
Cover Letter Writing Guide



MOUNT  VERNON
NAZARENE UNIVERSITY

Career Development Center

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The Purpose of Cover Letters

If you have a strong resume, why do you need to submit a cover letter when applying for a job or internship? Not all employers require cover letters, and some don't even have a place to upload one on their application system. Knowing this might lead you to assume that you never need to use a cover letter. However, cover letters are still widely used and oftentimes expected by employers.

Unlike a resume, a cover letter is more tailored to the specific job and company and shows why you are not only qualified but also a great fit for their specific needs. Employers prefer candidates who can show they understand this and demonstrate a good match with the job. Employers aren't just looking for qualified candidates—they are looking for the one *right* candidate. According to [Resume Mansion](#)¹, 59% of hiring managers believe your cover letter provides insight about your personality and attitudes. This is why you should provide more personal context and substance about yourself in a cover letter.

Cover letters can set you apart and make the difference between getting the interview and not getting it. When employers give you the option but don't require a cover letter, don't assume they don't expect one or that they don't value cover letters. When a candidate takes initiative and provides a cover letter, even though it is not required, it shows they are willing to apply themselves to achieve their goals. Imagine what an employment recruiter might think when they have numerous candidates who only provided resumes, but others who put in more effort to provide a well-written cover letter. Submitting a cover letter shows you took the time to understand and address their expectations in more detail and can make your case that you are the perfect candidate. You would be wise to submit a well-crafted cover letter at every opportunity. If you don't, and the other applicants do, your resume had better be way above average to compete without a cover letter.

¹Resume Mansion. (2023, August 14). *Twenty statistics to show you why cover letters are important for your job search.*: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/twenty-statistics-show-you-why-cover-letters-important-your/>

Writing Great Cover Letters

While a cover letter is essential in helping you demonstrate a personal fit with the position you are applying to, it is also an important opportunity to demonstrate your writing skills. Communication skills are highly desired by employers, as many of their employees generate hundreds of emails per week. The following guidance is provided to help you demonstrate your value as a candidate, as well as your writing skills. If you need more in-depth assistance to improve your writing, you can work with a writing coach in the Center for Student Success.

Since the purpose of a cover letter is to custom tailor your qualifications to the employer's needs, it should be apparent that you cannot use the same generic cover letter for every position you apply to. Even though much of your content can be used in many of your cover letters, there should be elements in each one that make the whole letter sound uniquely positioned for that particular job posting.

It should also be obvious that, to address the needs of the employer, you need to understand what they are looking for. Start by reading and rereading their job description carefully. Use your skills as a college student and apply critical thinking to understand what the work really entails. Also, review the employer's website to better appreciate their work, their mission and what might be the challenges they regularly deal with. The following excerpt demonstrates this type of understanding well:

I understand that DFAS is a massive operation, and I appreciate the importance of anticipating and meeting the needs of various departments and agencies in this type of organization. My experience has prepared me to provide timely and accurate financial reporting, and to track against targets to ensure budgetary compliance.

Since a cover letter allows you to provide more direct context about your knowledge and experience, don't miss the opportunity to do this. Rather than simply claim you can do the job or have the expected skills, provide specific examples to demonstrate this. By giving some specific context, you show that the claims about your experience are real and credible. To help illustrate this, imagine you are applying to a job opening that requires direct experience in patient relations. Following is an example of a weak statement, followed by progressively better examples.

Weak: *I have strong patient relations skills.*

Fair: *I have several months of experience in working directly with patients.*

Strong: *My passion for helping young patients and their families cope with discomfort and uncertainty has been well demonstrated in my previous role as an urgent care intake specialist. I know that my compassionate approach to address patients' concerns will support the Patient Relations mission at Children's Hospital.*

The third example is a home run! This candidate not only provides a clear example of meeting the requirement but shares some specifics that make their experience personal and credible. Most importantly, they demonstrate true empathy for the plight of ill and injured patients. Rather than merely meeting a requirement, this candidate demonstrates a genuine attitude of concern, based on significant interactions with patients, which is vital for this role. Your goal is to, likewise, demonstrate the value and impact you have made in your role as an employee.

Once you understand the importance of providing substantive examples of your work, keep in mind that you will have to be selective about the number of points you can convey in depth, as you only have so much writing space to do so. Your resume often gives a more comprehensive overview of your experience, but you can accentuate and reinforce the breadth of your experience in a cover letter. Below is an example of a candidate giving better context to the range of experiences that their resume covers more generically:

Through my experience with course projects, internships and various types of campus and community involvement, I have written materials and publications for a wide range of audiences, including students, members of professional associations, the local community and alumni.

In addition to providing substance, also make sure you clarify the active roles you've played in your activities. By using active voice, rather than passive voice, you will clarify things for the reader. Notice the difference between the two examples below:

Passive voice: *During my senior year, a case study analysis of the Ariel Corporation was presented.*

Active voice: *During my senior year, I presented a case study analysis of the Ariel Corporation.*

It is unclear, in the first example, who presented the study. The second example leaves nothing to question and shows clear command of the situation. Use the active voice approach to describe your experiences.

Another common pitfall in writing cover letters is beginning numerous sentences with “I.” This becomes monotonous, puts too much focus on you and shows a lack of writing ability. There is always a way to restructure things to avoid this kind of redundancy, so check your writing for overused words and phrases.

Of course, your cover letter is not just a laundry list of activities, it is similar to an essay or personal statement. With this in mind, try to have some sense of organization and flow to your writing, as opposed to listing things randomly and creating a disjointed body of information. The example below demonstrates this lack of cohesion you should avoid:

In my job at Subway, I worked hard to serve customers quickly and kept the wait times short. I maintained good grades during this time. Some of my professors compliment me on my eagerness to speak up in class. My coaches have also acknowledged my ability to take initiative with the team. Interpersonal skills would be highly valued in any future job I might seek.

Formatting the Cover Letter

Cover letters use a standard, business letter format, they should not be blocked out like a resume, or include headings, large text, ruled lines, color, etc. Even though you may see many examples of stylized cover letters, traditionally speaking, a letter should use simple, running text, all the same size and same type style.

In regard to length, cover letters should not exceed one page. With this in mind, it’s best to limit your documents to four or five paragraphs. The content of the beginning, middle and final paragraphs typically follow a common flow. The first paragraph will introduce you as a candidate for a particular position. The middle paragraphs will provide the substance to show why you are well-suited for the position. The final paragraph will restate your interest, make reference to your resume and express appreciation for their consideration.

Pages 5 and 6 show examples of two types of cover letters, in standard business format. Note the clean look, with flush-left paragraphs, the format used in addressing and dating the letters, and the type of content in each paragraph.

Types of Cover Letters

Letter of Application

A letter of application is used when applying to a published job posting. The job description provided by the employer will help you develop some important points for your letter, as you attempt to show how your qualifications match the needs of their position.

Addressing the Letter

With published job openings, you will rarely be provided the name of the individual who will do the hiring. Without this information, you are left in the awkward position of speaking to a nameless person. Frequently applicants will address their letter with “Dear Sir or Madam” or “To Whom it May Concern,” but this sounds very impersonal—more like the beginning of a form letter. If you can’t identify a specific person, a better approach is to address the letter with “Dear Hiring Manager.” But if you can get the name of the person in charge of hiring, through a little digging, this is most preferable.

Opening Paragraph

The first paragraph should serve as a personal introduction and expression of your interest in the specific position you are applying for. You should state how you became aware of the vacancy, whether through a job posting, word-of-mouth or other means. Here are some examples:

I am writing to express my interest in the Proofreader position that was listed on the Atrium Publications website. I will graduate from Mount Vernon Nazarene University in December 2023 with a Bachelor's degree in English, and my goals is to enter the field of publishing.

I am very excited to learn of the Customer Service Representative position with GreenGrow. Mary J. Alumnus, a systems analyst with your company, recently informed me about this exciting opportunity.

If you have extensive employment experience, focus on this instead of your degree, in the first paragraph.

I want to express my interest in the Loan Officer position listed on the JP Morgan Chase website. I have several years of experience in banking, including substantial work with loans and mortgages, as your position calls for.

Middle Paragraphs

The next one to three paragraphs make up the core of your letter, demonstrating the match between the skills and experience you possess and those required by the employer. If you have a fair amount of academic preparation and career-related work experience, you may want an additional paragraph to allow you to focus on these points more extensively.

Use the employer's job description to guide your writing. For example, if a job requires the candidate to have completed specific courses, then point out in the letter that you have had those courses. If a job description indicates that the successful candidate will possess excellent speaking skills, make sure you cover any examples of your experience in public speaking, such as giving presentations or announcing at basketball games. If you are underqualified in any way for the position, include a statement about related experience or your proven ability to learn new procedures quickly. Remember that the job posting is often a "wish list" from the employer—an ideal set of qualifications—and that you might not need 100% of the listed qualifications to be considered.

Closing Paragraph

The paragraph that follows the explanation of your experience and qualifications (usually the third or fourth paragraph) is where you will typically summarize your case and express your desire to schedule an interview. The examples below illustrate some varying approaches to closing your letter.

I believe my experience and knowledge make me an excellent candidate for this position. Should you need additional information, you can reach me at 740-555-1212 or gbraxton@mvnu.edu. I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your time and consideration.

I would value the opportunity to meet with you and learn more about this exciting opportunity with Ariel Corporation. My attached resume will further demonstrate my qualifications and experience. I hope to discuss the next steps in the process at your convenience.

Letter of Application Example

Megan Finley
202 Coshocton Road
Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050
740-397-9767
mfinely@mvnmail.edu

April 15, 2024

Mr. Peter Kirkpatrick, Director of Personnel
Defense Finance and Accounting Service
2000 East Broad Street
Columbus, OH 43215

Dear Mr. Kirkpatrick:

I am writing to express my interest in the Junior Budget Analyst position with DFAS, as listed on MVNU's job website. I will graduate from Mount Vernon Nazarene University in May 2024 with a Bachelor's degree in Accounting, and I am confident that my experience has prepared me well for this opportunity with DFAS.

In regard to the requirements for this position, I am experienced in many regulatory processes and have substantial training in principles and practices of accounting systems. My experience includes a full-year internship with a corporate finance department, involving review and analysis of historical financial information, revenue and expense projections.

I understand that DFAS is a massive operation, and I appreciate the importance of anticipating and meeting the needs of various departments and agencies in this type of organization. My experience has prepared me to provide timely and accurate financial reporting, and to track against targets to ensure budgetary compliance. I have also assisted my supervisor in developing monthly and quarterly financial forecasting processes.

My combination of field experience, detail-orientation, and analytical skills make me an ideal candidate for this position. Please see my enclosed resume for fuller details on my qualifications. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Megan Finley

Megan Finley

Letter of Inquiry/ Referral

Caleb Gross
3496 Saigon Drive
Mansfield, OH 43230
33- 487-2360

December 29, 2023

Mary Fleming
Alcohol and Drug Freedom Center of Knox County
106 East Gambier Street
Mount Vernon, OH 43050

Dear Ms. Fleming:

I am writing to express my interest in furthering the mission of the Alcohol and Drug Freedom Center of Knox County. I recently read an article in The Mount Vernon News, indicating that you are seeking to establish several new treatment teams to assist local residents with drug and alcohol recovery. I am excited to hear about this development because I am extremely interested in working with this population and anticipate that your need for social workers will grow.

My studies at Mount Vernon Nazarene University have provided me with a strong working knowledge of the social work field. I have a combination of formal education and extensive practical experience in social work that I believe will enable me to be a productive member of your treatment team. My experience at Volunteer Express has given me the opportunity to teach life management skills to clients. My attached resume provides additional details about my social work experience.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to discuss the growing work and any anticipated needs at the Alcohol and Drug Freedom Center of Knox County. I look forward to an opportunity to discuss my interest in your organization at your convenience. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Caleb Gross

Caleb Gross

Letter of Inquiry/Referral

There doesn't have to be a known job posting out there for you to connect with a company or influential person. A letter of inquiry, or referral, is what to use when you are inquiring about the *possibility* of working for a company of interest or connecting with someone based on a referral. (If someone you know shares the name and contact info of someone they think would be helpful for you to connect with, this is a referral.) Since you are not responding to an actual job posting, the first paragraph will not make any reference to a particular position, as would be the case with a letter of application. The second paragraph will probably take on a slightly more general tone since you are not responding to a specific list of qualifications. In addition, you will need to be more assertive in your approach to this type of letter. This is most obvious in the last paragraph, in which you will often indicate your interest in scheduling a meeting.

Addressing the Letter

When addressing a letter of inquiry or referral, you should have a specific person's name. This is a more personal approach, and you'll typically be trying to set up an in-person meeting, rather than waiting for a company to call you for an interview. If you don't have a referral to someone at the company, it isn't that impossible to get the name and title of the person to whom you should send your resume and cover letter. You can sometimes find the needed contact information via LinkedIn or, perhaps, on the company website. You can also try to call the main number of the company or organization and ask for the name and title of the person who oversees the department of interest. Be sure to get their title and correct spelling of their name.

The First Paragraph

In this type of letter, rather than mentioning a job posting you are applying to, briefly explain why you are interested in working for this company; try to make a personal connection. You may have read an article about the company, talked with someone in the field, or simply knew that the company hires people with your qualifications. Here is an example:

I am writing to inquire about Claims Adjuster positions that may be open at Fremont Insurance Company. A recent article listed your company as one of the top ten in customer satisfaction. I would like to work for a company that has this kind of public image. I am currently a student at Mount Vernon Nazarene University and will graduate in December 2025 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English.

Middle Paragraphs

This section of your letter can be basically the same as the middle paragraphs of a letter of application. The difference is that you are not responding to the qualifications of a specific opening. Rather you are giving the reader a general overview of your background and relevant qualifications. Do your best to address how you can meet the needs of the employer, rather than just highlighting your capabilities. This requires insight and creativity. Since you are not responding to specific requirements for a position, tell the reader what you think they would value in their candidates based on the nature of the work and needs of the company. This usually requires some research on your part. A sample paragraph is shown below:

During my graphic design internship at Communication by Design, I worked on several projects for clients in the retail industry, and I understand that your company caters primarily to retail clients. I have become accustomed to the fast pace of churning out projects and having last-minute changes, as I am sure your company experiences on a daily basis. My experience includes point-of-purchase displays and window graphics, which show my ability to impact customers visually and emotionally. Samples of my retail work can be viewed via the link on my attached resume.

Final Paragraph

When writing a letter of inquiry, there is little chance that your recipient will call you for an appointment. Since you are initiating this contact without an invitation, the burden to follow up with a phone call is solely on you. So in this case, it's very important that you indicate when you will contact the reader. There is, however, always the chance that your letter has arrived at a time when the employer has reason to reach out to you—such as a recent opening that you were not aware of. This is why you should leave the door open for the employer to call you. Here is an example:

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss any current or future accounting positions with Limbach CPAs. I will call during the week of April 9th to inquire further. If this is inconvenient, you may reach me by calling 740-555-2345, or via e-mail, at myemail@mvnu.edu. Thank you for your time in reviewing my information.

Sending Your Documents to Employers

Job applicants will most frequently submit their cover letters and resumes by uploading them to the employer's application system. But there are times when you may be providing your application materials via email, or when you are not applying to an open position but sending a letter of inquiry. When sending a cover letter (with your resume) to an employer via email, it can be attached as a Word document or pasted into the actual email message itself. If you are applying for an existing, published position (using a letter of application), it's best to attach the cover letter to the email, since placing your text into the message window of the email will not give you as much control over the formatting, fonts, width settings and other aspects that affect the look of your letter. These aspects often get altered on the recipients' end. When sending your cover letter and resume as attachments, do include a brief introduction to the documents, in the email message, without stealing too much thunder from your cover letter (see the example below). This message should be brief but professional. Indicate your intent and call attention to the attached documents. Before sending, always double check to make sure you have attached the intended items.

Dear Ms. Kimble:

I am writing in regard to my interest in the Laboratory technician position, which is posted on the Donovan Scientific website. Attached are my cover letter, resume and list of professional references for your review. Thank you for your consideration of my application materials. I look forward to hearing from you.

If, instead, you are contacting an employer based on a referral or general interest in their organization (using a letter of inquiry), the best recommendation is to paste your text directly into the email message rather than attaching the document to the email. This is because an employer is much less likely to take the additional step of opening your unrequested letter. If they open your email, having your full message right there makes it more likely that they will read it.

Finally, there are still times when a more strategic approach might mean that you will actually submit your cover letter and resume as hard copy through U.S. mail. If so, print your documents on light, neutral stationery rather than copier paper, sign your letter and fold it neatly to fit inside the matching envelope. If you need more guidance on this process, contact the Career Center.