

Cover Letters

Tools: Yourself, Pen & Paper & job description for role of interest

Time: 60 minutes

Context: More often than not your cover letter is your first introduction to your prospective employer. The Cover Letter is the equivalent of a highlight reel or trailer for a movie; an invitation to get to know who you are. It should be tailored to the role of interest and state why you are right for the role. If the application process does not specifically request a cover letter, yet involves you sending your CV to a specific email address, by default, the email you send is your Cover Letter. However, what do you say in a Cover Letter? How long should it be? How can you get your Cover Letter to stand out? We will explore answers to these questions in this worksheet. To make the most of this exercise, pull out a job description of interest, and apply the techniques to that role.

Instructions

- Step 1: Address it to a person
- Step 2: Write an attention grabbing open line
- Step 3: How to structure your letter
- Step 4: Finish strong
- Step 5: Things to remember

Address the letter to a person.

Avoid the generic *Dear Sir*, *Dear Madam* or *To Whom it May Concern*. This shows that you have not done your research. Instead, dig a bit deeper by finding out the name of the hiring manager. Here are five quick ways of finding this out:

- **Ask a friend:** if you have a friend or former colleague at the organisation, ask them for the details, and possibly an e-intro.
- **Visit the company website.** Often a job description will include the job title the role will report into. Jump onto their website, and look at the *About Us* or *Meet the Team* pages for the staff directory and search for the person the role will report into or the person in charge of the department to which you're applying.
- **Google it!:** if the team is not listed on their website, get onto Google. A sample search may be *who is the Head of Marketing at ABC Enterprises?*
- **Research social media:** If Google throws up nothing, jump onto LinkedIn. Go to the Companies LinkedIn page and browse through the list of employees.
- **Call the organisation:** If none of the above works, then simply call the organisation, and ask for the information directly!

You can then address your cover letter to that person.

Write an attention grabbing open line.

The vast majority of people start their Cover Letters the same way: *“I am writing to apply for the position of XYZ at your company.”* So, the first way to get your Cover Letter to stand out from the crowd, is to dare to be different. What does this look like in practice? Here are a few examples:

Think about your strengths: What are you known for? What do you do well? Look at the job description and pick out one or two of the skills, experiences or notable attributes required and demonstrate how you meet them. For example, you’re applying for the role of Head of Customer Services. Attributes required include respect and kindness. The organisation requires someone who can remain calm under pressure:

“I’m known among my colleagues and friends as the person who can whip up a dish of calm in the middle of any storm. My magic ingredients? Respect and kindness - just two of the values we both share - which is why I think there’s no better fit than I for the Head of Customer Services at Name of the Organisation.”

Show interest in the organisation: Key to this approach is your research into the company. In particular look at the latest news page on their website/blog/social media platforms. What are they bragging about? How does that news resonate with you? For example, your research has revealed the company you are interested in has launched a new game changing app:

“Congratulations on the launch of the ABC-App, which is set to increase user engagement in the programmes produced by ABC Films. The launch of the app is just another reason why I want to be part of an organisation at the forefront of change in the entertainment industry.”

Let them see your passion: Passion manifests itself into action.

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve been giving my friends and family free fashion tips, and I absolutely love it. I’ve styled them for weddings, birthdays, photo shoots and first dates! Name the occasion and they call my name. So, you can imagine my joy when I saw the role of personal stylist at House of Hebron. I tick your boxes, and you give me the opportunity to get paid for doing what I love, and what comes naturally to me.”

Highlight your transferable skills: If you are looking to change careers, get in there first and show how your skills connect with the job in question.

“You might be wondering why an Operations Manager with 10 years experience under her belt is applying for a Production Management role at a TV company like ABC Productions. Quite the leap, I know. However, the landing is made that bit softer with my (healthy) obsession with your programmes XYZ and DEF, and my transferable skills; managing budgets, people, schedules - all of which will be the glue that will keep your projects together.”

How to structure your letter.

Another common mistake many job seekers make is to regurgitate what is in their CV, bullet point by bullet point. This can lead to a lengthy Cover Letter that does not say anything new. As we're on a mission to break with tradition, let's try a different approach.

Step 1: Comb through the job description and highlight a mix of 2-3 must-have skills, experiences and attributes - as in, you won't get the job if you didn't have them. If you're unsure which 2-3 skills and experiences are important, drop the text of the job description into word generating software such as [WordCloud](#), which is free. You will see what words stand out the most.

Step 2: Go through your CV and identify 2-3 examples that demonstrate the skills that you have highlighted in step 1. Then write out a statement that illustrates how your strengths, personality, and approach to work contributed towards you getting the job done. Don't worry so much about the word count at this stage.

Step 3: To help you remain concise, summarise step two into a tweet. If you were writing a tweet about how you accomplished that task or bullet point, what words would you use? Don't be surprised if you find this a challenge - you'll learn what's important to say and what's not.

You're aiming for two succinct paragraphs that showcase how fabulous you are. It's okay if your final statements extend above 250 characters. You just want to avoid writing a novel.

Finish strong.

Just like it's tempting to start a Cover Letter with the traditional opening discussed earlier, it's equally tempting (and easier) to end with the well-oiled closing statement that goes something like: "I look forward to hearing from you." While there is nothing inherently wrong with this, we are in the business of standing out, and daring to be different. Here are a few examples:

Open invitation to talk further:

"I look forward to contributing my skills and experiences to the role of Customer Services Manager at XYZ company, and hope to have the opportunity to discuss how I can be an asset to your team."

Reinforce your passion:

"Finally, the documentaries produced by ABC Productions have had a profound impact on me. I would be thrilled to work at an organisation focused on shining a light on unsung heroes - those who are the heartbeat of our communities past and present."

Things to remember.

1. **Show your personality:** People buy into people. Don't dim your light, let it shine brightly.
2. **Key words:** Pepper relevant keywords from the job description throughout your Cover Letter where it makes sense. This is of particular importance if you are applying online or via Application Tracking System (ATS). The ATS is set to search your Cover Letter for keywords outlined in the job description.
3. **Contact details:** Don't forget to include your contact information on there, including your name, and phone number.
4. **Check for errors:** Get someone to proofread your letter.

Writing a Cover Letter is not easy. However, the process can be simpler by adopting some of the techniques explored in this worksheet. Here are some template Cover Letters to use for inspiration:

- Short, snappy and to the point:
<https://hbr.org/2009/06/the-best-cover-letter>
- For originality mixed with humour check out option 3:
<https://www.theguardian.com/careers/covering-letter-examples>

End Result

At the end of this exercise, you will have a structure that helps you break from tradition and stand out from the crowd.