

(ALMOST)

EVERYTHING

YOU NEED TO KNOW

ABOUT

COVER LETTERS

Do I REALLY need a cover letter for my job search?

Cover letters are not required for all job applications, particularly if the job is in a hands-on field such as construction, maintenance or food service. However, if you want the strongest chance of getting hired, it's best to exceed the minimum required application documents. Even if the application states that cover letters are *optional*, **a motivated job-seeker should consider them to be essential.**

What will I be communicating to the employer if I send a cover letter when it's listed as *optional*, or when it isn't mentioned in the job ad at all?

Imagine you have an apartment and you hire someone to clean it. You ask them to vacuum the floors, but you say nothing else about floor care.

When you return home, you notice that your floors are much more shiny than usual. The sunlight is reflecting off of them for the first time in ages. Did the cleaner simply vacuum like you asked? No, they also took the initiative to mop! Most likely you're impressed with the cleaner and consider them to be motivated.

The same concept is true when applied to job applications. Sure, the application might not mention cover letters. But **job-seekers who send cover letters are bound to appear more motivated, thorough and perhaps even more confident** than those who don't.

Other than suggesting that I'm motivated, what's the purpose of a cover letter? What is it for?

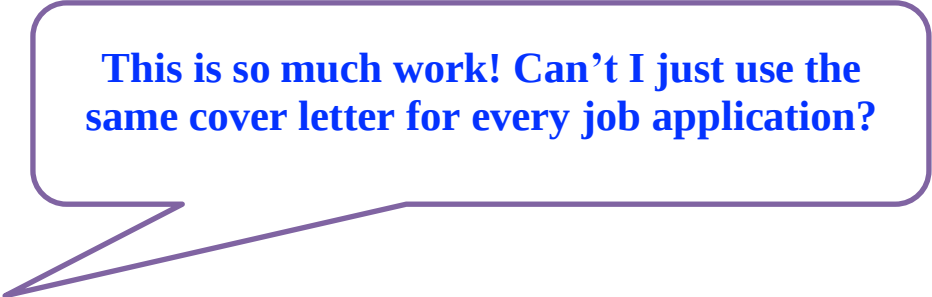
Resumes don't allow for the opportunity to explain your career path or to express what distinguishes you from other applicants with similar work histories. The cover letter is your chance to share such information—an in-depth cover letter tells some of the *story* that's behind the resume.

At minimum, a cover letter should express your interest in the open position and summarize who you are as a candidate: your work experience, your education/certifications, and some of your personal traits/soft skills. A strong cover letter goes beyond summary, though, and makes it easy for the employer to see how your qualifications relate to the position.

Rather than leaving the employer to read your resume and then wonder if you have what it takes to do the job well, **the strongest cover letters “connect the dots” for the employer. In other words, they make a convincing case that you're a great candidate.**

Strong cover letters demonstrate that you've carefully considered what the employer is seeking, you've considered your qualifications, and you've concluded that they're a match.

CONTINUED



This is so much work! Can't I just use the same cover letter for every job application?

Yes...and no.

If your goal is to send out a high volume of applications, it might make the most sense to avoid spending time on customizing your cover letter to each job. You can do this by keeping it general:

- Express your interest in “the position advertised with your company”—but don’t name the specific position or company.
- Address the letter to *Hiring Manager* or *To Whom It May Concern*, rather than to a specific person’s name.
- Summarize your qualifications *broadly*—this maximizes the chances that you’ll appear to be a match regardless of the field to which you are applying. For example, if you’ve worked in maintenance and construction, and are applying to jobs in both fields, discuss your experience in both fields in your cover letter.

If there’s a job you REALLY want, though, IGNORE the above advice! Instead, take the time to *customize* your cover letter.

- Update the position name and company name. Add in the name of the contact person at this company, if you know it.
- Tailor every mention of past jobs, every mention of your skills, and every mention of your personal traits to match what *this particular employer* hiring for *this particular job* would seek in their ideal candidate. (Stop short of lying, though—the goal is to angle the information, not to make it up.)

I'll try writing a general cover letter, but how do I do it?

Print your resume. Use it as a cheat sheet to fill in the **red sections** below. If you think of material to change or add, go for it! There's no one 'right' way to write a cover letter.

COVER LETTER TEMPLATE

(GENERAL—not customized)

To Whom It May Concern:

I am highly interested in the position your company advertised on [name of job website]. My background includes [#] years of experience in [the most relevant field you've worked in]. In my role as a [current/past job title related to the field you're applying in] at [company name], I was/am [← choose one] responsible for [relevant duty #1], [relevant duty #2] and [relevant duty #3].

In addition, I have experience in [another job in this field, OR a second-most relevant field you've worked in] as a [job title]. I believe that my skills in [relevant duty #1 from this job] and [relevant duty #2 from this job] would benefit me in this new position. My references can speak to the fact that I am [positive trait #1], [positive trait #2] and [positive trait #3].

Please review the attached resume, and contact me if you have any questions or would like to arrange an interview. Thanks in advance.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Phone number]

[E-mail]

CUSTOMIZED COVER LETTERS

How do customized cover letters differ from general ones? Do customized ones simply include the position name, company name and hiring manager's name?

No—those are just the easy additions. To truly customize a cover letter, point out why you're a good fit for **THIS** particular job. *Check out the sample sentences below.*

To make the case that you have relevant skills despite the fact that you haven't worked in the field before:

- While I'm new to the [name of new field] field, I believe that my [relevant field you've worked in] skills are directly transferrable. - OR -
- My skills in [relevant skill #1] and [relevant skill #2] would be an asset to me in this role. They would enable me to [explain HOW they would help]. - OR -
- I would bring to this position the added bonus of my [relevant field you've worked in] background, which would mean I could not only [main task/purpose of new field], but also [main task/purpose of field you believe is relevant].

To make the case that you're particularly interested in THIS company:

- I admire [name of company]'s mission to [something **specific** they stand for or are trying to achieve], and would be proud to contribute to it. - OR -
- [Name of company] stands out as the only one in the field that [something that distinguishes them from their competitors]. - OR -
- I am particularly drawn to [name of company] because [special connection such as (1) the fact that your uncle works at the company and loves _____ about it, OR (2) a time when you had a great experience as a customer of the company, OR (3) something about the company's history or policies that appeals to you].

To make the case that you're committed to this new field:

- I plan to make a long-term career in [name of new field], and am eager to gain any skills that would help me to do so. - OR -
- While I've enjoyed my work in [current or past field], I recently earned my [relevant new certification] to pursue my passion for [name of new field].

To make the case that your personal traits will lead you to succeed at the job:

- As a fast learner, I'm confident I would quickly become an asset to [company name]. - OR -
- I'm determined to advance in the [name of new field] field, and believe that my [personal trait/soft skill #1] and [personal trait/soft skill #2] would enable me to do so. - OR -
- Employers have noted my ability to [name of soft skill], which I would draw upon when [skill important for this new job] in this position. - OR -
- I believe I would be a natural fit for a [name of new field] role because of its emphasis on [a soft skill it values] and [another soft skill it values].

To make the case that you'll succeed in this job despite the fact that it's a higher-level position than you've had before:

- My professional experience has prepared me to manage [the most challenging duty of the new position]—I have grown in my current position and no longer find it to be very challenging. - OR -
- I have grown throughout my [number] years as a [name of a lower-level position than the one you're applying for] and am seeking an opportunity with increased responsibility. - OR -
- My [personal trait or soft skill #1] and [personal trait or soft skill #2] ensure that as I adjust to this position, I won't sacrifice [something important in the new job such as speed, accuracy, quality customer service, etc.] even as I learn.

Remember, there's no one 'right' way to write a cover letter.

That's why the 2 prior pages provide *several* examples of how to address each argument listed in **red**. There are limitless other ways of addressing each argument—and many other arguments you might choose to make.

If this is overwhelming—as it is to most people, even those with plenty of work experience—here's how to get started:

- Print your resume.
- Print the description posted for a job you'd like.
- Consider how your resume and job description are related.



- **Do this by asking yourself questions such as...**
 - What work experiences on my resume prepare me for the new job?
 - What certifications on my resume prepare me for the new job?
 - What personal traits (mentioned on my resume or not mentioned) prepare me for the new job?
 - If another candidate has similar work experience and similar certifications to mine, what makes *me* the better candidate?

As you come up with answers to the above four questions, jot them down. This is the raw material for your customized cover letter! Work on shaping your raw material into polished sentences, and consider incorporating some of the sample sentences from the two prior pages.