



Writing a covering letter

What is a covering letter?

A covering letter builds on two or three key pieces of information within your CV and expands them by explaining in more depth how those skills and experiences match the job role.

Your covering letter needs to show that you are motivated to work for the company you are applying to by demonstrating that you have researched the organisation thoroughly.

Your covering letter also gives you the opportunity to positively explain any gaps in your CV, changing courses, low grades and any disability you may have (although you do not have to disclose this).

When to send a covering letter

A covering letter accompanies your CV and enhances it by showing an employer how your particular skills and experience match the job role. It can be sent in response to an advertised opportunity or as a speculative application. A speculative application can help you to find opportunities before they are advertised or may even persuade an employer to create a new job. You could be asked to upload a covering letter as well as an application form for an online application.

Emails and covering letters

When applying for a position by email, you can either use the email itself as a covering letter and attach your CV, or write a brief email message and attach a separate covering letter as well as your CV. If you choose this option, your email should be professional in style.

If you attach a CV and covering letter to your email, avoid repeating information in the email which is in your covering letter. The email should be brief and professional, referring to your CV and covering letter attached.

Length and presentation of covering letter

A covering letter should generally be no more than one side of A4. It's a good idea to pick a modern font such as Calibri or sans serif, font size 11 or 12 – it's advisable to use the same font as your CV.

Covering letters for academic posts may be longer than this, but not usually more than two pages of A4.

nottingham.ac.uk/careers/applyingacademic

Style and language

It is very important to get this right as this is the employer's first impression of you.

Levels of formality

Choosing the right tone for your covering letter is key to its success. This can vary depending on which country you are applying to. If you are applying to a country outside the UK then use Passport Career for advice and models.

nottingham.ac.uk/careers/workingabroad

While you want to come across as respectful and professional, being too formal and over-polite is not advisable either.

While linguistically correct, these three statements come across as too ceremonious:

- ✗ I hereby apply for the position of graphic designer.
- ✗ 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)

Over-familiarity can be equally easy to fall into, so avoid sentences such as 'I hope this email finds you well' or 'consider me for this project and you will not be disappointed.'

Keep it simple as shown in these two examples:

- ✓ I am delighted to have the opportunity to submit this application.
- ✓ 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.

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.

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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.

- ✗ I will gladly undertake any task I might be assigned and I will work very hard to do my best. – Too eager and 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.

Language

Using active verbs when talking about tasks you've undertaken can be very effective. For examples of active verbs, see our leaflet on writing a CV.

Structuring your covering letter

Beginning

Include your personal and contact details and date the letter as the examples shown in this leaflet.

If the job advert does not say who to address your covering letter to, try to find out by telephoning the company, which will show interest and initiative. 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.

If you cannot find out the recipient's name then Dear Sir or Madam should be used and then you will close the letter 'Yours faithfully'. Generic expressions like 'To whom it may concern,' 'Dear recruiter' or 'Dear [company]' are not appropriate.

Opening paragraph

Open positively and politely, with a short introductory statement that explains the purpose of the letter and details how you found out about the job advert.

- ✗ 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.
- ✓ 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.

Middle

The middle of your letter should be a series of concise paragraphs that prove you are an ideal candidate and meet, or even exceed, the requirements of the position by highlighting your skills and experience and your motivation to work for the organisation.

Explain why you're the ideal candidate

To help structure your information use the following approach: make the point, provide evidence, and explain why it is relevant to the opportunity.

It's very important to provide evidence. For example if you say you have 'strong written and verbal communication skills', you will need to back this up with specific examples of when and where you have demonstrated them.

- ✗ I have developed sound organisational and presentation skills during my degree. – Unsupported assertion: which specific skills, and in what context?
- ✓ 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.
- ✗ 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.
- ✓ 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.
- ✗ My employment history proves I have the skills and attributes you are looking for. – Unclear assertion.
- ✓ 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.

Avoid clichés as employers read about countless 'ambitious recent graduate 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%'.

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:

- ✗ 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.
- ✓ 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 help organise other events as a result.

Writing a covering letter

Focus on the employer's requirements and how you can meet the employer's needs – not how the post can meet yours.

Check these examples:

- ✗ 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.

Explain your motivation

You should also include a paragraph that demonstrates you have researched the company and explains why you want to work for them. Have a look at the examples in the letters contained in this leaflet.

Ending

Close your letter positively and politely, if possible briefly reiterating your desire to work for the company.

Remember, if the letter is to a named person, end with 'Yours sincerely'. If it's addressed 'Dear Sir/Madam' then it's ended 'Yours faithfully'. You then type your name underneath as shown in the examples.

And then, when you've written your letter

Remember to save a copy.

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 with us, although we're not able to offer a proofreading service.

nottingham.ac.uk/careers/appointments

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 (you could use LinkedIn) or post brief enquiries on relevant internet forums.

nottingham.ac.uk/careers/passportcareer

Further help

The Centre for English Language Education (CELE) runs English courses for EU and overseas students as part of their in sessional programme

nottingham.ac.uk/cele/insessional

CELE also offer one-to-one consultations to help students with their writing – although they do not offer a proofreading service, they can make suggestions for improvement

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

Example covering letter – Reply to an advertised vacancy

4 Green Drive
Lenton
Nottingham
NG7 2EE
s.brown@hotmail.com
6 September 2018

Mr P Cottingham
Pockitt & Jingle
Main Street
Fossington, Hants

Dear Mr Cottingham,

Job reference: 22401: Marketing Assistant

I am writing in response to your advertisement for a marketing assistant listed on the Careers and Employability Service website.

As you will see from my CV, I am in the final year of a biological science degree. I have developed excellent oral and written communication skills through my coursework and work experience in catering and retailing. In addition, I am able to work well with other people. My role as captain of the University's badminton team required me to motivate and encourage other team members and, as part of the first year Buddy Scheme, I was able to build rapport with my group very quickly. The range of my extracurricular activities and my academic performance show that I have good time management skills and I am able to work under pressure. My academic work requires a high degree of numerical ability and attention to detail. I enjoy research and have always found analytical work very satisfying. My IT skills are well developed, and as a result of this, I see all these qualities as relevant to the role of marketing assistant.

Pockitt and Jingle offers me the opportunity to work in industrial rather than consumer product marketing where I can make use of my scientific knowledge in a commercial setting. From your website I see I would be involved in marketing projects at an early stage which is very appealing. In addition, I am attracted by the opportunity to deal with a wide variety of customers. I notice that you place great emphasis on training in the job description and this is important to me.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss my experience with you at an interview.

Yours sincerely,

Steven Brown

State why you are writing.

State what you can offer the employer.

State what the employer can offer you and show that you have researched the company.

End 'Yours sincerely' because there is a name contact.

End 'Yours faithfully' if addressing the letter to 'Dear Sir/Madam'.

Example covering letter – Speculative submission

4 Green Drive
Lenton
Nottingham
NG7 2EE
s.brown@hotmail.com
6 September 2018

Farrar PR Ltd
22 Regents Crescent
London
SW1B 2TP

Dear Sir/Madam,

Job reference: 22401: PR Assistant

As a highly motivated student, who has undertaken editorial work placements in different settings, please consider my application for an account handling role with your company. Having gained editorial experience through the Students' Union's magazine, Impact, while studying at the University of Nottingham and while at Crispin Publishing, I am now seeking a career in consumer PR.

State why you are writing.

As highlighted in my CV, I have excellent communication skills. Extensive customer service experience helped develop these skills coupled with my drama performance interests. Socially confident, I am capable of addressing a range of audiences. I have excellent negotiation and persuasion skills, which I have had to apply recently when persuading store managers to lend me props for 26 photo shoots. I possess a combination of creative ability with a very can-do approach. My peers regard me as a good team player who, being well organised, is comfortable with both event management and communication roles.

State what you can offer the employer.

I note from your website that you are a full service agency that specialises in PR for the retail industry. I am impressed by your extensive range of clients including top names such as Tesco, and have followed their recent campaigns in the media. Communication skills are my strength. My editorial experience has really developed my writing skills, and taught me the need to produce copy to tight deadlines. At Crispin Publishing I learnt how to compile and research information. The strong emphasis on written coursework throughout my studies has been important in developing my written communication skills. My secretarial course and employment also taught me how to use business English and my IT skills are well developed.

State what the employer can offer you and show that you have researched the company.

I hope that my enthusiasm for PR is conveyed in this application. I consider that I have the necessary drive and personal qualities required to contribute to your success as an established PR agency.

Close positively.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

Steven Brown

This publication is available in alternative formats.

t: +44 (0)115 951 5559

e: alternativeformats@nottingham.ac.uk

For more information, please visit:
nottingham.ac.uk/careers

Careers and Employability Service
+44 (0)115 95 13680 | careers-team@nottingham.ac.uk



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