

Writing Effective Cover Letters

This guide provides an overview of the key components of a cover letter. Students are encouraged to schedule an appointment in **HarrisLink** to have their cover letter(s) reviewed by a Career Development Office (CDO) counselor. However, be sure to plan ahead and give yourself time to make necessary changes well in advance of any deadlines.

INTRODUCTION

The cover letter is a supplemental document to the resume that highlights a candidate's qualifications to an employer. The letter serves as a measure of your writing skills, ability to articulate your qualifications for the target position, and familiarity with the organization's needs.

PREPARING EFFECTIVE COVER LETTER CONTENT

Step 1: Highlight Key Accomplishments from Your Resume

Cover letters should not exceed one page. A concise letter demonstrates your focus and ability to communicate succinctly. Do not simply restate the information in your resume. Instead, cite particular accomplishments and attributes that would be of special interest to the employer. Illustrate that you have the skills, knowledge, and experience an employer seeks.

If transitioning to a new field as a graduate student, the cover letter provides an additional opportunity to highlight your transferable skill sets. Assess your most proficient skills, interests, and industry-specific knowledge. If you have not already done so, complete and review the Skill Identification Booklet with a CDO counselor. You may have gained valuable and relevant experiences in a variety of settings—academic, personal, professional, and extracurricular—and your goal is to convey this information persuasively to a prospective employer.

Step 2: Conduct Market Research

Once you have assessed your interests and skills, it is critical to conduct industry research. Employers are seeking individuals who fit their organization and culture well, and who can express an understanding of how this organization is part of a larger market or community. Your letter should demonstrate a thorough understanding of the position and the needs of the employer.

Step 3: Analyze the Job Description

Now that you have a thorough understanding of your skills and target market, review the position posting thoughtfully. Employers usually enumerate qualifications in order of importance. Use the primary information listed under "Responsibilities & Qualifications" in the job description to guide the theme(s) of your cover letter, and use the vocabulary and tone of the job posting to describe your skills and experience.

1. **Format:** Follow basic business-letter format in composing your letters.
2. **Electronic Submittals:** Submit the cover letter as a PDF attachment. This will ensure that formatting and/or text is not lost through electronic submission. In certain circumstances, you can use your email as the cover letter with your resume as an attachment.
3. **Hard copies:** If providing a hard copy of your cover letter, use high-quality matching bond paper for your resume, cover letter, and envelopes in white or ivory.

COVER LETTER STRUCTURE

Date and Return Address

In addition to traditional formatting, students have also become accustomed to creating personal letterheads to match their cover letter and resume. In either approach, include the following information in the heading:

Example:

[Your Name]
[Your Street Address]
[Your City, State]
[Your Phone]
[Your Email]

Recipient's Address and Greeting

Avoid using the generic "To Whom it May Concern." Attempt to identify the hiring manager or overseer of the hiring process through the organization's website. While it is not always possible to secure this information, it demonstrates initiative and may help you get an interview. You may also contact company employees through LinkedIn for additional information—this can also serve as a great means for developing future networks.

Oftentimes, employers do not provide names of specific individuals and do not wish candidates to send applications to individuals, but rather post them on the organization's career page/website. In those cases, feel free to address the recipient as Recruiter or Hiring Manager.

Example:

Human Resources Director
World Hunger
Lloyd Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

First Paragraph: Introduce Yourself (Briefly)

This paragraph should be no more than 2-3 sentences. Articulate why you are writing, a quick review of your most relevant skills, and your interest in the employer.

Key questions to address:

1. Why are you writing?
2. Who are you, and what are you doing now? (Only include information relevant to the position).
3. Why are you specifically interested in this position and organization?

Body of the Letter

How can you convince the employer that you would be an asset to his/her organization? In the second paragraph of your letter, elaborate on aspects of your education, work experience(s), and additional skills that are relevant to the organization and position. Use the vocabulary of the job description as much as possible to tailor your experiences to the employer's needs.

Key questions to address:

1. How did you develop the relevant skills/attributes for the required position?
2. How have you been successful in achieving your goals?
3. Why should they hire you?
4. What makes you unique or more valuable than other candidates? (Be careful here—show why you are more valuable, but do not say, for example, "Unlike other applications, I have...").

Discuss Your Fit with the Position and Organization

1. Why does this job particularly intrigue you?
2. Why does this specific employer interest you?
3. What is it about the nature of the work that you find appealing?
4. Why are you committed to the employer's mission?

As you ask yourself each of these questions, support your claims with evidence to incorporate in the letter. Remember, you can draw from paid and unpaid activities—academic, extracurricular, volunteer, etc.—as long as you can communicate the transferability of your skills.

Closing Paragraph: Final Words and Details

In closing, indicate your interest in discussing the position and request an interview, and include your contact info here. Thank the reader for his/her time and consideration. Remember, your emphasis should always be on what you can do for the employer, not what you hope to gain from the experience.

Sample Cover Letter

Amanda Kelly
5544 W. Elm St.
Chicago, IL 60616
312-521-1212
akelly@uchicago.edu

March 30, 2013

Ms. Mary Smith
Human Resources Director
World Hunger
Lloyd Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Ms. Smith:

I am writing to apply for the position of Policy Analyst, recently posted by your office to the Career Services database at the Chicago Harris School of Public Policy. I will graduate with my Masters in Public Policy from the University of Chicago in June 2013, and I am confident that my education and professional background well qualify me to make a substantial contribution to your organization.

My experiences and values are a strong match for this position. I am specifically interested in your organization's focus on social injustice and poverty in Latino neighborhoods and in applying my analytical skills to help address these problems. In the course of completing my master's thesis, I developed strong quantitative skills, consistently met self-imposed deadlines, and produced work that received praise from my faculty advisors. I conducted a literature review of over 39 articles and books, and as a result I mastered large amounts of statistical information and identified issues in need of further research in minority poverty. These research, writing, and analytical skills will serve me well as a consulting analyst, as I can acquire expertise quickly and apply it to solve particular problems.

I also developed my leadership skills as the president of the Students for Haitian Relief Club, an organization formed in response to the Haitian earthquake. Setting and exceeding a fundraising goal of \$10,000, I led a team in recruiting student donors at the University of Chicago. Capitalizing on a rivalry between two dorms, I created a competition-based fundraiser with prizes from local vendors. I thoroughly enjoyed devising a creative path to reach and exceed a challenging goal. I believe working as a consultant in your organization would allow me to apply my rigorous analytical training to generating resolutions to the issues of poverty, inequality, and social injustice.

I welcome the opportunity to learn more about the policy analyst position and discuss my quantitative, analytical, and leadership skills in more depth. I look forward to hearing from you and can be reached via phone at 312-444-2323 or email at mychicago@uchicago.edu. Thank you for your consideration. I will follow up with you in one week to ensure you received my application materials.

Sincerely,

Amanda Kelly