entries for avian influenza materials, and guidelines for program practices. I am eager to put these skills to work as a Research Assistant with the Center for Health Policy, and I believe the additional experience I would gain from working with the Center would enable me to further refine my skills and knowledge base in policy, advocacy, and how best to reduce health inequities in other areas of the world.

Enclosed please find my resume for your consideration. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss my qualifications with you further, and can be reached at 555-555-5555 or graduate@yahoo.com. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to exploring this opportunity with you further.

Sincerely,

Any Graduate
February 15, 2005

John Doe
Health Initiative
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
4770 Buford Highway NE, Mailstop K10
Atlanta, GA 30341

Dear Mr. Doe,

I am writing to express my interest in the Public Health Fellow position with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Health Initiative. I possess a Bachelor of Science in Biology and I am a second year Master of Public Health student at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University, concentrating my studies in Epidemiology.

Through my graduate and undergraduate coursework, I have gained a firm foundation in scientific and behavioral research, data analysis, and evaluation, while honing my communication, presentation and organizational abilities. I have applied these skills through hands-on experiences in both program coordination and research. In my current position as a Student Trainee/Health Scientist with the Coordinating Office for Global Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, I have had the opportunity to take on key leadership roles on a division-wide basis, including assisting the Deputy of the Office of Capacity Development and Program Coordination with management activities and collaborating on the development of a divisional monitoring and evaluation plan. I have also had the opportunity to update the CDC Annotated Bibliography for Syndromic Surveillance, an information resource addressing syndromic surveillance associated with bioterrorism for public health practitioners. This involves conducting an extensive literature search and reviewing and synthesizing information to be published in the format of a citation. Working on my thesis project, I have become familiar with the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), thus improving my ability to collect and analyze secondary data utilizing a national data set.

My previous extensive applied research experiences at Johns Hopkins University allowed me to conduct and perform clinical, scientific, and epidemiologic research, much of it independently. I have had the opportunity to develop abstracts and a publication based upon my research and to present my findings in poster sessions at several symposiums. In addition, I gained excellent interpersonal communication skills through my research apprenticeship, in which I had frequent direct interaction with study patients. Due to my demonstration of strong research and interpersonal skills in my apprenticeship and subsequent summer internship, I was invited back to Johns Hopkins as both a Minority Summer Research Intern and as the recipient of a minority post-baccalaureate supplement from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

With my strong research, evaluation, and communication skills and my educational foundation in the biologic and epidemiological sciences, I believe I would be an asset to the CDC’s Health Initiative. I would welcome the opportunity to further discuss my qualifications, and can be reached at (555) 555-5555 or via e-mail at astudent@sph.emory.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Any Student
February 15, 2005

Jane Doe
Public Health Advisor
XYZ Branch
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
4770 Buford Hwy., NE, MS K6
Atlanta, GA 30341

Dear Dr. Doe,

I am writing to apply for the position of Medical Entomologist within the XYZ Branch of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. I have twelve years of experience in malaria prevention and treatment in developing countries. I am currently pursuing a Master of Public Health degree as a William H. Foege Fellow at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University.

Within the Burkina Faso Ministry of Health I worked for over four years as an entomologist overseeing a nationwide vector control management program. In this role, I participated actively in planning and designing the integrated vector control management policy for the country in order to reduce malaria mosquito vector populations and limit vector human contact through the use of ITN/LLTN and larval control. In addition to promoting ITN use and overseeing ITN distribution throughout the country, I monitored and evaluated the sensitivity of malaria vectors to insecticide and utilized participatory approaches to empower communities to control malaria. In this position, I engaged in collaborative work with complex partnerships, including government staff, international agencies and NGOs. Previously, I managed the malaria control program in a local health district for three years, including but not limited to ITN distribution, monitoring and evaluation of ITN use, and larvae control using community participatory approach. Since that time, I served as the National Coordinator of the Burkina Faso Guinea Worm Eradication Program.

I am particularly interested in working with the CDC’s XYZ Branch, as it would provide me with an opportunity to apply the skills I have acquired during the last decade as a medical entomologist and public health worker. I am committed to continue my contributions to efforts to alleviate the burden of malaria on affected populations in Sub Saharan Africa, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss my background with you further. I will follow-up with you next week to see if I can answer any questions for you regarding my qualifications. I look forward to speaking with you and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Student Name
Enclosure
February 15, 2005

Jane Doe
Center for Healthy Living
123 Main Street, Suite B
La Jolla, CA 92037

Dear Ms. Doe,

I learned about your need for a Case Manager/Health Counselor from a colleague of mine at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. I am currently a Master of Public Health student at the Rollins School of Public Health, and will be graduating in May 2007. I believe that my graduate and undergraduate education in public health and my skills in program management and interpersonal communication would make me an appropriate asset to the PACE MySteps program.

During my undergraduate training in public health, I developed an interest in lifestyle factors that contribute to overweight and chronic disease in adolescents and adults. In 2004, I worked on a groundbreaking diabetes study that examined the effects of insulin resistance on obesity within Hispanic adolescents. In the transition to graduate studies, physical activity and dietary behaviors have emerged as my public health foci. I am currently a research interviewer on a physical activity and lifestyles study of Emory University employees in which I conduct interviews, administer surveys, and lead walking groups for those participants who need extra encouragement.

My experiences in program management derive from an impromptu assignment as the Manager for an American Red Cross service center in Southern California. Although initially I was a Preparedness Instructor, my supervisors recognized my initiative, organizational ability, and interpersonal skills during my frequent interactions with professional colleagues and community members, and quickly promoted me to Interim Program Manager. As Assistant Clinic Manager of the Access to Care Clinic for Partners in Care, I not only interacted with patients but also supervised and advised the staff of 10 volunteer doctors and nurses. This faced-paced, high energy clinic required that I have the ability to assess recruitment, patient, and organizational needs as well as possess skill in interacting with patients and volunteers from diverse backgrounds.

As a current graduate student, I have obtained coursework in subjects such as healthcare management, community needs assessment, program evaluation, curriculum design, and statistical methods. I believe the combination of my health promotion training and my public health experience is well-suited for the position described. I have enclosed my resume with additional information about my qualifications. I look forward to speaking with you regarding the Case Manager/Health Counselor opportunity, and will contact you within a week to confirm that you have received my application and to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Any Student
February 15, 2005

John Smith
Hubert Department of Global Health
Rollins School of Public Health
1518 Clifton Road, NE
Atlanta, GA 30322

Dear Dr. Smith,

I am writing to express my interest in the part-time work study opportunity in the epidemiology and prevention of chronic diseases available through the Hubert Department of Global Health.

I am currently a second year Master of Public Health student in the Department of Epidemiology and I am very interested in pursuing a career in chronic disease epidemiology. Through my work in Case Studies in Chronic Disease and other courses, I have gained an excellent grounding in data analysis and the application of epidemiological methods. This work-study position would be an excellent opportunity for me to apply these skills to real-world issues.

Chronic disease prevention is also very important to me. I recently wrote a proposal to the American Heart Association asking for donations to increase awareness of heart disease for a group of people. Magnets, bookmarks, and pamphlets were ordered for over 400 community members expected to attend the event. I believe that a national organization reaching out to people on the local level speaks volumes about how we can all help one another through the building partnerships and sharing resources.

I am eager to learn more about chronic disease and to develop my research skills through this work-study position. I strongly believe that my work experience, interpersonal skills and enthusiasm will be of great benefit to the group in reaching the research project goals. I welcome the opportunity to discuss your plans for the student position and my qualifications. I can be reached via e-mail: astudent@sph.emory.edu or telephone: 555-555-5555. Thank your for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Student Name
February 15, 2005

John Doe  
Kaiser Permanente  
3495 Piedmont Road NE, Building Nine  
Atlanta, GA 30305

Dear Mr. Doe,

As an expected December 2007 graduate from the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University with a concentration in Health Policy and Management, I was pleased to learn about the Marketing and Client Services Intern position with Kaiser Permanente Healthy Solutions. I am writing to express my interest in the position and have attached my resume for your review and consideration.

My academic background includes a Bachelor’s degree in public relations, through which I gained a wide range of communication skills. I decided to pursue a Master of Public Health degree in health policy and management due to my genuine interest in health care access and racial health disparities. My graduate coursework in areas such as Financial Accounting, Financial Management, and Healthcare Marketing has provided me with a foundation of skills that would also be an asset in the internship position.

In addition to my educational experiences, I have enhanced my skills in these and other pertinent areas through hands-on work opportunities. Currently, as a Program Support Specialist for the Emory University Center for Lifelong Learning, I am involved with the marketing of the Center’s professional learning courses and certificate programs, including strategic ad placement, market research, survey design, and outreach. I am also responsible for maintaining ongoing relations with external vendors and conducting information sessions for new students, enabling me to exhibit excellent interpersonal and verbal communication skills. In addition to my interpersonal communication skills, I have developed superb written communication skills through experiences such as my position at the Howard University Office of University Advancement, in which I prepared data reports to illustrate fundraising results to deans and university administration. I also possess the project management and planning skills necessary to flourish as a Marketing and Client Services Intern as a result of my work as an Account Manager at CapComm, a student-run public relations and advertising firm.

The internship position with Kaiser Permanente yields an excellent opportunity for me to apply my existing skills and interests in both public health and public relations. In addition to my academic and professional experiences, I am confident that my motivation and eagerness to learn will be a valuable asset to your office. I am thrilled at the prospect of working at Kaiser Permanente and sincerely thank you for this opportunity to submit my qualifications for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me via e-mail: astudent@sph.emory.edu or telephone: (555) 555-5555 should you have any questions or if you would like to schedule an interview.

Sincerely,

Any Student