

## Job Search Correspondence Guide

Cover letters and other job search correspondence are crucial for your search because they serve to introduce you in many instances to a potential employer or allow you to connect with a referral through your networking activity. Any form of correspondence also functions as a writing sample. Your communication abilities are on display for employers, and it is just this type of written communication that we are most often asked to complete in our work worlds. As a result, you should tailor your letters for appropriate individuals and job postings, and you should treat the letters and other correspondence as you do your resume-- in other words, with great effort and care!

In keeping with professional correspondence, the following guidelines are true of almost all written documents in the business and non-profit sectors:

- Use a common word-processing program so your documents can be opened easily when sent electronically. Laser print your letters when sending hard copies.
- Write your correspondence using conventional business letter style. (Samples appear at the end of this guide.)
- Letters should never be longer than one page; cover letters are generally 3 (sometimes 4) targeted paragraphs. Your style should be concise.
- Make sure that all information such as the person's address and name are correct.
- Close your correspondence with "Sincerely" since most other closings are too informal.
- If sending a hard copy, use high quality bond paper that matches your resume.
- Single-space within paragraphs, and double-space between paragraphs.
- Sign all hard copy letters with a black pen, and make your signature legible.
- If possible, word process or type the address on the envelope when sending hard copies.
- Proofread, Proofread, Proofread!!! And then proofread again.

## Cover Letters

As mentioned previously, cover letters serve as a writing sample. In addition, they communicate to the potential employer traits and characteristics that make you unique; they also allow you to demonstrate how your skills, abilities, and personality would fit well within an organization. In addition, a good cover letter highlights the resume briefly and adds information that is not included in the resume. It also often makes connections for the reader or fills in gaps from the resume.

You want to communicate several things in a concise cover letter: your interest in a position or industry, your unique skills and abilities, a quick overview of your accomplishments (perhaps not all, but a sampling), and what you would bring to a potential employer. Avoid writing about what the employer would give to you; most employers see candidates as a commodity and do not at the beginning consider your professional development. Once they hire you, they will provide for your professional development.

You want to avoid addressing any potential weaknesses in a cover letter. You can do so if they ask you, but do not call a weakness to their attention. Stay away from broad language that is unclear or that depends too much upon jargon. In certain industries, using the terminology that is common in the field is acceptable. However, nebulous terms such as “excellent communication skills” do not tell people much about your real skills. If you make such claims, you must provide the reader with evidence. Give a specific example of how you accomplished a goal or exceeded expectations, especially if it fits well within the realm of the employer’s overarching mission and goals.

When contacting employers, try to find a direct contact—a person’s name and not merely a title. If you cannot locate a name after researching, then use language that is more targeted such as “To the Hiring Manager” or “To the Assistant Director Search Committee.” Do NOT use archaic language such as “Dear Sir/Madam.” You should also use “Ms.” for females and “Mr.” for males unless you know of another title such as “Dr.”

Finally, researching the employer is crucial in order to illustrate your fit with the organization's philosophies and ideologies. You do not want to enumerate how you believe you would fit well in the organization only to find out later that the view you presented was in opposition to their goals!

**REMEMBER:** You should always send a cover letter unless an on-line system does not allow you to do so. Some employers will discard resumes without cover letters. Although most hiring managers read a resume first, the cover letter draws them in and hints at your personality. Thus, you should ensure that your letters are written in your own tone and style while remaining professional.

## Structure of the Cover Letter

**First Paragraph:** Introduce yourself and your reason for writing. Include the specific position to which you are applying or the type of work (department) that most interests you. If you have been referred by someone, use that person's name up front.

**Second (and possibly third) Paragraph:** In the main body of the letter, you will include one or two paragraphs that highlight: your interest in the organization, your skills and abilities, your accomplishments, and some brief mention that you understand how you would fit within the culture of the organization. People with more experience or diverse experiences may need to use two paragraphs; many people will only use one.

**Last Paragraph:** In closing your letter, reiterate your interest in the position and organization. Include any relevant pragmatic factors; for example, if you are moving to Boston while job searching: "I am relocating to Boston as of June 13<sup>th</sup> and will be available to interview at that time." In addition, you might mention the best way to contact you. If you think you can follow-up accordingly, then tell them that you will be in touch within a certain timeframe. Keep in mind that most employers who post a position opening do not want to receive contact from a candidate outside of the initial resume and cover letter unless they initiate it.

## **Other Types of Correspondence**

In addition to the initial cover letter, you might interact with a potential employer a number of times during your job search. Save all copies of correspondence so that you will know exactly what you sent each person. You will also be able to ensure that your tone, style, and format match across the forms of correspondence. Following are some additional types of job search correspondence:

### **Thank You Letters**

After an interview or informational interview, the thank you letter provides an opportunity for you to reiterate your interest in a field or a particular job. You should send the letter immediately after your meeting with the person. If you suspect or know that a hiring manager or committee will be making a decision the next day, send both a hard copy and an electronic copy via email. It is appropriate to send a thank you letter to anyone with whom you interviewed. As such, make sure you collect business cards while on-site for your interviews.

Thank you letters are typically very short, but the tone tends to be a bit warmer than the traditional cover letter style, though still professional. A candidate typically expresses added interest in the position and makes a connection for the employer to see how your interview demonstrated your commitment to the field or job and how you would fit well in the organization. For informational interview follow-up, you want to thank the person, and let them know how useful the meeting was and reiterate your commitment to the profession.

### **Withdrawal Letters**

These letters are sent to an employer if you decide to withdraw from consideration for a position during the selection process. Express your appreciation for the employer's time, and provide a brief explanation for your decision, but do NOT tell them you accepted a "better offer" or a position with a "better organization". Keep your reasons simple and professional at all times.

## **Rejection Letters**

On occasion, you may reject an offer of employment. In doing so, you will want to maintain the same professional tone as you have throughout the search process. Regardless of your reasons for declining an offer, do so gracefully, sincerely, and again, professionally. Here, you will once again avoid using terms that belittle the organization or its offer. If the job did not pay enough, simply tell them that you have accepted an offer that falls within your required pay range, but still thank them for their efforts in the search.

## **Acceptance Letters**

When you decide to accept an offer, send a letter that briefly outlines your acceptance. Illustrate your enthusiasm, and reiterate the key terms of the offer in order to avoid misunderstandings before you begin the job.