

Writing Cover Letters

Unless otherwise stated, include a cover letter with every CV you send. It must be customised for the organisation and position you are applying for.

✓ What is a cover letter and how will it help me?

A cover letter is your opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge and interest in the employer or position, and to highlight what you can offer and why you are a good fit for the role. A cover letter must do the following:

- State the position applied for (if this is not a “cold call” application)
- Introduce you to an employer as a professional, confident and enthusiastic candidate
- Showcase your strengths
- Articulate your reasons for applying
- Highlight why you are suitable for the job
- Explain why you want to work for that employer
- Address any gaps or weaknesses in your CV

✓ What are employers looking for?

The employer is looking for evidence that you are a good match for the job. Your task is to convince them to invite you for an interview. They want to see that you can communicate clearly, that you are knowledgeable about the organisation and role, and that you have the right skills and character for the job.

✓ To whom should I address it?

It is best practise to name a person and their position at the organisation, for example, “To Dr. Mmbabane, Head of Department”. If you are responding to an advertisement there may be a contact provided. If you can’t find the appropriate person through research then you may use more generic titles such as “Dear HR manager”, this is better than using gender-based terms such as Sir/Madam.

✓ What should the format be?

Your letter should be one A4 page written using the standard business letter format, such as the one at the end of this pamphlet. Do not over fill the page, as white space helps with readability and makes the presentation more attractive. An employer will rarely request a hand-written letter, so type the letter using Microsoft Word. Consider converting the document into PDF to retain your layout. This is particularly important if you are going to email the cover letter, as one page can quickly become two when viewed on a different system or version of the software.

Dos and Don'ts

Do:

- Be concise, understand that people are busy
- Use clear, simple language, appropriate to the industry
- Customise each letter explaining what you might bring to the organisation
- Use descriptions of actual events, qualifications and skills rather than providing opinions
- Focus on your relevant experiences and pull attention to relevant parts of your CV
- Explain any weak points in your CV, such as gaps in work history
- You can reduce the font and margin-size to fit more on the page, but consider the impact. White space aids absorption of information.
- Spell check, grammar check and have someone else proofread the final document

Don't:

- Don't use a font size below 11 pt
- Don't use overly formal or informal writing styles or fonts
- Avoid hyphenated words at the end of a sentence
- Never suggest the job doesn't align with your ambitions
- Never attempt to use flattery
- Don't start every paragraph with "I"
- Avoid repeating yourself
- Don't repeat the information in your CV
- Never exaggerate your experience
- Don't leave the subject line blank in the email
- Avoid abbreviations, slang, colours, emoticons in your letter or quotes in your email signature
- Don't forget to attach the CV
- Don't forget to provide your contact details

✓ What will make me stand out?

Each letter will be unique to you and a particular employer, but we examine what makes a good or bad cover letter by looking at specific examples:

The Good	The Bad
<p><i>"I am interested in a career in journalism because I am passionate about communication and people's right to the truth. Current issues awaken my curiosity and often stimulate further research. They make me want to connect with the people involved and to find out more. I gained valuable research experience from my internship at The Daily News."</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">✓</p> <p>This applicant is conveying their motivation and demonstrating that they have relevant experience.</p>	<p><i>"I am interested in a career in journalism because I have always enjoyed watching the news and I am very impressed by the success of Aljazeera. I was very moved by the coverage of the Egyptian revolution of 2011."</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">✗</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This applicant comes across a consumer rather than someone who contributes. • Their emotional, yet passive response to a world event is not relevant. • "I" is overused, a better version would be: "A career in journalism has always interested me because..."
<p><i>"As an Economics graduate, I have excellent data management skills that will transfer well into project management. I am able to provide solid forecasting and could quickly highlight project issues before they have an impact."</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">✓</p> <p>This applicant provides evidence that their existing skills align with the demands of the job.</p>	<p><i>"As an Economics graduate, I am fascinated by trends in the labour market and hope to move into research. I am <u>excellent</u> at interpreting data and I believe working for you as a project manager will be a good starting point for my career."</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">✗</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This applicant admits that their career plans do not align with position advertised. • They have failed to use the spell checker to correct excellent.

<p><i>"Dear HR manager.</i></p> <p><i>I am very interested in being part of Scholarfund. Your focus on assisting underprivileged students to access education is a cause very close to my heart."</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">✓</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The applicant has failed to find a person to address the letter to, but targets it at the most relevant post. • They name the company. • They communicate alignment between their interests and the company's aims. 	<p><i>"To whom it may concern.</i></p> <p><i>This letter serves to introduce myself and inform you of my interest in becoming a part of your company. My CV will furnish you with information concerning my employment history."</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">✗</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This comes across as a generic application that could be sent out 100 times or more. • They fail to name the company. • The language is overly formal with "serves to introduce" and "furnish you".
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✓ **Cover letter template**

Your address (max 3-4 lines)

Phone number/email

Date

Company representative name

Company representative title/designation

Company address

Dear [Company Representative name/title/designation or "HR manager"],

Line 1 [State purpose of letter] Re: Application for ... advertised in ... [include reference number if provided]

Paragraph 1

- State your current location and occupation (e.g., I am a final-year Economics student at the University of Cape Town)
- List any documents that are attached in support of your application (e.g., CV, transcripts, testimonials)

Paragraph 2

- State your motivation for applying to *this* organisation (ensure you have done the research to be able to persuade that you are a good fit)
- Demonstrate your knowledge about the organisation and how your ambitions align with theirs

Paragraph 3

- Showcase your skills, qualifications and experience to demonstrate that you meet the basic requirements
 - Describe how your career interests, aspirations and personal attributes have led to your interest in and suitability for the position
 - Refer to specific examples in your CV to highlight your accomplishments and what you can offer
- Demonstrate how your attributes/accomplishments can benefit the organisation

Paragraph 4 (optional)

Outline any issues you may wish to inform the employer of (special needs/illness); disclosure is entirely your choice.

Closing paragraph

State your appreciation for the consideration given to your application and your interest in receiving a positive response. If you plan to follow up on the application with a phone call/email, then state that specifically (and ensure that you do follow up).

Sign off with “Yours sincerely” if you have addressed the person by name, or “Yours faithfully” if not.

[Your signature]

[Your name typed]