

Guide to Writing Application Letters

Cover Letters, Writing Samples, and Statements of Intent

What is a Cover Letter?

The cover letter is a formal letter that often accompanies your résumé when applying for an internship or job.

- Cover letters complement or extrapolate on — not repeat — your résumé content.
- It is an opportunity to strategically introduce yourself to the employer by:
 - Highlighting your best examples of the main skills and experiences specifically relevant to the opportunity you seek.
 - Leveraging what you learned from researching the employer’s website, social media, news articles, and networking conversations to connect your potential value to the employer and position.
 - Demonstrating how your interests, values, and aspects of your identity fit the employer’s mission and culture.

What is a Statement of Interest?

In addition to, or in lieu of a cover letter, applicants may be asked to submit a statement of interest (also known as a statement of intent) when applying to some opportunities. This document:

- Summarizes your related research or topical preferences and verifies your intent to pursue that particular field.
- Focuses on your deep commitment to continuing to explore a particular discipline in the future, whereas a cover letter pinpoints examples of relevant experience.

What is a Writing Sample?

Some employers ask candidates to submit writing samples alongside other typical application documents. These employers are evaluating your writing ability and potential to produce content similar to what is expected in this role.

- Choose a piece already created from a course, personal writing, or past co-curricular or internship experience.
Note: if you are utilizing content from an internship, be sure it is public content (e.g., an Instagram post) or verify with your employer that it is acceptable for you to share the material.
- Select content that reflects the writing style, tone, and typical length of work produced by the employer – this may vary greatly across different industries.
- Unless specifically noted, keep your sample to a maximum of three pages.
Note: If your best work exceeds three pages, create a truncated document by including the introductory/thesis paragraph(s), portions of the body, and the conclusion. Any content you trim should be noted by a paragraph break and “content omitted to reduce sample length” to assist your reader’s comprehension.

Getting Started with an Application Letter

- Spend time reading the employer’s website, LinkedIn page, and current news articles to familiarize yourself with the employer’s purpose, goals, values, and culture. Consider connecting with alumni or other professionals who can provide insight.
- Gather the job/internship position’s description, a highlighter, your résumé, and your notes from your research.
- Highlight the required and desired qualifications and characteristics the employer seeks, alongside clues of their culture and mission. On your résumé, note your best examples of these elements from your academic, co-curricular, and personal interests.

- For your opening paragraph, identify one or two main aspects from your research about what draws you to want to work for this employer. You might also highlight your research by mentioning a recent initiative or success related to the employer.
- Determine if you want to showcase distinct skills or experiences in your middle paragraph(s) (e.g., advanced Excel) OR a theme of experiences or skills (e.g., “my research experiences...”).

Writing Tips

- Employers make hiring decisions based on what a candidate can offer. Be careful not to overemphasize what you aspire to gain from the experience.
- To avoid generic letters and any perception that you did not research sufficiently to write a compelling document, each letter should be unique and tailored to the specific opportunity and employer.
- Your writing style should reflect that of the industry and employer. When in doubt, err on the side of formality.
- As with all good writing, begin your paragraphs with topic sentences and end with a strong concluding sentence.
- Read your letter aloud before sending it. Be careful of misplaced words, run-on sentences, or awkward phrasing. Be sure to address it to the correct person/employer.
- As an undergraduate, your letter should not exceed one page. Also, ensure that your font and font size mirrors your résumé. Statements of interest may provide you an allowance for a longer document.
- Be sure to save your document as a PDF with your name and position you seek. The title of your document should also include your name and the type of document (e.g., AStudentBioLabCoverLetter).

Using the STARR Method

The STARR method assists you to more deeply describe your strengths and highlighted experiences beyond what your résumé reveals. This organizational tool will help you form your letter’s middle paragraph(s) and explicitly connect your content to the qualities and qualifications employers seek. Becoming familiar with the STARR method will also prepare you for behavioral interview questions that may arise later in your process.



Breakdown of a Cover Letter

Header:

Your Address
City, State, and Zip Code

Date

Mr./Ms./Dr. (First and) Last Name Title
Name of Employer/ Organization Street Address
City, State, and Zip Code

Use the person's full name if you are unsure of gender or if the person is non-gender binary (e.g., "Dear Cameron Marx:"). If you are unable to find a name after a thorough search, you may use a more generic salutation: "Dear Hiring Manager:"

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. Last Name:

Opening Paragraph:

Grab your reader's attention within the first two lines. Avoid, "My name is..." or "It is with great enthusiasm that I submit my application for..." Instead, try a creative approach such as, "Designing, developing, and leading physical fitness training programs are my passions and expertise."

- Indicate the reason for your letter and state the specific position to which you are applying.
- Tell how you learned of the position and name your referral (if applicable, and only with that person's consent).
- Make a connection to the employer. Why do you want to work for them? What excites you most about the position/employer? Be careful not to solely reiterate facts about the employer, rather draw a connection between the elements you researched and your motivation to apply.
- End with a brief teaser (thesis statement) for topics you will discuss in the remaining paragraphs.

Avoid outlining details of your experiences in the first paragraph. Use your middle paragraphs to elaborate.

Middle Paragraph(s):

- Share specific and concise examples of experiences or themes of your entries that demonstrate your skills and fit.
- Explain concretely how these skills/experiences will contribute to advancing a specific goal of this employer.
- Be sure to study the job posting to prioritize what to highlight. If you have more than one paragraph, prioritize your paragraphs in the order that reflects what is most important to the employer.
- Add depth and detail beyond what can be found on your résumé; tell your story.

Use the STARR Method to create your content.

Describe only your qualifications and potential. Do not call attention to parts of the job description that do not match your experience.

Closing Paragraph:

- Reiterate your interest in the position.
- Indicate that you look forward to discussing your candidacy with them further. You may mention that you will follow up soon (if a company contact has been provided).
- Offer to provide any additional information if needed.
- Explain the best way to contact you (phone or email).
- If you are studying off-campus and anticipate challenges scheduling an interview, be proactive and suggest alternatives (e.g., Zoom meeting, times in their time zone) to make it easy for employers to contact you.
- Thank the employer for their consideration.

If printed, leave room to sign your name. This is not necessary if you are sending an electronic version.

Close with "Sincerely," "Sincerely Yours," "Yours," or similar
Type your name

Pulling the pieces together

The following examples will demonstrate how résumé content and an internship description can be used to craft the STARR example portion of your cover letter or statement of intent.

EXPERIENCE

Intern, Office of Admission, Colgate University

Summer 2021

- Created engaging social media posts utilizing multimedia to promote Colgate programs and events to prospective students
- Collaborated with team to develop summer-long outreach plan targeting college counselors, prospective students, and families to increase awareness of Colgate to regions with historically low enrollment
- Supported office efficiency and daily tasks by answering phones, greeting guests, and updating Slate software platform

Research Assistant, Department of Political Science, Colgate University

Spring 2021

- Analyzed over 500 survey responses to a regional polling initiative using Excel to summarize political trends
- Created visual representations of survey responses and summaries by graphing results in Excel and presented findings to faculty research lead for inclusion in forthcoming academic journal submission

Associate, Target, Philadelphia, PA

Fall 2018–Summer 2019

- Effectively mediated customer complaints and communicated store policy while handling product returns
- Improved customer experience by welcoming guests, completing service transactions, and directing customers to products

Sample 1: Communications Intern (skill identified: design software)

Job Description: Interns will assist Career Services with engaging students in programming and generating interest in internship and job opportunities. Interns will focus on strategic and innovative projects: writing and editing weekly newsletters; creating social media posts; designing marketing materials; planning and executing targeted outreach to distinct student populations; shooting and editing video content.

Requirements: Candidates must have excellent communication and organizational skills, exhibit maturity, and demonstrate creativity. Demonstrating an understanding of Colgate’s diverse community is essential. Graphic design, photography, and videography skills are desirable, but not required.

- S** *In the summer of 2021, I interned in the Office of Admission at Colgate University.*
- T** *In this role, I was tasked to communicate relevant event information to highlight Colgate to new and prospective students through social media.*
- A** *To design Instagram posts, I had to quickly learn to use Adobe Photoshop and Canva. I was previously unfamiliar with both platforms, but I became adept at creating eye-catching graphics.*
- R** *At the end of the summer, I had successfully created 8 unique posts that were utilized by my team.*
- R** *As a communications intern in Career Services, I would be excited to apply my design skills and ability to quickly create unique content to keep the student body informed and engaged with the office.*

Sample 2: Office Ambassador (skills identified: customer service, communication)

Job Description: Office Ambassadors (OAs) skillfully manage Career Services’ front desk. They direct incoming requests efficiently and confidently, employ a thorough knowledge of resources applicable for various visitors (e.g., students, alumni, parents), schedule advising appointments, and assist with administrative projects. OAs provide exceptional customer service while exhibiting a firm grasp of Career Services’ policies and procedures.

Requirements: Must be very detail-oriented and extremely dependable. Customer service or previous client-facing experience is a plus. Candidates must be self-motivated, have excellent organizational and communication skills, and have a desire to help others. A successful candidate will be comfortable handling multiple tasks simultaneously.

- S** *As a sales associate at Target,*
- T** *my primary responsibility was managing a register at the customer service/return desk.*
- A** *I often fielded complaints and collaborated with team members to problem-solve issues related to customers' purchases. To accurately direct customers, it was important to be knowledgeable of current promotions and store initiatives. Our clients represent a diversity of backgrounds and I took great care to personalize my interactions and be attentive to their individual store experiences.*
- R** *Because of this, I was often praised by my supervisor for my thoughtful approach to engaging with customers.*
- R** *I am confident that I will be able to quickly identify students' needs, learn Career Services' scheduling software, and reliably provide help.*

Sample 3: Assessment Intern (skill identified: data analysis)

Job Description: The assessment intern assists to collect, synthesize, and analyze data related to student engagement and learning, employment data, and outcomes. This intern's work will help our team make data-informed decisions to better serve our constituents and efficiently manage our resources.

Requirements: A high level of curiosity to understand the 'what, why, and how' of what we do. Requires proficiency with collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data. Must be detail-oriented. Proficiency with Excel, PowerPoint, and online surveying tools (e.g., Google Forms). The ability to work independently while maintaining quality and accountability.

- S** *As a research assistant in the political science department,*
- T** *one of my main responsibilities was to analyze data utilizing various functions in Excel. One particular project involved a complex data set of more than 500 survey responses. My task was to create a summary of the responses and draw out key insights related to the researcher's hypothesis.*
- A** *I completed the project by creating graphs to visualize key insights.*
- R** *The faculty member I supported included my graphs in their paper and noted how they increased the reader's understanding of complex content.*
- R** *Following this experience, I am confident that I can effectively apply my analysis skills to synthesize and interpret Career Services' datasets in a way that provides actionable insights to the team.*

Sample 4: Post-graduate research assistant (example: statement of interest opening paragraph)

Job Description: In collaboration with senior research staff, the research assistant will draft material summarizing research findings on specific projects assigned for incorporation into papers and projects to be submitted for publication. They will provide analytical reviews and summaries of existing literature pertinent to the research projects. The person in the role will also analyze data, using industry-specific software and Excel spreadsheets to create model frameworks and visualizations.

Requirements: Demonstrated interest in civic engagement. Strong software and computer skills (specifically STATA or R) necessary to handle large data sets and create models. Independent academic research is preferred.

- S** *I am pursuing this opportunity at the Public Policy Institute due to my interest in studying how different populations' regional and cultural heritages often result in significant public policy ramifications.*
- T** *Through my experience supporting research projects of one of my political science professors,*
- A** *I developed a solid foundation of utilizing quantitative and qualitative research methodologies and creating visualizations of our key insights. This project specifically focused on a study that examined more than 500 individuals' survey responses to questions related to regional polling practices.*
- R** *The more I dove into this data, the more interested I became to understand these dynamics. As we were working to meet our publication deadline, I was not able to explore all of the possible leads I inferred from the dataset.*
- R** *I am excited to work alongside the team at the Public Policy Institute to dive further into similar research questions and expand my perspective on these important issues. I am genuinely excited to commit the time to focus on this work before I turn my attention in a few years to seek a master's of public policy or administration.*

Cover Letter Rubric

Use this rubric to ensure your cover letter includes the key aspects of a strong document that tells your story accurately and succinctly. Career Services does not certify cover letters, as we do résumés, however, a well-written, persuasive cover letter will differentiate an application. Advisers are excited to review your content with you before it is submitted.

Criteria	Description	(X) if complete
<p>Overall Style and Appearance</p> <p>Goal: To create a document that is easily read and is written to formal business writing standards</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Letter is in block style format (Ctrl+Shift+ J) with appropriate margins that match your résumé; font style and size also match résumé Letter does not extend past one page Spacing between paragraphs is appropriate and consistent If sent electronically, the candidate's name is included in the document's title, and it is sent as a PDF 	
<p>Professional Heading</p> <p>Goal: To ensure the document is addressed correctly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes your complete contact information and the date Includes complete contact information for the employer including the name and title of the specific addressee, if available. If not, use an appropriate general salutation (e.g., "Dear Hiring Manager:" or "Dear Internship Coordinator:") Greeting includes the correct title: "Mr." "Ms." or "Dr." or both first and last name when gender is unknown or non-binary 	
<p>Introduction Paragraph</p> <p>Goal: To grab the reader's attention by demonstrating your specific interest in the position and employer. Compels the reader to dive into the remaining paragraphs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grabs the readers' attention with a "hook" or topic sentence and does not repeat basic information from résumé (e.g., name, class year, major) Explicitly names the position and describes how you learned of the opportunity, including networking connections, with their permission Leverages your research of the specific employer/industry to state why you would be a strong potential fit for the unique opportunity without solely noting facts about the employer Includes a thesis statement that highlights the themes of your body paragraph(s) 	
<p>Body Paragraphs</p> <p>Goal: To provide concrete evidence with sufficient context to aid the reader's comprehension and explicitly connects your past performance to your potential to contribute to the needs of the position and organization.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses the STARR Method to describe an experience or thread of experiences where you gained skill(s) or context that would translate to your success in this specific position Explicitly noted how your experience or skills could help you achieve a specific desired impact on a priority or need central to the employer's success Language focuses on what you can do for the employer, not what you hope to extract from the experience Accomplishments are not overstated or exaggerated, nor written to the level of detail as the résumé entry 	
<p>Conclusion Paragraph</p> <p>Goal: To wrap up the letter appropriately and compel the reader to take the next step.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicates a strong desire to work for the organization States that you are excited to interview, learn more, or provide additional information on skills and qualities you can bring to the role States your phone number or email and includes any unique circumstances associated with reconnecting to you (e.g., studying abroad) Thank the employer for their time and consideration Salutation is correct with punctuation ("Sincerely,") Letter is signed, if able, and your name is typed clearly 	
<p>Spelling, Grammar, Tone</p> <p>Goal: To ensure a polished document written to match the tone of the organization.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing has no errors — spelling, grammar, and syntax are correct. Punctuation is consistent Writing does not use contractions and avoids casual language, ineffective buzz words, and slang. If abbreviations are used, the full name is first spelled out Tone of writing matches the culture of the employer and industry 	



COLGATE