

Guide to Correspondence & Cover Letters



COVER LETTERS

A cover letter should always accompany your resume. The purpose of a cover letter is to introduce yourself to the reader and provide a frame of reference for writing. It can be used to express your interest in a particular position or to inquire about possible opportunities. The most important function of a cover letter is to entice the person who reads it to go on to your resume! Therefore, it is important that your letter is well-written and effectively communicates what you can contribute to the organization.

The Format

A cover letter is typically less than one page; usually three or four paragraphs are sufficient. It should match the style of your resume, using the same heading and paper. The letter may follow either the traditional business format or blocked format, but be consistent throughout.

Although you may develop one basic cover letter, avoid sending what seems like a form letter. Type and personalize each letter individually. Do not use "Dear Sir/Madam" or "To Whom It May Concern" as your salutation. Instead, find out the name and title of the person who should receive your letter and resume. Employers recognize form letters very quickly. A cover letter that is tailored for the position is more effective and can make a critical difference in an employer's estimate of your qualifications. The letter should give compelling reasons as to why you are interested in the industry and why the position appeals to you. It is important to demonstrate that you are familiar with the company and that you have conducted the necessary research to explain why you are a strong candidate. Use the job description to guide you in drawing clear connections between your skills and training and what you know about the company and the position.

Be professional and careful in your writing, keeping in mind that the letter represents you and is a sample of your work. An applicant with average credentials may gain many interviews

with an excellent cover letter, while a well-qualified candidate may defeat him or herself with a poorly written one.

Introductory Paragraph

The first paragraph should briefly state the purpose of your letter. Identify the position for which you are applying and how you became aware of the opening. If you do not know whether the employer has an opening, then indicate the type of position you are seeking and inquire about its availability. An objective statement on your resume can help in this type of situation. The introductory paragraph is also a good place to show you know something about the company.

Cover letters at a glance...

Opening paragraph:

- Start with a statement that explains your purpose for writing; mention the position you are seeking and how you became aware of the opening or organization.
- Include the name of a mutual contact if you have one.
- Hiring managers prefer a powerful first sentence that summarizes the top skills and experience that you bring.

Middle paragraph:

- Give the reader a clear sense of what makes you a strong candidate.
- Be specific when describing your qualifications and relevant experience.
- Provide examples that support your statements; avoid generic phrases.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the organization.

Closing paragraph:

- Request a personal interview.
- Be specific regarding your plan for follow-up and how the reader can contact you.
- Say thank you!

Body Paragraph(s)

The main content of the letter should be devoted to both your knowledge of the company and position of interest and what you have to offer. This is where your research will help you compose a more persuasive letter. You can briefly comment on any relevant history of the company, its services or products, and current news or projects they are undertaking. The tone of your letter should convey an understanding of the company and its needs; the focus is on what you can do for the employer.

Explain why and how your qualifications fit the position you are seeking. Cite specific situations that demonstrate the qualities and experience you bring. Avoid vague descriptions; you want to provide the reader with a clear sense of what you have done and are capable of doing. You may choose to highlight a couple of examples from your resume to support your statements; however, you want to refer your reader to your resume for the details of your education and experience, not repeat what it already says.

Brown College
6380 South Main
Houston, Texas 77030

November 3, 2008

Ms. Sandy Stride
Human Resources Manager
Rockie Industries, Inc.
2800 Corporate Drive
Denver, Colorado 88888

Dear Ms. Stride:

I am applying for the position of Systems Analyst, which I found advertised on the company website. I am aware of the excellent reputation that Rockie Industries holds as a leader in IT consulting, and this position has been recommended to me by Joe Ebben, a fellow Rice University graduate working in the company. My education, experience, and career interests are well-aligned with the requirements for the position.

The Systems Analyst position with your firm requires experience in computer systems, financial applications software, and end-user consulting. As a computer science major, I have training on mainframes, minicomputers, and microcomputers as well as with a variety of software programs and applications. My practical experience working in my university's computer center as a programmer and as a student consultant for system users has given me valuable exposure to complex computer operations. Additionally, I worked as an intern for a large banking institution where I gained relevant knowledge of financial systems. I have enclosed my resume, which provides more details regarding my experience.

I would appreciate a personal interview to learn more about this opportunity and to further discuss my qualifications. I will call you next week to see if a meeting can be arranged. If you wish to reach me, please feel free to call me at (713) 683-4333. I can also be reached by email at kmills@rice.edu. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely,

(Signed Name)

Kari Mills

Sample Cover Letter

Concluding Paragraph

Finally, conclude your letter by explicitly stating your interest in a personal interview. You can suggest that you will contact the person within one to two weeks to set up a time that is convenient. This allows you to be responsible for following up rather than leaving it to the employer. You will also want to make sure that the employer has a clear method for contacting you. Include a thank you and close with an appropriate salutation.

Electronic Cover Letters

You still need to include a cover letter with electronically submitted resumes whenever possible. There are a few differences in the way electronic cover letters are handled from traditional ones that you will want to keep in mind. However, the same basic rules of writing cover letters still apply.

The main difference with an electronic cover letter is that it will likely be read on a computer screen. This means that you should keep your letter relatively short. The number one complaint from employers regarding cover letters submitted electronically is that they are too lengthy. Try limiting it to one screen so that your reader does not have to scroll to read the rest of your letter. If this is not possible, it is especially important to have a first paragraph that grabs the reader's attention; make the person want to scroll down!

If you are submitting your documents via email, keep in mind that some employers may be wary of attachments. Put the position title and number in the subject field if you are responding to a posting; you want to be descriptive so that the recipient opens the email. Include both your cover letter and resume in the same message, with the cover letter first. If you are attaching your documents, compose a brief introductory email that is a few sentences at most, guiding the recipient to your attachments. There may be instances in which the email itself will serve as your cover letter; in this case, your signature block (phone number and email address) will go below your name instead of at the top of the document. In any type of electronic correspondence, be sure that you are still following business etiquette and writing in a professional manner.

Please note that if you are submitting an application through an online system where you have the opportunity to include additional documents (e.g., RICElink), the traditional guidelines for resumes and cover letters will apply.

Dear Ms. Beatty:

In reviewing Central Electric's website, I was excited to learn that your company hires Management Trainees for the summer internship program. I am particularly interested in one of the rotational assignments in human resources, marketing, and management systems.

I will be graduating from Rice University with a B.S. in Economics in May of next year. I have a strong research and leadership background, as detailed in my attached resume. Most recently, my research on the economic development of Southeast Asian nations was published by the Baker Institute for Public Policy. In addition, I am currently coordinating a Spring carnival for a local inner-city youth program.

I would appreciate the opportunity to interview with your company during the upcoming campus recruiting visit. I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Audrey Kelley
(713) 669-3373
akelley@rice.edu

Sample Electronic Cover Letter

THANK YOU LETTERS

It is always important to follow-up an interview with a thank you letter, yet many candidates fail to take this extra step. In addition to showing your appreciation, a thank you letter will remind the employer of who you are and reinforce your interest. You should mention some key points that were discussed during the interview and use it as another opportunity to highlight your unique qualifications. If there is something you wish you had mentioned during the interview, you can include it in your thank you letter. Plan to send out your thank you letters as soon as possible after your interview, preferably within twenty-four hours. You may wish to send a quick thank you email that you follow with a more complete, hard-copy letter. Use your previous interactions with the employer and the culture of the company as a guide in determining whether to send a formal, typed letter or a more personal handwritten note. If you interviewed with several people, it is best to send a separate thank you letter to each interviewer; try to vary at least a sentence or two to individualize the letters.

There is a chance that you may have received an offer of employment by the time you write the thank you letter. In this case you should confirm your receipt of the offer, indicate your

appreciation and interest, and inform the employer of the date by which you will reply with your decision.

ACCEPTANCE/REJECTION LETTERS

An acceptance letter is the most exciting letter of all to write! Refer to the written offer outlining the terms of employment. Confirm the official start date, restate the position you are accepting, and express your pleasure at joining the company.

The key to rejecting an offer of employment is to make certain that you do not burn any bridges. If appropriate, you can advise the employer of your plans. However, you do not need to provide details explaining why you accepted another position. Always express your appreciation for the offer as well as for the time and effort invested in considering you as a candidate. Professionalism is key here! It is best to write a formal letter or make a phone call; avoid rejecting an offer by email.

Request for More Time

Usually an employer will give you a deadline by which to accept or decline an offer. Should you require more time to make a decision, make this request in advance of the deadline date. (Often

this situation becomes a telephone conversation instead of something relayed in a letter.) Make sure to let the employer know specifically why you are requesting more time. Do you have additional interviews scheduled? Are you waiting to hear from other employers? Are there family obligations or events that you are waiting on to make your final decision? Be sure to express your continued interest as well as your appreciation for the employer's cooperation.

Cover Letter Checklist

- Did you address your letter to a specific individual? Double check the spelling of all names and make sure the titles are correct. If the recipient is a female, use Ms. rather than Mrs. or Miss.
- Is your reason for writing clear?
- Did you include how you heard about the position?
- Did you state why you are interested in the position or opportunity to work with the organization?
- Did you match your qualifications to the position and/or goals of the organization?
- Did you illustrate your accomplishments by giving specific examples?
- Did you refer the employer to your resume?
- Did you indicate your desire and availability for an interview?
- Is your letter no more than one page?
- Did you double check your spelling and grammar? Did you have someone proofread your letter?
- Did you limit the use of "I," "me," and "mine?" If most of your sentences begin with one of these words, try rewriting them with a greater focus on the employer.
- If you are sending your documents electronically, do you know the employer's policy regarding email attachments?
- If you are sending paper documents, does the paper for your letter match the paper for your resume?

5683 Greenbriar
Houston, Texas 77004

September 24, 2009

Mr. Nathan Forester
Director of Personnel
R.I. Engineering, Inc.
4278 Rose Blvd.
Houston, Texas 77080

Dear Mr. Forester:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me on Thursday regarding the position of Systems Engineer. I was impressed with the helpfulness and enthusiasm displayed by your team and appreciate that I had the opportunity to meet everyone. It was exciting to learn about your newest parallel computing advances, which clearly demonstrate the company's leading position in the field. I would be honored to be a part of R.I. Engineering's innovative mission.

Our discussion regarding the special qualifications needed for this position was especially encouraging. As I stated during the meeting, I enjoy the challenge of working within a competitive environment, and I have a demonstrated ability to work creatively and cooperatively based on my internship experience with Schlumberger.

Thank you for considering me for the position of Systems Engineer. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

(Signed Name)

John Carr

Sample Thank You Letter

Baker College
6320 South Main Street
Houston, Texas 77005

December 9, 2008

Mr. John Smith, Director
Marketing and Public Relations
National NonProfit Association
4553 San Felipe
Houston, Texas 77027

Dear Mr. Smith:

Thank you for offering me the position of Marketing & Public Relations Coordinator with your organization. I appreciate your confidence in my ability to handle the many challenges of the position.

The position is indeed one that would make good use of my education and experience while allowing me to enhance and strengthen my overall skills and qualifications. However, after careful consideration, I have decided to pursue other options that will more closely match my long-range career goals.

Again, thank you for your time and consideration. It was a pleasure meeting you and learning more about your organization and marketing strategies.

Sincerely,

(Signed Name)

Sara Bhavsar

Sample Offer Rejection Letter

Center for Career Development

Huff House | Rice University
6100 Main Street MS-521
Houston, TX 77005
713.348.4055 | ccd@rice.edu
ccd.rice.edu | [facebook.com/riceccd](https://www.facebook.com/riceccd)