

COVER LETTERS

Reports of the cover letter's demise are greatly exaggerated. Despite the proliferation of online applications where cover letters are optional or not even requested, you will frequently need some type of introductory letter or note when submitting a job application.

If you are preparing a cover letter, recognize the full range of fates that could await it. It may not be read at all, it may be glanced at, or it may be scrutinized to spot errors. Spend as much time proofreading a cover letter or note as you do writing it.

Don't spend too much time on either, however. People agonize for hours over the cover letter, which is a waste of job searching time. Draft the letter, proof it twice, and then move on to more productive job search activities, such as networking.

Most cover letters are now uploaded electronically, rather than mailed, but the same rules apply. Uploaded cover letters or cover letters attached to an email may be printed out, and will look better if they have been formatted as a piece of business correspondence.

FOUR PARAGRAPHS

A cover letter should consist of 4 paragraphs, and should fit easily on one page. If it doesn't, you are trying to cram too much into the cover letter. Lengthy, dense cover letters are likely to go unread.

Paragraph 1:

States the reason why you are writing, for example, in response to a job posting, at the suggestion of a contact, to introduce yourself. Be as specific as possible. Include the ad's date and/or number if you have it.

"I am writing at the suggestion of Mary Jones." "This letter responds to your LinkedIn posting for an account executive."

Paragraph 2:

Describe your qualifications and experience. Focus on those aspects of your experience that are most relevant for the job. Provide brief examples or quantify

your achievements. Focus on the things that will impress the reader. Your resume will cover the full extent of your career. No need to repeat all that information in the cover letter.

“I have five years experience as an account executive in the advertising field, and have worked with more than a dozen national firms on their ad campaigns.”

Paragraph 3:

This paragraph is often how you will set yourself apart from other applicants, because it demonstrates your familiarity with the company and/or the role. This paragraph explains why you are a good fit for this job or organization.

“I have watched XYZ company expand its territory into the Fortune 500 over the past two years, and I would like to put my sales experience to work to ensure that trend continues.”

Paragraph 4:

The final paragraph is the complimentary close. “I look forward to speaking with you further about this position.” Include your email and phone number in this paragraph, even if it’s elsewhere in the letter. People are reading quickly; make it easy for them to find the information they seek.

FINAL POINTS

- Make sure your name and contact information is at the top of the page. Take the time to design a nice header.
- Get the name and the title of the person you are writing to. If you are sending out a lot of “Dear Sir or Madam” letters, you need to do some networking to identify the right person.
- Proofread the letter again, starting with the last sentence and working backwards. This will help you spot small errors.
- Save each cover letter you write. Save the job posting as well. It may be months before you are contacted for this job. The online posting will have vanished.

For Mailed Cover Letters and Resumes

- If you happen to be printing this cover letter, use high quality paper in white, pale gray or ivory. Good paper can make a mailed cover letter and resume stand out.
- There is no need to say that your resume is attached. Simply note “Enclosure: Resume” under the signature line.

For Emailed Resumes

- Many resumes are now transmitted via email, usually as attachments. A cover note is still necessary, but now it is a paragraph above your resume, covering the same points, but in less detail.

“Thanks for speaking with me. As you requested, I am forwarding my resume. After 8 years working for corporations in the area of financial analysis and participating in three successful turn-around projects, I am interested in applying that knowledge to the problems facing organizations like ABCD. I’ll call you in a couple of days to get your thoughts.”

- The rules about proofreading apply here, too. Just because email feels less formal, don’t let your guard down. Everything about how you communicate tells the reader something about you. Mistakes deliver the wrong message.