



WRITING COVER LETTERS

A cover letter adds context to your CV. It is your opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge and interest in the employer or position, to highlight what you can offer and why you are a good fit for the role.

What to include in a cover letter for an advertised 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
- Articulate your reasons for applying
- Explain why you want to work for that employer
- Showcase your strengths and relevant experience
- Highlight why you are suitable for the job
- Address any gaps or weaknesses in your CV

Unless otherwise stated, include a cover letter with every CV you send. Thoroughly do research to customise your cover letter for the organisation and position you are applying for.

What are employers looking for?

The employers look 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 practice to name a person and their position at the organisation, for example: "Dear Dr. Mbabane, 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 Director" or "Hiring Manager"; best to avoid using gender-based terms such as Sir/Madam or the generic "To whom it may concern".

If you are emailing your application, attach your letter (and CV) as a pdf attachment, with a brief, professional email outlining what you are applying for and attaching.

What should the format be?

Your letter should be one A4 page written using the standard business letter format (see last page for example template). Do not over fill the page, as white space helps with readability and makes the presentation more attractive. It's best to electronically type the letter and convert the document into PDF format to retain your layout. This is particularly important with emailing the cover letter, as words shift when viewed on a different system or version of software.





DO'S AND DON'TS

Do's

- 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 as white space aids absorption of information
- Spell check, grammar check and have someone else proofread the final document

Don'ts

- Don't use a font size below 11 pt
- Don't use overly formal or informal writing styles or fonts
- Don't use 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"
- Don't repeat yourself, this includes simply repeating the information in your CV
- Never lie or exaggerate your experience
- Don't leave the subject line blank in the email
- Don't use abbreviations, slang, colours, emoticons in your letter
- Don't add quotes to your email signature
- Don't forget to attach the CV and 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:

A speculative cover letter is used for when a role is not advertised at an organisation. Do research so that you can explain the role that you are interested in at that particular company. This demonstrates that you are proactive and dedicated.





The Good

*"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.**"* This applicant is conveying their motivation and demonstrating that they have relevant experience.

*"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 during my internship, could quickly highlight project **issues before they have an impact.**"* This applicant provides evidence that their existing skills align with the demands of the job.

*"Dear HR manager.
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, having been a scholarship recipient throughout my secondary and tertiary education."*

- 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.**

The Bad

"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."

- This applicant comes across as 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..."

"As an Economics graduate, I am fascinated by trends in the labour market and hope to move into research. I am excellent at interpreting data and I believe working for you as a project manager will be a good starting point for my career."

- This applicant admits that their career plans do not align with position advertised.
- The use of "excellent" is an opinion, and they failed to use the spell checker to correct it.

"To whom it may concern. My name is Rose Theron. 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."

- This comes across as a generic application that could be sent out 100 times or more.
- There is no need to state your name upfront.
- They fail to name the company.
- The language is overly formal with "serves to introduce" and "furnish you".





COVER LETTER EXAMPLE FOR ADVERTISED ROLE

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”],

Subject 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 Humanities 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 unique circumstances you may wish to inform the employer of (e.g., special needs related to illness; gap in a CV; prolonged time to complete degree). Disclosure is entirely your choice as, regardless of your circumstances, you have the ability to fulfill the role.
- You may want to refer to your availability

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, and then your name underneath.

