

Guide to...
Writing a Cover Letter
(and other employment
correspondence)



Dickinson College
Career Center

WRITING A COVER LETTER

...and other employment correspondence

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WHY WRITE A COVER LETTER

A cover letter introduces a resume, and should be included with every resume you send, regardless of whether or not it is required as part of the application materials. Its function is to convince the reader to review the resume that accompanies the cover letter. This document is also a clear indication of a person's writing abilities as well as a great opportunity for you to sell yourself to an employer and convey your enthusiasm for the position and organization.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- **Do you know what you want?**
Before you begin, make sure you have decided on a career field and a function you wish to perform in that field. *Contact the Career Center for career exploration assistance, in order to effectively describe your goals.*
- **Have you identified a group of prospective employers?**
These should be companies or organizations likely to be hiring and likely to be interested in your skills and your background, or companies for which you have seen a job announcement.
- **Have you prepared your resume?**
You should have a polished, professional and well-written resume appropriate to your career field. Review the *Resume Writing Guide*.

DOS AND DON'TS OF A COVER LETTER

- **DO read the job description for the position for which you apply.** Much of the information included in your cover letter should be based on the job description. Research might also include a review of the company website.
- **DO send a unique cover letter to every employer to whom you are applying.** Form letters are easily recognized and very much frowned upon by employers. Each cover letter should be specific to the position and organization to which you are applying. If you are applying to similar positions you can use the same cover letter with minor changes.
- **DO write your cover letter on paper that matches your resume.**
- **DO provide examples and develop your “marketing paragraph.”** Anyone can say that they have certain skills. You need to prove to the reader that you have the skills they are looking for by providing examples from past experiences. For example, instead of simply saying “*I am a highly organized individual,*” say “*I am a highly organized individual. For example, while working at XYZ store I was responsible for shipping and receiving merchandise, which required a significant amount of paperwork, both for incoming and outgoing merchandise, as well as for damaged, back ordered, and missing merchandise. Realizing that a position with ABC Realty would require someone with strong organizational skills and based on my prior experience with XYZ Store, I feel that I am very qualified for the position.*”
- **DO address the individual by name,** not “Sir or Madame” or “Whom it May Concern,” and use the appropriate title: Mr., Ms., Dr., etc. If you do not have a name, call the organization and ask to whom you should send your application materials. With no phone number listed in the job announcement, or the announcement stating not to contact them, address the letter to “Hiring Manager” or “Human Resources Manager.”
- **DO explain the purpose of your letter in the first paragraph.**
- **DO show that you have researched the organization and the position** by including well-chosen bits of information about the organization that impress you or about the position requirements.
- **DO keep your letter short,** no longer than one page with four or fewer paragraphs.

- **DO sound natural in your cover letter and use an active voice.** Avoid overwriting or sounding too academic. Focus on demonstrations of skills as well as previous experiences.
- **DO lead off with a provocative or interesting sentence,** something other than *“I am a senior at Dickinson College, majoring in Political Science.”*
- **DO make your cover letter perfect.** Proofread for typographical or grammatical errors. Also, have a professor or career counselor proofread.
- **DO show how the reader will benefit from hiring you.** Be persuasive.
- **DON’T send a photocopy of a letter.**
- **DON’T use negative phrases or comments,** such as *“Although I have no experience...”* or *“My GPA is lower than required, but...”*
- **DON’T waste words or use flowery phrases.** Business writing is to the point and bottom-line oriented.
- **DON’T write in a mechanical or dull manner.**
- **DON’T make your cover letter into an essay or a novel.**
- **DON’T re-write your resume in your cover letter.** Rather, use your cover letter to expand on your resume and provide more detail on experiences relevant to the position to which you are applying.
- **DON’T forget to sign your letter!**

COMPONENTS OF A COVER LETTER

The Opening Paragraph

- Start off with a catchy opening line, something that will grab their attention and make them want to continue reading. However, don’t be too over-the-top!
 - ◊ *“Your advertisement in the New York Times captured my attention for two reasons...”*
 - ◊ *“My internship supervisor, Dr. John Smith, suggested I contact you regarding...”*
- Mention the position for which you are applying.
- Note how you heard about the position. If you heard about it from a mutual contact, be sure to mention their name.

The Body Paragraph(s)

- Before writing this paragraph, make sure you read the qualifications section of the job announcement. State your qualifications for the position, while keeping in mind the interests of the reader.
- Tell the reader how hiring you will benefit the company due to your talents, previous experiences, etc.
 - ◊ *“During my three years as a night desk clerk for Sheraton Hotels, I developed an appreciation for the importance of good customer relations. My experiences could be directly applied to your sales division as...”*
- Try to establish mutual interests or similarities between your background and the company.
 - ◊ *“While reading about your recent expansion in Germany, the similarities to my experience in Germany during my junior year...”*
- Focus on your strengths. Stress your achievements, skills, and abilities.
 - ◊ *“As captain of the track team, I developed a strong team spirit, as well as leadership skills, by...”*
 - ◊ *“Through my philosophy course work, I have learned to think analytically...”*
- Present challenging or novel thoughts that will inspire the employer to want to talk to you. Emphasize something in your resume that will intrigue the employer.
 - ◊ *“You may be interested to know that I led a Boy Scout troop throughout my four years at Dickinson. In an effort to fund troop activities, I created a list of the twenty prominent corporations in our area and spoke with a public relations representative at each company. Not only raising enough money to fund a major camping trip for the boys, I also acquired an interesting collection of observations into the public relations field...”*

- Explain the relationship between your background and the position.
 - ◊ *“Through my history major I have learned the importance of careful and accurate research and concise communication of knowledge and information. Using these skills to research your product line, I could develop appropriate and thorough sales presentations for you.*
- Expand on your resume.
 - ◊ *“You will note on my resume that I was an employee at Pizza Hut. While on the surface that might appear to be an entry-level position, in reality I served as the manager two evenings per week. During that time I was particularly challenged by...”*

The Closing Paragraph

- Reiterate your interest in the position.
 - ◊ *“I am extremely interested in the sales position with Merck. Based on my skills, prior experience, and academic background, I believe that I am a qualified candidate.”*
- Use an assertive close, make a bid directly for an interview.
 - ◊ *“I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the opening in...”*
 - ◊ *“I will call your office to discuss the opportunities in more detail.”*

E-MAIL COVER LETTERS

You may find that employers prefer you to send them your resume via e-mail. If this is the case, you should write an abbreviated version of your cover letter in the text of the e-mail. *This cover letter should still be professional*, rather than conversational, *even though you are sending it as an e-mail*. Most people will tend to just write a few brief lines when e-mailing their resume; therefore, writing a version of a cover letter in the e-mail may put you ahead of the other candidates vying for the position. When writing an e-mail cover letter, follow these guidelines:

- Keep the cover letter brief. It should be more than just a few lines, but less than what you would write for a typical cover letter.
- Use the same guidelines for content as you would use for a standard cover letter.
- Mention in the e-mail that you have attached a full version of your cover letter, as well as your resume.
- Follow-up your e-mailed cover letter and resume with a hard copy of both documents via snail mail. Mention in your hard copy of the cover letter that you recently e-mailed your cover letter and resume and are now following it up with a hard copy.
- Do not fill out the TO: portion of the e-mail until you have completed your cover letter and successfully attached the full version and your resume. This will keep you from accidentally sending the e-mail before you are ready to send it.
- In the SUBJECT line, write “Application for _____ position.”
- Send the e-mail from an e-mail account that has a professional-sounding address, such as your Dickinson account, rather than from an address such as partygirl@yahoo.com. Many people are able to choose an email address such as DickinsonJ96@gmail.com.
- Use spell-check, but do not rely on it. Proofread your e-mail...twice! Sometimes spell-check will catch a misspelled word and change it to a different word than what you had meant for it to be. You should also proofread to be sure that what you wrote flows, makes sense, and that your tone is appropriate. (Tone of an e-mail can be easily misinterpreted, and you really want this job.)
- The names of the attached documents should include your first and last name, as well as what the document is. For example, “John Smith Resume.”
- Follow professional e-mail etiquette, which includes:
 - ◊ Capitalize the first letter of each sentence and do not write in all capital or all lower-case letters.
 - ◊ Use proper punctuation.
 - ◊ Avoid emoticons, such as :) or :O
 - ◊ Avoid phonetic spelling, such as “ur” for “you are.”

- ◇ Correct spelling and grammar
- See an e-mail cover letter example on [page 11](#).

FORMAT OF A COVER LETTER

The format of the cover letter should be a standard business or professional letter format.

- Margins: No less than one inch wide in each direction
- Font: Professional
- Text: Single-spaced
- Formats: Modified or full block are the most common

Your address
Your city, state, and zip

Date

Contact Person's Name
Contact Person's Title
Organization's Name
Organization's Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear <Contact Person's Name>:

Opening Paragraph Opening Paragraph Opening Paragraph Opening Paragraph Opening Paragraph
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Sincerely,

<Sign Here>

Your Name

Enclosure: Resume

Dear Ms. Smith:

It is with great pleasure that I enclose my resume for your consideration. My movements last year were dictated by my father's illness. All meager funds went to bringing him the happiness he deserved. My background would prove an asset in dealing with all personas and interfacing on all levels.

Thank you so very much and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Don't play on the sympathy of your reader. In this case, the writer should not have mentioned the father's illness or the lack of money.

This sounds more like a graduation speech than a cover letter!

Dear Ms. Smith:

"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, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us..." This quote from Charles Dickens captures the essence of the business world today. We are presented with opportunities for growth and a lot of decisions need to be made which will affect all of our futures. To deal with these choices, help is often needed. This is why I would like to work for your company.

I have enclosed a copy of my resume which highlights my skills and experiences. I believe your management training position is the challenge and opportunity which I am looking for in my career. I am confident that I would be an asset to your company. Your consideration of my resume would be greatly appreciated.

Dear Ms. Smith:

Please consider this as my letter of application for the position of _____. I have a bachelor's degree in history and I have worked every summer as a painter for C&D Painting Company. I have enclosed a copy of my resume and I will be glad to send a list of my references upon request. For personal reasons, however, I will respectfully request that you not contact C&D Painters.

Thank you for your consideration.

If there is a reason that your employer should not be contacted, do not write that in the cover letter. You will have the opportunity once you are interviewed to discuss any concerns you may have.

I – I – I!!! This letter is not focused on the employer's needs, it is focused on the writer. The letter gives a perception of arrogance. The focus should be on the needs of the company and how you can help the company meet those needs.

Dear Ms. Smith:

I should like to be considered a candidate for a management training position in your company. Though I have no previous working experience in a company such as yours or in the position advertised, my excellent organizational skills and enthusiasm will more than make up for my lack of experience. Enclosed please find a current resume.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

This letter is shallow and slightly jumbled. The letter should be more organized and focused on the needs of the company or organization.

Dear Ms. Smith:

I am interested in applying for your management training program. I graduated from Dickinson College with a degree in Economics. I have done a lot of public speaking and I have written many papers which demonstrate my strong communication skills. I am good at dealing with people and I am a hard worker.

Do not overlook this opportunity to grant me an interview! Please contact me soon!

Do not focus on the negatives or the things you do not have or cannot offer. Instead, discuss what you do have to offer the company or organization. Also, unless Ms. Smith actually does own the company, do not refer to it as hers.

Dear Ms. Smith:

I am writing to apply for the position of management trainee in your company. I would like to be considered an active candidate for the position.

With four positive years of college behind me, I am looking for a new challenge and growth in a position that will permit me to use my people-oriented skills.

Enclosed you will find my resume and a list of people that I have worked with who I am sure can give you an excellent background and additional information on the personal abilities and energies that I possess. As an action oriented people person and team player, I'm excited at the potential for growth and responsibility that this position offers, and I look forward to further discussions with you.

EXAMPLE COVER LETTERS

On the following pages are several cover letter examples. Please note that the letters may not be to actual scale with spacing due to page sizes.

WARNING: These cover letters are intended as examples only. Please do not copy them verbatim. Copying these letters could have a negative impact if your classmates use the same letter to the same organization. (Trust us, this has happened more than once!)

Sample Letter—Internship

Dickinson College/HUB 000
Carlisle, PA 17013

February 14, 2012

Ms. Erin Beck
Deputy Director
Office of Senator Robert P. Casey
P.O. Box 1092
Harrisburg, PA 17108

Dear Ms. Beck:

As a Political Science major at Dickinson College, I have developed a comprehensive understanding of both federal and state governments. However, I realize that actually working in a political setting is critical in integrating the theory learned in the classroom with the actual daily workings of a government office. For this reason, I am hopeful that you will consider me for an internship with Senator Specter's office this summer.

I believe I would be an asset as an intern in your office. I have developed excellent research and writing skills during my three years at Dickinson College. In addition to the many papers written for my classes, I also completed a Dana internship with the Communications Office at the college last year. As a Dana intern, I researched and wrote stories for the *Dickinson Magazine*, as well as a number of press releases to announce campus events. My writing skills would be beneficial in preparing briefings, research summaries, or correspondence if I am offered an internship with your office.

Working extensively with the public has been a key role in my various jobs. As a hostess and waitress at Jordan's, an upscale restaurant in Philadelphia, I often came into contact with business and community leaders. Priding its reputation on excellent customer service, we were encouraged to do whatever was necessary to ensure that patrons had a superb dining experience. Working as a tour guide at Dickinson College, interacting regularly with prospective students and their parents, I understand the importance of courteous and professional contact with the public. These are skills that I could bring to Senator Casey's constituents.

My long-term career goals include working in a political setting after graduation. I have been impressed with Senator Casey's leadership on issues such as education, crime, and funding for better health care in the United States. An internship with the Senator would enable me to enhance the skills needed to pursue this goal as well as to give back to the citizens of the Commonwealth. I will call you next week to discuss the possibility of an internship in more detail with you. I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Molly Brown

Molly Brown

Enclosure: Resume

Full-time Job—Research

Dickinson College/HUB 000
Carlisle, PA 17013

September 14, 2012

Mr. Mike Santini
Biotech Employment Specialist
The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine
1830 E. Monument Street – Suite 2-100
Baltimore, MD 21203

Dear Mr. Santini:

While researching post-graduate opportunities at the Career Center at Dickinson College, I came across the description for the Research Technician position at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Based on my background, experiences, and strong interest in biomedical research, I am submitting my resume and application to you for a laboratory position at Johns Hopkins following graduation.

I have always enjoyed biology and specifically genetics, but my inspiration to pursue research came from my internship at the Hershey Medical Center. On my first day as an intern in the cytogenetics laboratory, a baby was diagnosed with Trisomy 13. The child died two days later. When informed of the infant's death, the knowledge I had learned in the classroom and in textbooks came to life. Through research and studying genetics, I could help solve unanswered questions and perhaps eventually save lives.

Over the past four years I have had a wide array of laboratory courses in bench sciences which have expanded my knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and the molecular systems of the human body. To enhance my education with practical experiences, I pursued an internship with Hershey Medical Center. In addition to diagnosing human chromosome diseases and disorders, I learned how to culture cells from amniotic fluid and blood samples, make and stain slides, and identify and karyotype chromosomes. Upon returning to Dickinson in the fall, I continued my studies in molecular genetics by starting an independent research project. The project examines the regulation of the transcription factor AP-1 in the differentiation of human leukemia (HL-60) cells. In addition to many hours of research, the experiments involve the isolation of nuclear protein extracts, polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis, and western immunoblotting. These experiences have provided me with a basic foundation for laboratory research positions.

My education, experiences, and interest in research would make me a valuable addition to The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. I would appreciate the opportunity to further discuss with you any available laboratory research positions. You can contact me at (717)555-5555 or hmart@dickinson.edu. Thank you for the consideration.

Sincerely,

Heidi Martinson

Heidi Martinson

Enclosure: Resume

Full-time Job—Financial Industry

Dickinson College/HUB 000
Carlisle, PA 17013

September 14, 2012

Mr. Gordon Jones
Chairperson
Jones Enterprises
1 Wall Street
New York, NY 11111

Dear Mr. Jones:

As a brokerage intern with Jackson-Steinman & Company, I research companies to assist the retail brokers with their investment decisions. Through cold-calling I have built a strong client list for the brokers and helped the firm reach its annual goal. These experiences have provided me with an understanding of the investment industry and enhanced my desire to obtain a position with Jones Enterprises, Inc. as an account executive upon my graduation from Dickinson College in May 2013.

My greatest strengths lie in my research, fund-raising, and communications skills. In addition to my intern positions, I am currently a supervisor at the Dickinson College Library, a position now held for two years. Responsible for the operations of the library on weekends and evenings, I manage 57 student workers and assist college and community members with research difficulties. As the secretary and treasurer of the Dickinson College Ice Hockey Club, I organized and conducted several fundraising activities which culminated in raising over \$2000 for new athletic equipment.

You will note from my resume that I am a consistently hard worker as evidenced by the wide variety of positions I have held. My continuous employment history has enabled me to finance over 50% of my education. My History major and English minor have strengthened my ability to analyze issues and trends, study their effects on the social, political and economic forces operating with the United States and communicate this information effectively.

I believe that my education, experience, and skills make me a suitable candidate for your organization. I have enclosed my resume for your review. I look forward to speaking with you about the Account Executive position with Jones Enterprises. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Richard Fox

Richard Fox

Enclosure: Resume

Full-time Position—Legal field

Dickinson College/HUB 000
Carlisle, PA 17013

September 14, 2012

Mr. James Brown
Partner
Law Office of Brown, Winston & Smith
1170 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 11111

Dear Mr. Brown:

I read your advertisement in the Los Angeles Times with great interest as I believe I am a well-qualified candidate for the position of legal assistant with the firm of Brown, Winston & Smith. As a legal research intern at Redding, Heberlig & Stefanic, I developed a working knowledge of a law library and completed several independent research projects. In addition, I assisted a title searcher with several sixty-year property searches. These experiences would enable me to be an effective legal assistant with your firm.

You stated in your advertisement that you are seeking someone with strong organizational, communication, and office skills. As you can see on my resume, I have held several positions which demonstrate my command of these skills. While working at Legal Consulting Services for two summers, I assisted the Hiring Manager in the area of employer benefits with correspondence, filing and light bookkeeping. I also worked very closely with the Coordinator of Trustee Reports by typing, photocopying and preparing the reports for distribution to the clients. Additionally, I developed strong interpersonal skills while working as a Career Coach in the Dickinson College Career Center, I guided my peers on all aspects of the job search. This experience has allowed me to work with many different types of people, sometimes under difficult circumstances. Thus, in addition to providing competent research assistance, my experiences would prove valuable with your clients and staff.

I am particularly interested in corporate law, as well as pension and profit-sharing law. My research into law firms in the Los Angeles area indicates that Brown, Winston & Smith is well-respected in these fields. I look forward to discussing the possibility of interviewing for a legal assistant position with your firm. To contact me, I can be reached at 717-555-5555 at your convenience. Planning to move to Los Angeles immediately upon graduation, I will be available for an interview any time after May 22. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Susan Smith

Susan Smith

Enclosure: Resume

Email Sample—Finance Industry

SUBJECT: Application for Account Executive Position
FROM: <Richard Fox> foxr@dickinson.edu
DATE: 9/14/2012 3:45 PM
TO: <Mr. Gordon Jones> gjones@jonesenterprises.com
Attachment: ■Richard Fox Cover Letter; ■Richard Fox Resume

Dear Mr. Jones:

Please consider this e-mail as an application for the position of Account Executive with Jones Enterprises, Inc.

As a brokerage intern with Jackson-Steinman & Company, I research companies to assist the retail brokers with their investment decisions. Through cold-calling I have built a strong client list for the brokers and helped the firm reach its annual goal. These experiences have provided me with an understanding of the investment industry and enhanced my desire to obtain a position with Jones Enterprises, Inc. as an Account Executive upon my graduation from Dickinson College in May 2013.

I believe that my education, experience, and skills make me a suitable candidate for your organization. I have attached my resume and cover letter as a Microsoft Word attachment for your review. I will follow this up with a hard copy of each in the mail this week. I look forward to discussing this position with you. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Richard Fox

Dickinson College/HUB 000
Carlisle, PA 17013

Full-time Job Prospecting Letter (not advertised)—Publishing

Dickinson College/HUB 000
Carlisle, PA 17013

September 14, 2012

Mr. Lou Miller
Editor
Random House Publishers
201 E. 50th St.
New York, NY 11111

Dear Mr. Miller:

Dr. Allen Poe, my English professor at Dickinson College, suggested I contact you regarding entry-level editorial or marketing positions in the field of publishing. He indicates that you and he worked together on various projects in graduate school. I have been conducting research for Dr. Poe this year, which has allowed me to develop my writing and editing skills. The result of our work will be the publication of an extensive directory of Faulkner's characters. Dr. Poe indicated that the skills I have developed relate directly to the type of entry-level positions offered at Random House.

Last semester I completed an internship at Stackpole Press, a local publisher which produces books on antiques, horses and country living. Under the direction of a senior editor, I was involved with copy reading, book design, working with printers, and editorial work. In addition to this internship, I have written news and feature articles for the college newspaper during the past two years and have submitted several articles to commercial publications.

I would very much like to visit you to discuss my qualifications in greater detail. I believe that my skills and desire to learn about book publishing from the ground up make me a strong candidate for a position in the field of publishing, specifically in the editorial and marketing functions for trade books. My resume is enclosed for your review. I would very much like to meet with you to discuss my options in the field of publishing, as well as learn more about what you do. You can contact me at 717-555-5555. I very much look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Mary Richards

Mary Richards

Enclosure: Resume

Example Thank You Letter—Education

Dickinson College/HUB 000
Carlisle, PA 17013

September 14, 2012

Mr. Bob Sweeney
Director
Education Resources Group
55 N. West Street
Burlington, VT 11111

Dear Mr. Sweeney:

Thank you for meeting with me yesterday and discussing the teaching opportunities at private schools available through your organization. I appreciate the time and interest extended by you and your staff. It offered me the chance to learn a great deal about the services you offer and the qualities needed to succeed in a private school setting.

As I mentioned in the interview, I am excited about the opportunities that teaching in a private school will offer. In addition to using my French major and International Studies minor, I am looking forward to the possibility of coaching a soccer team. I would enjoy living in a residence hall with the students and facilitating their academic and personal growth. I believe I will be able to convey my excitement about the study of foreign language and international relations to the students.

I look forward to hearing from you and from the schools to whom you distribute my resume. Thank you again for the hospitality you and your staff showed me. If you need additional information, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Steve Beringer

Steve Beringer

Dickinson College Career Center

HOURS

By appointment

Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Career Coach Drop-Ins

Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Tue. & Wed. Library Hours, 8:00 - 10:00 p.m.

www.dickinson.edu/career

career@dickinson.edu

717-245-1740

Career Spots

Check out these short videos offering advice related to the job search—such as “Top 10 Interview Mistakes” and “Career Fair Success.” Each video is approximately 3 minutes long and can be viewed on your computer! Career Spots also offers “Career Bytes”, 15 1-minute videos on a variety of career-related topics.

Access Career Spots on the Student page of the Career Center’s web site.