

# HOW TO WRITE A PROFESSIONAL COVER LETTER



Opportunity Network for At-Risk Writers,  
Artists, Rights Defenders, and Scholars

[www.onwardsproject.org](http://www.onwardsproject.org)

# WHAT IS A COVER LETTER?

- Job postings often ask applicants to write a letter to accompany their resumes, to state how they meet the job qualifications asked for in the posting. It's a bridge between your resume, which is all about you, and the job posting, which is all about what the "ideal candidate" should be able to do. Its purpose is to help "sell" your fit for a specific opportunity to a recruiter or hiring manager. It also may be read as a writing sample (!)
- Sometimes there is no request for a cover letter: **write one anyway**. You will make a stronger case than that of an applicant who expects the reader to draw all information about motivation and "fit" from the resume. Do this even knowing that 50% of cover letters go unread—but you don't know which recruiters/hiring managers do read them.
- Of those who read cover letters, many readers won't even look at your resume unless the cover letter is compellingly written and suggests a strong "fit" for the job.
- A cover letter is NOT the "transmittal" you use to send your resume and cover letter by email. Sometimes you will be asked to submit your resume and cover letter in one document. Pay attention to whether these are asked for in Word or PDF format.
- You may be asked for a "Statement of Interest" instead, especially for academic positions. While similar to the cover letter, it includes more information about how your specific career interests, often about a field of research, align with the position.

## Three rules

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graph TD; A[Three rules] --- B[Tailor for each job]; A --- C[Provide examples]; A --- D[Pay attention to details];
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Tailor for  
each job

Provide  
examples

Pay attention  
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# Tailor your letter for each job

- Who is your audience for this letter and application?
- Address the letter to the hiring manager if findable. Write “Dear [first name, last name]” to avoid errors with nonbinary people, those who use “they” pronouns. Never use Mrs. unless asked to do so. Use first name alone **only** if you have previously been invited to do so.
- If not, write “Dear Selection Committee” or “Dear Hiring Manager”
- Start your letter with your interest not only in the position, but **why you want to work for this organization**: research the strengths that attract you to it. Effectiveness, alignment with your causes, reputation?
- Address each qualification in the job posting. What might differentiate you from competing applicants?
- Use the language in the posting in your letter, and language that your readers will understand. Spell out acronyms at first use, e.g. ACLU.

# Provide examples of your applied skills and experience

- Specificity builds credibility: always give an example (a PAR synthesized into a brief accomplishment statement) of a situation in which you demonstrated the required skill with proof of its impact.
- When you do not meet a requirement, **ask yourself what experience gives you the confidence that you can perform the related task in the job description.** Skills are transferable but you have to make the case.
- Weak letters recap the skill: “I am an experienced consultant with a proven track record in organizational development.” [“Yup, got that!”]
- Strong letters offer proof: “After researching and analyzing the leadership structure of this organization, I suggested a reorganization which led to improvements in staff engagement and participation in leadership roles by 30% and to a 25% increase in new ideas.”

# Problem—Action—Results—Skills (PARS)

PROBLEM/OPPORTUNITY	YOUR ACTION	RESULTS/MEASURE	SKILLS/TRAITS APPLIED
URBAN POLICY ANALYST: Charged with identifying sites for future housing or commercial developments in a poor area of the Bronx, NYC	Conducted fieldwork, interviewed stakeholders, researched current owners, market values, taxes, and selling prices; produced a database and analyzed it	Recommended 60 potential sites, 23 of which were chosen for affordable housing and small business development to be constructed over 5 years	Research, fieldwork, interviewing, database development, data analysis, testing recommendations against criteria, analytical writing and presentation
PSYCHIATRIC SOCIAL WORKER: Assigned to work with a developmentally delayed 15-year-old boy in a residential facility who was acting out, throwing feces at staff, family stopped visiting, no staff interaction	Assessed his behavior and causes, designed a behavioral modification program for him, worked with him individually 5 days a week for 3 months, developing tools to help him work out frustrations in a socially acceptable way.	Family resumed visits, staff was found to be visiting him “off the clock” and he was able to join activities. This was an incremental, meaningful improvement in his quality of life.	Psychiatric assessment, choice of appropriate treatment, ability to build trust, effective implementation, outreach to existing resources

# Pay attention to the details

- A cover letter is an unannounced writing sample! Clarity, succinctness, argumentation, continuity, all matter.
- **GRAMMAR:** subject/verb disagreement, ["the proposed solutions was".] Errors after dependent introductory clauses, ["As a consultant, the work was very challenging." The second clause must start with "I".]
- **SYNTAX:** your writing needs to be fluid, as close to native English speaker sentence construction as possible. Tighten your writing, remove unnecessary words, "talk less and say more."
- **SPELLING:** the past tense of "to lead" is "led", not "lead". Use your dictionary/chart of irregular verb conjugations
- **WORD USAGE:** Spellchecker in Word will accept any actual word and does NOT check context. Don't be the candidate who wrote "pubic policy."
- **HOMONYMS:** their, they're, there all sound alike. Proof for context.
- **TYPOS:** inexcusable, telegraph you are sloppy

## Exercise: Volunteer and Diversity Resource Development Specialist for the Girl Scouts USA; here are the qualifications

- Minimum 4 years experience in volunteer development and adult education
- Experience in curriculum development, consulting in volunteerism & diversity, development and implementation of volunteer and diversity resource tools
- Outstanding writing, verbal communication, interpersonal & presentation skills
- Strong ability to analyze and synthesize data trends & anecdotal information
- Demonstrated expertise in developing resources for diversity strategies & programs, work effectively in a diverse team environment
- Proficiency in MS Office Suite required, experience with on-line learning a plus
- Proven ability to multi-task in a fast-paced environment
- Travel 25-40%

# Use this format to help identify how your qualifications meet the requirements of the job

- List required qualifications from the posting.
- Put them in the order they appear in the posting; it indicates relative importance of each, most critical first
- Next
- Next
- Put preferred qualifications last
- Write the example of education or a specific accomplishment for each requirement.
- Next
- Next
- Next
- Next
- Next

# Use of AI in writing cover letters

- UPSIDE: if you give Chat GPT or Perplexity or another AI program a job description, it will attempt to address every qualification, and function as a checklist for you.
- DOWNSIDES: **1.** Unless you give the AI program all of your accomplishment statements, it will regurgitate the claim that you meet the requirement without offering your proof. It might offer an example that does not prove the skill or experience. **2.** AI programs' syntax, language, and tone have become familiar to readers; the letter will not read as your original writing will. The tone is often inappropriate for the task. **3.** When AI cannot find information, it makes it up, as in its invention of case law that two lawyers actually presented in their closing statement, or advising to put glue on pizza. **4.** The writing is bad enough it will not be considered an excellent sample of your writing, defeating one of the purposes of a cover letter.
- ADVICE: If you use AI, consider it research, a rough draft, that may compel you to write a better letter. Never use AI language *verbatim*.