Writing Your Cover Letter

Cover Letter
Module Description and Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcomes:
- Learn strategies for writing each section of a cover letter
- Understand how to incorporate transferable skills if changing careers
- Learn how to evaluate each cover letter you draft

Northeastern University
Career Development

This module reviews a step-by-step guide to writing a captivating and professional cover letter.
The main goal of a cover letter is to convince an employer that your skills and background make you worth interviewing. It also allows you to explain why you are interested in a particular company, which makes you a more attractive candidate.

It is important to customize your letters for EACH job. Differentiating your cover letters shows employers that you did your homework and made an informed decision about working there.

Your cover letter should:
Demonstrate your knowledge about the job, the company and the industry
Show your enthusiasm for the job; and
Emphasize how your skills and attributes relate to the job and bring value to the employer

Employers want to hire people who can articulate why they want to work for them - therefore it is critical that you do your research!

Students often ask, “Do I really need a cover letter? Do employers and recruiters actually read them?”

And the answer is that about 50% of the employers we talk to say yes – that they do want a cover letter, and more importantly, for those who do it well, it can be a positive differentiator. On the other hand, a poorly written letter can and will hurt. Now, for those employers who don’t ask for a cover letter in the application, it is best to use a cover email instead.

A cover email serves the same purpose as a cover letter only it is a shortened more concise version.

The bottom line is that a well-written cover letter is an opportunity to tell your story beyond what your resume and LinkedIn profile can do and it is definitely worth investing time in.

That said, to do it right you have to customize your letter for each job. This probably sounds like a lot of work but we will offer you some tips and examples to get you started.
There are three key pieces to the process of writing an effective cover letter.

The first step is to conduct company research as part of your preparation. One of the best ways to make your letter stand out is to incorporate company information. Employers love to hire people who genuinely want to work for them and can demonstrate they understand the company’s needs. This is such an important step that we created a module dedicated to this topic. Check out the module called Researching Organizations to help you get started by reviewing sources of information and ideas for what content to include in your cover letter.

Next, you must identify your relevant skills and match them to your targeted positions. This is perhaps the most important job of the cover letter. When you can clearly and concisely demonstrate how you fit and can add value to that particular company, you increase your chances of getting your foot in the door. For more on this topic, review the module called Identifying Skills.

After reviewing both of those modules, you can begin to write your cover letter. In THIS module we will share tips and strategies for writing each section of your cover letter – as well as sample text.
Start by choosing 3 or 4 qualifications that best fit you. Here we list four qualifications and examples of how these might translate into a cover letter draft. For example, if you have research skills and those are relevant to this position you might say, “The market research I conducted for my internship helped the team launch a competitive product on time.”

### Table: Choose Your Qualifications to Begin Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH</td>
<td>“The market research I conducted for my internship helped the team launch a competitive product on time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMUNICATION</td>
<td>“I served as co-chair of my company’s community outreach committee for two years. I planned and ran committee meetings, and crafted the monthly company email newsletter.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORK INDEPENDENTLY</td>
<td>“I learned a new software program on my own at my previous employer. Then I used the software to answer customer questions and address their concerns efficiently and independently.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPUTER SKILLS</td>
<td>“I am well versed in MS Office, including Excel. My previous role required that I input data and use Word and PowerPoint for multiple projects.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Northeastern University  
Career Development
Once you have brainstormed your qualifications and examples, you can organize the content into three or four paragraphs – the salutation, the body or content and the conclusion. We’ll review samples here, but be sure to check out Northeastern Career Development’s cover letter guide to review more examples. You can find a link here and on the supplemental resources sheet.
The first section is your salutation. Begin your letter with a professional heading. List your address, the date of the letter and the contact information of the person to whom you are writing. Try to find the actual name of the person who is hiring so that you may address your letter directly. This may require a phone call to the company, an internet search or tapping into your personal network. If you cannot find this name, it is acceptable to address your letter to “hiring manager” or “hiring committee.”

Do not address your letter “to whom it may concern” or dear sir or madam”.

Your first paragraph should answer the question, why do you want to work for this company? This slide provides writing tips and an example of a good first paragraph.
Your body paragraphs should Describe, Demonstrate and Define your experience and interest. Let’s start with what we mean by “Describe” here.

Your paragraphs should answer what it is you bring to the position and the company. Make sure you talk about what you can bring -- not what you want to get from the job. Here your goal is to match your skills to the position. Also remember that you should only list your strongest and most relevant qualifications, not ALL of your skills. You can also use this space to very briefly explain any questions raised by your resume. The bold, underlined text you see here are examples of the applicant describing his strongest relevant skills.
These paragraphs should also Demonstrate your skills with examples in a way that is different from your resume. The bold, underlined text you see here are examples of the applicant demonstrating his strongest relevant skills with concrete examples.

- **ELEMENTS**
  - Demonstrate
    - With concrete examples
    - Do not rehash your resume

- **SAMPLE TEXT**
  I have extensive research experience through my coursework and have been praised for my organizational and writing skills. Recently, I researched and conducted case studies of five different companies. I compiled and presented my findings in a research paper and class presentation and received an A grade for both. I am confident I can use these skills as the Eastern Bank Charitable Foundation Summer Intern. I am also well versed in Microsoft Office and am confident working independently. For example, as a Student Ambassador, I gave tours to prospective students and parents and also managed the reception area. I was even awarded tour guide of the semester for my contributions.
  
  Additionally, community engagement and supporting local non-profits have always been important to me. As Student Government Secretary, I not only fine-tuned my writing and organizational skills, but also volunteered and helped facilitate SGA sponsored campus community events to raise money for local charities. I was excited to see this position within Eastern Bank’s Charitable Foundation because it will allow me to give back to my community, while gaining valuable professional experience.
Finally, these paragraphs should Define why you are interested in this company and show you have done your research. The bold, underlined text you see here is an example of the applicant defining why he is interested in this specific company by referencing the philosophy and relating it to his experience.
Your closing paragraph should answer the question, “What are the next steps?” This should be no more than a few sentences. See this slide for some tips and an example. You can also check out the supplemental resources sheet for a complete version of this sample cover letter and more tips for getting started.
It is important for students seeking jobs outside of their past or current industry to utilize their cover letters to emphasize their transferable skills. Cover letters can be a useful tool for the career changer to clearly connect the dots for the employer between past expertise and future responsibilities.

Take a look at how this career changer addresses the issue right in the opening paragraph. She explains that she was an entrepreneur with a science background, but has used her recent education to shift into a corporate setting.
Refer to this list of questions to evaluate each cover letter you draft.

Remember, it is important to customize your letters for EACH job. Differentiating your cover letters shows employers that you did your homework and made an informed decision about working there. Reviewing this list of questions for each draft will ensure you are providing the most relevant information to your potential employer.
A final step needed to make sure your cover letter puts your best foot forward is to proofread.

Remember to carefully read the employer's online application instructions and make sure to follow them. In your email, use a clear and identifiable subject line, and attach both your cover letter and resume unless they instruct otherwise.
To summarize, cover letters help you to emphasize your greatest skills and attributes, demonstrate your knowledge about the position and company, showcase your enthusiasm, and also prepare for your interview.

If you have any questions, contact Career Development during walk-in hours, or make an appointment. You can also use your friends and family, professors and the writing center.