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CAREER SERVICES RESOURCE CENTER:
WRITING YOUR COVER LETTER

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COVER LETTERS

Letter writing is perhaps the most-used traditional job search strategy. While it should not be relied upon as the primary means to develop interviews, effective letter writing is an essential skill.

A cover letter must always accompany a resume when it is sent. The cover letter zeros in on the particular needs of an employer and specifically points out exactly how your qualifications meet those needs. A letter that is obviously mass-mailed will be ignored. Be sure your cover letter is SPECIFIC to that company. Never mail anything that appears to be a form letter. Companies want to feel that you have made the effort to tailor your letter, highlighting your qualifications that meet their particular needs and showing that you are familiar with their organization.

COVER LETTER TIPS

A Cover Letter should be:

- **Concise:** A cover letter should be three to four paragraphs. Any longer might lose the interest of the reader. We suggest the following format (see sample on back):
 - **Opening paragraph:** Four or five sentences maximum. Mention the position you are applying to/interested in, briefly introduce yourself, and indicate where you learned of the opportunity.
 - **Body of letter:** Usually one or two paragraphs. Share detailed examples of your qualifications for the position's specific requirements. Many students choose to use one paragraph to discuss previous work experiences and another one to discuss academic experiences or leadership experience, etc. Choose whatever combination communicates your most relevant qualifications most effectively!
 - **Closing:** Three to four sentences maximum. Summarize your qualifications, restate your enthusiasm for the position, and include your preferred contact information for the employer to follow-up with you.
- **Clear:** Articulate your qualifications in words that mirror what the employer provided in the job description. Do not try to impress with a long list of accomplishments. This is the executive summary, not the resume.
- **Convincing:** An employer will make a decision on your candidacy based on the combined letter and resume package. You have to articulate the connection to the job description and sell your skills. This is a competition. Why should the employer hire you?

Other Tips:

- **TARGET** each letter to each specific job and company. **NEVER** send out a generic cover letter- there is no point since it won't cover any of the above topics. Remember, this is not just a formality; you are writing a letter to a person. Think about if you had the opportunity to be face-to-face with the hiring manager, what would you say to explain why you want the job and why they should want you there?

- Focus on what **YOU** can do for **THEM**, not what they can do for you. You want to say enough about why you're interested in the job to make them convinced that you really will fit and want to stay awhile, but your main focus should be on how you will benefit the company.
- Address your letter to a person; only use "To Whom It May Concern" as a last resort. It may not be obvious who the hiring manager is, so do some research to find out. Call and ask, talk to current employees, look for a directory on their website or other info about who is in charge of different departments, or use LinkedIn (see Job Search handout). It doesn't have to be addressed to the first person to read it, but it should be someone logical, like the head of the department this particular position is under.
- Use a standard font (Times New Roman or Arial). Especially if you're sending your letter electronically, this helps to ensure that your letter will open properly on the employer's computer. Keep it to 1 page, between 10 and 12pt font size. In most cases, especially for entry-level positions, employers won't want to read a letter that is longer than one page.
- It must be error-free! Errors in your letter make the employer think you will be careless at work, and having one error can be the only reason they need to rule you out. Always proofread carefully, and then have another detail-oriented person check it for errors. It's often hard to proofread your own writing!
- Write professionally and intelligently, but don't overdo it! An employer will be able to tell if you're trying to write in a way that is very different than how you would ever speak, like if you use too many big words! (You also don't want to disappoint them when you get to the interview!) **DO** make sure your letter is well written and well thought-out, because the employer **WILL** use it as a sample of your writing abilities!

COVER LETTER CHECKLIST

- The words and action verbs in your cover letter should be reflective of the job description.
- Always be professional.
- Use proper grammar.
- Check for spelling and punctuation errors.
- Know to whom the resume/cover letter package is going. Do not use "To Whom It May Concern." Address letter to the Recruiter or Hiring Manager.
- Use paragraph form, not bullet points.
- Do not copy and paste content from your resume to your cover letter.
- Do not be forward in requesting an interview.
- Keep to one page (no more than 3-4 paragraphs).
- When e-mailing a recruiter or hiring manager directly, use the body of the email to write two to three sentences that introduce yourself and mention to what position you are applying. Include your cover letter and resume as attachments. Do not cut and paste your cover letter into the body of the email.

(Include your resume header here)

Current Date (write out the name of the month)

Employer's Name, Title
Department or Division
Company/Organization Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr./Individual's Name,

Paragraph 1 (Introduction): Concisely state your purpose for writing the letter. This paragraph is usually only a couple sentences long. Here, you will specify the position you want to be considered for. You can include how you learned about the opening, but this is really the most helpful if you heard of the opening from someone the employer knows, such as a current employee or a contact of the employer. (A note about name-dropping: This is helpful only if the employer has a positive relationship with the person whose name you drop. So be careful, especially since it is usually impossible to know for sure if the employer likes the person! Also, dropping the name of someone in a higher position than the hiring manager can be seen as threatening, and can hurt your chances.) You can also include a brief introduction to why you're interested in the position and/or company, or why you're qualified for the position. Just like you would in an essay, you are introducing the ideas you will talk about in the rest of your letter.

Paragraph 2 (Body): Tell the employer why you're the best candidate for the job. This is your "qualifications" paragraph. Use the job description (or refer to the Resume handout for what to do if there is no job description) to determine what the employer is looking for. Highlight your strongest selling points, but don't just restate your resume; instead, explain HOW your qualifications have prepared you to excel at this job. Consider your education and/or training, experience (paid jobs, internships, fieldwork, volunteer work, extracurricular involvement, etc.), skills and abilities, accomplishments in your field, personal characteristics/strengths, and any other qualifications you may have.

Paragraph 3 (Body): Explain your interest in the position and the company and/or provide supplemental information. It is important to employers that they are able to see that you've done your research on their company and on the position, and have solid reasons for feeling like both the company and the job are the right fit for you. So, do all the research you can on the company, looking for things like its mission and values, its products or services, its history and its future goals, its performance and reputation, etc. Demonstrate that you've done your research by mentioning specific things about the company in explaining why it fits with your interests, goals, working style, values, etc. (Don't, however, talk about things that are all about you and not the work, like "the pay is good" or "I wouldn't have to move.") This section can also be your chance to provide extra information that will help differentiate your letter from everyone else's letter (or can be done in a separate paragraph as well if it doesn't tie in to the ideas you're already talking about here). In this section, you can be a little more creative and show more of your personality. Consider additional things that could make your letter more engaging and memorable. For example, you could share your philosophy of the type of work you do; ideas you have of what you'd like to accomplish for the company based on their needs, how you developed a passion for this field, or how you would go about doing a particular aspect of your job.

Paragraph 4 (Closing): Very briefly summarize the contents of your letter. Then, express your interest in an interview. Indicate how the employer can reach you. Finally, thank the employer for his or her time and consideration.

Sincerely, (Don't forget to SIGN your name here, preferably in blue ink!)

Your Name Typed

Cover Letter Walk Through:

This page will walk you through the standard business letter format, and what to include in your letter. You don't have to organize your paragraphs exactly as described below, but the format below is the most standard format, and is easy to follow for beginners!