

Writing effective covering letters & statements

The covering letter and how it differs from a CV

The covering letter accompanies an application form or CV in response to advertised jobs or when making speculative applications.

The covering letter is often the first document that recruitment staff read when they receive your application. Ideally it is addressed to a named person. Its purpose is to make a positive first impression by highlighting the most relevant parts of your experience and capabilities as included on your CV.

A CV is a summary of your experience and skills to-date that highlights your strengths and suitability for a particular job or employer. See our pdf article on how to write an effective CV for more details.

As a rule of thumb, put factual information and experience into the CV and use the covering letter to demonstrate your enthusiasm and suitability for the role, saying why you are applying for that job at that particular organisation.

Covering letters: tips on format

- Length usually one side of A4 only, five paragraphs or fewer.
- If sending online attach to a covering email along with your CV.
- If sending by post print on white A4, unlined, good-quality paper.
- Address the recipient by name if possible. Use the appropriate title and surname or first name and surname, eg: Dear Miss Burton, Dear Diane Burton. Ms is okay for a woman if you are uncertain of her marital status.
- When you are addressing to a named person, sign off 'Yours sincerely'.
- If you cannot find a named person use 'Dear Sir/ Madam' and sign off 'Yours faithfully'.
- Standard business format of letters is to include your address and the sender's address at the top of the letter as well as the date. See CV Builder for examples.
- Proof read your letter, then pass it to a trustworthy friend to check it over again. You can instantly spoil an application with elementary typing, spelling or factual errors.

Covering letters: tips on style

- Write formally but avoid trite phrases such as 'enclosed please find as per your request ...'
- Balance this formality by showing passion and allowing your personality to shine through.
- Try to adopt a positive and professional-sounding tone, avoiding negative or apologetic comments.
- Use positive words and examples from your CV to describe what you have achieved. You can be tactfully assertive and persuasive; show the reader how they will benefit from your skills and achievements.
- Try not to state the obvious eg: 'you are one of the major confectionary companies in Europe'
- Avoid starting too many sentences or paragraphs with 'I'; use alternative starting words such as 'Whilst'.

Covering letters: tips on what to include

- Try to begin with an interesting sentence to catch the reader's attention or at least describe how you heard about the opportunity.
- Explain the purpose of your letter early. Do not keep the recipient guessing.
- Do not repeat your CV or application verbatim. Use the letter to highlight and expand the most relevant points and to add other information in your favour. Focus on your strengths and achievements.
- Demonstrate that you have taken the trouble to find out something about the organisation especially recent news or projects, but don't quote from the graduate recruitment literature unacknowledged.
- Prove you know about the type of work you seek and how your skills match, for example by showing what you have done to investigate it.
- Use the last paragraph to state what the next action will be. Speculative applications require you to be proactive. A follow-up phone call after a couple of weeks is good practice.

To see examples of covering letters look at CV Builder and your Blackboard Jobs & Careers resource (UEA registered students only).

Application forms: tips on writing personal statements

Structure

- Split up the text into distinct paragraphs.
- Each paragraph will contain one or two main themes to its content. Common themes include:
 - Showing interest in the area of work/ study
 - Why you are applying for that particular course/ job/ organisation/ location. Showing knowledge of the company

- Your suitability for the role i.e. how your skills and experience are relevant. This normally covers education and employment experience
- Other skills and activities that are relevant to the job description
- How this opportunity fits in with your career plans

Writing the content

As you elaborate on a theme in each paragraph your sentences will use a combination of statements, examples and reflective insights.

Statements: One way to open a paragraph is to make a short statement summarising how you meet or relate to the requirement. For example: 'During my degree I have considerably developed my teamworking skills through both academic work and employment.'

Examples: All assertions you make about your skills and suitability should be backed up by concrete examples. For example: 'I successfully led a group project that investigated the effects of the recession on the banking sector. This involved motivating fellow team members and co-formulating a strategy for achieving the task.'

Reflection: A final sentence that shows reflection will add depth to the points being made. For example: 'From this experience I learnt the importance of communicating with each team member and finding ways to move forward despite contrasting views.'

Choice of words

Professional-sounding: There are many verbs and phrases (often called Action Words or Power Words) that convey a professional and business-like tone. Examples include: developed; initiated; solved; gained insight into; liaised with. Ensure yours are well chosen and not over-used! See CV Builder for more examples.

Positive: Convey a positive tone with words like: successful; rewarding; fulfilling; satisfying; achievement; efficient; enthusiastic; passionate; interested; motivation; drive.