

Writing a Cover Letter

A **cover letter** is a personal introduction to promote yourself. It serves as a companion document to a resume. Its main purpose is to elaborate on your professional skills, motivations, and why you should be viewed as the best candidate for a job.

There are three types of cover letters:

- **Networking**—Addressed to individuals to ask for their help in finding a job at their company
- **Prospecting**—Addressed to companies to explore all open job opportunities
- **Application**—Addressed to hiring managers to emphasize your fit for a specific job

This reading focuses on helping you write *application* cover letters. Employers have “who, what, where, when, why, and how” types of questions when they gather information about job applicants.

Your resume answers:

- **what** you have done
- **where** you worked
- **when** you were employed.

Your application cover letter describes in more detail:

- **who** you are
- **why** you want the job
- **how** you will be successful in the role

Preparing to write a cover letter

Pro tip: Not all job applications require a cover letter. When a cover letter is stated as being optional, it’s best to consider how much a cover letter might improve your standing. The following are common situations when people prefer to include a cover letter:

- When starting out in a career (early career applicant)
- When making a career transition
- When experience, education, or training isn’t an exact match with the listed requirements
- When entering a crowded field of applicants

Many people agree that no cover letter is better than a poorly written one! Even if a cover letter has no obvious errors, submitting a few paragraphs with very general statements isn’t going to help you that much. Before you write a cover letter, follow these steps to ensure you create a meaningful one.

Step 1: Research the company or organization

You can find out a lot about a company from these methods:

- Browse the company’s website
- Follow the company on social media including LinkedIn
- Perform a search on the company’s financial standing and investors, if applicable
- Perform a search on the company’s known competitors
- Ask your relatives, friends, and colleagues what they know about the company

Step 2: Inventory the required skills from the job description

Read the job description carefully and determine what you think are the most important skills for an applicant to have and why.

Step 3: Prioritize your matching skills from strongest to weakest

Based on the skills you identified in the previous step, identify your skills that match or are most closely aligned (associated) with them. Next, prioritize your matching skills from the strongest to the weakest. People often skip this ordering process. Ranking your skills enables you to emphasize your strongest skills first in your cover letter.

Parts of a cover letter

Pro tip: A cover letter is between 250-400 words in length and doesn't exceed one page.

Review the goals for each section of a cover letter below.

Introduction

The primary goals of the introduction section of a cover letter are to:

- Identify the position you're applying for
- Show your enthusiasm for the company
- Encourage people on the hiring team to learn more about you

Example *I'm applying for the Python Developer position, and can't imagine a more exciting role. As a frequent and avid user of your services, I'm eager to pursue this career opportunity.*

Body Section

The goal of the body section of a cover letter is to describe how your skills apply to the open position. Suppose the job description has these qualifications:

- Experience with Python scripting
- At least 1 year of IT troubleshooting experience
- Critical thinking skills with ability to solve complex problems

The following example shows how you can map your experiences to these qualifications in the body of your cover letter.

Example

I completed the Google _____ Professional certificate and have previous customer service experience in retail electronics. I was responsible for helping customers choose the right devices for their needs, and solve any problems they had with those devices. I also helped keep the onsite computers healthy by identifying and solving any technical problems. With my attention to detail, I can help your IT team solve problems quickly and efficiently.

Pro tip: Avoid the temptation to rehash the content of your resume. A warning sign is if your cover letter has essentially the same information as your resume but in a paragraph format.

Pro tip: Focus on what you can do for the company rather than on how you would benefit from being hired for that position. The difference between being company-focused and self-focused can be subtle, as in the following sentences:

- I would like to develop automation solutions to keep your company's IT structure solid and provide efficiency to the company's IT systems (**company-focused; what you will do for the company**).
- I would like to grow my Python skills by developing cloud automation solutions for efficient virtual machine management (**self-focused; what you would like to gain by being in the role**).

Closing

The goal of the closing section of a cover letter is to restate your interest in the company and position. It is also used to indicate your expectations, such as scheduling an interview, being considered for other jobs, or a timeframe for follow up.

Example

Thank you for taking the time to review my resume for this position. I'm confident I can excel in this role using my combined work experience and skills from the Google _____ Professional Certificate. I'm looking forward to an interview and request the privilege to follow up on my application's progress in the coming weeks.

Proofread your cover letter

Many errors in cover letters are caused by copying and pasting text from one cover letter to another. After you write your cover letter, proofread it carefully to catch these common things:

- Awkward formality—Few people call people Sir or Madam nowadays, so you shouldn't use these in your cover letter either. Also refrain from using "To whom it may concern" which sounds highly impersonal. If you don't know the name of the hiring manager, use "Dear Hiring Team." Likewise, consider using "Best regards" instead of "Sincerely" which sounds a little outdated.

- Misspelled words (especially those that sound the same but are spelled differently). For example, “affect” and “effect,” “then” and “than,” and “your” and “you’re.”
- Mismatched skills—Make sure you aren’t incorporating skills for the wrong job description in your cover letter. This happens with copying and pasting.
- Passive voice—Use active voice whenever possible: “I revised the ads” instead of passive voice: “I ensured that the ads were revised.”
- Long anecdotes—Save stories that describe any past results you achieved for when you are being interviewed.

Key takeaways

Cover letters help introduce the best points about yourself to a potential employer. Make sure that your cover letter doesn’t simply rehash the skills outlined in your resume, but adds value by describing how your skills align with the job requirements and how you would be successful in the role. To write the best cover letters, it’s helpful to research the company, identify the most important skills from the job descriptions, and prioritize and include your matching and relevant skills.

✓ Completed