Cover Letter Content and Format

INTRODUCTION

A cover letter (sometimes called a letter of inquiry or letter of application) is a business-style letter that accompanies every resume you send to prospective employers. It serves as an introduction, telling the employer who you are and why you are sending a resume. If written well, your letter will highlight the special features of your education and experience that qualify you for the particular position or organization.

Good cover letters are generally alike in that they share...

A personal approach.
As employers do not look favorably on cover letters which look "mass produced", it is important to personalize your cover letter. Try to address your letter to a specific individual within an organization rather than "To Whom it May Concern." It is often possible to find contact information online, usually on the organization's website or by way of a keyword search. You can also call organizations directly and ask a receptionist for the name of the appropriate contact. If it is impossible to obtain the person's name, you can address the letter with a salutation such as "Dear Recruiter:" If you are unsure of the contact's gender, use the first and last name in the salutation so that it reads: "Dear Pat Smith:"

A clear, concise presentation of interest, skills and intent.
Your cover letter will have the most impact if it is targeted to match each particular organization or position being sought. The letter should emphasize ways you can fulfill the organization's needs. Be direct about your interest in the organization and what you can offer; say it clearly and concisely. As with your resume, be prepared to back up any information you include in the letter. If you make claims, support them with evidence.

A glimpse of the author.
Although this is a formal document, the style doesn't need to be stiff. Allow your personality to come through and strive to project interest and enthusiasm, both about what you have to offer them, and what they can offer you. A good cover letter will communicate interest, motivation, and self-confidence. While you want to be upbeat and positive, avoid exaggerated statements such as "I've always wanted to work for your firm/organization" since they will likely not ring true to the reader.

All employers want people with excellent communication skills. Your cover letter demonstrates your writing skills, so write thoughtfully. Pay particular attention to grammar, typing and spelling, and avoid trite language and the temptation to turn your cover letter into an extensive autobiography.

Nice paper and readable fonts.
Your cover letters should follow a traditional business letter format (see samples). Use a good quality paper stock (preferably the same type of paper on which your resume was printed), and a font which is easy to read.
Suggested Format for a Cover Letter.

Your Name - Street Address, City, State Zip Code (Or Country), email address, phone

Today's Date
Person's Name
Title
Organization
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code (Or Country)

Dear Ms./Mr./Dr. Last Name: (or, Dear Recruiter: if you couldn't get a specific name)

The opening paragraph introduces you and lets the employer know why you are writing and why you are interested in working at the organization. To capture the employer’s interest, this paragraph should be specific so that your interest in the organization is expressed clearly. This paragraph must also be concise, as you should dedicate relatively more space to your middle paragraphs, which discuss how your qualifications are relevant to the employer and the particular position.

Explain why you are writing.
- Mention how you heard of the organization or of the position.
- If applying for a specific job, refer to the position title.
- If sending out "blind letters" (i.e. you don't know if a position exists or if there are any openings), identify the type of position you'd like.
- State the proper name of the organization at least once. Example: America Online (AOL)
- If you've already talked to the person to whom you are sending the letter, indicate this in your introduction.
- If you have a connection to the company or organization, let them know.

Explain why you are interested.
- Demonstrate that you know the organization and its mission/values. Avoid adjectives and generic descriptions such as "I'd like to work in a challenging environment with opportunity for advancement." Make it obvious that you've researched the organization and are familiar with its services. If you have a good relationship with current employee(s), mention them. If certain aspects of the company impress you...let them know!
- Explain how the position and/or company is a good fit with your career goals and interests. This is especially important in applying for positions in a different geographic location or in fields unrelated to your major.

The middle paragraph(s) are your chance to shine. This should make up the bulk of your letter. Summarize the aspects of your education, experience, and interests that are germane to the employer and convey your sincere interest in the position.

Ask not what the potential employer can do for you, but what you can do for the employer.
- Expand on the information contained in your resume and highlight your qualifications by discussing them in terms of the contributions you can make. Do not merely reiterate what is on your resume, but pick several highlights from your background that are particularly relevant to the position.
- If you are applying for a specific position, refer specifically to the job description. Example: "Based on the job description, it is my understanding that you are looking for a self-motivated employee with a demonstrated proficiency in utilizing social media. I offer you these qualities and skills. In my job last summer, I..."

The closing paragraph should pave the way for the interview. You may express your interest in an interview (though do not state a specific time or day) or suggest that you will follow-up with a phone call. End your letter by thanking the recruiter for his or her time and consideration of your application.

Sincerely,

[ Signature]

Your Name (typed)