

The Insider's Guide to Building a WINNING Cover Letter

Introduction to Cover Letters

What is a cover letter?

Your cover letter is a vital part of your job application. Many employers will not consider a candidate without one. The purpose of a cover letter is to **"tweak"** a hiring manager's curiosity enough that they **read your résumé** and **invite you to an interview**. It is meant to convince an employer **you are the right fit for the job**.

Your cover letter is also like your **personal calling card**, or **a friend you've asked to put in a good word for you**. And, it is your very first introduction to a potential employer, and will likely be scanned by them in less than 10 seconds, so it better be perfect!

Your cover letter should be **well written**, **use key words**, and be **compelling**. That means it should be **"convincing"** or **"persuasive"**. In most cases, a potential employer **will not consider a poorly worded cover letter**. A well-written and error-free cover letter, if handled correctly, can **increase your chances of getting hired substantially**.

Why do we send cover letters?

We send cover letters so we can express in words why we feel we are a good fit for the position we are applying for, and to mention any information, or unique selling points, that may not be in your résumé. **It is really a sales pitch**. You are answering the question, **"Why do you think you are qualified for the job?"**

When to use a cover letter and when not to:

A cover letter should not be confused with an e-mail that is a **"cover note"**. A traditional cover letter should be used **if the employer is requesting one**, or **if you feel the position you are applying for requires one**.

With many job postings, a well-written e-mail note or a shortened version of the traditional cover letter, will do as an introduction. Many times a cover letter that is not requested will not be read, but an e-mail note with a résumé attached will be. Instead of a sales pitch, the e-mail note is like a **"30 second commercial"** advertising you.

Cover Letter Types and When to Use Them

<p>Response or Targeted Cover Letters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respond to a known job opening and are addressed to either a company or a hiring manager 	<p>Use a Response or Targeted Cover Letter if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are applying for an advertised position You are able to highlight your skills and experience so they match the job requirements and show why you are the perfect person for the job
<p>Recommendation or Referral Cover Letters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce the best results since you and the company already have something in common In this type of cover letter, say <i>"Joe Smith (from XYZ Company) recommended I apply..."</i> 	<p>Use a Recommendation or Referral Cover Letter if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Someone has referred you to the company or has introduced you to the job opening Note: Make sure you have the permission of the person who is recommending you for the job before you send in your referral cover letter and résumé Make sure you mention the person's name in the first paragraph of your cover letter
<p>Cold-Call or Introduction Cover Letters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are addressed to either a company or recruiter Are an introduction of your skills and résumé Normally don't produce many leads Produce the same results as advertising through pamphlets, because they have to first reach the right person, be read, kept, and then used to contact you 	<p>Use a Cold-Call or Introduction Cover Letter if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You want to contact a company that did not place an ad for a specific position You are hoping that your cover letter and résumé will arrive just as the potential employer realizes they need someone like you You are initiating negotiations for a job

The "BIG PICTURE" - Basic Cover Letter Structure

Here is a quick overview of the **basic structure of a cover letter**. A complete step-by-step guide with all the "tools" you need to create your own winning cover letter follows.

Opening Paragraph: "WHY I AM WRITING TO YOU"

- Highlights how you heard about the position, what excites you about it, and why
- Refers the reader to the enclosed résumé
- Starts with a **"Lead-In Grabber"** (see page 5)

Paragraph 2: "WHAT I AM OFFERING"

- Mentions directly related skills or experience
- Illustrates your understanding of the job and the organization

Paragraph 3 (optional): "WHY I AM QUALIFIED FOR THE JOB"

- Highlights qualifications not already stated in your résumé that add value to the potential employer
- Using the "STAR Formula" (see page 8), provides examples that show you can do what the employer needs

Closing Paragraph: "WHAT YOU NEED TO DO NOW"

- Restates your interest, summarizes how you are a good fit for the job, and requests an interview
- Indicates you are available for an interview at the reader's convenience
- Includes *"The next step..."*, stating either you will follow-up or will wait for their call for an interview
- Includes a personal thank you such as: *"Thank you for your time and consideration."*

Essential Cover Letter Writing Tools

TOOL 1: Warm-up Exercise

Here is a warm-up exercise. Besides helping you establish a positive mindset, use whatever information that comes out of it to help you write your cover letter.

In the spaces below, write down ten things you are confident about yourself by completing the following sentence:
"I am good at what I do because..."

1. ***"I am good at what I do because..."***

2. ***"I am good at what I do because..."***

3. ***"I am good at what I do because..."***

4. ***"I am good at what I do because..."***

5. ***"I am good at what I do because..."***

6. ***"I am good at what I do because..."***

7. ***"I am good at what I do because..."***

8. ***"I am good at what I do because..."***

9. ***"I am good at what I do because..."***

10. ***"I am good at what I do because..."***

TOOL 2: Matching the Job Description with Your Skills/Characteristics/Abilities

When writing your cover letter, you **must provide examples of your skills, characteristics or abilities that match the employer's job description.**

STEP 1. Look closely at the job description you are interested in applying for.
In the column on the left, **write down the specific requirements that are listed in it.**

STEP 2. In the column on the right, **write down the skills/characteristics/abilities that you have that match the job description. Here are four examples:**

Qualities in the job description:	Your knowledge/aptitude of those skills/tasks:
1. Knowledge of investment securities and accounting principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certificate in Canadian Securities Course • Applied accounting knowledge to various school projects • Undergraduate major in Finance and Accounting
2. Communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Served as Company liaison between real estate agents and potential buyers/sellers • Speak English, Mandarin and Cantonese
3. Computer skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilized QuickBooks in reconciling bank statements • Experienced in Microsoft Office Suite
4. Excellent analytical and problem solving skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have vast experience with business case analysis
→	→
→	→
→	→
→	→

TOOL 3: Minimizing "I" Sentences Accomplishment Statements in Bulleted Cover Letters

Bulleted cover letter writing is unique. **Personal pronouns**, such as "I", "my", "we" and "our" are generally avoided in the accomplishment statements found in them. As such, incomplete sentences are used to describe key characteristics and accomplishments.

The following exercise will help you minimize the use of personal pronouns in your bulleted cover letter:

STEP 1. Write the sentence you want describing your accomplishment **with** personal pronouns. Here's an example:

"I devised a strategy for advertising to middle-aged men which helped our advertising team tap into a new market and increasing our annual sales by 26%."

STEP 2. Cross out the personal pronouns and rewrite the sentence below. If it still makes sense, then you are done.

If it doesn't make sense, here is a trickier example to show how you can make it make sense:

"I improved my computer skills on my own time by studying and completing three certifications over two years."

Without the personal pronouns it looks like this:

"Improved computer skills on own time by studying and completing three certifications over two years."

STEP 3: Add/change/delete words to the sentence so it makes sense and gets across the meaning you want like this:

"Vastly improved computer skills by studying after work to complete three certifications over two years."

TOOL 4: Using a "Lead-In Grabber"

Using a lead-in grabber rabber like, "***Time is Money!***", will grab the employer's attention right away.

Here are some more ideas for Lead-In Grabbers:

Mention the name of a personal contact whom your reader knows:

- *"Blaine Powell recommended I speak with you about your opening for Sales Manager."*
- *"My former associate, Ellen Banks, spoke so highly of JNP & Associates, I decided to send you my résumé."*
- *"At a recent dinner party, Arthur Lewis told me the inspiring story about his mentorship with you."*

Pose a question that pushes one of the reader's hot buttons and pulls them into your train of thought:

- *"When your customers need quick delivery to a foreign country, what's the first thing that comes to their minds?"*
- *"When you walk into a store as a customer, how do you measure quality service?"*

Deliver a bold statement that makes the employer want to understand how you could fulfill such a promise:

- *"Great article in the Sunday paper! As soon as I read it, I knew I had to get my résumé in to you right away!"*
- *"No home appliance store in Toronto should be without the Wilmington Blender! I'm ready to make sure each dealer stocks it."*

Begin with a quote that will snag the reader's attention:

- *"Some men see things as they are and ask why. Others dream things that never were and ask why not."*
- Playwright, George Bernard Shaw "
- *"There is real magic in enthusiasm. It spells the difference between mediocrity and accomplishment."*
- Author, Norman Vincent Peale
- *"Failure to prepare is preparing to fail."*
- Basketball Coach, John Wooden

Here are some formal Lead-In Grabbers:

- *"You may have a situation that requires a unique approach to marketing."*
- *"As an experienced Insurance Underwriter, I..."*
- *"I recently read about that your company has expanded into the Asian market..."*
- *"Last summer at the BNY Sales conference, I saw you..."*
- *"For some time now, I have been looking for the opportunity to do (such and such)."*

Here are some friendly Lead-In Grabbers:

- *"Last year alone I expanded the customer base by 20%."*
- *"Developing effective 'Personnel Management Techniques' is no easy task."*
- *"In some organizations, things move so quickly that a General Manager like me is needed to..."*
- *"Immediate results are what you can expect from me as a Director of Sales Promotions."*
- *"At first glance, the broad range of my capabilities may surprise you, but look closer..."*

Here are some bold Lead-In Grabbers:

- *"Call me ambitious or downright tenacious!"*
- *"Here's the catch..."*
- *"If you don't remember anything else after reading this letter, remember this:..."*
- *"People say I have the most exciting profession in the world. I couldn't agree more!"*

TOOL 5: Adding Value or Cost Benefit: The PEP Strategy

PEP (Profitability/Efficiency/Productivity) is a strategy in cover letter writing that directs you to speak to the employer on how you can **increase profitability, enhance efficiency or improve productivity**. Writing more in terms of **results** rather than responsibilities will greatly enhance the quality of your cover letter. The hiring manager wants to know **exactly how you can add value to their company**.

If you can see the job from an employer's viewpoint, an employee that will **make more money for the company, save the company money, or make the company more productive is *hard to resist hiring***. Putting it another way, it is a "**value proposition**" to your potential employer.

Here are some examples of a value proposition:

- *"I am very excited to begin my career in the field of money management, and would greatly appreciate the chance to help you make money for your clients."*
- *"As an intern, I created spreadsheets that aided in the detection of duplicate cheques paid, and as a result, saved the company almost \$50,000."*
- *"By hiring me, I will be able to bring (your particular skill/experience/knowledge) to you which will add value by..."*
- *"I am eager to discuss with you how I can help turn your company's operations around and increase your shareholder's value."*
- *"I use my passion for innovation and expertise in new media, mobile, social networking and emerging technologies to drive brand awareness, increase revenues, and engage mobile and social communities."*

Backing Up Your Value Proposition

In your job description, you should **highlight how you delivered on your "value proposition"**. The best achievement statements focus on **your ability to add value to your next employer** so you get their attention and interest.

Here is an example: look at the last bulleted statement above (page 6, at the bottom) and pretend it was in your cover letter. If it was, you would want to provide **credible proof** that you can **"drive brand awareness"** and **"engage mobile and social communities"** just like you said you could. And you would **explain exactly how** you would engage mobile & social communities by giving an example from your work experience.

In order to come up with compelling information, ask yourself the following questions and write your answers in the space provided below. What **SKILLS** and **EXPERIENCE** is the employer looking for in the ideal candidate for the job you want?

In this job posting, the employer is looking for the following skills and experience:

- Which of your **ACHIEVEMENTS** demonstrates that you have the skills the employer is looking for?

The achievements that illustrate that I have the skills the employer is looking for are...

- What **PERSONALITY TRAIT** is the employer looking for in the perfect applicant for the position?

The employer is looking for someone who is...

- What **ASPECTS OF YOUR PERSONALITY** would make you a productive member of the employer's team, department or company?

The aspects of my personality that would make me a productive member of the employer's team are...

The "STAR" Formula

It's time to take your value proposition a bit further. Take the information you wrote down above, and using the **"STAR" Formula**, which stands for **"Situation, Task, Action, Result"**, write the sentence or sentences that belong in your cover letter.

Here's how to use the STAR Formula:

- **SITUATION:** What was the situation at work?
- **TASK:** What task(s) were you required to do?
- **ACTION:** What actions did you take? How did you solve the problem?
- **RESULT:** What was the outcome?

Here is an example of a **STAR Answer**:

- **S:** *"During my internship last summer, I was responsible for managing various events."*
- **T:** *"I noticed that attendance at these events had dropped by 30% over the past 3 years and wanted to do something to improve these numbers."*
- **A:** *"I designed a new promotional packet to go out to the local community businesses. I also included a rating sheet to collect feedback on our events, and organized internal round table discussions to raise awareness of the issue with our employees."*
- **R:** *"We utilized some of the wonderful ideas we received from the community, made our internal systems more efficient and visible, and raised attendance by 18% the first year."*

Here's a STAR answer from a **Sales Representative**:

- *"My extensive network of contacts in the perfume and cosmetics industry includes more than 1,000 buyers, both domestic and international. These are professionals who know my name - and who listen to my recommendations."*

Here's one from a **Marketing Manager**:

- *"Here's my secret: I use bold, unusual marketing strategies to achieve phenomenal results in half the expected time - and at half the cost!"*

From an **Office Manager**:

- *"You know you have the right person in the position when you can:*
 - *Count on your office operations to run smoothly*
 - *Access accurate information about your finances at any time*
 - *Make efficient use of your computer hardware, software and other equipment*
 - *Know that your office technology is configured to meet your needs*
 - *Feel the team spirit in your office"*

From a **Public Relations Professional**:

- *"Here are two ideas I'd like to discuss with you:*
 - *A Japanese mail order program: "The Japanese mail order program I designed and launched at Floressence and Co., that cost less than \$1,000 to start up: our most recent mail out, "The Floral Holiday Gift Book", generated a 15% response, with an average order of \$404. (Our domestic response rate was 2.11%, with an average order of \$149.)*
 - *A Public Relations Program: "I increased Friday Night Club's media coverage by 500% over a two year period. (PR contributed \$650,000 to their yearly sales.)"*

Use the space below to write your own compelling STAR statement:

SITUATION:
TASK:
ACTION:
RESULT:
YOUR STAR STATEMENT:

(If you need more space, use the back of this sheet)

Bullet or Paragraph Style?

Which style you should select depends on **who you are writing to and why, what type and the amount of information you want to write, and the tone of the letter**. **BULLET STYLE** is most often used: Employers like bullet points because they are easily skimmed through. **PARAGRAPH STYLE** allows you to communicate by telling a “story”. You can also combine both styles for readers that like to skim first and read second. The choice ultimately rests with you.

"Snail Mail", Drop Off or E-mail?

"Snail mail", or the regular post, is the slower option and is **not guaranteed** because you are not in complete control. Dropping off your cover letter and résumé gives you the option of printing them on nicer paper, so your general presentation is better.

When sending an e-mail cover letter, it is important to follow the employer's instructions on how to submit your cover letter and résumé. If you are going to e-mail your cover letter as an attachment, make sure there is something in the body of the e-mail that makes the recipient want to open it. Otherwise, cut and paste your cover letter (from the salutation down) directly into the body of the e-mail. **Make sure you send your e-mail with your résumé. Attach it first before you start typing the e-mail.**

Obtain Feedback and Revise Accordingly

Revising your cover letter using the insights of others can be highly effective. Obtain feedback from a professional consultant, or someone whose opinion you trust. Ask them things like: ***“Do my accomplishments and skills jump out at you?”*** or ***“At first glance, would you be impressed?”*** Use the following checklist as a guide:

- **Is your cover letter visually enticing?**
Is it neat and attractive? What sort of first impression does it give? Is your formatting effective?
- **Is your cover letter focused?**
Does the letter state why it was written and grab the reader's attention? Does each paragraph build upon the key theme established in your first paragraph?
- **Is the tone appropriate?**
Is it confident and not arrogant? Does it project a “can-do”, positive image of yourself and your abilities?
- **Are there ABSOLUTELY NO ERRORS in your cover letter?**
Typographical and grammatical errors must be avoided!
- **Are your relevant skills and accomplishments apparent?**
Do you use examples that demonstrate your abilities related to the position?
- **Does your letter address the employer's needs?**
Does it state what you can do for the organization, rather than what the organization can offer you?

NOTE: You will find a Cover Letter Template, sample cover letters and other helpful sample letters in the Learning Library to help you create yours, according to your needs.

**From all of us at The Career Foundation, thank you for the opportunity
to assist you in developing your human potential!**