



George Mason University Writing Center

writingcenter.gmu.edu
wcenter@gmu.edu
703.993.1200

Writing Cover Letters

WHAT IS A COVER LETTER?

A cover letter is a one-page document that accompanies your resume. Cover letters are an opportunity for you to take three steps:

1. Introduce yourself to the employer
2. Express interest in a position
3. Demonstrate that you are an ideal candidate

Think of a cover letter as a **marketing tool**, one that allows you to market yourself as the ideal candidate using persuasive information, background, and details that may not appear in your resume. The prose of a cover letter (in contrast to the bullet points of a resume) provides the employer with an impression of your personality, encouraging the employer to look at and consider your resume further. In addition to acting as a marketing tool, cover letters also provide a writing sample.

There are two types of cover letters:

- **A letter of application:** Write a letter of application **to express interest in a particular position**. This kind of letter explains why you are a good candidate for that particular job and requests an interview for that job.
- **A letter of inquiry:** Write a letter of inquiry to contact an employer **when no known opening exists**. This kind of letter expresses interest in the company and requests an opportunity to interview for a position appropriate for your interests and skills.

HOW DO I WRITE AN EFFECTIVE COVER LETTER?

An effective cover letter should answer the following questions:

- What position are you applying for, exactly?
- What skills and experiences do you have that are relevant to the job, as it is described in the job ad?
- Why do you want this job at this company, specifically?

An effective cover letter should express the answers to these questions efficiently (in no more than one page) using specific evidence. Effective cover letters are written in a professional and personable style. Make sure your writing is polished and respectful, but don't be afraid to let your voice shine through.

Questions to Ask

Before writing, ask yourself the following questions:

- What do you know about the company? Research the company's mission statement, products, services, or other past work.
- What kind of skills does the position you are applying for require? (Find this info in the job ad or in an ad for a similar position.)
- What experience do you have that shows you have those skills? Consider past work, volunteer, or extracurricular experiences; projects from coursework; or accomplishments. Provide specific examples (evidence) to support your claims.

The answers to these questions should help you identify your audience, the claims you wish to make about your qualifications, and the evidence you can provide to support those claims. As a brainstorming exercise, try using the table below to identify and align the skills the company is looking for with your own skills and experience.

Skills or character traits the job/company requires or values	Your applicable skills, qualifications, experience, etc.	Evidence (anecdotes, recommendations, accomplishments) that demonstrates skill

Strategies to Use

Below are 5 strategies for writing an effective cover letter.

1. **Tailor your cover letter to the company and position.** Cover letters should be tailored to the company and position you are writing for.
 - Research the company's mission statement and review its past work. How do your work values, skills, and past experience align with the company's? What kind of writing style and conventions does the company operate in? Should you write your cover letter in a similar style?
 - Tie your skills and qualifications back to the job posting. Use examples that demonstrate you have the required skills as outlined by the job posting.

- Address your salutation to the specific person who will be doing the hiring. This may require you to research online or call the department. Avoid the generic and stuffy, “To whom it may concern.”

Not only does tailoring your cover letter help you present yourself as the ideal candidate, it also demonstrates that you are an invested and enthusiastic candidate.

2. **Show, don't tell.** When discussing your skills, do not simply say you have them, *show* that you have them. Use examples of your experiences or accomplishments that demonstrate specific skills or qualifications. In other words, if you make a claim about yourself, provide evidence to support that claim. In general, it's better to *show* character traits like enthusiasm, passion, and work ethic rather than to make explicit claims about possessing them.
3. **Do not merely duplicate your resume.** Cover letters are an opportunity to interpret your resume to show *how* your experience is relevant to the position. Use the letter to describe a particular experience in depth or to gather all of your experience that demonstrates a single skill into one paragraph. The letter also illustrates your personality, writing skills, and, perhaps, other information that may not be in your resume. Cover letters should complement your resume—not repeat (or replace) it.
4. **Focus on what you can do for the company.** Don't focus on what you *want from* the company; focus on what you can *do for* the company.
5. **Consult Career Services (or another industry expert).** Career Services is an on-campus resource that provides guidance for students exploring and pursuing career paths. Career Services offers samples and guides, as well as walk-ins for students to have their cover letter reviewed by an industry expert. These experts can provide insight into the values and conventions of the industry you are entering, which you can use to further tailor your cover letter and demonstrate an understanding of your industry.

Sample to Examine

Attached below is an example of a strong cover letter. Reading samples is a useful strategy for familiarizing yourself with the genre of cover letters and gaining inspiration. The comments in the margins of this sample point out some writing choices the writer makes, discussing how they function and why they are effective.

Anne W. Elliot

1775 Kellynch Rd.
Pittsburgh, PA 15230-3320
(803) 592-4100
anne8@elliott.jmu.edu

May 15, 2017

Ms. Louisa Musgrove
2235A 14th St. NW
Washington DC 20009

Dear Ms. Musgrove,

I am writing to apply for a summer internship at your magazine, "Off Our Backs." I discovered the internship program through the Feminist Majority's web page. I am currently a sophomore at James Madison University with a double major in Professional Writing and Ethics, History, and Public Policy. I have a strong interest in feminist activism, and through my course-work and related activities, I believe I have developed the writing, editing, research, and communication skills necessary to be a successful intern at "Off Our Backs."

As a member of NOW and the "Women's Center" on campus, I remain continuously up-to-date on political feminism. Last spring, I served as a JMU delegate to the Feminist Majority Exposition held in Baltimore, MD. Through a History and Policy course, I gained knowledge of social policy making procedure and researched and wrote an analysis of domestic violence related legislation. During a Professional Ethics course, I produced a case study of Catholic-owned hospitals' impact upon women's reproductive health. On campus I have helped organize letter-writing campaigns to legislators about the passage of CEDAW and the funding of microbicides for female health. I also work as a JMU Sexual Assault Advisor, a position that requires me to attend workshops, provide campus education about rape and acquaintance rape, and be available to take hot-line calls.

I am the News Editor of James Madison's school newspaper, a weekly 20-page publication with a circulation of 7,000. My duties include investigating and writing news articles, editing stories, arranging interviews, giving board meeting presentations, keeping close communication with writers, and laying out the news section. The newspaper environment is fast-paced and deadline driven, and I enjoy the challenge of effectively and professionally producing the news section each week. I formerly served as the Assistant Production Manager at the newspaper, a job that gave me experience in advertising copy, publication layout, photography, and photographic editing.

With my experience in journalism and policy analysis along with my dedication to the feminist cause, I feel I can positively contribute to "Off Our Backs." I am determined, hard working, and have a strong desire to increase my knowledge of grassroots feminist activism. I have enclosed my resume, letters of recommendation, and writing and graphic samples for your review. Please contact me at (803) 592-4100 or anne8@elliott.jmu.edu if you require further information.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Anne W. Elliot

Commented [GW1]: The writer opens with a straightforward statement of purpose.

Commented [GW2]: The writer includes a "thesis" at the end of the first paragraph, clearly stating why she is qualified and a good fit for this specific company.

Commented [GW3]: The writer uses a topic sentence that clearly states the main claim or topic of the paragraph. In this paragraph, the writer focuses on her experience with political feminism, one important aspect of this particular job.

Commented [GW4]: The writer provides specific examples (evidence) that demonstrate her experience with political feminism. This information is probably not in her resume, making it especially strong material for her cover letter.

Commented [GW5]: After discussing her experience with political feminism in the previous paragraph, the writer now discusses her qualifications related to newspapers.

Commented [GW6]: The writer ties her qualifications to the skills required by the job descriptions.

Commented [GW7]: The writer begins her closing statement with a reiteration of her thesis, summarizing for the reader why she is the ideal candidate.