

# Cover Letter Basics

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**What is a cover letter and why do you need one?** Contrary to what you might think, a cover letter is **not** a short essay where you get to tell your potential employer: 1) All the amazing things you've done since starting your degree, 2) What you hope to gain or learn when you get the job, and 3) How the job will help you achieve your future goals.

Like the resume it accompanies, the cover letter is not really about what you want/need or are most proud of at all.

- **It is about the employer's wants and needs.** The cover letter is your chance to expand upon the facts listed on your resume by showing the potential employer (in one page or less) that you "get" them; that you understand what they need in the position you are applying for, and how the skills and qualities you possess are ready to meet that need.
- **It is also a writing sample** that gives you a chance to prove that you possess great written communication skills (a quality that ranks anywhere from #1 to #3 on annual surveys of skills employer seek).
- Like writing an essay, **you should have a solid thesis statement before you write the cover letter.** Your thesis statement guides how you write your cover letter and your resume. These two documents should support each other; and the thesis statement is the starting point. In order to come up with that thesis statement, you must first analyze the position announcement to identify the employer's needs and the language they use. (See example on the next page)
- **The cover letter should complement, not duplicate, resume information,** and focus the prospective employer's attention to pertinent areas of your experience.

**NOTE: The cover letter is ALWAYS tailored to a specific position/organization.** There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all cover letter.

**Who should it be addressed to?** If the name of the contact person is not given in the job listing (or if you are sending an "unsolicited" letter of inquiry), here are strategies for finding a name of an appropriate individual:

- Call the company directly and ask for a contact person
- Check on BuckyNet in the "Employers" section for contact information for companies who recruit through this office
- If you cannot find any name to whom to address the cover letter, use "Dear Hiring Manager."

**Tips for electronic delivery:** Send your resume and cover letter as PDF attachments to preserve formatting unless otherwise instructed. If completing an online application which asks you to upload your resume, save the cover letter and resume as one document and upload them as one attachment. If sending an email, include the cover letter in the body of the email as well as an attachment, or consider sending a shorter, introductory email referring to the attached resume and cover letter.

## Addressing "Difficult" Issues

Difficult issues can be anything from a lack of internship/volunteer experience, to a low GPA, to why an employer should take a chance on a candidate who wants to move from central Wisconsin to New York City. Basically difficult issues are anything that make you worried that the employer will exclude you from the candidate pool before you even get a chance to present yourself in person.

- **To address or not to address?** – Obviously you'd much rather explain these topics in person during an interview, but you are worried you may never get an interview unless you explain them first. A career counselor can guide you in determining whether or not the issue you feel compelled to address in the cover letter truly needs to be addressed or not.
- **Be succinct** – If you do address something, don't spend more than 1-2 sentences on it. You are merely trying to be proactive, not give the employer your life story.
- **Where should they be mentioned?** -- Difficult items should only be brought-up in the final paragraph of the cover letter.

## The Salary Question

Applicants are sometimes asked to include salary requirements. The final paragraph of the cover letter is the place to do this. As a recent graduate, your salary history doesn't necessarily reflect your abilities. Here are a few key salary tips to keep in mind if asked about this:

- Never give a specific dollar amount, but instead list a range if at all possible
- Let your prospective employer know that salary isn't the only criteria by which you judge a job offer
- Research salary information for comparable positions and companies/cities on [www.salary.com](http://www.salary.com) or [www.glassdoor.com](http://www.glassdoor.com)

## Applicant Follow-up

Applicants who have not heard from an employer after two to three weeks may choose to follow-up by email or telephone. Follow-up should be directed to the original contact person/office or email address. Take a "low key" approach -- state the date the original application materials were sent, ask if they were received (the Post Office and the Internet are not infallible), restate your interest in that specific position, and politely ask where they are in their selection process. It is important that the follow-up does **not** come across to the prospective employer as, "Why haven't I heard from you?"

## BASIC COVER LETTER FORMATTING

(adapted from *Building the Better Burger: Cover Letters* published on GovLoop by Paul Binkley)

**Your street address** (notice your name is not here)

**Your City, State and Zip Code** (no phone number or email address)

**Date**

**Contact's name, Title** (if known)

**Organization Name**

**Street Address**

**City, State and Zip Code**

**SALUTATION:** "Dear Mr. Smith:" or "Dear Ms. Jones:" (do NOT use "Mrs." unless you know for sure), or simply "Dear Hiring Manager:"

### INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH (Thesis Statement)

Start with a "grabber" statement. This serves as your chance to tell the employer how you heard of the position and/or mention a personal connection you have with the organization. Then add your thesis which tells the reader what you are about to prove and in which order. It should be direct and confident without being arrogant or wishy-washy. You have the skills/abilities they need and you are going to prove that to them in this letter.

**Example:** *"Brian Jenkins, director of the Environmental Policy office, recently told me about the Management Analyst position in the Human Resources Office. My research, analysis, and project management skills make me an excellent candidate for this position."*

### BODY PARAGRAPHS (Proof Statements)

These paragraphs should demonstrate two things: Why you are a good fit for the job, and why you want to work for this *specific* employer. Body paragraphs often are 3-6 sentences long. They can be longer or shorter depending on relevant content but they should never be just one sentence. The Body of the cover letter is the place where you support your Thesis Statement from the Intro Paragraph *not* by summarizing your resume, but by making connections for the employer between your skills and the needs of their business.

1. In the example above, research skills were listed first, so you would begin by discussing your research experience: ("**Throughout my work and academic experiences, I developed strong research abilities.**")
2. Follow that statement with some examples which illustrate your research skills (work, volunteer opportunities, class projects, etc...)
3. Show how your experiences tie into the employer's mission, and/or business model, and/or the specific job you're applying for
4. Move onto the next skill listed in your Thesis Statement (in this example "analysis") and complete steps 1-3 for that skill and finally do the same thing with "project management."

**SPECIAL NOTE:** *There is one key piece of information that you must include in your cover letter:* demonstrate what you know about the employer; their mission, business model, recent achievements, etc... and link that knowledge to your own skills and achievements relevant to doing the job. You may achieve this either by:

- Interweaving knowledge of the employer into your Proof Statements as you go along;
- Including a separate paragraph after your Proof Statements and before the Conclusion Paragraph wherein you discuss things you've learned about the employer from your research which genuinely impress you.

### CONCLUSION PARAGRAPH

The first sentence of this paragraph is a restatement of your thesis: "Given the research, analysis, and project management skills I've just discussed, I believe I am an excellent candidate for the Management Analyst position." This is also the place to mention any schedule-related information such as when you graduate or when you are available to begin the position. The final paragraph might also include transitional thoughts such as: "I look forward to learning more about this position with a personal interview." You may also restate your contact information if desired. The paragraph should end with you thanking them for their time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Your Name

## SAMPLE COVER LETTER

509 Northgate Road, #112  
Madison, WI 53702

February 22, 20xx

Madeleine Johnson  
Manager, AS/COA Miami  
2655 LeJeune Road, 5th Floor  
Coral Gables, FL 33134

Dear Ms. Johnson:

In researching non-profit organizations serving the Latin American community, I discovered the listing for a Membership and Programs Development Specialist in Miami on your website. Please accept my application as I feel that my research and writing experience, data handling, and both Spanish and Portuguese language skills will allow me to excel in this position.

Through my experience as both a student and at a variety of internships, I have learned to hone my research, administrative, verbal and written communication skills. In the past year I have taken on two different independent research projects which included personal interviews with UN delegates and a project I undertook as part of a course where I utilized skills in project design, data collection, analysis utilizing Excel, and a presentation and report on the interpretation of the data. Additionally, through my work for a U.S. Senator, I interacted with many high level government officials and business and government leaders. This was in addition to the administrative work that relied on my ability to be both detail-oriented and prioritize a variety of tasks in a fast-paced environment with minimal staff.

For the past three years, I have been involved with the Latino community through my study abroad experience and my extensive travel throughout Latin America. My experiences with Latino culture have increased my desire to use my knowledge of both the Spanish and Portuguese languages and Latin American cultures to advocate for Latino communities in the United States. As evident from my resume, I have a track record of accomplishments and commitment to community service. These volunteer positions taught me about interacting effectively with diverse groups of people and confirmed my interest in helping others. I am dedicated to serving the Latino community which is why I am impressed by what I have learned about the Council of the Americas. The work you do, the populations you serve, the working groups you facilitate, and your organization's mission statement are all aligned with my own passions and interests.

I hope you will agree that my research and communications skills in English, Portuguese, and Spanish plus my facility for working with large amounts of data will make me an excellent Membership and Programs Development Specialist. Attached is a copy of my resume for your consideration. In the meantime, if I can provide you with additional information, please contact me at 608-555-1298 or ksandler@wisc.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Karina Sandler

## Karina Sandler

509 Northgate Road #112, Madison, WI 53702 (608) 555-1298, ksandler@wisc.edu

### EDUCATION

#### University of Wisconsin-Madison

Bachelor of Arts, May 20xx

Major: Political Science

GPA 3.6/4.0, Dean's List

### GOVERNMENT AND RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

#### United Nations, New York, NY

Intern, United Nations Summer Seminar 20xx

- Met with delegates to discuss current international issues
- Conducted independent research which included personal interviews with United Nations delegates

#### Office of United States Senator, Middleton, WI

Intern, January-May 20xx

- Answered constituent mail and responded to requests for information
- Interacted with diverse customers on a constant basis, improved communication skills
- Researched regional press information and distributed it to 10 different press headquarters
- Completed various special projects under minimal supervision

#### Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Independent Research Project, January-May 20xx

- Designed research project to investigate recent voting trends
- Developed data-collection forms to efficiently organize and access detailed information
- Collected, analyzed, and interpreted data into meaningful report
- Prepared and presented final research report; earned an A for final grade

### CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

#### Centro Hispano Juventud Program, Madison, WI

Tutor and English Teacher, September 20xx-Present

- Tutor and build positive relationships with Latino middle school students
- Gain insights into issues and challenges facing Latino adolescents

#### Council on International Educational Exchange, Santiago, Chile

Academic Year Abroad, 20xx-20xx

- Fluent in Spanish, proficient in Portuguese
- Increased knowledge of Chilean history: political, economic, and social issues

### ADDITIONAL EXPERIENCE

Server, Vintage Brewing Company: Madison, WI, August 20xx-Present

Monitor, University of Wisconsin-Madison Info Labs: Madison, WI, August 20xx-May 20xx

Barista, Starbucks: Wausau, WI, May-August 20xx-20xx

### COMPUTER SKILLS

Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access

STATA, SAS, and SPSS statistical data software

## SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION

### **Council of the Americas, Miami**

The Americas Society and Council of the Americas (AS/COA) is seeking Membership and Programs Development Specialist for the Miami office. This position provides unique exposure to influential community, government and business leaders from throughout the Hemisphere and the opportunity to help run the various meetings and seminars hosted by AS/COA Miami.

### **Principal responsibilities:**

- Researching and identifying prospects for membership with the Council, in South Florida as well as throughout Latin America
- Performing market research on current and prospective members and preparing company profiles
- Generating reports and queries as well as facilitating maintenance of our database
- Writing briefing papers on relevant topics for programs
- Providing logistical support and assisting with outreach for public and private programs
- Basic administrative tasks

### **Qualifications:**

- Bachelor's Degree
- Excellent English writing skills
- Strong written and spoken Spanish, Portuguese a plus
- Exceptional research skills
- Facility with databases
- Must be detail-oriented
- Ability to work on a variety of projects and to prioritize
- Curiosity and an eagerness to contribute to a small team

Please send your resume and cover letter to Madeleine Johnson at [mjohnson@as-coa.org](mailto:mjohnson@as-coa.org). Note that only those candidates who will be considered for an interview will be contacted.

### **About us:**

**Council of the Americas (COA)** is the premier international business organization whose members share a common commitment to economic and social development, open markets, the rule of law, and democracy throughout the Western Hemisphere. The Council's membership consists of leading international companies representing a broad spectrum of sectors, including banking and finance, consulting services, consumer products, energy and mining, manufacturing, media, technology, and transportation.