

# Writing Job-Application Letters

The purpose of a job-application or résumé cover letter is to improve your chances of being called for an interview, by convincing the reader that you would be the best person for the job. If your letter is poorly written, the reader will not likely take the time to look at your résumé. So, your job-application letter is a crucial chance at making a good first impression.

## What Makes a Good Letter

**Selectivity.** Choose only your best points—two or three that will be of the most interest to the reader—to present in well-developed paragraphs. Focus on skills you can bring to the company and how your accomplishments may have benefited a previous employer.

A job-application letter should

- be single spaced, leaving one space between paragraphs.
- be about one full page in length (longer if you are more experienced).
- have carefully chosen words—pack a lot into a small space, making each word count to show that you are the most qualified candidate for the position.

## Parts of a Job-Application Letter

**Inside Address**—Include the name, title, organization, and mailing address. Spell the name correctly to avoid offending the recipient—phone the company if you do not know whom to address the letter to.

**Salutation**—Begin your letter with “Dear” followed by the reader's title and last name, ending with a colon, not a comma.

**4 Paragraphs Minimum**—Your letter should have at least an introductory paragraph, an education paragraph, an employment paragraph, and a concluding paragraph.

**Complimentary Close**—These are some standard phrases: Sincerely, Sincerely yours, Yours sincerely, Yours very truly, and Very truly yours.

**Signature**—Type your full name on the fourth line below the complimentary close. Sign in ink above your typed name.

**Enclosure Line**—The enclosure notation refers to the résumé.

### ***Introductory Paragraph***

This paragraph captures your reader's attention and creates the tone of your letter. You want to establish the tone of quiet self-confidence, not self-effacement. Avoid all negative statements. For example, do not say, “I do not have a strong background in computers, but I am willing to learn.” Your reader will walk away remembering your weaknesses instead of your strengths.

**Four functions of the introductory paragraph:**

- 1) **Identifies your source of information.** For a solicited application, name your source of information: ad, website, current employee's name and title. If your application is unsolicited, simply ask if a position is available.
- 2) **Identifies the position you are interested in.** Make it clear which position you are applying for, in case the organization has advertised many job openings.
- 3) **States that you wish to be considered for the position.**
- 4) **Forecasts the rest of the letter.** Choose a few phrases in the opening paragraph that let your reader know what to expect in the body of the letter. For example, “retail experience” or “computer experience” prepares your reader for a discussion of these qualifications later in your letter.

These four points do not need to be in any particular order in your letter.

## **The Education Paragraph**

If your education paragraph is stronger than your employment paragraph, as most students' will be, place it before your employment paragraph. In your paragraph, consider what aspect of your education best fits the job requirements. A good strategy is to discuss skills and knowledge gained from advanced coursework in your major. You can also discuss the range and diversity of your courses to show your versatility, if the job you are applying for stresses this. Your business or communication skills that you acquired in college, as well as extracurricular activities, are often valuable to mention in your education paragraph. Employees with leadership experience and skills are of value to many companies. Be sure to mention your college major in the education paragraph, if you have not already done so in your introductory paragraph.

Here is an example of an education paragraph that develops one unified idea, rather than a series of unrelated facts:

In addition to the courses required for a biology degree at Texas A & M University, I took several business courses to enhance my education. Because your ad mentions that the position will require a great deal of client contact, I believe that my work in marketing would be of special value to your company. In an upper level course, I designed a 25-page pamphlet describing the hospital laboratory equipment that Peterson Hospital Equipment Company manufactures. Peterson, where I am currently employed in a work/study program, is now using this sales pamphlet to market their equipment.

Your own education paragraph should strive for a unified idea, as this one does.

## **The Employment Paragraph**

Begin with a topic sentence and develop a single idea. The idea might be that you have a broad background or that a particular job has given you special skills that will help you in the job you are applying for. This is an example of an effective employment paragraph:

For the past three summers, I have gained valuable experience as a technical editor at Space-Age Computers. The copy editors had no special training in computers and needed someone who could help verify that their revisions were technically correct. Our systems analysts answered my questions for me when I did not know the answers to our copy editors' questions, thereby increasing my own understanding of computer systems. My position in the company provided me with excellent training in the creation of operating manuals.

## **The Concluding Paragraph**

The purpose of the concluding paragraph is to encourage the reader to invite you for an interview. In the earlier paragraphs, you provided information to convince the reader to give you a second look. Your last paragraph should make it easy for the person to contact you. The following elements are in a good concluding paragraph: **a reference to your résumé; a polite but confident request for an interview; and your phone number and e-mail address.** Use the phrase "at your convenience" when requesting an interview and state the time of day you can be reached. Below is an effective example of a concluding paragraph:

More information about my education and work experience is provided on the enclosed résumé, but I would appreciate an opportunity to meet with you at your convenience to discuss further skills and experience I could bring to your company. You can reach me on Wednesdays and Fridays after 1:00 P.M. at (979)784-6595, or leave a message for me anytime on my answering machine or e-mail address: jjackson@yahoo.com.

Source:

Markel, Mike. *Technical Communication*. 8th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 387-393.

# The DON'TS of Cover-Letter Writing

## A poor cover letter

- Is poorly written with weak sentence structure and bad grammar.
- Has misspelled words or typographical errors.
- Contains sexist, condescending, or discriminatory language.
- Fails to address the reader personally or focus on his or her needs.

If you want to have a chance at all of being invited for an interview, avoid the above common mistakes found in job-application cover letters.

Let's look at some examples of **BAD COVER LETTERS**:

Dear Mr. Jones:

With great pleasure, I am enclosing my résumé for your consideration. My work history for the past two years reflected my father's illness. All available money went toward his care. I am sure my background would show what an asset I would be for dealing with all types of people.

This letter plays on the sympathy of the reader. Instead of making excuses for one's weaknesses and asking for pity, the cover letter should focus on one's strengths.

Gentlemen:

I would like to apply for the position of \_\_\_\_\_. I recently earned a bachelor's degree in marketing, and I worked the past two summers at College Town Bookstore as a sales clerk. Enclosed is a copy of my résumé, and I will gladly send my references upon request. I request, though, that you do not contact College Town Bookstore.

If you are concerned about having a previous employer contacted, do not write it in your cover letter. It raises questions in the reader's mind about your past work relationships, taking the focus off of your cover letter's purpose. During an interview, you will have the opportunity to address your concerns.

To Whom It May Concern:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the spring of hope, the winter of despair, we had everything before us. . . ." In his quote, Charles Dickens could be describing the business world of today. All of us will be faced with decisions to be made that will affect our futures. Sometimes we will need help with the choices we will need to make when opportunities for personal growth occur. I believe your management training position is the very challenge and opportunity that will help my career grow, and I would appreciate your consideration of my résumé.

This cover letter sounds more like a graduation speech! Being overly dramatic is not appropriate for a job-application cover letter; strive for a more professional, neutral tone.

Dear Ms. Johnson:

I am very interested in applying for a management training position. I graduated from Texas A&M University with a degree in marketing. I have presented many speeches and have written many papers in my classes, showing my strong communications skills. I consider myself a hard worker and a real “people person.” I would be a tremendous asset wherever I work.

The focus should be on the company’s needs—not on the perceived arrogance of the writer!

Dear Mr. Adams:

I wish to be considered for your management training position. I have no working experience in a company like Carlton Data Management or in the advertised position, but I acquired excellent organizational skills from my college courses. I think that my enthusiasm will more than make up for my lack of work experience. Please consider my enclosed résumé.

It’s best not to lead with your weaknesses. Rather, concentrate on what you can offer the company.

Dear Sirs:

I am applying for the management trainee position that I saw advertised in the newspaper. I feel I am qualified for the position.

With four years of college behind me, I am seeking a new challenge in a position where I can use my people-oriented skills.

Here is my résumé and a list of contacts who will give you information about my background, skills, and my tireless energy. I am an action-oriented people person and a team player, excited about the potential for growth and ever-increasing responsibility. I would love to share ideas with you.

I look forward to meeting you as you search for the best possible candidate for this important position in your company.

This letter is shallow and slightly jumbled. Strive for better organization and stay focused on the company’s needs.