Guide to Cover Letters for Industry, Nonprofits, and Government

Cover letters for jobs in industry, nonprofits, and government give job candidates the space to provide employers with clear evidence of interest in, knowledge about, and passion for the company, institution, or organization to which they are applying. They are both brief and highly tailored for each position. Importantly, cover letters for industry, nonprofit, and government roles provide **specific** and **compelling** reasons why a candidate is a strong **fit.**

Cover letters also serve as succinct writing samples. It can be helpful to think of them as short **argumentative essays**. To this end, well-written cover letters should have a **main claim** about your fit to a particular position and should provide the reader with **evidence** to support this claim throughout. They create a narrative context for the information found in a candidate's resume, fleshing out the list of qualifications and experiences that hiring managers will find there.

Finally, cover letters work **in tandem with** the resume. Employers will not *necessarily* read the cover letter *first* and then move onto the resume. It's likelier that a hiring manager will move back and forth between resume and cover letter. While many job openings no longer require cover letters, it is still considered a best practice for job seekers, and (if done well) will never count against you.

Some Initial Best Practices

- Write to a **real person** whenever possible (use "Dear Hiring Manager" as an alternative):
    - Find out the hiring manager's name and address the letter to them
    - If you can't find it in the job description, try to figure it out by looking on LinkedIn or the company/institution website

- Tell the reader what's **exciting** about this job in the first paragraph
    - Answer the question: "Why are you interested in / excited about *this position?"*
    - Mention *substantive* conversations or connections with current employees if you've had them

- Move **quickly** into specifics about what skills or experience you would **bring** to the job
    - Remember that it's not about what you will get out of the job
    - It's about how you will make **the kind of contribution that they need**

- Give **narrative shape** to a resume by using specific examples in each paragraph
    - Don't repeat your resume in list form! Tell a story

- **No more than one page**. Be sure to include an actual physical signature

Write LESS About Research:

Research skills will likely be highly valued by employers, but it's not necessary to go into extensive detail about your dissertation, thesis project, or research interests — **unless** the content of the job matches perfectly with your research projects.

Take cues from the job description. Ask whether the job *requires* knowledge of methods or research areas in which you have expertise. If it doesn't, then consider writing about your research *skills* more broadly.

Don't FORGET About Them:

Too often, students and postdocs are in a hurry to explain their skills and experience. Hiring managers care far more about the fact that candidates have taken the time to learn about their company or organization. Answer the question "why do you want to work for *us*?"

How many times does the company's name appear? The name of the organization should be in every paragraph. Make it easy for the hiring manager to discern that you've tailored the document to them.
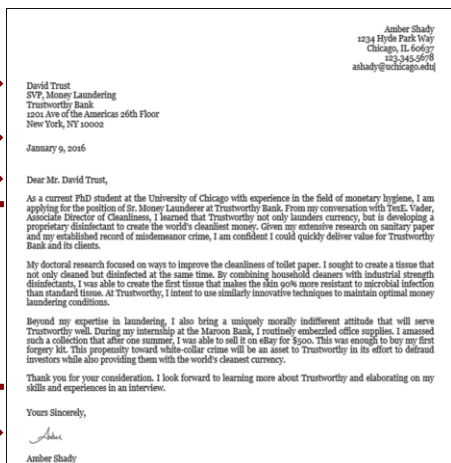
Sample Cover Letter

Company's address →

Date →

Address it to a real person →

Claims and evidence of fit in one page →

Physical signature →

(Sample cover letter addressed to David Trust, SVP, Money Laundering, Trustworthy Bank, dated January 9, 2016, from Amber Shady, 1234 Hyde Park Way, Chicago, IL 60637, 123-345-5678, ashady@uchicago.edu)

Common Questions:

- **Should I include references in the letter?** No. Employers will ask for references separately, and typically will do so later in the interview process.

- **How should I end the letter?** Tell the reader that you "would look forward to talking more about this position in person."

Don't Apologize:

Too often, graduate students and postdocs will include sentences that begin, "Although I don't have exactly the experience you're looking for […]."

Avoid this construction! Instead, talk confidently about how your experience will fit directly into the position. Career advisors at UChicagoGRAD can help you make this case.

Don't FORGET Format:

Your resume and cover letter should both be in the same font. UChicagoGRAD likes Helvetica, Palatino linotype, and Garamond, among others.

Don't shrink your font or margins just to make the page limit. Show that you care about the hiring manager's time and keep your letter concise.

Areas of Skepticism:

Think about some of the areas where hiring managers might have skepticism about graduate students or postdocs.

- **Are you able to work well with others?** Use examples in your cover letter that show you working with others to solve problems.

- **Can you work quickly, efficiently, and accurately?** Don't let the reader worry that you work "academically" – i.e. slowly and methodically. Show them that you have a record of achievement from each situation.

- **Do you have to be the smartest person in the room?** Hiring managers might see a graduate degree and worry that you do not effectively deliver or receive critical feedback. Show them that you've worked with others and that you thrive on collaborative input.

- **What kind of practical experience do you have?** If you have applicable professional experience outside graduate school, be sure to talk about it. But if you have been only in school, think about the activities that you have done outside the classroom. Have you managed a lab? Planned a conference? Served on committees? Talk about those experiences.

Checklist:

Before meeting with UChicagoGRAD career advisors, it's helpful to have thought of and done some of the following things. This work can really improve the efficiency of our conversations with you!

- ❑ Your letter is 1 or 1.5 pages (we can help cut)
- ❑ It uses 0.7" to 1" margins and a standard font
- ❑ It has specific references to why you want to work at the company
- ❑ The company's name is in each paragraph
- ❑ It uses 1 – 2 examples of your work experience or skills in each paragraph
- ❑ It does not **just list** what's in the resume
- ❑ It is signed