

Cover Letters

The Writing Center
At Rensselaer

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Introduction

The preliminary application for a professional position generally consists of two documents: a cover letter and a resume. This handout describes the cover letter; the resume is described in a separate Writing Center handout. While the resume is a somewhat generic advertisement for yourself, which you may send unaltered to scores of different companies, the cover letter allows you to tailor your application to each specific job. Although the thrust of your various letters may remain the same, with the assorted text-processing options available at RPI—options that include find-and-replace and merging capabilities—there is really no reason to have a single, generic cover letter.

Remember that your cover letter and resume are usually all a prospective employer has to decide whether or not you will reach the next phase in the application process—the interview.

Purpose

Your cover letter and resume usually provide all the information which a prospective employer will use to decide whether or not you will reach the next phase in the application process: the interview. While your goal is an interview and, ultimately, a job offer, the more immediate purpose of your cover letter in some cases may simply be to gain an attentive audience for your resume.

Audience

A cover letter provides, in a very real sense, an opportunity to let your prospective employer hear your voice. It reflects your personality, your attention to detail, your communication skills, your enthusiasm, your intellect, and your specific interest in the company to which you are sending the letter.

Therefore, cover letters should be tailored to each specific company you are applying to. You should conduct enough research to know the interests, needs, values, and goals of each company, and your letters should reflect that knowledge.

Content

A cover letter should be addressed to the specific company and the specific individual who will process your application. You can usually find this through research or simply by calling the company to find out who you should address your letter to.

The letter should name the position for which you are applying and also make specific references to the company. Indicate your knowledge of and interest in the work the company is currently doing, and your qualification for the position. You want the reader to know:

- why you want to work at that specific company,
- why you fit with that company
- how you qualify for the position to which you applying.

In addition to tailoring your application to a specific job with a specific company, the cover letter should also

- highlight the most important and relevant accomplishments, skills, and experience listed in your resume
- point to the resume in some way (as detailed in the enclosed resume")
- request specific follow up, such as an interview.

Format

A cover letter should be in paragraph form (save bulleted lists for your resume) with a conversational, though formal, tone.

The first paragraph should be brief, perhaps two or three sentences, stating

- what job you are applying for and how you learned about it
- any personal contacts you have in or with the company
- your general qualifications for the job.

The body of your letter should consist of one to three longer paragraphs in which you expand upon your qualifications for the position. Pick out the most relevant qualifications listed in your resume and discuss them in detail, demonstrating how your background and experience qualify you for the job. Be as specific as possible, and refer the reader to your resume for additional details.

The concluding paragraph of your letter should request an interview (or some other response, as appropriate). State where and when you can be reached, and express your willingness to come to an interview or supply further information. Close by thanking your reader for his or her time and consideration.

Sample Cover Letter 1

34 Second Street
Troy, New York 12180

October 4, 2001

Ms. Gail Roberts
Recruiting Coordinator
Department DRR 1201
Database Corporation
Princeton, New Jersey 05876

Dear Ms. Roberts:

Your advertisement for software engineers in the January issue of the *IEEE Spectrum* caught my attention. I was drawn to the ad by my strong interest in both software design and Database.

I have worked with a CALMA system in developing VLSI circuits, and I also have substantial experience in the design of interactive CAD software. Because of this experience, I can make a direct and immediate contribution to your department. I have enclosed a copy of my resume, which details my qualifications and suggests how I might be of service to Database.

I would like very much to meet with you to discuss your open positions for software engineers. If you wish to arrange an interview, please contact me at the above address or by telephone at (518) 271-9999.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Joseph Smith

Sample Cover Letter 2

1234 15th Street
Troy, New York 12180

January 30, 2002

Mr. John M. Curtis
Recruiting Coordinator
HAL Corporation
55 Washington Avenue
New York, New York 10081

Dear Mr. Curtis:

As an experienced computer programmer who is presently pursuing a master's degree in electrical engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, I am writing to request information about possible summer employment opportunities with HAL. I am interested in a position that will allow me to combine the talents I have developed in both computer programming and electrical engineering. However, as you can see from the attached resume, I have extensive experience in many related fields, and I always enjoy new challenges.

I feel that it is important for me to maintain a practical, real-world perspective while developing my academic abilities. I am proud of the fact that I have financed my entire education through scholarships and summer jobs related to my field of study. This work experience has enhanced my appreciation for the education I am pursuing. I find that I learn as much from my summer jobs as I do from my academic studies. For example, during the summer of 1986, while working for IBM in Boca Raton, Florida, I gained a great deal of practical experience in the field of electronic circuit logic and driver design. When I returned to school in the fall and took Computer Hardware Design, I found that my experience with IBM had thoroughly prepared me for the subject.

Having said all this, I realize that your first consideration in hiring an applicant must not be the potential educational experience HAL can provide, but the skills and services the applicant has to offer. I hope the experience and education described in my resume suggest how I might be of service to HAL.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss with you how I might best assist HAL in fulfilling its present corporate needs. I will be available for employment from May 14 through August 31, 2002. Please let me know what summer employment opportunities are available at HAL for someone with my education, experience, and interests. You can reach me at the above address or by phone at (518) 271-0000.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,
Joan Doe