

# Cover Letter Guide



Center for  
**CAREER**  
Development

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

**M**any students say they don't know what a cover letter is, much less how to write one. This guide will demystify this crucial document and show you how to write one in a few simple steps.

It's important to personalize your cover letter to the specific opportunity to which you are applying, but there is more to it than mentioning the organization's name a few times or quoting the job description. Doing this well means thinking about your target audience and demonstrating the value you can add to your future employer.

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## Basic Principles of Cover Letter Writing

### 1 A well-written cover letter can set you apart from candidates who don't submit one.

- Not all employers will ask for – or read – cover letters, but knowing how to thoughtfully convey your interests and qualifications is an integral part of the recruitment process.
- A cover letter answers three basic questions: Who are you and what are you applying for? What value can you add to this organization? Why are you interested in this particular opportunity?
- It is an opportunity to introduce yourself and showcase your value to the organization.
- Be thorough, yet concise. Keep it to half a page, approximately 250-300 words.

### 2 A cover letter is more than a resume in paragraph form.

- Cover letters provide the context around – and highlights from – the experiences outlined on your resume.
- This is your chance to demonstrate you know what the organization needs and that you are the candidate who can provide it.

### 3 The format, content and purpose of a cover letter are highly individualized.

- Follow basic professional writing standards, paying special attention to differences in uploading a cover letter into an online application or using your letter as the body of an email message.
- Match the tone of the job description or vibe of the organization's website.
- Know that employers can tell when a letter reads like a generic template.

# ANATOMY OF A COVER LETTER

This page is meant as a guide, not a formal template. Consider your own writing style and that of the organization to which you are writing when composing your cover letters.

## Traditional Business Format:

Your street address

City, ST 00000

[Recommended: Use same header style as your resume]

Month Day, YYYY

Contact's Name

Contact's Title (Note: Start here if contact name unknown)

Organization Name

Street Address

City, ST 00000

### TIP

If you are sending your cover letter in the body of an email, omit the information to the left and begin with the salutation. Be sure to add in a subject line, such as "Candidate for [Job Title]"

## Salutation

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. Lastname: [or Dear Firstname Lastname]

\* Note: If name unknown, write Dear Recruiter/Hiring Manager/Internship Coordinator (pick one!) or something similar.

## Opening paragraph:

Start by highlighting something interesting about yourself, like how a course inspired you or an internship confirmed a career path. Avoid introducing yourself by name or filling in blanks ("I am a \_\_\_\_ major applying for \_\_\_\_ position with \_\_\_\_ company."). Write with enthusiasm and demonstrate you recognize what this organization is trying to accomplish. Tell the reader what appeals to you about that role/firm. Include contacts you've had with the firm, like if you met a representative at an information session or were referred by a friend/alum.

## Middle paragraph(s):

Convey your story or the context around/themes running through your experiences. Highlight key accomplishments and how they support your candidacy. Use examples to demonstrate the value you can add to the organization.

Point out commonalities between your experiences and the work environment. Respond to the stated mission, purpose and/or goals of the organization and why you want to support their work. Demonstrate a connection between your skillset and the needs of the organization.

## Last paragraph:

Express appreciation for being considered. Include your phone number and email address here if it's not already in the header. Reiterate your interest in the organization/role and the opportunity to further discuss your qualifications.

## Closing:

Sincerely,

\* Note: Leave 3-4 blank lines then type name.  
On a printed document, sign your name in this space.

Firstname M. Lastname

### TIP

This example follows a standard business letter format. Ask a career adviser about more creative ways to communicate your skills, strengths and qualifications.

# ..... Sample Letter: Response to a Job Lead .....

## Tammy Tiger

Phone: 609-609-6096

[www.linkedin.com/in/tammytiger](http://www.linkedin.com/in/tammytiger)

[tammyti@princeton.edu](mailto:tammyti@princeton.edu)

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Month DD, YYYY

Henrietta Rollins  
Recruiting Manager  
Airplane, Inc.  
8 Planet Boulevard  
Flyup, CA 97654

Dear Ms. Rollins:

An announcement from my university's Center for Career Development about Airplane Inc.'s new entry-level Aircraft Engineering Program immediately sparked my interest. I have long admired Airplane's use of technology to prototype new products and am confident you will find my engineering background and entrepreneurial spirit a strong match for the Aircraft Engineering Program.

Throughout my studies as a mechanical and aerospace engineering major at Princeton University, I have sought out ways to apply theory to practice. During two significant course projects – a World Geography Card Game and a Box Lift Crane Design – I had the opportunity to collaborate with others and take on a team leadership role, and this past summer I accepted an internship that focused on process improvement. Collectively across these experiences, I have seen products through from concept to pilot test and have confidently presented my model designs to senior engineers and corporate executives.

As the leading aircraft manufacturing firm on the East Coast, it is understandable that you expect new hires into the Aircraft Engineering Program to demonstrate a penchant for ingenuity and design. Additionally, it is evident from the CEO's recent press release that Airplane is committed to addressing global challenges. My resume speaks to both characteristics, with project designs that have the capacity to improve lives and campus activities that emphasize community engagement.

I appreciate your consideration for the Aircraft Engineering Program and look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Tammy Tiger

**See more examples of cover letter sentences on p. 8**

# INTERPRETING A JOB DESCRIPTION WORKSHEET

A cover letter answers three basic questions: Who are you and what are you applying for? What value can you add to this organization? Why are you interested in this particular opportunity?

This worksheet is designed to help you think of the answers to these questions, and then present them in a compelling way. Refer to a specific job description to complete the chart below.

## THE JOB DESCRIPTION

## HOW I MATCH

List three traits sought in a candidate <i>(e.g., Strong presentation skills)</i>	List three phrases describing your personality <i>(e.g., Confident public speaker)</i>
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

List three job duties/responsibilities <i>(e.g., Source newsworthy items from media outlets)</i>	List an achievement related to each duty <i>(e.g., Curated hundreds of news clippings weekly)</i>
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

List three facts about the organization <i>(e.g., Leading aircraft manufacturing firm)</i>	List why you find that fact appealing <i>(e.g., Firm uses tech to prototype new planes)</i>
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

### Next Steps:

- Review the standard cover letter format (p. 3) and the sample cover letter (p.4).
- Craft your letter in your own voice.
- Match the tone of the job description and organization.



# ORGANIZATION/AGENCY INFORMATION WORKSHEET

If you find yourself struggling to answer the question, "Why do you want to work for this organization?" use this worksheet to learn more about the organization first. You can answer these questions by reviewing the company website, company summaries on Vault.com, checking Glassdoor.com, conducting an internet search for recent articles or updates about the company and (when possible) speaking with employees at career events or through informational conversations. Use the findings to craft a letter that shows you know what the organization does and why you want to support their efforts.

**What is the organization's mission?**

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**What products/services does this organization provide?**

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**How does this organization stand out from its competitors?**

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**Describe any of the organization's community engagement projects or employee development programs.**

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**List an internship or entry level role or job function you'd enjoy within this organization.**

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**Identify skills needed for this type of position and examples to demonstrate you have them.**

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## **Next Steps:**

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# WEAK-BETTER-BEST SAMPLE SENTENCES

## Introduction

The **weak** opening line lacks enthusiasm and originality. The **better** one hits key points (who I am, why I'm writing), and the **best** letter demonstrates a connection between the applicant's skillset and the organization.

Weak	Better	Best
I am a junior sociology major seeking a summer journalism internship.	I am interested in using my writing skills this summer in your journalism internship. As a junior sociology major, I have had the opportunity to develop my writing skills through my academic work and submissions to a University magazine.	I am an avid reader of People & Places Magazine and was inspired to launch a travel blog [link] after my semester abroad. With an interest in creative writing and a global focus, I am excited to apply for the creative writing internship at your publication.

## "About Me" Content

This first line is **weak** because it is simply a list of skills. The **better** sentence demonstrates achievements with those skills, and the **best** one tells a story that ties the skills and achievements together.

Weak	Better	Best
I have strong writing skills and am proficient in Microsoft Publisher and Adobe InDesign.	With strong writing skills and proficiency in Microsoft Publisher and Adobe InDesign, I have created dozens of flyers for the Princeton Writers Club and submitted three articles to Student Magazine.	I was recognized by my internship employer for my writing and creativity when I wrote website content to highlight new products. On campus I contribute to Student Magazine, and my articles engage readers and capture their attention.

## "About the Organization" Content

A **weak** letter skips this part altogether, and recruiters will notice it missing. The **better** letter references the organization but is written like a sales pitch. The **best** letter shows the writer's interest and common traits.

Weak	Better	Best
	People & Places Magazine has won more Ellie Awards than any other publication in the past decade.	I am committed to writing excellence and admire People & Places Magazine's long-standing record as a leading industry publication.

## Conclusion

A **weak** closing focuses on the job seeker's wants and does not express appreciation for being considered. A **better** one is more polite, and the **best** version reiterates both the applicant's interest and value to the company and calls the reader to action.

Weak	Better	Best
This internship would be a great opportunity to improve my writing skills. Please feel free to call me if you'd like more information.	Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope to hear from you soon.	I am excited about the journalism internship and am confident you will find my background a strong match for your organization. I look forward to speaking with you soon about the role and my qualifications.