

Guide to Writing Application Letters

Cover Letters, Writing Samples, and Statements of Intent

COLGATE UNIVERSITY

Career Services

What is a cover letter?

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

- Cover letters complement or expand upon — not repeat — your résumé content.
- It strategically introduces you to the employer by:
 - Highlighting your best examples of specific skills and experiences relevant to the opportunity you seek.
 - Leveraging your research from 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.

Note: Unlike résumés, Career Services does not certify cover letters, but advisers can review your content with you before it is submitted. Use the cover letter rubric on page seven to prepare. A well-written, persuasive cover letter will differentiate your application.

What is a statement of interest?

In addition to a cover letter, employers may request applicants submit a statement of interest (also known as a statement of intent) when applying for opportunities. This document:

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

How to reach an adviser

The staff at Career Services is here to help. You can easily schedule an advising appointment by calling our office at 315-228-7380, visiting the front desk at Benton Hall, or using our online form: colgate.edu/ccsadvicing.

What is a writing sample?

Writing samples help employers evaluate your ability and potential to produce content suitable for the role.

- Choose a piece already created from a course, personal writing, or a past cocurricular or internship experience.

Note: If you use content from an internship, be sure it is public content (e.g., an Instagram post) or verify with your employer that you may share the material.

- Select content that reflects the writing style, tone, and typical length of work produced by the employer (this may vary across different industries).
- Unless requested, 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 paragraph, portions of the body, and the conclusion. Note any content you trim with a paragraph break and “content omitted to reduce sample length” to assist your reader’s comprehension.

Getting started with an application letter

- Review the employer’s website, LinkedIn page, and current news articles to familiarize yourself with the employer’s purpose, goals, values, and culture. Connect with alumni or other professionals who can provide insight.
- Gather the position’s description, your résumé, and your notes from your research.
- Highlight the required and desired qualifications and candidate characteristics the employer seeks, along with clues about its culture and mission. On your résumé, note the best examples of these elements from your academic, cocurricular, and personal interests.
- For your opening paragraph, identify one or two main aspects from your research about what draws you to this employer. You might also show your research by mentioning a recent initiative or success related to the employer.
- Determine if you want to list specific skills and experiences in your middle paragraphs (e.g., advanced Excel) or share a theme of experiences with related 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 hope to gain from the experience.
- Avoid generic letters and any perception that you did not sufficiently research. Each letter should be unique and tailored to the specific opportunity and employer.
- Your writing style should reflect 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 or employer.
- As an undergraduate, your letter should not exceed one page. Also, ensure that your typeface and text size mirrors your résumé. Statements of interest may allow for a longer document.
- Be sure to save your document as a PDF with your name and the 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 experiences beyond what your résumé reveals. It will help you form your letter's middle paragraphs and connect your content to the qualities and qualifications sought by employers. Familiarizing yourself with the STARR method will also prepare you for behavioral interview questions that may arise later in the process.

- S** **Situation:** state the situation you were in
- T** **Task:** talk about the task you were asked to complete
- A** **Action:** outline what action steps you took
- R** **Results:** describe the results in measurable terms
- R** **Relate:** show how it demonstrates relevant skills for this opportunity

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

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

Opening paragraph:

Grab your reader's attention in 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 you are applying to.
- 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 or employer? Be sure to connect the elements you researched with your motivation to apply rather than simply reiterating facts about the employer.
- End with a brief thesis statement for topics you will discuss in the remaining paragraphs.

Middle paragraphs:

- Share concise examples of experiences or themes that demonstrate your skills and fit.
- Explain concretely how these skills or experiences will contribute to advancing a specific goal of this employer.
- 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.
- Tell your story by adding depth and detail beyond what can be found on your résumé.

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., virtual meeting, times in their time zone) to make it easy for employers to contact you.
- Thank the employer for their consideration.

Close with "Sincerely," "Sincerely Yours," "Yours," or similar

Your first and last name

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, you may use a more generic salutation: "Dear Hiring Manager:"

Do not list details of your experiences in the first paragraph. Use middle paragraphs to elaborate.

You can write one or more middle paragraphs; use the STARR method to create your content.

Describe your qualifications and potential. Avoid calling attention to parts of the job description that do not match your experience.

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

Pulling the pieces together

The following examples demonstrate how to craft the STARR portion of your cover letter or statement of intent.

EXPERIENCE

Intern, Office of Admission, Colgate University

Summer 20XX

- Created engaging social media posts utilizing multimedia to promote Colgate programs and events to prospective students
- Collaborated with team to develop a summerlong outreach plan targeting college counselors, prospective students, and families to increase awareness of Colgate within 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 20XX

- 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 20XX–Summer 20XX

- 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 20XX, 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 to 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.*
- I often fielded complaints and collaborated with team members to resolve issues related to customers' purchases.*
- A** *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 in 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,*
- one of my main responsibilities was to analyze data utilizing various functions in Excel. One particular project*
- T** *involved a complex dataset 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 the graphs 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: Postgraduate Research Assistant (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 for incorporation into papers and projects to be submitted for publication. The research assistant will provide analytical reviews and summaries of existing literature pertinent to the research projects. The research assistant 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 datasets 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,*
- 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.*
- A** *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 in public policy or administration.*

Cover letter rubric

Ensure your cover letter includes the key aspects of a strong document that tells your story accurately and succinctly.

Criteria	Description	X if complete
<p>Overall style and appearance</p> <p>Goal: 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 should also match résumé Letter does not extend past one page Spacing between paragraphs is appropriate and consistent If sent electronically, your name is included in the document's title, and it is sent as a PDF 	
<p>Professional heading</p> <p>Goal: 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: Grab the reader's attention by demonstrating your specific interest in the position and employer. Compel the reader to dive into the remaining paragraphs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grabs the reader's 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 paragraphs 	
<p>Body paragraphs</p> <p>Goal: Provide evidence with sufficient context and connect 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 skills or context that would translate to your success in this specific position Explicitly notes 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: 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) Thanks the employer for their time and consideration Salutation is correct with punctuation (e.g., "Sincerely,") Letter is signed, if able, and your name is typed clearly 	
<p>Spelling, grammar, tone</p> <p>Goal: 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 	



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