

The Elements of a Winning Cover Letter

By Emily Sanderson

A cover letter is an introduction to your resume. Although it must stay brief, a cover letter can provide additional information to potential employers that you could not include in your resume. In addition to the business purpose of the letter — requesting an interview — the cover letter can discuss your career goals, your present circumstances, such as if you are relocating, and what type of position you are seeking. Most of all, a cover letter can highlight your achievements and those areas in your work history that best serve as transferable skills for the position a potential employer seeks to fill. In the following account names and circumstances have been changed.

Karl recently hired an entry-level civil engineer for his piping project. The position requires extensive on-the-job training for the first month of employment because of the specified nature of the work. Karl needed to hire someone who he knew would grasp concepts quickly and who would be able to apply them to the project.

"Hiring an engineer is an investment," Karl says. "I need to know someone I hire is going to deliver results." Karl approached contacts in the Houston area to consider as candidates.

Karl is like many potential employers to whom individuals like you may be applying for positions. What will set you apart from the competition? The first step is to *get noticed* through a well-crafted cover letter.

Cover letters introduce resumes. In some circles the cover letter has become a thing of the past since so many resumes are submitted via email these days. Whether a cover letter is in the form of an email with a resume attachment or a hard copy submitted by traditional mail, it provides an important forum that is different from a resume where information can be transmitted that cannot be in a resume alone.

The business purpose of a cover letter, which is perhaps its most important role, is to request an action on the part of the potential employer, which is for him or her to contact you for an interview scheduled at his or her convenience. The rest of the cover letter serves to convince the employer that such action will be a well-spent use of his or her time.

A cover letter should never be longer than one page — and the shorter the better, since potential employers often have a lot of resumes and cover letters to get through. It often consists of three or four paragraphs. It should explain your present career objective and reason for a job change, such as the fact that you are relocating or your desire to pursue a different career path. But most of all, the cover letter should be geared towards what you can do for them as opposed to what they can do for you. Your cover letter should serve as a type of business proposal for what you intend to offer a potential employer.

The following is a breakdown by paragraph of the information that should appear in your cover letter and where to include it.

Your Contact Information

Display your contact information in the same way that it is displayed on your resume, using the same layout, font choice, and text size. Double-check to make sure your contact information is correct.

Addressee

If possible, address the letter to a specific contact person, even if you need to make a phone call to the human resources department to discover the appropriate name to use.

First Paragraph

1. **Identify yourself.** Your identity for the purposes of this letter is strongly connected to your qualifications. Karl, for example, was looking for an entry-level civil engineer. Note that Karl was not looking for an experienced engineer who would exceed his budget.
2. **Explain your reason for writing,** which is to express interest in a position with the addressee's company, whether it is a posted position that you found on a job board, on an employer's website, or through a classified ad or a position that is not even posted that you heard about through a business associate. Your reason for writing can also be that you are relocating to the area, that you recently graduated and are seeking to begin your career, that you are impressed with the company's track record, and/or that you are seeking to begin a new chapter.
3. **Introduce yourself as a viable candidate.** The first paragraph is an introduction to the rest of the letter. Provide a "thesis statement," if you will, that discussion points in the rest of your cover letter will support — for example, "My skill set and previous work experience will allow me to make immediate contributions to your company." Be careful to use the future tense here, as opposed to a conditional verb. Using the future tense will provide a subtle indication as to your confidence without sounding too cocky.
4. **Explain that you have enclosed your resume for the addressee's review.** This phrase should be connected logically to another point in the first paragraph. For instance, you might write, "I am impressed with your company's track record in computer manufacturing, and I know I have a lot to offer you. I have enclosed my resume for your review."

Middle Paragraphs

1. **Provide examples in your work history and schooling of your qualifications and achievements.** In the middle one or two paragraphs, provide a brief summary of your work history and schooling without rehashing your resume. Highlight those parts of your resume that would best serve as transferable skills for the position at hand and that would paint the picture of your character.
2. **Share positive performance** evaluations or when you were commended for your work on a project.
3. **Mention relevant service** you have conducted in the community.

Final Paragraph

1. **Summarize the skills you have to offer**, whether they be excellent writing and researching skills, good phone rapport, analytical skills, or journeyman skills.
2. **Reiterate your thesis statement** that you have a lot to offer the company.
3. **Request an interview** scheduled at the addressee's convenience.
4. **Thank the addressee for his or her time and consideration.**

Sincerity and humility are critical to this letter. If you have the time to do some research on the company, mention in your cover letter specific aspects of it to which you have something to contribute.

Karl ended up hiring an engineer who he knew would contribute 120% to the project and who had great potential for career growth.

The cover letter plays an important role in a job application. Preferred Resume can help you prepare a winning cover letter. For more information about our services, go to www.Preferred Resume.com.