

Covering Letters

A **covering letter** is more than just a note to accompany your CV or application form. It is an opportunity to explain to an employer why they should consider your application seriously, and enables you to introduce your key selling points.

Employers may well read your covering letter **before** the enclosed CV or form and for that reason you need to take the letter-writing process seriously and tailor each letter to each position and recruiter, just as you would with your CV. Unless explicitly asked not to, you should *always* include a covering letter with each application form or CV sent, especially when making speculative applications.

The best covering letters are no longer than one side of A4 and strike an appropriately enthusiastic but professional tone; remember this is a business document that demonstrates to an employer that you can be taken seriously.

AIMS OF A COVERING LETTER

Remember that the key aims of a covering letter are to:

- Express clearly and succinctly who you are, what job you are applying for, why you are suitable for that job and why you want to work for the organisation.
- Highlight your specific strengths, motivations and reasons for applying.
- Convey a confident, competent, enthusiastic and professional attitude.
- Avoid any spelling, grammatical or typing errors. Ask a friend to check your letter before you post it off.
- Address any gaps or apparent weaknesses in your CV such as poor academic results due to illness, for example.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

There is no magic formula for covering letters, especially since they need to be adapted depending on the application and organisation. Nevertheless, the following outline should give you a useful structure to start with. Also, try to think of sections rather than paragraphs *per se*, since some aspects may require two paragraphs; overall though, the letter should not be any longer than one side of A4 paper.

Greetings

Always try to find a name, rather than a job title, as it demonstrates to the employer that you have done your homework and have researched the organisation: *Dear Ms Smith* is much better than *Dear Sir/Madam*. If the job advertisement does not specify a name it is worth contacting the company to ask the name and proper title of the person to whom you should address your application.

Introduction

This first paragraph needs to be very clear: include who you are (*recently graduated with a 2:1 in geography from University College London*), why you are writing (*to apply for X position; looking for work experience*) and where you saw the position advertised or, if it is a speculative application, where you heard about the organisation.

Why them?

Use this section to tell the employer why you want this particular job with their particular organisation; this is

your chance to impress them with your commitment and enthusiasm. Demonstrate that you understand what the job involves and that you have actually researched their company. Avoid vague statements and blatant flattery; be specific and illustrate your opinions with some original points (*I am attracted to working for you because..., I am drawn to X plc because..., I am especially interested in X plc's...*).

Why you?

Now it is your chance to really impress upon the employer why you are just right for this job, in terms of skills, experience and personal attributes. Illustrate your unique selling points with three or four excellent examples, rather than try to cover everything. Use the organisations recruitment information to guide you towards the particular skills and competencies that they want and highlight your evidence of them (*As you can see from my CV I have..., I have frequently worked..., I have gained experience of..., as demonstrated by X, my main skills are...*).

This is also the chance to deal directly and positively within any gaps or apparent weaknesses in your CV (*You will notice from my CV that it took me 5 years to complete my BSc. This is due to X. I feel this demonstrates my resilience and commitment, especially when faced with challenging situations.*).

The ending

Do not rush your closing paragraph, as it is an important opportunity to both restate your interest and summarise your suitability for the post. It is also a good place to state your availability for interview and to end on an optimistic and polite note. Furthermore, you can demonstrate your keenness by informing the organisation that you will follow up your letter/CV with a phone call (*I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for taking the time to read my application; I am available for interview anytime...I will contact you shortly regarding my application...*).

Finally, do not forget the correct method of signing off: *Yours sincerely* if addressed to a particular name, *Yours faithfully* if you use *Dear Sir/Madam*.

FINAL TOP TIPS

Presentation: this is very important; remember your covering letter is a business document and needs to be clear, well-presented and visually attractive. Do not cram too much on the page and use good quality A4 white paper. Always word process the letter as it looks more professional (unless otherwise requested) and ensure the font type is consistent with that used in your CV.

Use positive language: the phrasing of your covering letter is important so choose your language carefully. Try to use 'power words', such as key action verbs or phrases that illustrate your experiences in a really positive light. For example, *Initiated..., Instrumental in..., Succeeded in...* For more useful phrases you may find the 'What makes an effective application' section at www.prospects.ac.uk helpful. However, do not be tempted to exaggerate previous successes. This information may form the basis of an interview question and you need to be able to describe it in convincing detail.

Complement your CV: remember that your covering letter is not just a regurgitation of your CV; think of it as a tailor-made statement for a particular job and organisation, which allows you to highlight your particular suitability for the post by providing evidence of specific skills. Also, remember you are persuading an employer to pay you to do a specific job, not just provide you with useful training, so reassure them of your employability value and strengths.

Get it checked: a careless spelling error or common grammatical mistake can be lethal for a covering letter, so make sure you ask someone with a good eye for detail to proofread your letter before you send it off. Your college careers service can also give you further advice and examples of how to write a really successful covering letter.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- www.careers.lon.ac.uk/sortit Implementation section:

- 'Covering letters' and 'Find the right words'
- *How to Write a Curriculum Vitae*, The Careers Group, University of London, 2006
- *How to Complete an Application Form*, The Careers Group, University of London, 2008
- *Brilliant CV*, Jim Bright & Joanne Earl, Pearson Education, 2005
- *101 Best Cover Letters*, Jay A Block & Michael Betrus, McGraw Hill, 1999

The Careers Group is committed to providing information in accessible formats. An electronic version of this document is available at www.careers.lon.ac.uk/cep. For further formats, please contact your college careers service or email cs@careers.lon.ac.uk.

44 Fenton Road
Crouch End
London N8 9NS

21 March 2008

Mr B Taylor
GYK Events
25-32 Freeman Street
London EC1 YHG

Dear Mr Taylor

Graduate Traineeship - Technology Consulting Division

I am writing to apply for the above position as advertised in the Guardian on 15 March. I am currently completing a master's degree in Environment, Science and Society at University College London and am interested in joining your graduate scheme for the September 2008 intake. Please find enclosed my CV as requested.

I am interested in a career in technology consulting because I have always enjoyed problem-solving, including the analysis of the problem and then working out a practical solution. My strengths in IT and technology make a career in technology particularly appealing, but I am keen to be involved in an environment which is focussed on people and business goals rather than pure technology.

I have had experience of some of the processes involved in consultancy in my capacity as a Webmaster with the London Disabled Forum. Not only has this given me an insight into the realities of working within an IT-based environment, it has helped me to develop important key skills such as client relationship-management, teamworking and leadership. These skills have been added to by time spent working at the University of London Union bar, where I often had to deal with potentially difficult situations with tact and diplomacy.

As a Geography student, I have had to use research and analysis skills throughout my degree and masters courses. Dissertations and research projects have taught me how to plan my time effectively and use resources in the most efficient way. I have opted to take a number of IT and management courses such as Geographical Information Systems and Regional, Economic Development in the UK which have helped me understand the increasingly vital role technology plays in today's business environment.

Having thoroughly researched the sector, I am drawn to GYK due to the tailored nature of your technology solutions and the culture of the organisation as being one of a multi-disciplinary team that share both goals and working space. I have attended presentations at the GYK Open Day held on 15 January and talked to new trainees present at the UCL Finance and Management Fair. I was impressed with their obvious enthusiasm and honesty when describing their work.

I am available for interview at any time and look forward to hearing from you in due course.

Yours sincerely

Sadia Mira

enc