

MOUNT HOLYOKE
CAREER DEVELOPMENT CENTER
Phone 413-538-2080/Fax 413-538-2081

Cover Letter & Thank You Letter Writing

What is a cover letter? Why do you need one?

A cover letter should accompany every resume you send to a prospective employer. A well-written cover letter is just as important as—and in some instances, more important than—a well-presented resume. If it does not impress or catch the attention of employers, they may not even look at your resume for consideration. Your cover letter should be brief and personal, address the needs of your target employer, and reflect your natural choice of vocabulary as well as your enthusiasm about the opportunity for which you are applying.

Purpose of the cover letter is to:

- Introduce yourself and elicit interest in you by grabbing the employer's attention
- Highlight 1 or 2 skills or accomplishments mentioned on your resume
- Demonstrate a particular interest in the company that may not be as obvious in the resume
- Serve as a sample of your writing ability

Cover Letter Construction Guidelines

- Target each cover letter to a specific employer. Address your correspondence to the person with hiring authority, using her or his name and title. A “form” or photocopied cover letter is never appropriate.
- For letters of application: In the opening paragraph of your cover letter, introduce yourself, clearly stating your reason for writing. Mention your interest and how you learned about the opening, identifying the position for which you would like to be considered and why you are interested in this organization.
- For letters of inquiry: As with letters of application, in the opening paragraph of your cover letter, clearly state your reason for writing, identifying the type of position for which you would like to be considered and why you are interested in this organization.
- In the middle paragraph(s), highlight your educational credentials, employment experience, and personal attributes that qualify you for the position. Use specific examples from your co-curricular activities, coursework, and employment that demonstrate skills pertinent to the position. Some significant skills include leadership, decision-making, and communication. Refer the reader to your resume for more details.
- In the closing paragraph, you may indicate one of the following depending upon the circumstances: Request an interview, note that you will call on a certain date to arrange a convenient time for an appointment, ask for application materials, or affirm your interest in the position and/or organization.

- Type your cover letter, using a computer and laser printer, on 20-25% bond paper that matches your resume. Proofread for misspellings, grammatical errors, and poor construction before you submit it to a prospective employer! Mediocre writing or typos will be sure to land your application in the “reject” pile!

Cover Letter Etiquette: the Do’s and Don’ts

Style:

DO use quality stationery and envelopes that match your resume. Using photocopier paper or other “plain paper” gives the impression that you just didn’t care enough to give it your best effort. Consider what your competitors might present, and use that to gauge your own materials. If someone else goes that extra distance in the presentation of their materials, imagine the impression it generates if you don’t do the same.

DO use matching fonts for the letter and resume. By making your application materials a matching set, you show organization, continuity, consistency, and professionalism.

DO be simple and brief. Say what you mean without verbosity. Keep your paragraphs to 4-5 sentences. You should use terminology and buzzwords of the career field to display your familiarity with the profession, but do not over do it.

DO place the most important items first, supported by facts. Group similar items together in a paragraph and organize the paragraphs in a logical order.

DO use the first sentence of each paragraph strategically. Your reader may skim the letter and only read the first sentence. Be sure your message is conveyed.

DO use the active voice, action verbs, and descriptive words. (see page 4)

DO make sure there are no errors or typos. Don’t rely solely on the computer’s spell-check function. Proofread and edit thoroughly. Have someone else proofread, because it is easy to miss your own mistakes.

DO keep it short. One page with three to five paragraphs should convey your message.

DO sign the letter. This point may be obvious, but you’d be surprised.

DON’T address letters to “Dear Sir or Madam,” or “To Whom it May Concern.” Make a phone call or two to find out the correct name, spelling, and title of the individual you should contact. Confirm the address while on the phone.

DON’T make statements you cannot verify. You should be able to cite specific examples that demonstrate your skills. Don’t state facts unless you can back them up with experiences.

DON’T use vague words and phrases. Avoid overused and meaningless terms such as: “hardworking,” “strong communication skills,” or “loyal.”

Content:

DO explain the reason for the letter in the first paragraph. Make sure your reader knows immediately why the letter was written. Be clear about the specific position or type of job you are seeking.

DO drop names or include referrals in the first paragraph. If someone has suggested that you contact this employer, be sure the employer knows early on. Being referred makes you an “insider.”

DO explain why you are interested in this organization. Is it because of its reputation or its work in a specific research or product area? Your reason may generate specific interest in you as an employee.

DO identify yourself as a good solution to the employer’s needs. Answer the employer’s question: “What’s in it for me?” Relate your strengths to the requirements of the position and explain how you meet the qualifications. Tell the employer what skills you will bring with you. Be employer-centered, not self-centered. Stress what you can contribute to the position, not what you want out of it.

DO highlight important aspects of your resume. Use key phrases to bring your reader’s attention to the major achievements and talents that make you a good candidate.

DO end the letter with a commitment to action. Tell the employer what will happen next. Inform her or him that you will call to make an appointment to discuss the job—and then follow up! Or, make it known that you are expecting her or him to contact you and be sure that she or he knows how to contact you. If you have an answering machine, be sure your message is professional.

DON’T send a generic letter to all employers. Tailor each letter to the specific needs and characteristics of each organization. If you use a print merge function, be careful to change all references to match each employer’s name, organization, and type of business or the position involved.

DON’T say you are willing, or able, to do “any job.” No one is qualified to do everything. In addition, this shows lack of direction, or self-knowledge, as to what you want to do.

DON’T highlight any weaknesses in your qualifications. If you do not have experience in one aspect, sidestep the issue or state that you look forward to the challenge of learning. Express it in a positive mode. Similarly, don’t make excuses for not having that experience.

Key Descriptive Words

adept	energetic	productive
assertively	enterprising	quick
ambitious	exceptional	readily
analytical	extensively	realistic
artful	foresight	reliable
astute	highly	repeatedly
broad	imaginative	resourceful
competent	increasingly	responsible
concerned	initiative	responsive
conscientious	innovative	sensitive
creative	instrumental	significantly
dependable	logical	sophisticated
diplomatic	mastery	strong
disciplined	objective	tactful
diverse	outgoing	trained
dynamic	outstanding	uncommon
effectively	penetrating	unique
efficient	perceptive	versatile
empathetic	pioneering	vigorous



Cover Letter Layout & Construction

Indented Block Style

Standard margins are set at 1 inch.

This section starts 2 inches from the top and to right of the center line.

Your present address
City, State Zipcode
Phone number (optional)
E-mail address (optional)
Date

4 spaces

Name (Specific), Title
Organization
Street Address
City, State Zipcode

2 spaces

Dear Ms. or Mr. _____:

Indent at .5 inch.

2 spaces

1st paragraph - State why you are writing. Name the position or the type of work for which you are applying. Mention how you heard about the job opening. Explain why you are interested in working for this organization.

2 spaces

Text can be justified or aligned left.

2nd paragraph or 2nd & 3rd paragraph - Explain why it makes sense for you to be applying to this organization and for the reader to consider you. Talk about your qualifications, what you can bring to the job. Do not directly repeat information from your resume. Instead, highlight the areas you want the reader to particularly notice. The key word here is skills. Tell them about the skills you have acquired through various employment and co-curricular activities. Think about who the reader is: what skills are valued in this particular field? What are some of the issues or trends this employer might be facing? How can you make a contribution to this organization? If you've "done your homework" you'll already be aware of some of the answers as well as some terminology of the field of choice. Reflect this awareness and knowledge in your letter. This paragraph is the key to differentiating yourself from the next candidate.

2 spaces

Text is presented in 10-12 pt font.

Closing paragraph - Refer the reader to the enclosed resume. State that additional information concerning your background and interests will gladly be furnished upon request. Talk about what will happen next, i.e., your follow up. State that you will contact them (usually in a week) to see if you might set up a mutually convenient time to meet, or that you may be contacted at either the above address or phone number. In case of an on-campus interview or previously agreed upon action, that you look forward to talking with the employer about this position. Thank the reader for their time and consideration of your application.

2 spaces

Sincerely,

Line this portion up with return address

4 spaces

(Your Signature)

Your Typed Name

2 spaces

Enclosure

Cover Letter Layout & Construction

Standard Block Style

Your present address
City, State Zipcode
Phone number (optional)
E-mail address (optional)
Date

This section starts
2 inches from the
top and on the left
margin.

4 spaces

Name (Specific), Title
Organization
Street Address
City, State Zipcode

Standard margins
are set at 1 inch.

2 spaces

Dear Ms. or Mr. _____:

2 spaces

1st paragraph - State why you are writing. Name the position or the type of work for which you are applying. Mention how you heard about the job opening. Explain why you are interested in working for this organization.

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2 spaces

Sincerely,

4 spaces

(Your Signature)

Your Typed Name

2 spaces

Enclosure

What is a Thank You Letter? Why should you write one?

Thank you letters should be written after informational interviews, employment interviews, and internship experiences. Beyond proper etiquette, there are several reasons to send a thank you letter. For informational interviews, it is an opportunity to express appreciation for time and information and to build your network. For employment interviews it can be a chance to clarify points and remind potential employers of your skills and enthusiasm. For internship experiences, it is an opportunity to maintain a professional contact that could lead to work at the organization in the future. Whatever the reason, it is necessary to thank the appropriate person for the time and opportunity they have given you.

How should a Thank You Letter be written?

Thank you letters vary, depending on their purpose. Please look at the sample letters for employment interviews, informational interviews, and end of internships.

There are a few general guidelines. Informational interview and internship experience letters should describe how the experience honed your skills, increased your knowledge, helped you learn about opportunities in the area, etc.. Employment interview letters should reiterate how your background and skills meet the needs of the organization and highlight or explain any attributes you failed to discuss during the interview. All letters should include the actual words, "Thank You."

Depending on the situation and the audience, letters can be handwritten or typed. Informational interview letters can be handwritten, but employment interview and post-internship letters should be typed. If handwritten, it is preferable to buy a set of thank you cards and compose your note in black pen. If letters are typed, bonded paper should be used, and always typed in black ink. They should be at least one-half of a page, single-spaced with one-inch margins.

Thank You Letter Construction Guidelines

Target each Thank You letter to a specific audience. If you interviewed with multiple individuals, each person should receive a separate letter. This also applies if you worked under multiple supervisors. A "form" or photocopied Thank You letter is never appropriate.

For Employment Interviews: Address your correspondence to the person who was your primary contact, using her/his name and title. Your letter should thank the person for their time and the opportunity to learn more about the position. Highlight points of the interview that were attractive or interesting to you. Remember to reiterate your interest in the position.

For Informational Interviews: In the first paragraph, thank the person for their time and candor about both themselves and the field. Explain what you learned or why you found it helpful. In the second paragraph, discuss how you are following up on your discussion, including individuals they suggested you contact, information you should research, changes in your resume, etc. In the closing paragraph, thank them again for their time and depending upon the circumstances, you should also indicate that you hope to remain in contact or will follow up with them in the near future.

For End of Internship Letters: In the first paragraph, explain what you gained from the internship, including exposure to issues, new skills, individuals you had the opportunity to meet, etc. In the second paragraph, discuss how the experience shaped or perhaps changed you. This could include a change of major, groups you have joined, or individuals you are considering speaking with. Express an interest in remaining in contact and your hope to use them as a reference in the future. In the closing paragraph, thank them again for their time and depending upon the circumstances, you should also indicate that you hope to remain in contact or will follow up with them in the near future. Include your current address, email and telephone number.

Thank You Letter Etiquette: the Do's and Don'ts

DO use quality stationery and envelopes that match your resume. Using photocopier paper or other "plain paper" gives the impression that you just didn't care enough to give it your best effort. Consider what your competitors might present, and use that to gauge your own materials. If someone else goes that extra distance in the presentation of their materials, imagine the impression that generates if you didn't do the same.

DO include another copy of your resume if you are sending a Thank You letter for an employment interview. Also use matching fonts for the letter and resume. By making your application materials a matching set, you show planning, continuity, consistency, and professionalism.

DON'T add skills or abilities in an employment interview thank you letter that you 'forgot' to mention because you think that the company wants to hear them. You might come across as untruthful. Also, don't lie about abilities that you truly don't have to make yourself appear more qualified.

DO be brief. Say what you mean without verbosity. One page with two or three paragraphs should convey your message.

DO sign the letter. This may be obvious, but you'd be surprised.

DO be genuine. A sincere, short thank you is appreciated.

Checklist for your Thank You Letter

- Is it addressed to a particular person?
- Does a colon, rather than a comma follow the salutation?
- Have you told the employer exactly what position you are applying for and how you found out about it?
- Is the sentence structure varied? Have you limited the use of the words "I" and "My" to begin sentences?
- Is it an original letter rather than a mass-produced copy?
- Is it neat and attractive? Is it free of typographical or grammatical errors?
- Does the whole letter fit on one page?
- If typed, is it laser-printed on high-quality paper that matches your resume?
- Did you sign it? Preferably in black ink!