Covering letters: UK conventions

An effective covering letter provides strong evidence of your suitability for a job. This leaflet deals with UK cultural conventions on content and style in covering letters using examples based on real-life applications.

A covering letter describes your suitability for a role by showing how your experience and skills meet the job description. It links together other enclosed documents such as a CV, a portfolio, or further evidence depending on the post. It also explains any gaps in your CV, career changes or a return to education.

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If you are unfamiliar with UK covering letters, check our dedicated web pages and our leaflet Writing a CV and covering letter to learn the basics.

www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/writingcv

Once you have a first draft, use this guide to focus on:

- salutations and closing statements
- providing evidence
- presenting yourself the right way
- levels of formality

Read your draft carefully for grammar, punctuation, capitalisation and spelling, and have it proofread by someone with a sound knowledge of English and an eye for detail. You can make an appointment to have your covering letter reviewed and discuss any queries you may have.

Salutations and closing statements

The use of salutations and matching closing statements is set by convention — choosing them correctly is essential as they will affect recruiters' first and last impressions of your letter.

When the recipient's identity is unknown, avoid salutations that take gender for granted such as 'Dear Sir/s.' Use gender-inclusive formulas such as 'Dear Sir or Madam' instead, and finish with 'Yours faithfully'. Generic expressions like 'To whom it may concern,' 'Dear recruiter' or 'Dear [company]' are not appropriate either.

If the job advert does not indicate who to address your covering letter to, why not try to find out from the recruitment agency or the employer's human resources department? It shows interest and initiative, and it might well make you stand out from other applicants.

If you know who the addressee is, use 'Dear' followed by title (Mr, Miss, Mrs or Ms, or Dr. or Professor if this is specified) and surname, and finish your letter with 'Yours sincerely'. Use Ms for a female addressee when a preference for Miss or Mrs is not stated.

Emails and covering letters

When applying for a position by email, you can either use the email itself as a covering letter and attach a CV, or write a brief email message and attach a separate covering letter as well as a CV. If you choose the first option, your email should remain professional in style. If you submit both an email message and a covering letter on top of the CV, avoid repeating information in the email already presented in your covering letter.

Use…

- Dear Sir or Madam
- Dear Miss Jones
- Dear Mrs Jones
- Dear Ms Jones
- Dear Prof. Smith

Avoid…

- Dear Sir
- To whom it may concern
- Dear Mary Jones
- Dear Mary
- Dear [Name of the company or recruitment agency]
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Providing evidence

It can be difficult to determine what kind of evidence and how much information to offer in a covering letter as expectations can vary in different sectors and jobs. Make sure you consider carefully the points covered in this section: length, detail, common expressions and personal experiences.

Length

The length of covering letters varies depending on the role and your experience. A specialist or permanent job might require a longer statement (up to an A4 sheet), while temporary roles or starter positions do not usually require more than half a page.

Drafting too short a letter is not advisable either, even when the job description is very brief. Read the text below focusing on the statements in blue, which are often all the information applicants provide for part-time or temporary jobs. Consider then how the additional details in pink highlight relevant experience with specific examples and show awareness of what employers are after.

Dear Sir or Madam

Please find enclosed my CV in application for the post of part-time administrative assistant advertised on your website.

I am a postgraduate student at The University of Nottingham and have previously worked as an administrative assistant at Purple Design and Insignia Ltd., dealing with email enquiries, preparing and processing documents, producing reports and scheduling meetings. A BA in English and masters studies in history have also provided me with a sound command of English, strong organisational skills, and the ability to produce high quality written texts and oral presentations.

I have strong interpersonal skills, adapt quickly to new environments and can deal efficiently with tasks requiring precision while working under pressure, having held various temporary jobs in busy offices both in Spain and the UK.

I am IT literate with sound command of Microsoft Office and working knowledge of InDesign, and can familiarise myself quickly with new programmes.

I enclose my CV for your attention and would be available for an interview at any time.

Yours faithfully,

Manuel Pérez

Detail

Even if the post and company applied for are clear from the subject line, include this information in the main body of the letter too — not doing so might suggest you are reusing the same text for several applications.

Be specific when describing your background and strengths without adding irrelevant details or repeating points already in your CV. You should establish clear connections between the skills sought by the employer, your experience and the value you could add to the organisation — these might be obvious to you, but they might not be to the recruiter. Even if the job advert is very short, think carefully about what the post will involve and aim to produce two to three relevant paragraphs. This will show you understand the implications of the job. Should you struggle to identify which skills and experience to highlight, make an appointment with our team to discuss it.

If you think you need more information to produce a strong application and these key points cannot be found in the job description or company website, contact the recruitment agency or the employer. Employers generally welcome intelligent, relevant questions; even if they cannot give you an answer, having shown interest and initiative will not go against you.

Check these examples

1. "I am applying for this position..." / "I am applying to become a member of your team/staff/company..." — An employer or agency might be advertising several jobs simultaneously.

2. "I am applying for the position of graduate management trainee advertised on your website as I would welcome the chance to work for Transco Exports." — The job and company are now clear.

3. "I have developed sound organisational and presentation skills during my degree." — Unsupported assertion: which specific skills, and in what context?

4. "I have developed sound organisational and presentation skills during my degree by participating in student working groups and research projects, giving presentations to staff and fellow students, and undertaking extracurricular activities such as delivering two papers at undergraduate conferences." — Specific, well supported statement.

5. "As you can see from my CV, I have previously undertaken similar duties to the ones required for this post." — The links between background and job requirements are unclear.

6. "I have previous experience of providing technical support and dealing with client requests in a pressurised environment, as shown in my CV." — Key skills and attributes are now highlighted.

7. "My employment history proves I have the skills and attributes you are looking for." — Unclear assertion.

8. "I have sound communication skills developed through dealing with clients as well as by writing reports for both internal and external use." — Specific, well supported statement.
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Job applicants often claim to have ‘strong written and verbal communication skills’, but employers will look for specific examples of these attributes. Steer clear of clichés too: they make your text feel less professional and individual. Employers read about countless ‘ambitious recent graduates looking for a challenging position’ who can ‘think outside the box’ and are ‘team players equally happy to work by themselves’ as well as ‘fast learners with a can-do attitude who always give 100%’.

Personal experiences

If you present personal experiences as evidence of having certain competencies, relate your achievements to the post as clearly as possible.

In the following examples, the second version is much more specific and better connected to the job.

For a post of assistant events organiser:

a. The various parties I organised for the Spanish Society were amongst the most popular on campus — they were always full to the brim, people had a great time and I became well known at university as a result.

b. I organised three parties for the Spanish Society covering all costs through sponsorship and ticket sales. Attendees highlighted a vibrant atmosphere and excellent value for money, and I was asked to organise other events as a result.

For a graduate trainee role:

a. During my semester studying abroad I travelled extensively round the country with three other fellow students, being the main organiser of all trips. I was often complimented on being fun, resourceful and able to keep calm in challenging situations.

b. During my semester studying abroad I organised three week-long trips around the country for a group of four, researching destinations and costs and arranging accommodation. I was complimented on my resourcefulness and calm manner when I solved unexpected transport problems during the trips.

Presenting yourself effectively

Avoid overstatement and understatement

While you want to draw attention to your qualifications and skills, exaggerating the work done or the responsibility held can come across as not being genuine. For instance, if you worked in a small business helping with administrative tasks or dealing with customer enquiries, do not describe your post as a ‘project officer’ or ‘customer relations officer’.

Avoid listing achievements and awards — however prestigious — unless their relation to the attributes sought by the employer in the job description is made clear. For instance, having won a prize for public speaking given by the university’s debating society would not be relevant by itself when applying for an auditing job. If you highlight that preparing for debates involved analysing complex documents and policies, the connections to the job are much more obvious.

While you need to convey enthusiasm, too much eagerness can have a negative effect. Be careful as well how you present your hopes to be offered an interview. There is a difference between showing self-confidence and interest in reaching the next stage, and implying you expect to be selected.

Being too general or modest about your abilities is not beneficial either, for example by not specifying the tasks or studies undertaken, levels of responsibility held and outcomes achieved. All this key information should be in the CV and covering letter — do not keep essential details for the interview.

Check these examples

• 'I will gladly undertake any task I might be assigned and I will work very hard to do my best.' — Too eager. It also suggests achieving the required standards might be a struggle.

• 'I am a focused, reliable worker keen on utilising my experience and developing new skills.' — Highlighting keenness on undertaking responsibilities as well as learning new things.

• 'I look forward to hearing from you regarding an interview.' — Could be perceived as too pushy.

• 'I would welcome the opportunity to discuss my experience further should I be offered an interview.' — Shows interest and confidence without being forceful.

• 'I successfully undertook a range of clerical tasks in the department and dealt with client enquiries as needed, working in collaboration with other colleagues.' — The kind of work done and level of responsibility held are not specified. It is also unclear what dealing with enquiries actually involved (e.g. forwarding them to others, answering them according to guidelines, or doing research before responding).

• 'I was in charge of processing all departmental purchases, from placing orders to dealing with invoices and monitoring budgets. I also dealt with enquires by phone and email as well as in person, referring them to specialist teams as needed.' — The kind of work done is now clearer.
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Focus on employers’ requirements
Show your interest in the job, but focus on how you can meet employers’ needs — not how the post can meet yours. It is appropriate to mention how the position would contribute towards your professional development or career goals, but do not call attention to financial reasons, potential gaps in skills and experience, or any other difficulties.

Check these examples
Changing the focus from personal gain to benefits for the employer:

- ‘I am willing to learn what I need in order to adapt quickly to the company’s working practices.’
- ‘I adapt quickly to new environments, having held part-time jobs in very different workplaces in both England and Spain.’
- ‘I am applying for this job as it will show me aspects of the UK workplace I am not familiar with.’
- ‘I am applying for this job as it will allow me to utilise and develop my IT skills in a UK context.’
- ‘This post constitutes a great opportunity to update my design skills and will also help towards the costs of my studies.’
- ‘This post constitutes a great opportunity to build on my design skills complementing the knowledge gained in my masters studies.’

Levels of formality
Choosing the right tone for your covering letter is key to its success. While you want to come across as respectful and professional, being too formal and over-polite is not advisable either.

Over-familiarity can be equally easy to fall into. You might find sentences such as ‘I hope this email finds you well’ or ‘consider me for this project and you will not be disappointed’ in email exchanges between colleagues, but they are too colloquial for a covering letter.

Formality and familiarity are culture-specific and context-dependent. It is not always easy to define what is and isn’t appropriate. If you are unsure about the tone of your covering letter, make an appointment with our team to clarify any doubts.

Check these examples
While linguistically correct, these four statements come across as too ceremonious. Contrast them with the final, more appropriate version.

- ‘I hereby apply for the position of graphic designer.’
- ‘I am delighted to have the opportunity to submit this application.’
- ‘I would highly appreciate the opportunity to have my application considered and thank you in advance for your time and attention.’
- ‘I hope this email will find you in good health and spirits.’ (No need to offer personal good wishes in a covering letter)
- ‘I am applying for the post of graphic designer advertised on your website as I believe I have the skills and experience to make a valuable contribution to Sigma Solutions.’

Covering letters for other countries
Conventions on writing a covering letter vary from country to country. Check the country guides in Passport Career for advice and CV models, and find out what is common practice for your target field, company and job category. If in doubt, seek advice from someone working there or post brief enquiries on relevant internet forums.

www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/workingabroad

Further help
The Centre for English Language Education (CELE) runs English courses for EU and overseas students as part of their insessional programme.

www.nottingham.ac.uk/cele/insessional

CELE also offer one-to-one consultations to help with these matters — although they do not offer a proofreading service.

www.nottingham.ac.uk/cele/insessional/consultations.aspx

We’re here to help, get in touch:

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