

*writing*

# COVER LETTERS

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It is not hard to write a good cover letter, but many are poorly written. In this handout, you will learn the basics of writing a cover letter and how to determine if yours is well done.

Do employers read cover letters? Most do. In fact, 76% of employers will eliminate a candidate from further consideration based solely on the quality of the cover letter and almost half of hiring managers see the cover letter as equal to the resume in importance (NSHRM.org). Candidates can be eliminated because of their cover letters for reasons that include typos; letters that are too generic (for example, lines such as, “I am an excellent candidate and want to work at your fine company because of its outstanding reputation”); a lack of understanding about the position and poor grammar.

## **Background:**

1. The cover letter is a marketing tool – often the first thing that a recruiter sees about you. Its sole purpose is to advertise you well enough to secure an interview.
2. It represents you – your passion, energy, accomplishments, individuality and professionalism within the context of the job to which you are applying. If you were applying for a position to be a research assistant for a professor, you might emphasize course work, grades, class papers you’ve written, interest in the subject, and your ability to work independently and learn fast. If you were applying for a position as a tutor to grade school students, you might emphasize attributes that include previous experience working with children, your creativity, a love of learning, grades and patience.
3. Think like an employer—what qualities would you seek in an employee? You can find hints by carefully reading the job description, going to company info sessions, conducting info interviews, exploring the website, and so on.
4. A good cover letter entails background research and goes all the way through meticulous proofreading.
5. Keep in mind the phrase, “compelling reason.” Employers look for a compelling reason to interview candidates.
6. There are many ways to write cover letters.

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# COVER LETTER

1. What qualifications does the employer want? Read through a job description of interest and underline the attributes. (These qualities are usually clear; in some positions or industries, however, the descriptions can be especially euphemistic and vague.) If there is no job description or the description is not clear, write the qualifications that you think are important by doing as much research as possible. Look at the organization's website, network with people who work there, find out if the organization has been in the news recently, and so on.

**Example: Jeff Metcalf, Research Assistant for the New York Philharmonic**

Description:

“The New York Philharmonic Archives is the repository for all documents, both paper and audio, relating to the Orchestra, dating back to 1842...It contains programs, music scores marked by Mahler and Bernstein, business records, correspondence of nearly every important musical figure, newspaper clippings, photographs, broadcast tapes dating back to the early 1930s and recordings beginning in 1917...The research assistant will participate as curator for the opening night multi-media exhibit in Avery Fisher Hall. The assistant will also help as needed in various research projects within the collections and participate in the day-to-day activities of the archives.”

“The successful candidate will have a strong interest in history and/or classical music, have good writing skills, and be a careful worker who is able to pay attention to detail and handle delicate materials with the proper respect and caution. He or she will be comfortable in the sometimes hectic atmosphere of a busy archives and research office.”

The organization is telling you that they will evaluate candidates based on whether they have the following qualifications:

- Interest in history and or classical music (notice, it did not ask for experience or expertise)
- Writing
- Attention to detail
- Ability to handle delicate materials
- Demonstrated comfort in a hectic office

In a cover letter, emphasize those aspects. As a Metcalf, this internship is only open to UChicago students, so there is no need to emphasize the University. For most internships and fulltime jobs, it would be important to emphasize your college.

2. How does your experience relate to the job? What are at least two specific accomplishments that you can cite?
3. Remember that you can include classes, class papers (just don't call them publications if they weren't published), hobbies, volunteer work and interests.
4. What are three qualities or experiences that you want the employer to know about you?
5. Why do you want to work for this organization or person? What do you know about them? (Look for something deeper than their being an “excellent” company.) Is there something specific about their services, product, philosophy that you can to express?

*tips on writing*

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## **Additional Tips:**

- The letter should be written in a conversational/natural, albeit deferential, style. Stilted prose is not effective.
- Show enthusiasm for your work and the position.
- Establish your credentials early.
- Run spell-check but check word-by-word after. Also, check your phone number, email address and street address carefully. Have as many people as possible read your cover letter for mistakes.
- Be careful. If you merge your letter, check that you changed everything and are not addressing the letter to a different organization than the one that you mentioned in the body of the letter.
- Use the active tense, avoiding “i-n-g” endings when possible.
- Watch the number of “I’s” that start sentences. There is no absolute acceptable number.

There is more than one way to write a cover letter. Ask different people for their perspectives then develop your own style. Trust your judgment.

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## **Online Protocol:**

If someone asks you to email a cover letter and resume to apply for a position, you can do one of two things, both equally acceptable:

1. Write a brief e-mail, with the cover letter and resume attached.
  2. Use your cover letter in the body of the e-mail, with the resume attached. Email format does not require you to include your mailing address, the date or the recipient’s mailing address; simply start with the salutation, for example, “Dear Ms. Smith.”
- Be formal. It is not acceptable to use email/texting conventions that you would with friends (for example, lower case “I’s,” acronyms such as BTW, etc.).
  - Be very clear in your subject line so that the recipient knows that he or she will not be receiving spam.

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# COVER LETTER

Your street address  
City, state and zip code  
Phone number  
Email address

Mr./Ms./Dr./Prof. first and last name of person  
Position or title  
Name of organization  
Street address of organization  
City, state and zip code

**Dear Mr./Ms./Dr./Prof. last name of addressee:**

## **First Paragraph:**

- Give the person a reason to read on. Give an overview establishing your qualifications and cite the position.
- Do not start with “My name is...”
- What’s important to mention? In general, experience in the field if you have it. Being a student at the University of Chicago is critical if you are applying for an internship, summer job or position in which the organization is specifically targeting students, eg, on-campus recruiters. This will include most positions, but there are times when you may want to deemphasize your student status.
- If someone recommended that you write to someone specific, start with his or her name; for example, “Zip Smith recommended...”
- Mention the reason for writing to that firm if the reason is compelling.
- Do not say that you are the ideal candidate if you cannot prove it.

## **Second (and Possibly Third) Paragraph:**

- Elaborate on your qualifications in the context of the position—you can mention relevant jobs, course, etc. Keep in mind the job description.
- Stress what skills and attributes that you have to offer. Identify those parts of your experience (paid and unpaid) that will be of interest to the employer. This can be done in either one or two paragraphs.

## **Final Paragraph:**

- What’s the next step? Here’s where you thank the person. “Thank you, in advance, for your consideration” and similar alternatives are fine.)
- You can request an interview. There are many different ways (of varying levels of assertiveness) to handle this, but they will not make an appreciable difference as to the outcome (no matter what you may read).
- If you want, you can tell the reader that you will follow up in two weeks or just thank the reader for his or her “consideration.” If you will be visiting that city, let them know the dates that you will be there.

**Sincerely,**

**Your Name**

*sample #1*

# COVER LETTER

This letter was used to apply for the Jeff Metcalf Internship for the New York Philharmonic Archives. It is an excellent letter and got an interview. There is one thing that would have made it stronger—mentioning music. Even though the description asked for an interest in music or history, they want both. Consider this alternate opening, “As a student at the University of Chicago with a passion for both classical music and history, I read your description with great excitement.” If the applicant doesn’t have that passion for music, don’t lie, but show that you are interested and have done some research.

February 8, 200\_

Jeff Metcalf Fellowship Selection Committee  
c/o University of Chicago  
1212 59th Street  
Chicago, IL 60637

Dear Fellowship Selection Committee:

I am a first-year student at the University of Chicago writing to apply for the research assistant position at the New York Philharmonic Archives. I am interested in history, and am very keen on learning exactly what a specialized historian does on a day-to-day basis.

Through my editing experience with Diskord and the Wildcat, I have developed an outstanding attention to detail and sensitivity to deadlines. While I was editor-in-chief of the Wildcat, no one on my staff of 32 ever missed a deadline. At Graham Crackers Comics, I have had some experience preserving and archiving comics from as early as the 1940s, and I have had several opportunities to read and carefully analyze primary documents in my history and humanities courses at the University. My experiences in document archiving and analysis and working and managing others under pressure have given me many skills I believe would make me an asset to the Archives.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to talk with you further about this internship. Please feel free to contact me at \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ with questions or for clarification. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mildred Canoli  
(letter used with permission)

sample #2

# COVER LETTER

January 6, 2009

5422 Frankford Avenue, Apt. 1  
Chicago, IL 60637

Human Resources  
Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania  
3400 Spruce Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am applying for the Clinical Research Associate position posted on the University of Chicago jobs Web site. Currently, I am a fourth-year student majoring in the Biological Sciences with a specialization in Immunobiology. I offer you excellent lab experience combined with a passion for research.

That experience includes research on campus and at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. For example, at the University of Chicago Hospitals, I investigated the cellular action of a mouse gene, Fv1, which gives mice resistance to the leukemia virus, MuLV. In addition, I have also carried genotyping experiments involving DNA extraction and documented the results in an Excel spreadsheet. I have applied benchwork laboratory techniques, including polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and yeast hybrid systems. Through these projects, I have gained experience in research data consolidation and management skills. Throughout, I developed a reputation as someone who learns quickly and works tirelessly. *[If you don't have this level of experience, emphasize your relevant coursework and lab skills.]*

Academically, I have a 3.4 GPA and have been on the Dean's List each quarter while working 10-15 hours per week. My involvement in activities outside of the academic realm has strengthened my leadership and interpersonal skills. Most notably, as a teacher's aide in a local underserved elementary school, I explain science concepts to students, many of whom had been previously afraid of the subject. As a rugby player at the University of Chicago, I not only learned teamwork, I recruited many lab associates join the scrum.

I have attached my resume for your further consideration. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the position and my qualifications further. Please feel free to contact me at \_\_\_ with any questions.

Sincerely,

Bedilla Parfum

This letter has been adapted.)

sample #2

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Sincerely,

Bedilla Parfum

This letter has been adapted.)

sample #3

# COVER LETTER

December 23, 2008

401 Grove Place  
New York, NY 10012  
\_\_\_\_@uchicago.edu  
212-333-0897

Mr. Schweppe Gray  
Preston Henderson Marketing Consultants  
2 Wall Street  
New York, NY 10001

Dear Mr. Gray:

With a background in market research complemented by the rigors of a University of Chicago education, I am applying for the analyst position at Preston Henderson Marketing Consultants. Ever since I heard Carol Eckard speak during your on-campus recruiting presentation, I knew I wanted to work for you. She described your clients, the problems you solve, your culture and your commitment to your employees. Since that talk, my interest has become a passion and I have honed the skills you seek: writing, problem-solving, academic excellence, a team orientation and quantitative analysis.

I demonstrated these skills during my internship at Peoply Research where my assignment was to reduce the cost of the company's keyword advertising campaign in Google AdWords while increasing revenue-generating traffic to the website. After extensive modeling of how variables, such as keywords and day segmenting, affected cost per click and traffic quality, I successfully determined how to produce more revenue.

At Peoply, I exhibited leadership and my ability to work under pressure when my boss, the Vice President of Marketing, had emergency surgery and handed me the responsibility to lead the construction of a new search results page in a joint effort by the marketing and information technology teams. I had three days to explain the project to the teams and assign them tasks. By embracing this challenge, working long hours and even learning how to format code in order to alleviate the technology team's workload, we successfully launched the test pages on time.

I would greatly welcome the opportunity to discuss the analyst opportunity with the company and will phone you in two weeks to follow-up.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Emma Kim  
(Adapted)

sample #4

# COVER LETTER

January 18, 2008

5745 S. Brim Street, Apt. 12  
Chicago, IL 60637  
\_\_\_\_@uchicago.edu  
773-221-3242

Ms. Rose Rubinstein  
AIDS Terra Campaign USA  
12 Farley Way, NW  
Suite 1700  
Washington, DC 20011  
Dear

With a demonstrated commitment to eradicating AIDS, I am applying to the position of Marketing and Policy Analyst for the AIDS Terra Campaign, which I read about on your Web site. I am a graduating student at the University of Chicago majoring in public policy and have experience in research, Web design, marketing, public relations, fundraising and writing. Equally important, I have been active on campus and in the community in raising awareness about AIDS/HIV.

My resume attests to my qualifications. As Director of Communications of the Student Global AIDS Campaign, I co-organized a conference entitled, "The Feminine Epidemic." I identified and secured speakers and publicized this successful event, which received coverage in local media. Further, I have coordinated letter writing campaigns and petitions for HIV/AIDS treatment access. For example, in little time, with a limited budget, I was able to mobilize over 125 students to write letters. As a peer health counselor, I have educated students about HIV and AIDS. By doing so, I learned techniques to get their attention and stop risky behavior.

My classes complement my hands-on experience. As a public policy major, I have taken courses that include micro- and macro-economics and From Natural Law to Human Rights, which have provided me with a framework from which to analyze policy and understand opposing points of view. I have a multicultural background and have translated materials in Spanish. Finally, I am a member of the student circus and my juggling skills have enlightened many meetings and presentations.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the position.

Sincerely,

David Aardvark