A Brief Guide to Cover Letter Writing

Your CV is important but it is not the only opportunity to impress a potential employer. Cover letters – or even cover emails – are a further opportunity to motivate the employer to invite you to interview. Below is a quick guide to letter writing to help you get started, and we’ve included an example overleaf.

Before you get started, you need to know this: You are not going to tell them everything that your CV says. You are going to choose a few highlights from your CV that encourage them to read it. For further inspiration on letter writing make sure you also visit our CareeHub+ resources: https://essex.careercentre.me/u/csa5g12r

Cover Letters – Why Bother?

Think of the cover letter as your shop window: you want employers to come in and find out more about the product: you. So put items in the window that you know will interest them – you then motivate them to read your CV. You’re not going to send the same letter with every job application: all employers seek different skills. Plus, the skills you want to showcase – and the order you want to showcase them in - will change with every job too. So use this leaflet as a rough guide, rather than a hard rule, for what to include in your letter. Tailoring your letter means changing the “window” display so that the employer sees the skills/strengths that you want them to see.

Formatting

How long should your letter be? As a general rule, let the length of the Person Specification influence your letter length. If the job criteria’s fairly brief: one page will be sufficient. If the criteria is fairly long, then aim for 1-2 pages. Make sure you pay attention to details such as grammar, spelling and presentation. Keep formatting simple with fonts such as Arial or Calibri, and use black font colour only – unless it’s for a creative role. Where possible, address the letter to a specific person. Proactive online research, or taking the initiative to call and enquire, means you ensure the letter is seen by the right manager as quickly as possible.

Structure

Generally, employers want to know that you are:

- Motivated – tell them why you’re applying for this role / organisation
- Qualified – showcase relevant skills or experience that you’ve identified from the Person Spec as important
- Compatible – that you are a good fit for their organisation and/or share the same values / priorities.

Essentially you need to answer: Why you? Why this role? Why do you want to work for this organisation? Some students find it helpful to structure their letter so that each paragraph addresses a different theme – e.g. paragraph 1 is why you want the role, paragraph 2 shows off work experience, etc. Others find it easier to brainstorm these themes and build their letter around them. Templates and examples are useful to review – see CareerHub+. But remember: there is no right/wrong way to structure your letter, your letter should be as unique as you are. Do company research and use relevant language to showcase your commercial awareness alongside your job motivations.

Language

Essentially the cover letter is a series of ‘selfies’ that shows you in action at work or study. They can then imagine you in the role, slotting into their team with ease. It needs to be readable, well written, and include key words from the job criteria. Cover letters are also a great opportunity to showcase your good written communication skills. The employer needs to know that you have the language skills to be able to liaise well with stakeholders, and the commercial awareness of their sector that means you can hit the ground running.

Across your letter, use vocabulary which imply a good insight to their business or the role. For example, a retail employer might use the term customer, whereas a bank employer might prefer the term client. Analysing the job information, company website, and social media such as LinkedIn, will help you to identify relevant language. You also want the employer to see the energy and enthusiasm you’ll bring to the role. Use active / dynamic language which helps them to see you in action – for example, verbs such as facilitating, liaising, coordinating. CareerHub+ has a Power Verbs Generator, if you need inspiration. Including explicit admiration for the company (flattery) helps emphasise your enthusiasm and job motivation too.

Top Tips:

- Research the company online to further understand what the company is looking for in top candidates.
- Don’t worry about using fancy words for your first draft, write from the heart then formalise the language later.
- Avoid generic words that anyone can use (e.g. hardworking), focus on showcasing your unique strengths.
- Don’t hesitate to show off your achievements. Help them to see just how good you are.

Visit CareerHub+ https://essex.careercentre.me/u/o5n0w4jm Visit Our Blog: https://tinyurl.com/essex-cvprofile
Dear Mr XYZ

Re: Research Assistant Vacancy (Ref XYZ)

I am writing to apply for the above named role, as advertised in Gradcracker. As you will see from the enclosed CV, I am a first class honours Biomedical Science graduate offering a strong array of technical and analytical competency combined with excellent communication and interpersonal skills.

My degree and experiences acquired in the laboratories at the University of Essex have equipped me with a sound understanding of molecular biology and relevant practical lab techniques. As an example, my final year project centred on gene expression, and my research required analysis of XYZ assays, using techniques such as PCR and LIMS. Dextrous manipulation of materials such as XYZ was also a key feature of my degree. Furthermore, I have a proven track record for managing multiple projects at pace, alongside the ability to build rapport with clients and colleagues. This is demonstrated by my selection for the Dean's List for Excellence in 2018, when I successfully delivered multiple concurrent degree projects, alongside undertaking a series of part-time customer facing roles. I am therefore confident that I possess the skills, qualities and knowledge to be a strong candidate for this role.

The opportunity to be part of the Sanger Institute team conducting leading edge research of XYZ is incredibly exciting. I greatly admire the Institute's values and commitment to genomic innovation that is both ethical and ground breaking, and I have read several papers by Sanger researchers. I would relish the opportunity to work and learn alongside such inspiring colleagues.

Thank you for your kind consideration of my enclosed CV, I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours sincerely

Fred James