

Cover Letters: The Dos and Don'ts

You've crafted a great résumé/CV – well done! This isn't enough, on its own, to land you an interview, though. You'll also need a covering letter that impresses your potential new employer.

Tip: If you're applying by email, then your email itself is your covering letter. You don't need to attach a separate document.

The "do"s...

Do: Address the person who will be reading your email

Not every job listing will make it clear who's handling the applications – but a few minutes' research will often help you find out. (If, for instance, you're given the email address george@companyname.com, take a look at the "Staff" or "About" page on the company's website to find out George's full name.)

Unless you already know the person, (perhaps through a networking event or through social media), address them as Mr. or Ms. Only use Mrs. or Miss if you find them referred to in this way on the company's website. Use the formal "Dear" rather than an informal variation like "Hi" or "Hello".

If you really can't find a name, "Dear Sir / Madam" is OK.

Do: Make it clear what position you're applying for

Some companies will be recruiting for several roles at once, so do make it clear which position you're applying for, by including the exact name of the role as stated in their job advert. (If a reference number is given, use that as well.)

You can do this in the subject line of your email:

Application for SEO Account Manager role

You may also want to repeat it in the first line of your email, as this often makes for an easy start:

I'm writing to apply for the SEO Account Manager role, as advertised on your website.

In the unlikely event that you're applying by post (or have been asked to attach your cover letter as a separate document), you can include a subject line in bold text beneath the salutation (that's the "Dear Mr Smith part).

Do: Emphasize how you meet the "essential" criteria

Most job roles will list "essential" criteria – e.g. "experience running PPC campaigns" or "familiar with Google Analytics". Try to address these briefly in your covering letter, without copying-and-pasting straight from your CV.

The person reading your cover letter will have dozens more – possibly hundreds – to go through. Make their life as easy as possible, and maximize your chance of success, by making it very clear that you're a perfect fit for their role.

Do: Make it clear you've done your research

Put yourself in the position of the business you're applying to: would you rather hire someone who just wants any old job in the field, or someone who's keenly interested in joining your company?

Even though you're probably applying for multiple jobs in the field, you should research each company carefully – and demonstrate this in your covering letter. For instance, if their "About" page makes it clear that they specialize in online reputation management for travel sites, you could mention that you're a TripAdvisor user and you're very aware of the problems that travel-related sites can face with negative reviews.

And the "don't"s...

Don't: Re-use a previous covering letter

Even though you might only need to make minor tweaks to your résumé/CV for different roles, your covering letter will often need to be quite different, as it should be tailored to the company that you're applying to.

Copying-and-pasting makes it very easy to inadvertently create errors (like leaving in the wrong person's name at the start, or using the wrong company name part-way through the email).

It's better to create a completely new cover letter each time – even if that means retyping a few sentences word-for-word.

Don't: Forget to proofread

A spell-checker won't catch everything – and typos, misspellings, and other sloppy errors won't create a good impression. Proofread your cover letter twice: it might help to read it out loud so that you slow down and focus on each word.

Pay particular attention to your subject line, the salutation ("Dear...") and your closing words. (Pity the unlucky job-hunter who mistyped "regards" as "retards"!)

It's easy for your eyes to skate over these areas. Double-check your spelling of any names, including that of the company.

Don't: Sound arrogant – or apologetic

Your tone, or way you write, can make or break your cover letter, as it conveys something of your personality to the person reading. If you sound arrogant, they're likely to be put off. Don't tell them, "You can stop the job-hunt now: I'm the person you need!" – it's more likely to get a grimace than a smile.

Do not, however, go too far in the other direction. You might not feel very confident, but there's no need to let that show. Avoid writing anything like "I know I don't meet all the criteria" or "Sorry if I've wasted your time." Instead, draw attention to all your strong points: you might be in with a much better chance than you think.

Don't: Go on for too long

Your cover letter doesn't need to drag on for paragraph after paragraph: around four fairly short paragraphs, or 250 – 400 words in total, is usually enough. If you find that you're struggling to fit everything into the space, refer to your résumé/CV instead – you could write something like "I am highly experienced with Google Analytics (see my attached résumé for further details)".

Once you've written your cover letter, do a word count. Edit it, and see if you can cut the word count by 10% – so, if you wrote a 400 word covering letter, aim to cut 40 words.

Remember, your cover letter is just as important as your résumé/CV, if not more so: it's your best chance to make a great impression and it demonstrates that you care enough to personalize it for the job you are applying for. Don't spend days seeking perfection, though: a clear, professional cover letter that highlights your key strengths will put you well ahead of other candidates.