Cover Letter: A “How To” Guide

http://careersuccess.msu.edu/phdcareers/search/resumes

For Private, Public, and Non-Profit Sector Careers

A cover letter is a document sent with a resume to introduce yourself and explain your suitability for the desired position.

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<th>Goal: To provide the potential employers with strong evidence of your qualifications for and personal interest in the position you are applying for.</th>
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<td>Length: One page</td>
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<td>Focus: The reasons why you are unique and would benefit the organization you are applying to; conveying interest in the position and why you are interested.</td>
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<td>Essentials: Why you think you are a good fit for the job, why you are unique and would benefit the company, and your qualifications (education, work experience, etc.).</td>
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<td>Extraneous: Personal data (marital status, weight, race, etc.) that does not support the goal of the cover letter.</td>
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The Format

Introduction
- Introduce yourself & answer the reader’s question: “Why am I reading this letter?”
- Name the position you are interested in, how you learned of the opening or organization, and, if appropriate, who referred you. In a sentence or two, explain what skills make you the best candidate for the position.

Body
- In one or two concise paragraphs, match your background to the needs of the employer.
- Summarize your qualifications and give specific examples, focusing on your transferable skills, strengths, accomplishments, and results.

Conclusion
- Make a summary statement and refer the reader to your enclosed resume.
- End actively, with an offer to contact the employer within a specific period of time.
- Confirm how they may reach you, via phone or e-mail & thank the reader for his/her time.

To Stand Out
- Know your audience and customize your materials depending on the position or your discipline.
- Make your cover letter complement, but not reiterate, the information on your resume.
- Send a cover letter even if the position document requirements list it as “Optional.”
Cover Letter Resources

- **MSU PhD Career Services**: A comprehensive page based on creating resumes, CVs, and cover letters.
  - http://careersuccess.msu.edu/phdcareers/search/resumes

- **Versatile PhD**: Includes real examples of resumes, cover letters, and other written credentials for a variety of careers in the public and private sectors.
  - http://versatilephd.com/
  - *Note: First time users of Versatile PhD will need to log in through MSU; you can access the link on the Versatile PhD website.*

- **MSU Career Services Network**: Resources for written credentials
  - http://www.csp.msu.edu/resources-tools/index.html

- **Resume/Cover Letters (Stanford)**: Overview of how to craft effective resumes and cover letters
  - http://stanford.io/1fVX01R

- **Cover Letters (Illinois)**: A guide to writing a cover letter and an overview of what it should include
  - http://www.grad.illinois.edu/careerservices/coverletters

- **Job Search Letters (Dartmouth)**: A guide to writing cover letters, informational interview request letters, and thank you letters.
  - http://graduate.dartmouth.edu/careers/services/letters.html

- **Cover Letter Organization & Formatting (Purdue)**: A guide to formatting and organizing cover letters effectively.

- **The Cover Letters That Make Hiring Managers Smile (Daily Muse)**: A list of tips to effectively write a cover letter.
  - http://bit.ly/1kzEU4L

- **The Cover Letter: Relic or Still Relevant? (Science Careers)**: Reasons why writing a cover letter is a good idea when applying for positions.

- **Quiz: Is your cover letter like a bad handshake? (Career Builder)**: A quiz that tells you how your cover letter is doing.
  - http://cb.com/1h5WblX

- **Learn From These 6 Real-Life Cover Letter Failures (US News & World Report)**: Six cover letter failure examples.

If you have any questions, please contact the PhD Career Services Office at 517-884-1332 or go to careersuccess.msu.edu/phdcareers/prepare/advising to schedule an interview with one of our advisors.