



Simple Rules for a Winning Cover Letter





Ask any hiring manager, HR specialist, or recruiter, and they'll tell you: most cover letters are exceptionally awful.

So bad that they can disqualify even the most-skilled candidates from further consideration.

This is your FIRST impression to a potential employer. It is crucial that you get it right for any position, but especially one that calls for attention to detail and strong writing skills.

This document outlines important format and style rules for application cover letters, and provides a template for writing a cover letter that resonates with employers and lands you an interview.



Format rules for cover letters

Step one is to properly structure your cover letter to make it direct and easy-to-read. Here are a few formatting rules you should follow:

Follow the business letter format

You're applying for a job not sending a personal letter. So make sure you structure your cover letter into a [formal business letter format](#).

This shows that you know the proper rules of business communications and that you are detail oriented.

Not familiar with the business letter format? Here are the elements, in order, you should include.

1. Your address
2. Today's date
3. Employer's address
4. Greeting (ex: "Dear Ms. Smith,")
5. Body of cover letter
6. Closing salutation (ex: "Regards,")
7. Your full name and LinkedIn URL



Want an example?
Check out the cover letter samples on page 9.

Use the hiring manager's name

In the greeting, use the last name of the hiring manager. “Dear Ms. Smith” will always work better than “Dear Recruiter” or “To Whom It May Concern.”

If the hiring manager's name isn't included in the job posting, you'll need to do some research to figure out who you should address the letter to. Dig around on LinkedIn and look through the staff page on the company website. Don't be afraid to make an educated guess. Even if you target the wrong person, including a specific name shows that you've been doing your research on the company.

If you want to play it safe, address the letter to the head of the department to which you're applying. Or, if it's a smaller organization, consider addressing the letter to the leader of the organization.

Break up your paragraphs

Each paragraph should be concise and the entire body of the cover letter should be broken into [short digestible chunks](#).

Start a new paragraph when you begin a new idea or point, when your readers need a pause, or when you are ending your introduction, main points, or starting a conclusion.

Breaking up paragraphs isn't just about proper grammar. It also improves readability. Readers tend to skip over big blocks of uninterrupted text. Crafting shorter paragraphs make it more likely that your cover letter actually gets read.





Use bullet points

You might also consider using bullet points to address one-off items that don't require any extra explanation.

For example, bullets are a great way to highlight high-level skills or qualifications, without being trapped in a paragraph structure.

Keep it to a page

There's some debate about the ideal length for a resume. But it is an absolute rule that cover letters should be no longer than one page. Conciseness is a virtue!

Include a link to your LinkedIn profile

This is, increasingly, becoming a norm in business communications. Sharing the URL to your LinkedIn profile gives the employer easy access to your full work history.



Style rules for cover letters

Cover letters aren't just about structure; a killer cover letter also needs to have style. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

Don't repeat your resume

Don't use your cover letter to simply rehash the information already in your cover letter. Doing so is redundant and makes for a particularly tedious reading experience.

While you may want to briefly touch on your past experiences, the focus of your cover letter is how you can apply those experiences to the employer's current needs.

Focus on the employer's needs

This is the most important thing you need to remember! The cover letter isn't about you (or at least it isn't *entirely* about you.) It's about the employer and their challenges.

The best cover letters show that you understand the employer's problems and are already thinking about how you can help them.

You want the employer to feel like you're writing this letter just for them. That means you need to research the organization's specific challenges and address how you can help them in these areas.



Show some personality

While the overall tone of your cover letter should be professional, don't be afraid to show a bit of personality. A creative introduction or some personal information can help your application stand out from the pile of boring cover letters, full of stale business-speak.

Remember that culture fit is a major consideration in hiring decisions. It isn't always the most qualified candidate who gets the job. Sometimes having a shared connection with the hiring manager—a love of baseball, or an affinity for tacos, for example—can make all the difference in getting your foot in the door.

Name drop

People also get interviewed (and hired) because of who they know. If you have an inside lead in the organization, or a shared connection with the hiring manager, make sure you share that information in the cover letter.

People will sometimes roll their eyes when you name drop in a social conversation. Don't worry about that in your cover letter. Employers want to hire people who are already known and trusted in their field. A referral from a known shared connection can fast-track your application to the interview process.





Explain why

This is probably the most important aspect of any cover letter. You need to make it crystal clear why you want to work for the company. (*Hint: your reason has to be about more than just a paycheck.*)

Employers want people who are passionate and excited about working the job. You can showcase your interest in the position by explaining why you're applying.

Consider the following questions:

- What about the job description caught your attention?
- How have your previous experiences brought you to this point?
- How does this job fit into your career goals?
- What do you like about the hiring organization?

Answer these questions in your cover letter and you'll make a great impression with the employer.



Examples of great cover letters

Want to see examples of quality cover letters? Here are two cover letters that work—and helped the writers land an interview.

Jane Doe
123 Main Street
Portland, OR 97206

Acme Agency
Attention: John Smith, Managing Director
555 Market Street
Portland, OR 97204

Dear Mr. Smith,

I have been a fan the Acme Agency for many years. I admire the work you do, improving communications and outreach for Portland's social-impact organizations. I am excited at the opportunity to work with such a professional and yet accessible organization.

I believe my natural abilities as a communicator, my job experience in sales and customer service, and my education have prepared me to succeed as a sales associate at your office. Should you consider me for the position, I would prove to be a diligent worker, an ambitious thinker, and a dynamic personality.

My creative mind thrives on three primary strengths; writing, networking, and project management. I require minimal supervision, collaborate well with others, and operate with a refined sense of professionalism. I firmly believe that my intuitive ability to build sustainable connections through wise and thoughtful communication would prove to be of great value to your organization.

Please find my resume attached. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe
<http://www.LinkedIn.com/your-profile-URL>



Here's another example

John Doe
321 Main Street
Portland, OR 97206

Acme Corp
Attention: Sally Smith, Managing Director
555 Market Street
Portland, OR 97204

Ms. Smith:

My former colleague, Deborah Black, recently mentioned that you were looking for a skilled communications and marketing professional to help grow Acme Corp. I would like to throw my hat into the ring for your consideration.

I have been in the communications field for nearly a decade and have extensive experience with website management, product development, sales, content marketing, and copywriting. I've monetized nonprofit websites before and have no doubt that I can increase margins (and overall standing) at Acme.

Since resigning from my position at the GlobalCorp in February, I've been searching for my next big professional adventure. I am looking to join an organization that is entrepreneurial, socially-minded and progressive with its communication strategy. Acme seems like it fits this mold perfectly.

Let's talk about this opportunity and the specific goals you have for Acme Corp. I believe I can help you reach these objectives as your new Communications Manager. I see the prospects for a happy and productive fit.

Regards,

John Doe
<http://www.LinkedIn.com/your-profile-URL>



About Mac Prichard

Mac Prichard, founder and publisher of [Mac's List](#), has been connecting people to rewarding work for decades. As a transplant to Portland, Oregon in the early 1990s, Mac learned the secrets to finding work in a competitive market. He has since become a recognized expert on job hunting and career management. Mac writes for [Mac's List](#), hosts a weekly podcast, [Find Your Dream Job](#), and is the author of [Land Your Dream Job in Portland \(and Beyond\)](#) and [Land Your Dream Job Anywhere](#).

About Mac's List

Since 2001, Mac's List has been Oregon's premier job search resource, an online community connecting thousands of passionate and talented people to meaningful work opportunities in the Pacific Northwest. A registered B Corp, Mac's List is an organization with a social mission: to give people the tools and knowledge they need to conduct effective job searches. We do this through our [job board](#), a [blog](#), a [podcast](#), and [online courses](#) all dedicated to the nuts and bolts of job hunting and career management. More than 80,000 people a month connect with Mac's List.

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