



UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

Student Employment &
Career Centre



Cover Letter Guide

Introduction

Every resume you send should be accompanied by a cover letter—a powerful tool in communicating your uniqueness and personal qualifications. The primary purpose of the cover letter is to acquaint the prospective employer with your unique talents and skills, and to arrange an interview to discuss employment possibilities.

The cover letter should highlight your resume by identifying how you are qualified for the position. Tailor your cover letter to the position for which you are applying, linking your qualifications with the job description and/or qualifications requested by the employer. In order that it stand out from the hundreds of cover letters (resumes, application forms, etc.) your cover letter should emphasize the specific abilities, talents, skills and accomplishments that make you the ideal candidate for that particular position. Highlighting one or two of your greatest strengths will increase the chances of your standing out in the recruiter's mind. Articulating this information in your cover letter demonstrates your ability to write and communicate—skills that are highly regarded by many employers.

If your cover letter is effective, it will provide the reader with a sense of your approach and potential fit within the organization. Keep in mind that the employer wants to know what you can do for them, not why and how the position would benefit you.

Cover Letter Writing Guidelines

- Ideally, the letter should be one page in length, single spaced, three to four paragraphs, with paragraphs limited to six or seven lines.
- Make sure the letter looks professional in format, structure and design.
- Write your letters in the first person, yet vary your sentences with beginning phrases and clauses so that they do not all start with “I” or “My.”
- Communicate a clear purpose—organize your thoughts and present them in a way that is easy for the reader to follow, and avoid jargon, acronyms and trite language.
- Use words that demonstrate your confidence but do not make you appear overly aggressive or arrogant.
- Use the first sentence of each paragraph strategically—cover letters are often skimmed and the first sentence is key in enticing the reader.

Step by Step Guide

To help you tackle writing your cover letter, follow this step by step guide:

Step 1: Know Yourself

The first step is to identify your interests, skills, accomplishments and any experiences that may interest the employer. Identify your goal(s) for writing the letter—are you applying for a specific position or are you initiating the first contact? A cover letter should answer an employer's ultimate question: Why should I hire you?

Step 2: Know the Target Audience

Try to keep in mind the perspective of the employer who will be reading the letter. He or she is interested in what value you could bring to the organization. What you convey in your letter should provide enough interest to lead an employer to want to interview you. Most cover letters state that the applicant has the necessary skills and qualifications. To make yours unique, you must go one step further—relate how your skills and experience can help the employer's organization.

Research the employer and position for which you are applying. You should leave no doubt in the employer's mind that you know something about her or his organization. When composing your letter, write from the job description, using it to draw as many connections as possible (knowledge, skills, abilities, experiences) between yourself and the position. Consider making a chart to guide you in writing your cover letter that outlines employer needs and requirements on one side and your qualifications on the other side.

Employer Needs	Your Qualifications
Budget experience	Treasurer, Accounting Club
Accounting coursework	Accounting major
Computer literacy	Specific software, courses
Community service	Volunteer for Special Olympics

Step 3: Production & Format

A cover letter should be no longer than one page in length and written in a standard business format that aligns all the information to the left margin. When organizing your cover letter, it should be composed of the following:

Your Contact Information

Begin by providing your contact information. This should include your name, full address, telephone number and e-mail address.

Date

Place one line of space before the correspondence date.

Recipient's Contact Information

Place another line of space, then list the recipient's contact information. Include her or his name, title (if available), the company's name and address. Ensure that you have addressed the letter to the correct company and contact name (using the appropriate title for the recipient) and that both are spelled correctly.

Reference Line

It is highly recommended that you use a "Re:" heading to clearly indicate the purpose of the letter. The Re: line may include topics such as the job title, competition number or position inquiry. This is information that quickly provides the reader with a clear indication of the letter's purpose.

Salutation

Ideally, you want to address the letter to a specific person. It is better to send your letter to someone you have already contacted and who is in a position to hire you than to send a generic letter. You can often be provided the name of a contact person through the front office, Human Resources or the Personnel Office by calling and indicating that you would like to send correspondence and need to know to whom you should address your letter. Ask for the correct spelling of the name and thank the individual for her or his time.

When you research the organization you may be referred to someone as you engage in networking opportunities. Ask for the contact person's name, job title, mailing address, telephone and fax numbers, and e-mail address.

If you cannot find the name of the appropriate person, you may address your letter in one of the following ways: "Madam/Sir," "Human Resources," "Hiring Committee" or "Personnel." Avoid addressing your letter "To whom it may concern," and never guess about someone's gender. If you are unsure, do not make any reference to "Mr." or "Ms."

Cover Letter Writing Guidelines

- Highlight and draw attention to the points in your resume that uniquely qualify you for the position.
- Do not use vague descriptors such as "loyal," "hardworking," or "good at working with people" unless you give concrete examples to support these.
- Do not highlight your weaknesses. If you do not have direct experience, you can emphasize your eagerness to learn and to master new systems.
- Pay special attention to grammar, spelling and neatness. The cover letter should represent your very best efforts. Have someone else proofread your letter, rather than relying on your computer's spell check feature.
- Use the same font and quality paper that you used for your resume. Print your letter using a laser printer for better quality and match envelopes with a typed or printed address.
- Print an original letter rather than sending a mass-produced copy.
- Read your letter out loud and listen to the language. Ask yourself: Does it sound like a form letter? Do I convey enthusiasm and a sense of who I am? Have I sold myself as a strong candidate?

Introductory Paragraph

If you use the “Re:” heading, there is no reason to repeat the purpose for writing in the opening paragraph. Instead, use this opening paragraph to *grab* the reader’s attention. For example, if a reference suggested you write this letter, use her or his name in the opening paragraph:

“Sarah Smith in your Graphics Department indicated to me that opportunities may be available in your Marketing Department.”

If you are applying to an organization without a referral, grab the reader’s attention by explaining why their organization appeals to you. For example:

“Engineering Plus is one of few organizations that give young engineers the chance to develop multiple skill sets in the early stages of their career.”

The introductory paragraph should be brief, perhaps two or three sentences long.

If you do not use a “Re:” heading, your opening sentence must clearly indicate your purpose for writing the letter.

- For a letter of application, state the position for which you are applying and how you learned about the opening. Mention both the job title and competition number if you are responding to an advertisement. If you have any personal contacts in the company or if a person referred you to the position or organization, this is a good place to mention them.
- For a letter of inquiry, indicate the type of position you are seeking and enquire about its availability.

Sample Advertised Job Description

- Customer service/sales experience an asset;
- The ability to deal with all types of contacts using effective diplomacy and interpersonal skills;
- Excellent analytical, communication, presentation and business writing skills;
- Post-secondary education preferred;
- Proven planning, organizational and time management skills;

Main Body

The main content of the cover letter, consisting of one to two paragraphs, should explain why the employer should take an interest in you.

The goal is to match your background and experience (key strengths, skills, abilities, achievements, experiences and/or extracurricular activities) with the position by selecting the most relevant qualifications listed in your resume and discussing them in detail.

Remember, you want to reference your education and work history, not merely restate what the resume already has listed. Incorporate information that reflects your knowledge of the company, its industry and relevant issues. Tell the employer what you can do for the organization rather than what it can do for you.

If applying for an advertised position, look at the qualifications and see how they were listed. In general, employers tend to list the most important things first. (See Sample Advertised Job Description to the left.)

Although your education is important, this employer lists education fourth in the list of qualifications and states that post-secondary education is “preferred.” Focus first on how your customer service/sales experience and interpersonal skills would benefit the organization, since these attributes are listed first and appear to be the most important qualification sought in an employee.

Concluding Paragraph

In the concluding paragraph, clearly describe how you will follow up on your application (unless the employer has indicated no contact). Indicate that you plan to follow up by telephone or e-mail to discuss your background and to schedule a convenient time for an interview (or some other response, if appropriate). Be sure to follow up if you indicate that you will be doing so. This will allow you the responsibility of following up rather than leaving it to the employer.

Clearly state where and when you can be reached (home telephone, e-mail address, message service), and express your willingness to be interviewed or to supply further information. Close the paragraph by thanking your reader and expressing your appreciation for his or her time and consideration.

Closing

Close your letter with a statement such as: Sincerely, Yours Truly, Regards, or another word or phrase that conveys professionalism. Underneath your closing, leave three blank lines and type your name. Remember to sign your letters neatly within the blank lines.

Enclosure

When enclosing documents with your cover letter, indicate the documents you are enclosing (resume, transcripts, letters of reference, etc.).

Step 4: Proofread & Critique Your Letter

It is critical that your letter is error-free. Proofread your letters carefully, as cover letters that contain spelling and formatting errors will not create a favourable impression and will make you stand out in a negative way. It may be beneficial to have a friend or relative proofread your letter for grammar and readability. The Student Employment & Career Centre (SECC) also offers QuickTalk sessions, a service that allows you to meet with a Career Services Officer to discuss strategy and presentation for your documents. These are one hour drop-in sessions held at various times throughout the week in an informal setting. Visit the SECC website for a list of timeslots available.

Step 5: Sending Your Letter

When printing your documents, use the same font and quality paper that you used for your resume. Print your cover letter using a laser printer to ensure top quality; remember that laser printers are available in all campus computer labs. Always print an original letter for each employer rather than sending a mass-produced photocopy.

Carefully staple all documents together in the top left-hand corner. If mailing your documents, place them in a large envelope to ensure that your application will arrive unfolded. Address envelopes in type or print clearly by hand.

If you are faxing the document, make sure to include a fax cover sheet that clearly identifies the person(s) to whom you are sending the application and the total number of pages being faxed.

Sending your letter electronically

When sending your application via e-mail to the employer, we recommend that you do not “Cut and Paste” your entire cover letter into the body text of the e-mail message. When the applications are received by the employer, he or she will often print off copies of your documents. If your cover letter is in e-mail format, the first document the employer will view is that of an unattractive e-mail print out. Instead, you are encouraged to attach your cover letter and resume as one document and to write a brief e-mail message to indicate which documents the employer should find attached. Also, please keep in mind that professionalism, including spelling and grammar, is of the utmost importance.

Example

Subject Heading: Application for Development Coordinator Position

Dear Ms. Job:

Please find attached my application documents for the Development Coordinator opportunity. The documents are in MS Word format; if you have any problems opening the attachment, please contact me at (306) 555-5678.

Thank you for your consideration.

Regards,

Anita Career

However, should you choose to insert the text of your cover letter into the body text of the e-mail message, ensure that the content is in plain text format and includes contact information. The contact information will be useful to the employer, should he or she be unable to retrieve the attached documents. Do not exclusively paste your cover letter into the e-mail; ensure that it is also included as an attachment, along with your resume.

Step 6: Keep Track with an Organizational System

Once you start sending out cover letters and resumes, it is important that you devise some way of keeping track of what you have sent and when. If, for example, you send out a letter to an employer requesting an interview and offer to call them during the week of March 3rd, you must record that date somewhere so that you are sure to meet that commitment. It is critical to know what you have said in a particular letter so that you can follow it up with accuracy.

The following are some suggested formats for organizing your cover letters, resumes, application forms, etc. You may use a paper form or record entries in a computer spreadsheet or other program that can track your job search.

- a. **Use charts** – In a hard copy or electronic format, chart out in columns with headings such as Prospective Employer and Contact Information, Person Contacted, Date Sent, Proposed Follow-up Date, Person Who Replied, Date of Reply and any Action Required. Try to keep this chart updated and retain any letters that you receive in response.
- b. **Electronic copies** – When saving cover letters in electronic form, name the file with appropriate titles to identify what they are. For example, Company_name_CL_datesent.doc
- c. **Hard copies** – Make copies of all the letters you send out and keep them in a file folder or binder. You can keep additional folders that contain all the letters you receive that call for further action to be taken on your part and another for rejection letters. This method will help to ensure that you have all your letters to refer to when composing other letters. You can also reflect on the letters you have sent and determine which ones were the most effective in generating interviews.

Sample Cover Letters

Sample One: Advertised Position

ANITA CAREER
201 – 110 Penniless Road
Broke, SK S7N 2C4
(306) 555-1234
abc123@mail.usask.ca

February 12, 2009

Debbie Reynolds
Human Resources Manager
Engineering Plus
1000 – 100 Street East
Saskatoon, SK S2P 9S1

RE: Engineering Support Analyst (#A875)

Dear Ms. Reynolds:

Engineering Plus is one of few organizations that give young engineers the chance to develop multiple skill sets in the early stages of their career. The opportunity to apply my skills in the design, production and service divisions of the company is exactly the type of challenge I am looking for. With this in mind, I was quite happy to see your advertisement in The Sunday News. My background in mechanical engineering and 2 years of relevant experience will allow me make a significant contribution to the achievement of Engineering Plus' service goals and objectives.

Recently, I completed an internship experience with an engineering firm in Southern Saskatchewan. I was given the responsibility of managing a small project. Throughout this experience, I acted as a liaison between plant engineering personnel and equipment suppliers, prepared quotes and technical documents, gathered operational data for design purposes and coordinated production. My strong mathematical skills, ability to meet deadlines and complete tasks unsupervised would be a valuable asset to Engineering Plus.

Accepting challenges is the foundation of my education and work experience. You will find me a committed individual who takes pride in producing quality work, providing innovative solutions, and communicating effectively with all members of the team.

I look forward to meeting you to further discuss how my education and experience would be beneficial to Engineering Plus. You may reach me at the above telephone number or e-mail address.

Thank you for considering my application.

Sincerely,



Anita Career

Enclosures: resume
letters of recommendation (2)

The examples utilized within this guide are fictitious. No association with any real person, company, organization, product, e-mail address, place, or event is intended or should be inferred.

Sample Cover Letters

Sample Two: Networking Letter

Anita Career

201 -110 Penniless Road
Broke, SK S7N 2C4
306.555.1234
abc123@mail.usask.ca

26 September 2009

Mr. Joel Robinson, Product Development Manager
Agri-Impact
987 Bright Futures Avenue
Regina, SK S5H 8G2

RE: Research & Development Opportunities

Dear Mr. Robinson:

As an industry leader in product development, Agri-Impact stands alone in terms of innovation and quality. I had the opportunity to speak with you on September 23 at the University of Saskatchewan's *Campus Career Expo*, where it was mentioned that a number of opportunities are available for new graduates. As of May 2010, I will have obtained my Bachelor of Science in Agriculture and I am interested in entry-level positions within your organization.

My research background in the field, complemented by my education, would be of high value to Agri-Impact. As a Research Assistant with NuGrowth Botanicals, I worked as a contributing member of the Development Team. My role involved extensive fieldwork; including seeding, spraying, and harvesting of research plot trials.

Further, as a participant in the University of Saskatchewan *Leadership Advantage* program, I was able to learn and apply the principles of solid leadership: awareness, competence, and respect. As part of the program, I worked with a team of five students from a variety of colleges, as well as community partners, to investigate the feasibility of bringing a Science Centre to Saskatoon. Through this experience, I worked independently on various aspects of the project and brought back my research for integration with the team document. From this experience, I applied and learned how to effectively communicate with team members and manage numerous projects concurrently. Within your team-focused environment, I would be a valuable asset.

As you mentioned, the continued expansion of your dynamic organization is allowing a wide variety of opportunities. I will contact you on October 1 to enquire about possible employment within the company. Please feel free to contact me at 306.555.1234 to discuss my qualifications and interest in Agri-Impact. Thank you for your time and consideration; I look forward to speaking with you in the near future.

Best regards,



Anita Career

Enclosures: Resume, Transcript of Grades

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Additional Types of Letters

Although there are many types of job-search related letters, these are some of the most common. Refer to our Career Library at the SECC for more information about these and other types of letters.

Follow-up or Thank-you Letter

Every meeting and interview should be followed by a thank-you letter. These letters demonstrate good manners and are an effective job-search tool. Your letter can serve to refresh your session in the mind of the interviewer. Within two days of an interview or meeting, send out a thank-you letter to the person(s) who conducted the interview or arranged the meeting. You may choose to send a thank-you letter as a formal business letter, a thank-you card or an e-mail.

Reiterate your interest in the employer by mentioning new points or assets you may have failed or forgotten to address in the original interview. Ask any questions that you have that were not answered in the original interview and supply any additional information that was requested at the time of the interview or visit. Express your anticipation to receive word regarding a hiring decision. In addition, after attending a career fair or after a casual meeting with an employer, write a thank-you note to employers with whom you met and whose organizations you want to pursue further.

Acceptance of Job Offer Letter

The successful conclusion of your job search may mean signing a formal contract offer. In the absence of a formal offer you may need to write an acceptance letter. The letter is a statement of your good faith and commitment to accept a position. Upon receipt of a job offer, a prompt acknowledgment should be sent to the prospective employer.

In general, an acceptance letter follows a telephone or personal conversation in which the details of the offer and terms of employment are discussed. Address the letter to the person who offered you the position. Confirm specific details about salary, starting date and other arrangements for moving, relocation, expenses and other details regarding your transition (if applicable). Thank the person and show your enthusiasm and appreciation for the offer.

Letter of Declination or Withdrawal

A letter of declination is written to organizations whose job offers you are rejecting. This letter informs an employer that you will not be accepting the job offer or that you have accepted another offer.

Express your appreciation to the person who presented the job offer. Identify the position and explain your decision for declining (do not get too personal—stick to the facts). The key to this letter is to make certain that all your opportunities are kept open. You need not explain why you accepted another position or the salary offered. It is important to be courteous and tactful.

Follow-up to a Rejection Letter

When you have received a rejection letter for a position you have applied for, do not take this rejection letter as a definite “no.” A demonstrated interest in the organization and respectful letter may lead to further consideration for other positions as they become available. Acknowledge that you have received the rejection letter and thank them for considering your application. Indicate that you are still interested in a position with the organization, and give some specific information to illustrate what you like about the organization, position or both.

Additional Resources

For additional literature and examples, U of S students and alumni are invited to borrow resources from the SECC Career Resource Library.

SECC Office Hours (Monday–Friday)

8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m.



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