OFFICE OF CAREER & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Writing a Cover Letter

Why do you have to write cover letters?
Cover letters serve several purposes. They are NOT simply a paragraph version of your resume. In your cover letter, you are matching your experience, knowledge and skills to the needs of the employer, and conveying your interest in working for them. This portrays your understanding of their needs and how you can address them. Form cover letters do not accomplish this goal, so take the time to tailor each cover letter to the specific employer. Secondly, the cover letter serves as a sample of your writing ability. Hence, having a well-written and free of typographical and grammatical errors is essential.

When do I send one?
Your cover letter should accompany your resume whenever you do not. If you are attending a career fair, a cover letter is not necessary. Instead, a follow up email is recommended.

Is there a set length?
With the exception of faculty positions, cover letters should never exceed one page. Cover letters for faculty positions can exceed that limitation if it includes your research areas and teaching interests.

What is the typical format?
A cover letter is a professional correspondence, so it should be formatted as such. It should lead with your address (or your header), the date, recipient title, name and address. Your salutation should be followed with a colon rather than a comma. Standard professional letter format also includes the word Enclosure (if mailing) or Attachment (if emailing) at the bottom of the letter to indicate that your resume is included.

Who do I make the letter out to?
Do your homework. If no contact person is included in the job listing, do research online to determine who the position reports to or telephone the main line of the employer and ask who you should direct the letter to. (Do not call the employer if they state no phone calls) If you are unable to find a specific person’s name, address your letter to a relevant title (i.e. Dear Human Resources Manager: or Dear Search Committee: or Dear Clinical Director:).

What’s the best way to submit my resume and cover letter?
Follow the employer’s instructions. If the employer provides several options (i.e. email, hard mail, fax, etc.), select the one that is best for you. Keep in mind email and fax arrive immediately, so these are the best modalities. If emailing, you have two options - you can place your cover letter in the body of the email or include a brief email message with your cover letter and resume attached. If an employer requests no attachments and you want to email your materials, copy and paste both into the body of your email. If attachments are permitted, often times, attaching your cover letter and your resume as PDFs is a better approach. It enables you to keep the email message brief, but professional. A sample message with documents attached may be written as:

Dear Ms. Smith:

Updated 8/14
I have attached my resume and cover letter in regards to the xyz position posted on your website. If you have difficulty opening the attachments, please contact me via email or phone at 212-555-5555. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mary Clark

Should you choose to fax and/or email your application, you may also submit a hard copy if desired. If you do, indicate you are doing so on the fax cover sheet or in the email message. For example, if faxing:

Dear Ms. Smith:
I am submitting my resume and cover letter in regards to the xyz position. If you do not receive all pages, please contact me at 212-555-5555. A hard copy is also in the mail. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mary Clark
NAME
Address
City, State, Zip Code
Date

Name (Dr., Mr., Mrs., Ms.)
Title
Organization
Street Address or PO Box #
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Mr./Ms.______:

First Paragraph: State specifically why you are writing by identifying the position, field or general area of your inquiry. Tell how you heard of the opening or organization and the central reason why you would like to work for that organization (e.g. its mission or philosophy) and/or why you are well suited for this opportunity. This is also where you include salary requirements, (in the last sentence) but only if they request them.

Body of letter (typically one or two paragraphs): Elaborate on why you are particularly suited for THIS organization and THIS job by reviewing the job description, conducting online research, and specifically connecting the qualifications needed with your skills. Highlight your particularly relevant achievements. Elaborate on key points from your resume without repeating your resume word-for-word. This is not a paragraph version of your resume. Communicate clearly to the employer that you understand what is required of the position and the ways in which you have developed the skills the employer seeks.

Final Paragraph: Refer the employer to an enclosed resume and/or application form. Reiterate your interest in the specific position and restate the name of the organization. Request to meet with them to discuss this opportunity and your qualifications. Indicate how you can be contacted. If the position requires any level of “organizational” skills (development, etc.) state that you will follow up (this demonstrates your comfort in doing this type of marketing outreach). But, if you state you will contact them, be sure to do so in the time you indicated! This is also the place where you include information that may be important but where you haven’t included elsewhere - for example if applying for a position out of town and you will be in the area at a certain time, or if you will be out of the country and inaccessible for a period of time, etc.

Sincerely,

(insert signature)

Your Name Typed
Enclosure (or Attachment if emailing)
Dear Ms. Smith:

I am writing in response to the Post-Graduate Social Work Fellowship at Children's Hospital which was posted on the Columbia University School of Social Work's online job board. I am presently exploring career opportunities in clinical social work, particularly associated with the health and mental health of adolescents and young adults. Throughout my graduate school education, I have gained experience working with adolescents and young adults dealing with a variety of health and mental health concerns, including: chronic mental illness, teenage pregnancy, physical and sexual abuse, and eating disorders.

Of particular relevance, with respect to my qualifications for the Post-Graduate Fellowship position, is my work at Harlem Mental Health Center’s Adult Outpatient Department, where I provide intake assessments and long-term treatment for individuals with mental illness. I have gained the knowledge and clinical experience essential for working with culturally diverse populations with varying types and severities of mental illness, as well as effectively functioning on a multi-disciplinary team of professionals. Additionally, my experiences working at Queens Community Center have enhanced my desire to work with adolescents and young adults and furthered my interest in women’s health, such as eating disorders and reproductive health issues.

I am able to forge excellent working relationships and collaborate with other staff and community agencies to assist clients in meeting their treatment and life goals, and am committed to working creatively and collaboratively with clients. I believe that with my educational and professional experiences, as well as my motivation, enthusiasm, empathy and compassion for others, I would be a valuable and productive member of your team.

I have attached my resume for your review and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss your employment needs and my qualifications in further detail. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mary Clark
555 W. 55th Street, #4D  
New York, NY 10023  
March 10, 2013

Ms. Kris Stackman  
Executive Director  
Forum at the Crossing  
555 Woodside  
Chicago, IL 60666

Dear Ms. Stackman:

Susan Alcott, Superintendent of the League for the Protection of Immigrants, recommended I submit my resume regarding the Development Director position with the Forum at the Crossing. With my graduate education from the Columbia University School of Social Work, proven abilities to motivate staff, and extensive fundraising experience, I am confident in my abilities to excel as Director of Development.

I believe Ms. Abbott has already spoken to you about my speech writing and fundraising skills. My five-year community service background also includes program development experience in providing health, education, and psychological services for immigrants and women entering the work force at an organization called Immigrants First. In addition to providing these vital social services, I supervised junior staff, interns, and volunteers, and successfully designed and implemented several projects which increased funding by 45% over a two-year period.

Given my skills and our areas of mutual interest, I believe I could be an invaluable resource to you in the growth and expansion of the Forum. I will contact you next week for an appointment to further discuss ways I can contribute to your development initiatives. I can also be contacted at your convenience at 212-555-5555.

I look forward to meeting with you in the near future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mary Clark

Enclosure
555 W. 55th Street, #4D
New York, NY 10023
March 10, 2013

Mr. Robert Burns
Director
Brooklyn Community Healthcare
37 West 14th Street
2nd Floor
New York, NY 10014

Dear Mr. Burns:

I would like to express my interest in applying my relevant experience to a position at Brooklyn Community Healthcare. I am a second year graduate student completing my Master of Science degree at Columbia University School of Social Work. My concentration is in Advanced Clinical Social Work with a focus on Family, Youth and Children’s Services. I am graduating in May and currently in the job search process. I believe that my skills and experience in the mental healthcare field make me an excellent candidate for a position in your organization.

My education, internships and past work experiences have provided me with the necessary skills to be successful in a community healthcare organization. As an intern at the Northeast Counseling Center, I conducted psychosocial assessments and treatment of children, adolescents, adults and families. I referred clients to community resources as needed. I also worked collaboratively with a team of psychologists, nurses and clinical social workers to set the Center’s overall strategy and goals. As a social work intern at the Sisters Institute, I provided diagnostic evaluation and offered feedback to staff. I also developed and facilitated outreach to the surrounding community. Additionally, I have experience working as a crisis counselor on a suicide hotline where I provided help to adult and adolescent callers.

Attached please find my resume which includes specifics about my experiences. I would greatly welcome the opportunity to meet with you to further discuss potential opportunities within your organization. Thank you for you time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mary Clark