

Cover Letters

Effective letter writing

Effective letter writing is an essential part of your job search. If you want to convince a potential employer not to hire you, send a résumé with no cover letter or with a standard form letter. Or address your letter to "Dear Sir" and have it opened by a female manager.

Good writing takes time. Compose letters that reflect your personality. Do not copy someone else's letters.

Because the co-op process is time sensitive, you will not always have the time to write a cover letter. But take the time to write tailored letters for those special positions, the ones that are important to you.

If you are a co-op student applying to jobs on WaterlooWorks, do not address a cover letter to an individual; instead, remove the salutation line or replace it with "Dear Recruiter" or "Dear Prospective Employer."

Letter writing strategies

You may contact several hundred people during your career exploration and work-search activities. For every written communication, confirm the name and title of the person to whom you should write and ensure that you have the correct spelling. Telephone the organization to verify that your information is current. Your correspondence will be better received when addressed to the correct person and not just to a job title.

Use "Ms" to address a woman unless you know that she prefers "Miss" or "Mrs."

Decide on the focus of your letter, tailor your information to the reader, and ensure that you remain on topic. Keep your letters to one page.

Let your enthusiasm shine. You do not want to lose the reader's interest before the end of the page. Avoid writing "as you can see," because the reader may not "see" the point as you do.

Check your first draft for how often you have written "I." The overuse of "I," monotonous sentence structure, and rambling or boring text defeat your goal of writing an effective letter. Try to limit your paragraphs to no more than five sentences and your sentences to a maximum of two lines. Remember that the first sentence in a paragraph should introduce the topic discussed in that paragraph.

Send an original, not copies that look mass produced. Keep a copy of your correspondence. Follow up at the appropriate time because the person you wrote may not contact you.

Cover and broadcast letters

A cover or broadcast letter accompanies your résumé to introduce you to a prospective employer as a knowledgeable and capable applicant. It should be written in business format and be no longer than one page.

If you are a co-op student and wish to include a cover letter with your other application documents, load it onto WaterlooWorks as the first page of your résumé. Because the co-op process is time sensitive, you may not be able to write a cover letter in every case. Consider writing tailored letters for those positions that are a priority for you. Do not address your letters to an individual. Remove the salutation line or replace it with "Dear Recruiter" and do not make the mistake of addressing your letter to the CECA Account Manager whose name accompanies the posting.

Use cover letters to apply to specific, advertised positions. Remember: fewer than 25% of available positions are advertised (i.e., the visible job market), so do not limit yourself to these jobs. The position you want may not be advertised when it first becomes available, if ever. You are competing with others for interviews. In fact, 90% of all job seekers are applying to the approximately 25% of jobs that are advertised!

Use broadcast letters to uncover opportunities in organizations. Jobs in the hidden job market can be found most easily through networking. (For more information regarding the hidden job market, review the [Work: Find/Create section](#).) Through your contacts, you should be able to obtain the names and addresses of people who hire for the work you would like to do. You can also use employer directories and web sites to discover which organizations might hire. Refer to the [Contacting hiring managers](#) page within the [Success at Work](#) unit for additional ideas on the effective use of broadcast letters.

Strategies

The quality of your letter will determine the employer's first impression of you. Do your research so that you can articulate your competitive advantage. Remember that your goal is to market yourself by clearly explaining why the employer should consider hiring you. Include only job-relevant information, particularly on your experience (paid and volunteer), education, accomplishments, and skills related to the job. Your cover letter highlights the most important information while your résumé is more comprehensive.

Write down ideas for your letter as you think of them. Then analyze the material and organize it into themes. Highlight achievements and how they are transferable to the job for which you are applying. Based on your research (literature/web review and speaking to knowledgeable people) and the advertisement, make notes on the qualifications required or desired, and be sure to emphasize your strengths in these areas. Use action verbs, but do not repeat verbatim what is in your résumé. Avoid negative words and negative ideas: stress your qualifications for the job rather than mention those you do not have. Avoid words such as "although" and "however" because they introduce negative statements.

Letters are typically written in complete sentences. In fact, employers often consider the letter to be evidence of your written communication skills, particularly for jobs that involve significant writing. If it seems appropriate, you may wish to highlight several key points in a bulleted list. If you use this approach, make sure that your list is not a repeat of your Summary of Qualifications. Underlining, bolding, and italicizing are not recommended.

Be sure to group your points by themes: decide which points fit together to form your paragraphs, prioritize your themes, and include only the most essential information. Refer to your notes to determine the order of importance for your paragraphs, using the job description as a clue. Construct an opening sentence for each paragraph. Throughout your paragraphs, make clear statements, expand upon each point, and give examples as proof. In your examples, include specifics such as dollar amounts or other numbers, to validate your assessment of your capabilities. Follow this process for each paragraph. Include

three to five paragraphs in your letter (one opening, one to three middle, one closing), and limit each paragraph to a maximum of five sentences. Be sure you close with a strong paragraph that encourages the employer to take action (i.e., to contact you).

Rewrite as many times as necessary to create a clear, interesting, and relevant document for the reader. Then, be sure to proofread and, if possible, have someone else review your letter. If sending printed copies, use good-quality paper, preferably the same paper used for your résumé.

In a broadcast letter, choose carefully the phrasing of statements about the type of work you are seeking. If you are too narrow, you may not be considered for some positions. If you are too broad, you may be perceived as unfocused or indecisive, as a person who wants just any job. When sending letters into the hidden job market, don't send hundreds because you will not be able to do the necessary research, and the response rate will not justify the time and cost. Concentrate initially on fifteen to twenty organizations. Then expand your focus to the next group of fifteen to twenty. Expand your mailing list only as long as you can produce quality applications.

Both types of letters are best addressed to a named individual. When composing a broadcast letter, you require a contact name, so obtain the name and title of the person to whom you will apply (supervisor or manager of the area you want to work in; president of a small company; executive director of an organization). Remember to record the mailing address and phone number.

Quick tips/final check

Do

- Address to a named individual (except in co-op process)
- Project confidence
- Make the most of the opening paragraph
- Use simple business language
- Speak to the job requirements
- Demonstrate value added
- Clarify why you should be hired
- Minimize "I" statements
- Use action verbs
- Provide your contact information
- Track all correspondence for follow up
- Follow the format of a standard business letter
- Be brief and to the point
- Proofread your letter

Do Not

- Send a form letter
- Use clichés
- Be negative or humble
- Send your résumé without a letter
- Wait for the employer to follow up with you
- Send written material with typos or smudges
- Tell employers what they can do for you
- Rehash your résumé or include too much detail
- Say anything about your lack of experience

| | COVER (ACTUAL JOB OPENING) | BROADCAST (POSSIBLE JOB OPENING) |
|------------------------|--|---|
| | Dear Mr/Ms (Last Name): (except in co-op process) | Dear Mr/Ms (Last Name): (except in co-op process) |
| FIRST PARAGRAPH | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name the job you are applying to and where you saw or heard the advertisement ▪ If applicable, include a reference to the person(s) you spoke to about the organization ▪ Briefly sum up your value to the employer by stating what interests you in the organization and position | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name the area you are interested in and starting date ▪ Include a reference to the person(s) you spoke to about the organization ▪ Briefly sum up your value to the employer by stating what interests you in the organization and area |

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| MIDDLE PARAGRAPH | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When discussing your qualifications, use (occasionally) words from the job description ▪ Group your qualifications according to themes and prove points by using examples ▪ Organize paragraphs carefully and place the most important ones first | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group your qualifications according to themes and prove points by using examples ▪ Organize paragraphs carefully and place the most important ones first |
| FINAL PARAGRAPH | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to your enclosed résumé (optional) ▪ Mention that you would like to provide more information in an interview ▪ Include your phone number with the best times to reach you, and your email address (except in co-op process) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to your enclosed résumé (optional) ▪ Mention that you would like to provide more information in an interview ▪ Indicate the follow-up you will do (e.g., phone to arrange a mutually convenient time to meet) |

Thank-you letters

Send thank-you letters or notes to everyone helping you, to:

1. Express your appreciation for their help
2. Keep them up-to-date on your activities
3. Retain their support

Thank-you letters can be word processed, handwritten, or emailed. A word-processed letter is the most formal and is generally always appropriate. Handwritten letters are more personal and may be appropriate for brief notes. Letters sent via email are acceptable when email has been your means of contact with the individual you wish to thank, when your contact may have indicated a preference for email, or when you would like to send a quick thank you before following up with a word-processed or handwritten letter. Ensure you have the correct email address for the intended recipient. Format your email as you would a word-processed letter. Remain professional and do not use happy faces or acronyms (such as "TIA" for "thanks in advance"). Try to keep the message to one screen length.

Remember: emails tend to be read quickly and deleted, but a letter or note may be placed in a file.

Thank-you letters in response to telephone conversations and informational interviews should be short. Mention one or more helpful points you learned and convey your appreciation for the person's assistance. Be sure to send your letter within one or two days of your meeting.

Acknowledge in writing your appreciation to a networking contact who gave you tips on job openings and who is hiring, or who referred you to others who can help.

Thank people who have agreed to provide references for you or to speak on your behalf. Make sure you know what they will say about you. Is it accurate and complimentary? Always keep this group of people informed about your activities. For example, after an employer asks for your list of references, call those on your list with details about the position so that they will be able to tailor their information.

Thank-you letter for a job interview

Use this letter, the most neglected of all the letters, to confirm your interest in the position, to summarize your main credentials, and to express your desire to be included in the next step of the interview process or to be offered the job.

Promptly after an interview, send a letter that builds upon the strengths you discussed in the interview. You can also mention additional information that was not covered in your interview. Remind the interviewer of your qualifications for the position and how the company could benefit. Always express appreciation to interviewers for the time and courtesy shown to you (e.g., tours, lunch).

A thank-you letter for a job interview should include:

1. An opening paragraph in which you state the name of the employer, mention the date of the interview, and express your appreciation for the interview
2. A second paragraph that reaffirms your understanding of the position's requirements and emphasizes your qualifications. Here is where you can add an important piece of information that you may have forgotten to discuss in the interview
3. If necessary, a third paragraph to correct any misunderstandings the interviewer may have following your interview. This paragraph can also be used to counter an objection the interviewer may have raised
4. A final paragraph to express your interest in and enthusiasm for the position and the company

Follow up letters

After being declined for a job

After you receive a "we do not wish to hire you at this time" letter from an employer, compose a letter to demonstrate your positive attitude towards the organization. Indicate your interest in being considered for opportunities similar to the one you were interviewed for.

To withdraw from consideration

Inform an employer if you decide that you are no longer interested in a position so the employer can remove your name from the list of candidates. The employer will therefore not have to spend time and money trying to locate you, only to be told you are not interested. Your thoughtfulness will allow the employer to concentrate on other applicants. State your appreciation for the interview. Write the letter as positively as you can, to ensure a future amicable relationship.

In your letter, you might:

1. Express appreciation for the interview
2. Mention the name of your potential supervisor and state the position for which you were being considered
3. Decline graciously
4. Briefly explain your reasoning, sticking to the facts
5. No apology is necessary; reiterate your appreciation

To decline a job offer

Write a tactful, friendly letter, thanking the employer for the job offer and expressing regret that you are unable to accept the offer.

Include, if you wish, information on factors that have led you to accept another position (e.g., more customer contact, more writing and editing, more research and development in XYZ Company). Avoid negative overtones so that you will maintain an employer's goodwill and high regard for you, making it easier for you to contact the company in the future.

To accept a job offer

When you accept a job offer, confirm the details in writing. Express your enthusiasm about undertaking the position and reiterate all terms discussed during the interview period so that any misunderstanding can be resolved before your first day of work. Include a brief paragraph mentioning why you believe the employer made the right decision.

State the title of the position you will be assuming and the starting date. Confirm all arrangements discussed during the interview (e.g., salary, benefits, car allowance, reimbursement of moving expenses). Add any other particulars that may be important.

Cover letter templates

Note

The way in which files open on your machine will depend on the web browser you are using, and the type(s) of software (e.g., Microsoft Word) installed on your device. For example, files may open up in a new window, download to your machine, etc.

- [Cover letter template \(.doc\)](#)