Cover letters

This tip-sheet offers some hints and tips on how to write a cover letter suitable for jobs outside academia.

1. Essentials

Your cover letter should **introduce you** to a prospective employer and explain your eligibility for the post.

A cover letter complements any other application documents like the CV, e.g., by highlighting key information and explaining how particular experiences make you a good candidate.

Cover letters also convey implicit information, e.g., style, content, and tone that say something about you as a person and how motivated you are.

Avoid talking in general terms about why you want 'a' job. Your cover letter needs to describe your motivation for **this particular** job, at **this particular** employer, at **this particular** moment in time.

Before you start writing, read the job description carefully and produce a list of the key skills and competencies required. Then identify your best evidence to match each item on the list.

Always provide robust evidence of success – you can't just say that, in your opinion, something was successful. **STAR** is a useful tool to help ensure you tell a well-rounded story:

Situation	Where were you, when, who with?
Task	What were you trying to achieve?
Action	What, specifically, did you do?
Results	What happened? Who benefited?

Include **quantifiable data** where possible to support your evidence:

Led a team of 4 for a six-month project costing £40,000. Delivered the key project milestones 2 weeks ahead of schedule and 10% under budget.

Established an industrial collaboration resulting in a £400,000 grant and a successful patent application.

Ensure that all information is about you. Don't say 'we' or talk about your team in general terms.

2. Content

Tailor every cover letter to the job you are applying for. Everything you write should reinforce the point that you are the right person for **this particular** job.

Research the role and the organisation, so that you can refer to specifics in your letter. This will demonstrate your initiative and genuine interest.

Use **action verbs**, which make it easier to identify your personal contribution

accomplished, achieved, advised, arranged, budgeted, chaired, created, delivered, demonstrated, designed, determined, developed, devised, established, examined, formulated, implemented, improved, initiated, instructed, investigated, launched, negotiated, organised, persuaded, planned, produced, promoted, quantified, restructured, scheduled, searched, secured, set up, started, surveyed, verified…

3. Style

Looks matter: your cover letter should be clearly structured and professional to look at.

Letter etiquette

Write your name and home address in the top right corner. Put a line break, then write the date. Put another line break and, writing on the left, put the name and address of your recipient.

Always aim to write to a named person. If no name is provided in the job advert, try to find out.

If you don't know the person's title, it's OK to leave it out, e.g. 'Dear Sam Smith' or 'Dear Robin Banks'.

Although they used to be common, the phrases 'Dear Sir/Madam' and 'To whom it may concern' are now considered rude – it looks as if you haven't tailored the letter.

If all else fails, 'To the hiring team' or 'To the recruitment team' will suffice.

Sign your letter either 'Yours faithfully' (if addressed to a job title) or 'Yours sincerely' (if addressed to a named person).

Format

Send your letter as a separate attachment, and give it a sensible name, i.e., not just 'Cover Letter', but include your name, vacancy reference, and date (MM/YYYY).

Alternatively, you could write your text directly into the body of the email.

In both cases, stick to **one side of A4**. It's important to show that you can prioritise, and brevity adds impact.

Get someone to proofread your letter for you and check for any spelling, punctuation, or grammatical mistakes.

The employer will be skim-reading, so stick to short paragraphs (5-6 lines), and use simple sentences (under 25 words).

Use the same font and style as your CV and ensure that your letter looks attractive and is neatly laid out.

4. Structure

There are many different ways to write a cover letter, but if you're stuck or writing a cover letter for the first time, the following structure would be acceptable to most employers.

Introduction: Why are you writing?

Start your cover letter by explaining why you are writing and if you are responding to an advertisement. Include any reference numbers and the title of the post you are applying for.

Give a few key details, e.g., you are currently a protein scientist at Imperial College with 4 years' experience.

Paragraph 1: Why this position?

Why do you want to do this particular job, at this particular organisation? How did you find out about them? What makes them different? Why does that appeal to you?

Don't quote straplines or advertising language from the employer's website, e.g. 'I am attracted to your company as a global market leader with a dynamic portfolio' – use your own words.

Make sure that what you say about the organisation could only be said about them, e.g., quote names of individuals you've spoken to, specific projects or initiatives.

Paragraph 2: Why you?

Why are you suited to the post?

Respond directly to the job description, demonstrating the match between your experience and their requirements.

Highlight the ways in which the organisation could benefit from your skills and expertise. Although it can be useful to note what the post would do for you, be sure to emphasise **what you would bring to the organisation**.

Give the employer two or three highlights – i.e., pick your best, most relevant stories in order to show where you have had success, especially things that set you apart from others.

Conclusion

Succinctly reiterate your suitability and enthusiasm for the post.

If there's anything you need to tell the employer, e.g., dates you can attend the interview, use this paragraph.

Many people thank the employer for considering their application or say that they hope to be invited to interview – this is not bad, but nor is it strictly necessary.

5. Tone

Use enthusiastic and positive language throughout your letter.

Your letter will appear professional if you use an appropriate style and accurate terminology, and if you avoid the use of jargon, humour, and anecdotes.

Reflect the language used in the advertisement, job description and person specification. For example, if the job description uses the term 'multi-disciplinary' you should avoid terms like 'interdisciplinary' or 'cross disciplinary'.

6. Things to avoid

- writing your life history or duplicating your CV verbatim

- clichés and overly general statements, e.g. 'I have excellent communication skills'

- over-emphasising what the post would do for you – say instead how you could help the organisation to be successful

- starting too many sentences with 'I' – this can get tedious and suggests that you're thinking about yourself, not the employer

- irrelevancies – i.e. anything that doesn't explicitly contribute to the argument that you are the best person for the job

- waffle – have a good reason for everything you're saying, and check that you have explained its significance to the employer.

7. Checklist

- Does your cover letter demonstrate your eligibility and why you are the right person for the job?

- Do the examples of your relevant successes show impact? Do they follow the STAR structure?

- Is the layout, format, and content of your letter, correct?

- Have you checked your letter for any spelling and grammar mistakes?

If you have any further questions regarding your cover letter or any other aspects of your professional development, please **contact us:**

pfdc-support@imperial.ac.uk