Anatomy of a Cover Letter

After searching numerous online job sites, you finally found a posting for the perfect position! However, in addition to completing the lengthy online application, the employer wants a cover letter file attached. While you might have the expert skills needed for the position, writing cover letters may not be your greatest strength or something with which you have had a lot of experience. So exactly what should be in a cover letter? What format should be used? We will look at the anatomy of a cover letter in detail and answer those questions. But first, you may wonder why employers always require a cover letter.

Why Do Employers Want Cover Letters?

Generally, there are two main reasons why an employer might want a cover letter. First, a cover letter enables an applicant to describe how their background and skills are a good fit for the position in a way that might not be readily apparent from a basic form-type application or even a resume. Computerized online forms and resumes can often read like grocery lists, merely detailing dates and locations of education and employers, and bullet-listing work experience in generic terms. A cover letter, however, affords the applicant the opportunity to briefly, concisely, and convincingly explain how their background makes them an ideal match with the needs of the position.

Second, a cover letter provides the employer with a sample of an applicant's writing skill, a talent that unfortunately is many times severely lacking. I have often said the writing skills of most people today are generally so poor that all you have to do is write reasonably well and you will be favorably noticed. Of course, with a cover letter, you want to take the time and care to write better than just "reasonably well" as this may be your only shot at making a good first impression!

Sections of a Cover Letter

Shown at the right are the major sections of a cover letter, each highlighted with a different color. Next, the individual sections will be discussed in detail and a cover letter for a fictional applicant will be created along the way as an example.
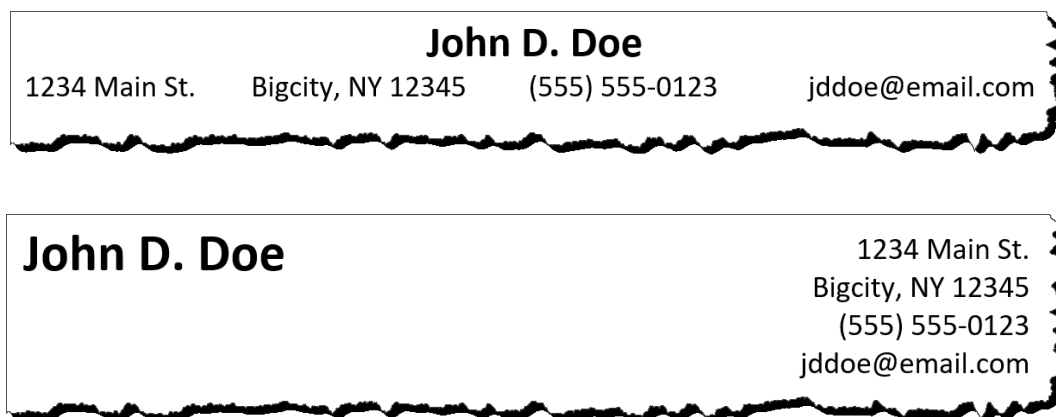

© 2022 Career Lantern
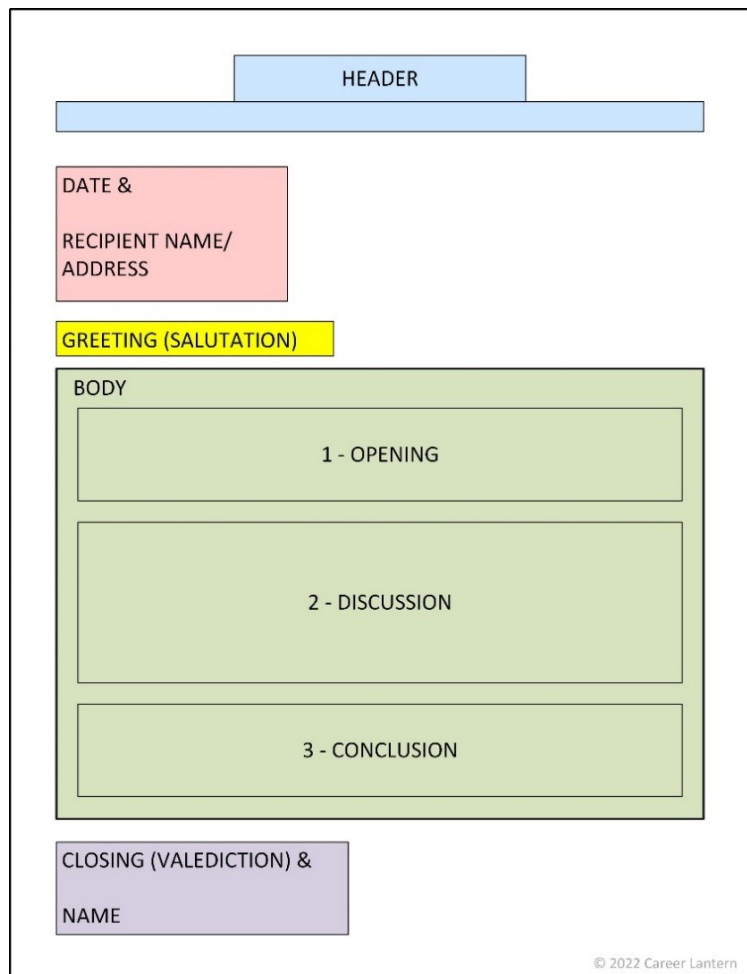
Header

The purpose of the header is to indicate who you are and provide your contact information. While there is room for individual taste and creativity in the format and layout of this section, I strongly suggest doing so with text and normal fonts. Do not create the header as a graphic or image as many of the computerized applicant tracking systems (ATS) used by human resources (HR) departments cannot read them. If that happens, the system may automatically reject your resume because your name, address, etc. are unreadable.

Your name should be prominently displayed but not in a ridiculously large font. Next, include your mailing address, email address, and telephone number. Some authors feel including the physical mailing address is optional as most contact today is done electronically. Others also suggest you might become a victim of discrimination based on your geographic location (the employer may prefer applicants who live closer). While this could happen, the employer will eventually find out where you live anyway, so why hide it? Besides, some employers require the address for their database or they still use regular mail, so I recommend including your mailing address.

Regarding your email address, make sure it sounds professional or at least not silly or suggestive. For example, if your regular email address is something like crazyfootballdude@email.com or hotbabe27@email.com, use a different one. Ideally, create a simple, professional-sounding email address that is used exclusively for job search purposes. A simple one might include your name, such as jddoe@email.com or mary_doe25@email.com.

Some header examples:

John D. Doe

1234 Main St.   Bigcity, NY 12345   (555) 555-0123   jddoe@email.com

John D. Doe

1234 Main St.
Bigcity, NY 12345
(555) 555-0123
jddoe@email.com

Date & Recipient Name/Address

Formal business correspondence—such as a cover letter—includes the date, so add it a few lines below the header. Unless corresponding directly with the military, use the standard "Month Day, Year" date format (e.g., October 15, 2022). However, if you are applying for a position with an employer outside the United States, determine the date format typically followed in that country and use it.

THIS WAY	NOT THIS WAY
October 15, 2022	15-Oct-2022
	October 2022
	11/15/22
	11/15/2022
	2022-10-15
	Saturday, October 15, 2022

Skip a line after the date and add the recipient's information, just as if you were addressing a mailing envelope.

When preparing a cover letter, the absolute preferred method is to identify a specific individual as the recipient. Sometimes, the name of the hiring manager, a human resources staff member, or other designated individual is included in the job posting. If not, see if you can obtain a copy of the complete job description as postings frequently contain only a condensed version due to space limitations. The complete document may indicate the name or title of the individual to whom the position reports. Some online searching or contacting the HR department by phone to inquire about a contact name may be helpful.

For our example, here is the date and recipient section:

John D. Doe

1234 Main St.   Bigcity, NY 12345   (555) 555-0123   jddoe@email.com

October 15, 2022

Mr. Dale Bigshot, Manager
Acme Products Co.
12345 Wile E. Coyote Drive
Somewhere, NM 12345

Greeting (Salutation)

The greeting of the cover letter (such as Dear Mr. [Name]) is known as the salutation. When writing the salutation, end it with a colon (:) or comma, not a semicolon (;) or hyphen.

Salutations frequently include a title known as an honorific, such as Mr., Ms., Prof. (Professor), Hon. (Honorable), Rev. (Reverend), Dr. (Doctor), etc. If a specific honorific is associated with the name in the job posting, use it in the salutation. Sometimes the gender of the recipient may be unclear based on the first name. For example, the name may apply to either sex or is foreign and unfamiliar. In such cases, a general salutation (in our example) such as "Dear D. Bigshot:" is acceptable. For female recipients, avoid using "Mrs." unless the individual refers to herself in that manner. Instead, use the generic "Ms." abbreviation.

Note that many individuals prefer not to identify by gender. Although more common in the United Kingdom, there is increasing use of the gender-neutral honorific "Mx." (pronounced "mix") in the United States. Should you encounter this honorific, be aware of it and use it accordingly.

Even in cases where you know the recipient personally and are close friends, I still suggest keeping things business-like and using a formal salutation. Why? Remember, individuals other than your friend will likely also read the cover letter. You want to sound respectful of your friend's position and certainly do not want to give any appearance of favoritism.

When a recipient's name is not provided and you cannot determine who might read the letter, a generic salutation such as "Dear Human Resources:" is acceptable, although not ideal. Do not use a stuffy, impersonal, form letter salutation such as "To Whom It May Concern" or an unbusinesslike, informal greeting such as "Hi." For our example, here are some suggestions:

THIS WAY	NOT THIS WAY
Dear Mr. Bigshot: Dear D. Bigshot:	Dear Dale: Dear HR: Dear Mr. or Ms. Bigshot: Dear Sir or Madam: Greetings: Hello: Hi: To Whom It May Concern:
ACCEPTABLE	
Dear Human Resources: Dear Hiring Manager: Dear Acme Products:	

Skip a line after the recipient's name and address and enter the salutation, such as in this example:

Acme Products Co.
12345 Wile E. Coyote Drive
Somewhere, NM 12345

Dear Mr. Bigshot:

Body Sections
The body of the cover letter has three sections: the **Opening**, **Discussion**, and **Conclusion**, each with a specific purpose. Throughout the cover letter, avoid being overly wordy and do not deliberately use unusually large words. A verbose cover letter will not impress the reader—at least not in a good way! Individuals who read cover letters want them clear, concise, and easy to read.

Opening
The opening or introductory paragraph of the body briefly explains why you are writing. Usually, you will be writing to apply for a specific position, typically one found in a job posting. If so, be

sure to include the position title exactly as stated in the posting. Sometimes, a job posting may also have an associated identifying number; if so, include it. The identifier is important as the HR department may have several similar positions listed at the same time. These various listings might be for positions in different cities, geographic regions, departments, or shifts. Including the complete job title and any identifying information will help ensure you are applying for the correct position. For example:

<div align="center">

Data Analyst II (Listing #A234)
ICU Nurse, Third Shift
Sales Representative, Northern Region
Software Designer #543
Power Module Design Engineer

</div>

An opening paragraph for our fictional applicant might go something like this:

"I am writing to apply for the position of Senior Data Analyst (Listing #A234) as posted on your Acme Products website. As you will see, my education and work experience in data analytics make me an ideal match for this position."

Discussion

In the opening section, you indicated you are applying for a specific job and stated you are an ideal match for the position. Now, it is time to back up that claim in a very convincing manner. Look to the requirements and duties of the position as stated in the job posting to see how you can tailor the discussion to make your background a good fit. Show how this is true, providing enough detail to make your point, but keep it concise. This section will typically have one or perhaps two paragraphs, depending on your experience and credentials.

Also, because employers often use computerized Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) to automatically scan cover letter files for keywords or phrases, be sure to use the same terminology and wording found in the job posting. For example, if the posting specifically requires "experience with Microsoft Excel," be sure to use that specific product name. Do not merely state you have "experience with spreadsheets," which is non-specific and would possibly be scored low or even missed by the ATS.

The discussion section for our applicant might go something like this:

"For the past six years, I have been employed as a Data Analyst II by XYZ Products. In this position, I track and analyze production and quality metrics using software including SAP BusinessObjects, SAP Crystal Reports, and Microsoft Excel. According to the job posting, this position will be responsible for providing presentations regarding quality metrics. Please note that I have considerable experience in this function, as I develop and deliver live monthly presentations summarizing quality metrics for executive management using Microsoft PowerPoint and create written reports using Microsoft Word. Additionally, I lead the facility-wide, multidisciplinary Quality Assurance Team.

I graduated magna cum laude with a GPA of 3.96 from Big Time University in Los Angeles with a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) degree. This program included extensive coursework in accounting, computer science, and mathematics. In 2021, I was awarded the Certified Data Analytics Professional (CDAP) certification from the ABCD Institute."

Conclusion

The conclusion section is where you wrap up the cover letter and include the following:

- Thank the reader for considering your cover letter or application (if applying)
- Express interest and enthusiasm for the position
- Indicate the next desired steps, usually a call for action for an interview
- Express availability and willingness to discuss further

Although this is the "conclusion" of your cover letter, DO NOT begin the paragraph with the stuffy-sounding "In conclusion" opening phrase.

The conclusion section for our applicant might read:

"Thank you for considering my application. I would appreciate the opportunity to interview with you to learn more about this exciting position and further discuss my qualifications. If you would like any additional information, please feel free to contact me at (555) 555-0123."

You may not want to receive a call while at work (your boss might be nearby) or because you are usually unable to answer (perhaps due to classes or meetings). If so, consider revising the last sentence to suggest using your email address instead. For example, "If you would like any additional information, please contact me via email at [your email address]." If you do this, be sure to periodically check your spam folder to ensure you do not miss a critical email!

Closing (Valediction) & Name

The closing line of the cover letter that reads "Sincerely" (or something similar) is known as the valediction. The valediction chosen must sound professional and polite, not informal or suggest familiarity. You are ending a business letter that asks for a job, not writing a personal letter to a dear friend. Also, unless you are applying for a position that requires a specific foreign language, avoid using non-English valedictions, and even then, it depends on the circumstances. End the valediction with a comma.

THIS WAY	NOT THIS WAY	
Best Regards, Regards, Respectfully, Sincerely, Thank You,	Adios, Be Safe, Best Wishes, Bye for Now, Cheers, Ciao,	Later, Love, So Long, Take Care, Thanks in Advance, Yours,

After the valediction, skip three lines and type your name. If the letter is to be physically sent, sign your name in blue or black ink in the space above the typed name. In our example, the valediction and name might appear as:

you to learn more about this exciting position and to also discuss my qualifications. If you would like any additional information, please feel free to contact me at (555) 555-0123.

Sincerely,

John D. Doe

Other Recommendations

When preparing the cover letter:

- Use a simple, common font such as Times New Roman, Arial, Calibri, or Verdana; never use a script, handwriting, or italics style font
- Use the regular versions of these fonts, not styles labeled "light"
- Use the same font throughout the entire cover letter
- Use a normal font size, such as 12; if you have a lot of content, use size 10 or 11
- Single space the lines
- Skip a line between paragraphs
- Indenting the first line of each paragraph is not necessary
- Use a standard one-inch outer margins on the sides and bottom; a smaller margin above the header at the top of the page is optional and acceptable

Also, if your letter content does not fill the page, adjust it to look "balanced" below the header, i.e., with even white space above and below the other content. This is the format commonly used in business correspondence.

THIS WAY	NOT THIS WAY

The completed cover letter in our example appears as shown below.

John D. Doe

1234 Main St.   Bigcity, NY 12345   (555) 555-0123   jddoe@email.com

October 15, 2022

Mr. Dale Bigshot, Manager
Acme Products Co.
12345 Wile E. Coyote Drive
Somewhere, NM 12345

Dear Mr. Bigshot:

I am writing to apply for the position of Senior Data Analyst (Listing #A234) as posted on your Acme Products website. As you will see, my education and work experience in data analytics make me an ideal match for this position.

For the past six years, I have been employed as a Data Analyst II by XYZ Products. In this position, I track and analyze production and quality metrics using software including SAP BusinessObjects, SAP Crystal Reports, and Microsoft Excel. According to the job posting, this position will be responsible for providing presentations regarding quality metrics. Please note that I have considerable experience in this function, as I develop and deliver live monthly presentations summarizing quality metrics for executive management using Microsoft PowerPoint and create written reports using Microsoft Word. Additionally, I lead the facility-wide, multidisciplinary Quality Assurance Team.

I graduated magna cum laude with a GPA of 3.96 from Big Time University in Los Angeles with a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) degree. This program included extensive coursework in accounting, computer science, and mathematics. In 2021, I was awarded the Certified Data Analytics Professional (CDAP) certification from the ABCD Institute.

Thank you for considering my application. I would appreciate the opportunity to interview with you to learn more about this exciting position and further discuss my qualifications. If you would like any additional information, please feel free to contact me at (555) 555-0123.

Sincerely,

John D. Doe

Final Steps

Professional writers know a secret most people do not: they rarely trust their own writing as the final version. Without exception, always have your cover letter double-checked by an individual with excellent writing and grammatical skills. While built-in grammar checkers and online services such as Grammarly may be helpful, these are by no means perfect tools and cannot be trusted to have the final say over something potentially so impactful to your career.

As a cover letter is not a one-size-fits-all document, be prepared to revise it each time you apply for a different job. Every letter must be customized to carefully and convincingly explain how you

best fit the needs of each unique position. Also, when submitting the cover letter, be sure to use the file format specified in the job posting, typically Word doc or PDF. Doing so will help ensure that if the company uses an ATS, the software will scan and read your letter more accurately.

As a final double-check, email your cover letter to a friend and have them check that it can be opened and looks as it should. Exporting documents and converting file types can do weird things to your formatting, resulting in extra lines, wrong fonts, misalignment of text, or a host of other unexpected and bizarre changes.