

SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY OFFICE OF CAREER SERVICES

Cover Letter Essentials

The cover letter is a way to introduce yourself and your resume to a prospective employer. Your main reason for writing the letter is to highlight points of interest in your background that match the employer's requirements for a position. It is hoped that a well written letter will lead to an interview for an internship or job. A cover letter also offers an excellent opportunity to demonstrate your writing skills to an employer.

Top 10 Cover Letter Tips

1. Always write a cover letter to accompany your resume whether you contact the employer by mail, fax, or as directed by the employer.
2. Send your cover letter to a specific person and always check for correct spelling of the name, correct title, correct address. Use the phrase "To whom it may concern:" to begin your letter only if a contact name is not available.
3. The cover letter should be one (1) page and should always have your contact information included in case it becomes separated from your resume.
4. Paragraph #1: Mention the position you are applying for, where you heard about the opening, and/or the name of the person who referred you to the employer.
5. Paragraph #2: Highlight your background as it relates to the job position requirements and qualifications that the employer has described in the job opening announcement. To add more focus to your cover letter, include research about the company and how this information pertains to your application and qualifications for the position.
6. Paragraph #3: State your interest in the position again and that you look forward to speaking to the employer soon to discuss your qualifications and how they match the requirements for the position. Tell the employer how you will follow-up your letter. If you mention that you are going to call to inquire about an interview, then be sure to do so on the appointed day. If you cannot call and must wait for a response from the employer, then be sure to thank the employer for consideration of your credentials.
7. If the employer requests a salary requirement, quote a salary range within paragraph #3. You may speak to a career counselor or professionals working in your field to research current salary ranges. If a salary history is requested, include the information on a separate sheet of paper listing the organization, your title, and your salary for each position. If you have primarily held non-paid or stipend-only positions, let the employer know that this is not indicative of your current market value. References also should be listed on a separate sheet of paper.
8. Proofread: Check for spelling, grammar, typographical errors, and consistent formatting. Use spellcheck, but also have your resume and cover letter reviewed by two other people. Example: "collage" is a word, but you may have wanted to use the word "college."
9. Use quality bond paper when mailing a cover letter and resume to an employer and always use the same color paper for both.
10. Answer these questions to be sure the employer will know the 5 "W's" after reading your cover letter:
 - What position are you applying for?
 - Where did you hear about the position?
 - Who are you?
 - Why should the employer consider you for the position?
 - When are you going to follow-up?