

# Cover Letter Pointers

Cover letters are just as important as resumes in conveying your value to employers. You'll use them to:

- Introduce yourself to prospective employers and motivate them to read your resume.
- State your career interests and highlight your strengths in relation to job responsibilities and/or organizations.
- Demonstrate your writing skills, professionalism, and courtesy.
- Reveal your personality and enthusiasm for the position, organization, and field.

The following pointers will be of help to you as you write your cover letters.

**1. Address an individual**, preferably the person with the power to hire. If you cannot identify the person by means such as networking, an information interview, or printed resources, call the organization and get the right name by talking politely to the person or persons who hold (and often guard) that information. If you are unsure of the gender of the individual you are writing to, write out the whole name. Be sure to spell the name correctly!

**2. Zero-in on your market** by asking, "for whom do I want to work?", "why do I want to be hired by this organization?", and "what do I have to offer?" A career counselor or advisor in 177 Roberts can help with each of these questions. Also, our "Top Ten Reasons To Hire Me" exercise offers a great technique to identify your transferrable skills and qualities. It is critical that you convey the **top** three to five reasons for the employer to consider you.

**3. Add power by using facts/examples/evidence.** The statement, "can initiate and accomplish tasks with little direction," has no credibility until backed with an example: "As President of Cornell Greens, I organized meetings, workshops, rallies and Earth Day activities for the Cornell campus, and also established an environmental educational curriculum for an after-school program."

**4. Say good things about yourself.** This is one of those rare occasions in which modesty will hurt you.

**5. Write from the reader's point of view.** What's in it for them? It is natural for people in the job market to look for what they can get - what the benefits are, the training, hours, vacations, etc. Employers, however, want to know why you can be an asset to them - they are not interested, at least initially, in what they can do for you.

**6. Paint an accurate picture.** If you exaggerate, even once, your reader will suspect everything else you write is also an exaggeration or, possibly, a downright lie.

**7. Be natural and friendly.** Write the way you would talk if the person were sitting before you, i.e., simply and naturally. The litmus test of a cover letter is to read it aloud when you're done; that way, you'll know for sure if it sounds natural. Also, give your letter a friendly tone, as opposed to one that is stiff and formal. A friendly, conversational letter enables you to say things more clearly and concisely.

**8. Edit ruthlessly.** Look for passive verbs you can make active; this invariably produces a shorter sentence. Example: "The cherry tree *was* chopped down by George Washington." (Passive verb and nine words.) "George Washington *chopped* down the cherry tree." (Active verb and seven words.)

**9. Make it perfect.** No typos, no misspellings, no factual errors. If you don't have the paperback *Elements of Style*, by Strunk & White, you may want to pick up a copy.

**10. Keep it short.** Cover letters rarely exceed one page.

**11. Make your letter attractive.** Print it on good quality paper using a high quality printer. Be sure it is spaced properly and that it follows an acceptable business format. You can refer to our example notebook or ask any of the staff in the CALS Career Development Office (177 Roberts) for help.

**12. Concentrate on quality, not quantity.** It is better to send a few well written letters to employers you have researched and in whom you are truly interested than to send large numbers of general letters.

**13. See us for help.** A CALS CDO staff member will be happy to critique your letter, either by appointment or during our drop-in hours.

# Letter Tips

## Do

- Use standard business-letter format and generous margins.
- Single-space paragraphs and double-space between paragraphs.
- Address the individual by name and use his/her appropriate title.
- Use the person's full name if you don't know his/her gender (e.g., "Dear Pat Smith")
- Attract attention with a strong first paragraph. Limit letter to 3-4 short paragraphs.
- Refer to your enclosed resume.
- Highlight and expand upon the most relevant information in your resume, using specific examples.
- Use correct grammar.
- Have someone proofread letters to make sure they error-free.
- Use high-quality bond paper and envelopes in white, ivory, or light gray.
- Keep copies of your letters.

## Don't

- Use the passive voice.
- Include extraneous information.
- Repeat verbatim what's in your resume.
- Point out weaknesses or lack of experiences.
- Begin too many sentences and paragraphs with "I."
- Use jargon or excessive wordiness.
- Exceed one page
- Copy exact wording from letter examples in the *Career Guide*.
- Assume spell check will identify all errors.
- Overlook signing your letters.
- Emphasize what you hope to get from the experience, but rather what you can contribute.