

# Cover Letter Guide

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**Revised November 9, 2015**

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## WHY SHOULD YOU SEND A COVER LETTER?

A well-crafted cover letter is a necessary accompaniment to your résumé. It 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 résumé 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 résumé for any purpose, unless explicitly instructed not to. The letter should:

- ✓ Explain why you are sending your résumé
- ✓ Provide any requested information
- ✓ Call attention to your relevant skills
- ✓ Reflect a positive attitude, and
- ✓ Convince the reader to look at your résumé

## 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 nothing at all.

- 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.

## PREPARING TO WRITE A TRADITIONAL COVER LETTER

The first step to writing a cover letter is to carefully evaluate the job description and research the organization.

- Highlight or underline the main qualifications and duties of position.
- Examine your résumé to determine where you have developed these skills.
- You may not have all of desired skills. It's okay – it's good to have room for growth in a position.
- If you possess at least 70% of the skills, it is a good idea to apply.
- Be sure to highlight those areas in which you have the greatest strengths and experience.

Researching a company is key before sending a cover letter and résumé, 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, including why you are the best fit for the position.

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 (i.e. "Dear Dr. Jones" or "Dear Mr. Jennings"). If no proper name has been provided and cannot be obtained, 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 or job 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 résumé and should come in the first sentence (i.e. "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, give a brief synopsis of your background (i.e. degree and area(s) of experience).

Here are some tips for your introductory paragraph:

- ✓ Use an appropriate greeting in the salutation, such as "Dear" and use proper names if known
- ✓ Use the professional title (Mr., Ms., or Dr... never Mrs.) followed by last name – do not include the first name here
- ✓ Use professional language
- ✓ State your purpose for writing
- ✓ Be specific – name the position and organization
- ✓ Reference position number and/or advertising location
- ✓ Provide brief description of who you and why you are a good candidate for position based upon your experience or education

### **GOOD EXAMPLE**

Dear Ms. Smith,

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) advertised through LinkedIn. My previous research experience in obesity and nutrition coupled with my current Master of Public Health degree in Epidemiology make me an ideal candidate for the position.

### **POOR EXAMPLE**

Hi Barbara Smith,

My name is Bob Jones 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 while serving as a graduate assistant at the Tobacco Technical Assistance Consortium, where I conducted phone interviews, 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 résumé.

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. Do not assume that the reader has already viewed your résumé, so you should refrain from making references such as "as you can see on my résumé..."

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 résumé or write your biography
- ✓ Replace "soft" statements with strong statements that demonstrate your work experience
- ✓ Use relevant terms and phrases from the description in order to address position requirements
- ✓ Keep this part of the letter to 1 or 2 paragraphs max
- ✓ Don't discount your academic and school-related experiences, even if they were unpaid or volunteer opportunities

### **GOOD EXAMPLE**

As an undergraduate, I spearheaded the Lead Education and Awareness Program (LEAP), as part of my passion for environmental justice. The program encouraged University of California-Berkeley students to educate the community about toxic hazards, lead poisoning, pollution, and prevention. I organized presentations surrounding community needs at local college campuses and community centers in underrepresented and underserved communities that were at higher risk of hazardous exposures. Through this experience, I became comfortable creating and managing activities aimed at enhancing environmental justice and awareness. My continued success through the LEAP program opened the door to other opportunities with the City of Oakland and Oakland Unified School District. Collaborating with non-profit organizations, law enforcement and universities, I used my public health sciences skills to effectively communicate with communities of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

### **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 is not descriptive enough and is too vague. The good example provides examples to validate the individual's skills and utilizes many 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."*

*"I am eager to be a part of your team and am confident that my enthusiasm and flexibility will be a valuable asset to your organization."*

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 it would be appropriate to mention how the training program (i.e. fellowship) 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.

Here are some tips for your closing paragraph:

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

#### **EXAMPLE**

I would love the opportunity to work for my alma mater, as I can help Vanderbilt develop and maintain lasting, employer and student relationships for years to come, especially in the educational, business and health-related fields. My recruitment experience, program management and determination to achieve maximum success would make me an asset to your team. 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](mailto: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 résumé 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**

Be sure to use the same header (name, contact info) as on your résumé and same font as your résumé 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 is a good idea to include it as the first page in the same document with your résumé, 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 the same 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 JOB DESCRIPTION & COVER LETTER**

# Sample Job Description

## Position Description:

The XYZ County Health Department is seeking a full-time Public Health Educator to **plan, implement, and evaluate public health programs** that promote awareness of health issues, healthy behaviors, and improved health and wellness in XYZ County.

The health educator works independently and in teams to **develop audience-appropriate health promotion strategies, educational programs, and print and electronic materials; deliver engaging presentations and outreach at community events; and utilize program evaluation strategies** to assess and **report on outcomes**.

The successful candidate will possess strong knowledge of health issues (including but not limited to nutrition, physical activity, tobacco, and cardiovascular health), health behavior theories, evidence-based health promotion practices, instruction and learning principles, program evaluation techniques, and current developments in public health. Additionally, the successful candidate will have demonstrated strong research, **writing, and public speaking skills**, as well as the ability to **tailor communication and presentation style to a variety of audiences (including scientific, public health, and lay audiences)**. Position requires creativity, initiative, and the ability to **establish and maintain effective collaborative relationships** with local health officials, professional and community groups, and the public.

## Requirements:

Bachelor's degree required, MPH preferred.

**2+ years of experience with public health programming and education, community engagement, and marketing and dissemination activities.**

General understanding of basic statistics and fiscal planning, and competency in Microsoft Office applications, particularly Word, Outlook, Excel, and PowerPoint, are required.

## Any Student, MPH

123 Main Street  
Decatur, GA 30033

Phone: 555-555-5555  
E-mail: student@yahoo.com

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February 15, 2005

Jane Doe  
XYZ Health Department  
123 County Road  
Atlanta, GA 30303

Dear Ms. Doe,

My prior experience as a health education coordinator coupled with my extensive background in program management and health education program delivery makes me an ideal candidate for the Public Health Educator position at XYZ Health Department (Job # 123456).

My expertise at planning and implementing educational programs from brainstorming ideas to creating objectives to executing strategic plans sets me apart from others. I deliver targeted health promotion workshops to professionals, and educate local communities and children in health education topics in nutrition, obesity, chronic disease, healthy eating and physical activity. I also have a proven successful track record training over 250 students annually in physical fitness activities designed at reducing obesity and chronic disease at community events, workshops, and school assemblies. Further, I serve as project manager and logistics coordinator for 2 major health events: Tobacco Cessation Program and the Get Up and Get Moving Campaign. I create and market all campaign print and electronic messaging via social media, evaluate both programs for effectiveness, and report on outcomes and improvement.

I am creative, results-oriented, and self-motivated. My strengths lie in my ability to cultivate and facilitate long-lasting relationships with community partners, local and state public health agencies, and school administrators. I would love the opportunity to continue my passion educating the masses in chronic disease, as I feel my demonstrated experience and current MPH degree make me an asset to your agency. I often take initiative and responsibility of learning new technologies to drive new and improved methods of achieving results and possess invaluable computer skills. I welcome the opportunity to interview with you and can be reached at (555) 555-5555. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Student Name