

Frequently Asked Questions About Cover Letters

Here are brief answers to some frequently asked questions about cover letters:

1) What is the proper tone of a cover letter?

The impressions your cover letter gives to prospective employers about you often have a tremendous bearing on your ability to get an interview. Your letter should be well written, and you should sound enthusiastic and confident about your ability to add value to the company, without sounding arrogant or pretentious. Often people confuse confidence with arrogance. To appear confident, simply state what you already know-that you can perform the job well for X, Y, and Z reasons. As long as what you state is the truth, it will never appear arrogant.

2) What is the protocol for requesting an interview?

Should I tell the employer that I will contact him/her at a certain time, rather than asking to be contacted? Some experts may tell job seekers to make the first phone call rather than wait, but it is not always in the job seeker's best interest. Employers do not want to be hounded by job seekers. Often, they will state so in their advertisements. The best approach is to state that you are available for an immediate interview at the employers' convenience. They will contact you if they are interested.

3) Do I need to show I have researched the firm/company I'm applying to?

The more you know about a company, the more knowledgeable you sound. But do not inundate the employer with facts he/she already knows. Simply use this information to determine what qualities and experience you have that would be valuable to the employer.

4) Should I mention salary requirements in my cover letter?

With salary requirements, it is best to only mention them when it is specifically requested in an advertisement. If it is not, then the topic is sure to come up during a later interview.

5) Is there a specific cover letter format I need to use?

As with a resume, the format of your cover letter should be dictated by your particular experience. It is best to keep letters as brief as possible and to not overwhelm the reader with large paragraphs. Employing the three to four rule should work for most applicants: no more than three to four sentences per paragraph and no more than three to four paragraphs per letter.

6) What is the best way to deal with employment dates that could possibly be construed as having a negative connotation?

Dates that show you are currently unemployed, prone to hopping jobs, or not the typical age of someone who might be considered ideal can be explained by applying the correct spin on them in your cover letter. This is where you can explain that you were part of a massive layoff from your employer of 10 years, you took time off to obtain your master's degree, or you took three years off to raise your child, all the while maintaining contact with former coworkers and keeping up with current trends in your industry.

7) If I have been laid-off/fired/quit, how do I broach this subject?

You have to put it in the best possible light. Casting aspersions on your former employer will not make anyone want you aboard, for fear you may exhibit similar behavior if/when you leave them. Keep letters as positive as possible. If you were fired, don't bring it up. If you quit, you could put a positive spin on it by stating that although you thoroughly enjoyed your former job, you felt that this was a point in your career at which you wanted to explore new and more involved challenges in a position such as this. Simply put, find the silver lining surrounding your situation and make that the focal point rather than the negative black cloud.