How to Write a Cover Letter: 31 Tips You Need to Know

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Ah, the dreaded cover letter. Every time you sit down to write one, you probably browse [cover letter examples](https://www.themuse.com/advice/31-attentiongrabbing-cover-letter-examples?ref=search) online, get overwhelmed, and think something to the effect of: *Does anyone really read these? Wouldn’t it be so much easier if I could just let my resume speak for itself?*

First off: Yes, we can assure you that cover letters do, in fact, get read. In fact, to some hiring managers, they’re the most important part of your application. And yes, while it would be easier to let your resume speak for itself, if that was the case you’d completely miss the opportunity to tell prospective employers who you are, showcase why they should hire you, and stand out above all the other candidates.

Ready to get started? To make sure your cover letter is in amazing shape (and is as painless as possible to write), we’ve compiled our 31 best cover letter tips of all time into one place.

Read on—then get cover letter writing.

1. Don’t Regurgitate Your Resume

Instead of just repeating yourself (“I was in charge of reviewing invoice disputes”), use your cover letter to describe additional details that you weren’t able to squeeze onto the single page of your resume: “By resolving invoice disputes, I gained a deep analytical knowledge—but more importantly, I learned how to interact calmly and diplomatically with angry customers.” A cover letter gives you the freedom to use full sentences—instead of bullet points—so use them to expand upon your resume points and tell the story of why you’re the perfect fit for the company.

2. Think Not What the Company Can Do for You

A common cover letter mistake? Talking about how great the position would be for you and your resume. Frankly, hiring managers are aware of that—what they really want to know is what you’re going to bring to the position and company. On that note:

3. Clearly Show What You’re Capable Of

Beyond explaining what you’ve done in the past, show hiring managers what you can do in the future. “Determine the key requirements and priorities for this job, and make it instantly clear to the reviewer that you can deliver the goods on these key things,” [says Jenny Foss](https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-cover-letters-that-make-hiring-managers-smile-then-call-you), job search expert and founder of [JobJenny.com](http://www.jobjenny.com/). “Consider crafting a section within the letter that begins with, ‘Here’s what, specifically, I can deliver in this role.’ And then expound upon your strengths in a few of the priority requirements for that role.”

4. Showcase Your Skills

When you know you have the potential to do the job—but your past experience doesn’t totally sell you as the perfect one for the position—try focusing on your skills, instead. [Here’s a template](https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-perfect-cover-letter-template-to-show-off-your-skills) that helps you do just that.

5. …Not Necessarily Your Education

Many new grads make the mistake of over-focusing on their educational backgrounds. At the end of the day, what hiring managers care about most is your work experience (and yes, that can be volunteer or internship experience, too)—and what you can walk through the door and deliver on Day 1.

6. Don’t Apologize for Skills You Don’t Have

When you don’t meet all of the job requirements, it’s common for job seekers to use lines like, “Despite my limited experience with marketing…” or “While I only have work experience doing administrative tasks…” But why apologize? Instead of drawing attention to your weaknesses, try to focus on the skills you do have, says [career expert Lily Zhang](https://www.themuse.com/advice/dear-job-seekers-stop-apologizing-for-the-experience-you-dont-have). “Stay positive, focus on your strengths, and immediately launch into your transferable skills and infectious enthusiasm for the position.”

7. Highlight the Right Experiences

Not sure what skills and experiences you should be featuring? Drop the text of the job description into a word cloud tool like [Wordle](http://www.wordle.net/" \t "_blank), and see what stands out. That’s what the hiring manager is looking for most.

8. Tell a Story

What brings you to this company? Did you used to sing along to all of its commercials as a kid? Did the product make some incredible difference in your life? Do you sometimes pull into the parking lot and daydream about what it would feel like to work there? Stories bring your background and experiences to life, so feel free to tell them. (Just, you know, keep them short and to the point.)

9. Use a Few Numbers

When it comes to the job search, numbers often speak louder than words. “Offer stats to illustrate your impact on companies or associations you’ve worked for in the past,” suggests career expert and founder of [ProfessionGal](http://professiongal.com/" \t "_blank) [Megan Broussard](https://www.themuse.com/advice/5-secrets-to-making-your-cover-letter-stand-out). “Employers love to see numbers—it shows them that you speak their language and that you understand what they’re looking for in an employee: results.”

10. Consider Testimonials

If you have great feedback from old co-workers, bosses, or clients, don’t be afraid to use it! A seamless way to integrate a positive quote from a previous manager or client is to use it as evidence of your passion for your area of expertise. For example, “I have developed a keen interest in data science during my years working various political campaigns (as my past supervisor once said, I love Excel more than anyone she knows).”

11. Cut the Formality

“Don’t be overly formal (‘I wish to convey my interest in filling the open position at your fine establishment’),” [writes career expert Mark Slack](https://www.themuse.com/advice/7-cover-letter-mistakes-entrylevel-candidates-makeand-how-to-fix-them-now). “It makes you seem insincere and even robotic, not anything like the friendly, approachable, and awesome-to-work-with person you are.

12. Think Custom, Not Canned

Most companies want to see that you’re truly excited about the position and company, which means creating a custom letter for each position you apply for. “When a recruiter reads, ‘Dear Hiring Manager, I am so excited to apply for the open position at your company, where I hope to utilize my skills to progress in my career,’ he or she immediately recognizes it for what it is—a stock cover letter that you’ve mass-distributed to every place in town,” says [Muse career expert Katie Douthwaite](https://www.themuse.com/advice/best-of-2013-5-ways-your-cover-letter-lost-you-the-job). And then probably throws it in the trash.

13. Start With a Template

That said, there’s nothing that says you can’t get a little help. Our [easy, downloadable cover letter guide](https://www.themuse.com/career-resources) will walk you through, step-by-step, how to create a cover letter that rocks.

14. …Or Some Inspiration

Having trouble getting started? Check out [31 examples](https://www.themuse.com/advice/31-attentiongrabbing-cover-letter-examples?ref=search) of how to start your cover letter in an engaging, attention-grabbing way or [these eight examples](https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-8-cover-letters-you-need-to-read-now?ref=search) of awesome cover letters that actually worked.

15. Be Open to Other Formats

If you’re applying to a more traditional company, then the tried-and-true three-to-five-paragraph format probably makes sense. However, if you’re gunning for a more creative or startup job—or need to explain to the hiring manager, say, how your career has taken you from teaching to business development, a different approach could be appropriate. Here at The Muse, we’ve seen cover letters use bullet points, tell stories, or showcase videos to (successfully) get their point across. [This professional](https://www.themuse.com/advice/3-lessons-you-can-learn-from-this-buzzfeed-cover-letter?ref=search) even turned hers into a BuzzFeed-style list!

16. But Don’t Go Too Far

Like [this guy did](https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-worst-cover-letter-ever-written-literally?ref=search). Just—don’t.

17. Consider Adding a Headline

One formatting idea from [The Undercover Recruiter](http://theundercoverrecruiter.com/secret-cover-letter-headline-formula/)? Add an eye-catching headline to your letter, like “3 Reasons I’m an Excellent Fit for the Marketing Manager Position.” Again, no one says you have to follow the tried-and-true format, and this can be an easy way to catch the hiring manager’s eye quickly.

18. Be Real

“Honest, genuine writing always goes much, much further than sticking to every dumb rule you’ve ever read in stale, outdated career guides and college textbooks,” [explains Foss](https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-cover-letters-that-make-hiring-managers-smile-then-call-you).

19. ...And Normal

We can’t tell you how many cover letters we’ve seen from people who are “absolutely thrilled for the opportunity” or “very excitedly applying!” Downplay the adverbs a bit, and just write like a normal person.

20. Cut the Fluff

Avoid, at all costs, describing yourself as a “team player” or a “people person,” [says Broussard](https://www.themuse.com/advice/5-secrets-to-making-your-cover-letter-stand-out). “Instead, show off your skills with descriptive statements like ‘I’m an expert communicator with experience bringing together diverse departments to develop a cohesive program.’ It’s longer—but it’s also stronger.”

21. Write in the Company’s “Voice”

Cover letters are a great way to show that you understand the environment and culture of the company and industry and prove that you’ve got what they are looking for. So, always keep in mind who will be reading your cover letter, and tailor it to what you know will get them excited. Spending five or 10 minutes reading over the company website before you get started can be a great way to get in the right mindset—you’ll get a sense for the company’s tone, language, and culture, which are all things you’ll want to mirror as you’re writing.

22. Boost Your Confidence Before Writing

Writing guru [Alexandra Franzen](http://www.alexandrafranzen.com/) offers a simple mind trick that will dramatically change the way you write cover letters: Pretend. “Pretend that the person you’re writing to already loves and respects you. Pretend that the person you’re writing to already believes that you’re worthy and valuable. Pretend that the person you’re writing to doesn’t need a big sales pitch,” she explains. Then, write. Your words will come out so much easier. (Here’s [more on how to do it](https://www.themuse.com/advice/best-of-2013-the-mind-trick-that-will-change-the-way-you-write-cover-letters-forever).)

23. Have Some Fun With It

News flash: Cover letter writing doesn’t have to be boring. In fact, there are plenty of ways to spice it up! Hoping for a job at a startup? Making your cover letter more creative—whether you use a spunkier tone, play with the format, or make it more visual—will likely improve your chances of getting a call back. Applying for a corporate position? Stick with the traditional format, but make it more conversational, or include a story about how you first came in contact with the company or how much you love it. Much more fun, right? (Here are a few other ways to [make cover letter writing suck less](https://www.themuse.com/advice/4-ways-to-make-writing-cover-letters-suck-less).)

24. Don’t Let Your Fear of Bragging Get in the Way

If you tend to have a hard time writing about yourself, here’s a quick trick: Imagine you’re someone else writing a letter about yourself. Think from the perspective of a friend, mentor, or previous employer—someone who would only sing your praises—and then write the letter from her point of view. If it helps, you can even write the letter in third person (i.e. “Erin would be a great fit for this position because…”). Just make sure you’re very careful about going back through and changing it to first person when you’re done!

25. Have Someone Gut Check It

Have a friend take a look at your cover letter, and ask him or her two questions: *Does this sell me as the best person for the job?* and *Does it get you excited?* If the answer to either is “no,” or even slight hesitation, go back for another pass.

26. Keep it Short and Sweet

There are always exceptions to the rule, but in general, for resumes and cover letters alike, don’t go over a page. “According to the Orange County Resume Survey, almost 70% of employers either want a half page cover letter (250 words) or ‘the shorter the better,’ approach,” [writes Slack](https://www.themuse.com/advice/7-cover-letter-mistakes-entrylevel-candidates-makeand-how-to-fix-them-now).

27. Don’t Start With Your Name

Because, well, the hiring manager can see it already on your resume. Get right to the point with what you can bring to the job.

28. But Do Include the Hiring Manager’s Name

Use the person’s first and last name, including a “Mr.” or “Ms.” (e.g., Mr. Jack Smith). Never use “To Whom it May Concern” or “Dear or Sir or Madam”—nothing could be more generic (not to mention archaic).

29. Unless You Don’t Know It

OK, sometimes, even after hours of online searching ([try these tips](https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-hunt-down-a-hiring-managers-email-address)), you still might not be able to definitively figure out who exactly the hiring manager for the position you’re applying for is. If you can only find a list of executives and you’re not completely confident who the hiring manager is, use the head of the department for the position you’re applying for. If you really don’t have a name to use, try to still be as specific as possible in your greeting. Consider using “Senior Analyst Hiring Manager” or “Research Manager Search Committee”—something that shows that you’ve written this letter with a particular audience in mind.

30. Edit

We shouldn’t have to tell you to run your cover letter through spell-check, but here’s an even better step: Check out how the wording sounds to others [using Hemingway](https://www.themuse.com/advice/a-quick-way-to-tell-how-your-cover-letter-sounds-to-others?ref=search). Drop your text onto the page, and the color-coded app will give your writing a once-over. Is a sentence too wordy, overly complex, or totally unreadable? It’ll be highlighted in red until you revise it. Tend to overuse the passive voice? Every instance of it will show up in green. The site will even recommend when you can use shorter or simpler words (Why take up precious resume space with “utilize” when you can say “use?”).

31. But Care Most About Standing Out

Perhaps the best piece of cover letter wisdom we can offer you [comes from Foss](http://www.jobjenny.com/the-blog/2013/5/15/memorable-cover-letters-ignore-convention-and-stupid-rules.html): The most memorable cover letters are written by people who care less about the rules and more about standing out to the hiring manager. “Next time you sit down to write a cover letter, vow to not get uptight about all the tiny little ‘rules’ you’ve picked up along the way,” she writes. “Instead, buck convention. Be memorable. Nail the stuff that will make you a true standout.”