

Cover letters and personal statements

A cover letter is your opportunity to make a positive first impression. Just as important as your CV, it's where you can explain your skills, ability and motivation for the role.

The aim of a cover letter is to convince the recruiter of your suitability for the job and to put you through to the next stage of the selection process. To do this effectively your cover letter should provide evidence that you meet the requirements in the person specification.

It is also where you can explain your motivations and understanding of the role and organisation that you are applying to. These principles also apply to personal statements, which can form part of an application form where you are asked to provide details about your interest in the role.

In essence, your aim is to communicate:

- why you want to work in their organisation
- why you want to work in that particular role
- why your strengths, skills and experience make you the right candidate for the role

To answer these points effectively you will need to be specific and tailor your letter to each role you apply for. Ideally your cover letter and your CV will be read together but this might not be the case, so make sure they can each stand alone. Your cover letter should refer to key facts from the CV, highlighting areas of particular relevance to the role, but shouldn't merely duplicate it. You should always send a cover letter with your CV unless you are told otherwise.

Our title *How to write a CV* has further information.

Structure and content

Remember your cover letter is an example of your written communication, so write in a clear, succinct and professional manner. To make it easy for the recruiter to read, follow a structure and keep to one side of A4. The following gives an outline of a suggested structure, although the sections could be used in a different order and some may require two paragraphs.

Greeting

Address your cover letter to a named contact whenever possible to show you have sent it to them personally. These details will usually be in the application pack, otherwise look at the organisation's website or use LinkedIn to find a name.

Introduction

Include who you are, your degree subject, university and situation – recently graduated, about to graduate, penultimate year. Explain why you are writing (to apply for X position/looking for work experience) and where you saw the position advertised or, if it's a speculative application, where you heard about the organisation.

Why them?

Employers look for candidates who are genuinely interested in working for their organisation, who are enthused by the role and are keen to carry out the work involved. Generally speaking, staff who are passionate about their work are more likely to have a positive attitude at work and perform well.

Because of this it is vital to give clear evidence of your motivation for **both** the role and the organisation.

Why do you want to work for *this* company in particular rather than someone else? Research the organisation and the sector – the company website, LinkedIn and Twitter are good places to start. Always use specific examples to support your statements, and avoid being too vague or using blatant flattery. If you could remove the organisation's name and replace it with that of a competitor, and it still makes sense, it's not specific enough.

What particular aspects of the job are most attractive to you, why, and how does that make you a strong candidate for the role? This is where you can weave in examples of your skills and experience (see why you? section below) to convince the recruiter that you are suitable for the role.

Why you?

Make it easy for the employer to see why your skills, experience and attitude are right for the position by clearly linking them to the requirements of the job listed in the person specification. Identify what it is that makes you a good fit for the organisation and evidence this by choosing specific examples outlining the experience you have and why it is relevant. This could be from work experience, your studies or extra-curricular activities, but don't try to cover all of your experience - illustrate your selling points with three or four good, specific examples, backed up by evidence.

By showing that you understand the role and the company, and that you possess the skills they are looking for, you'll help the recruiter see that you have the potential to fit in to the organisation and make a positive contribution.

This section is where you can explain any gaps on your CV or circumstances such as changing or taking longer to finish your degree. Use positive language and try to link it to a skill that you gained from the situation i.e. demonstrates resilience, problem solving or decision making skills when faced with challenging situations.

The ending

Reaffirm your suitability for the role and your enthusiasm about the prospect of working for the employer, and state that you look forward to hearing from them.

Top tips

- Keep it clear, well presented and visually attractive. Don't cram too much on the page.
- Use positive language – 'power words' can illustrate your experiences in a really effective way. For example, 'initiated', 'instrumental in...', 'succeeded in...'
- Avoid copying chunks of text from your CV. You should use your cover letter to highlight relevant skills and experience in your CV, without simply repeating information.
- Check to make sure you've got the company name and other key details correct.
- Double check your spelling and grammar! Get it checked by someone else for any errors.
- Always follow any instructions given, as you may be required to submit it in a particular way. If you are sending a covering email rather than uploading or attaching the document, you won't need to include the addresses at the top as you would in a formal letter.