

DRIVING FORWARD COVER LETTER GUIDE



Overview

Employers will often ask for a cover letter as part of a job application. The cover letter introduces yourself, explains your interest in the position, and highlights how your background aligns with the job. It adds more context on your hard and soft skills and showcases your communication skills.

You will frequently read resource guides that describe the cover letter as a marketing tool. This misrepresents what the role of the cover letter in the recruiting process. Recruiters and hiring managers read the cover letter to learn more details about your hard skills and soft skills through specific answers. Interviewers use the cover letter to better understand a candidate's background and develop specific questions.

Cover Letter Structure

- **Length** - One page. While the brevity required can feel challenging, you are showcasing your ability to communicate succinctly and clearly.
- **Address** - If you do not have a specific name, use “Dear Hiring Manager” or “Dear *Name of Company Team*”
- **Sections** - Four sections including the Opening, Hard Skills, Soft Skills and Closing. Unlike using a resume format to align with a recruiters ATS (Applicant Tracking System), these sections are a suggested starting point, not a hard and fast rule.
- **Opening** - two to three sentences in length. Consider using or adding slight personalization to:

“My name is <name> and am a student at <school> majoring in <major>. I am applying for the role of <role>. I am interested in the opportunity to <align your career interests and skills with this position>.”

- **Hard Skills** - six to eight sentences in length. You're expanding on one story that showcases your hard skills. Include the organization, your role, the work you completed, what you learned, hurdles you cleared, problems you solved, results you delivered. These hard skills should be part of the skills included in the job description.
- **Soft Skills** - four to eight sentences in length. You are expanding on one story that showcases your soft skills. Popular skills to highlight include leadership, teamwork, communication, working cross functionally and coaching / mentoring others. Students frequently describe an accomplishment in a student club.

Cover Letter Structure (continued)

- **Closing** - two sentences in length. Consider using or adding a slight personalization to:

"I am excited about the opportunity to meet with the team to learn more about the opportunity and share my skills and interests. I look forward to hearing from you about possible next steps."

Tips

- **Proofread** - It is critical that you proofread each cover letter for spelling, punctuation, and grammar. In addition to digital tools like Grammarly, read the letter out loud which is an easy way to spot bad or awkward grammar. Mistakes made here signal that the applicant is not thorough and may have put little time into their application.
- **Do not praise the company** - The space on a cover letter is precious. Do not waste the space telling the company what you like or admire about that. Anyone can make those statements without differentiating themselves. Your interest in the company should be self evident by virtue of the fact that you are applying for a role. Save the stories about your interest in the company and the perceived fit for the interview process.
- **Stick with two to three stories** - Remember that the cover letter should expand what is on your resume, not repeat it. Focus on examples you are proud of allow to go deeper in describing specific accomplishments.
- **Tailor stories as appropriate** - Especially if you are a college student applying for similar types of roles, you will not need to create new stories for each cover letter. First consider if what you have written previously is relevant and you need any minor edits.
- **Employer expectations** - It is not known how and how much a recruiter uses the cover letter. Unlike the resume which is required, cover letters may or may not be reviewed by the recruiter, the hiring manager or members of the interview. They will know your resume but let them initiate any discussion of what is included on your cover letter.
- **Proofread** - Yes, it is so important that it needs to be repeated. You must proofread your cover letter for spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Proofreading does not take long, so doing it twice is worth the result.