



# Cover Letter Guide

## What Is a Cover Letter?

**A cover letter is a business-style letter** written to a hiring manager in order to be considered for an interview. In a cover letter, you persuade the reader that you are a great fit for the job; this means that each letter you write should be customized to the job and the organization to which you are applying.

**Below are some of the basics of cover letter writing.** On the pages that follow, a “before” and “after” sample of a cover letter written by a first-year student show how to customize your cover letter and avoid some of the most common mistakes.

*Always include a cover letter with your application unless specifically instructed not to.*

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## How to Get Started:

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- (1) **Research:** Look carefully at the job description. Ask yourself, what are the 2-4 most important skills or qualities the employer needs? Circle them or make a list. For example:
  - Office tasks: answering phones, data input, filing, etc.
  - Customer service: answering customer questions, making people feel welcome, etc.
  - Technology skills: skills with software, online research, database work, etc.
  - Marketing: posting on social media, making flyers, etc.
  - Event or project coordination skills
  - Qualities like attention to detail, calm under pressure, personable and welcoming, takes initiative to solve problems, etc.
- (2) **Match your skills to what the job requires:** Look at your list from #1; now consider which of these skills or qualities you have. They can be learned or demonstrated in paid jobs, school clubs, sports, volunteer projects, hobbies, etc.
  - Pick 2-3 of these to talk about in your cover letter. Choose a story or example to illustrate each one. (Ideally the examples come from experiences listed in your resume.) These will form the body of the letter. See the sample letter on page three.
- (3) **Write a first draft:** Your cover letter should answer the question, why should you pick me over the other people applying? Focus on 2-3 main ideas—don’t try to recap the entire resume.
- (4) **Edit the content:** Do you use examples? Do you avoid slang and use a professional tone? Does each paragraph have one main idea? Do you connect your skills to your ability to do the job you’re applying for?
- (5) **Format and proofread:** Use a business-letter format (see example). Your letter should be error-free and fit on one page.

Upload to [Handshake](#) or email to [cservices@clarku.edu](mailto:cservices@clarku.edu) to have our staff do a final proofread.

## “Before” Version

*This cover letter uses a basic business format, but makes a few common mistakes. The revised version on the next page corrects those mistakes and really customizes the letter to the recipient and showcases what the writer (a first-year student) has to offer.*

Missing business header – who is sending? Who is the recipient?

May 10, 2019

Generic name of reader. Whenever possible address to a specific person.

To Whom It May Concern:

Opening focuses on what the reader wants – not what she can offer. Also, no need to state your name.

My name is Amanda Cortez and I am interested in working as your Visitor Services Specialist. I am looking for a summer job that uses all of my customer service skills and challenges me, and I think this position will be a great fit.

During the last two years, I have continuously sought to learn the many aspects of the Customer Service Industry by serving as an associate at CVS. I am also applying for this position because I have the combination of multitasking and organization for such work. I have organized science classes and activities for children from elementary school and up, through the Women in STEM club at Clark University, I have been able to better my multitasking skills. As well when I worked at Center Montessori, I had the handle organizing field trips along with other activities constantly, to keep the children entertained and safe.

There are good points here but each deserves its own paragraph with better detail or examples.

I would greatly appreciate an opportunity to talk with you in the ways in which I could serve the Museum of Science. Thank you for your consideration. I am enthusiastic about working at the museum and believe I will be a valuable employee. Feel free to contact me by phone or email. Thank you again for your time.

There is more here than needed; as a result the paragraph rambles.

Best,  
Amanda Cortez

“Best” is informal; in most cases, switch to a more formal closing instead.

## “After” Version

Here is the revised version. Remember, a cover letter is just one page.

### AMANDA CORTEZ

Boston, MA 12345 · 555-555-5555 · AmCortez@clarku.edu

May 10, 2019

Dan Smith  
Customer Service Manager  
Museum of Science  
1 Science Park Boston, MA 02114

Contact info  
formatted to match  
resume

Addressed to hiring  
manager in header  
and salutation

Dear Dan Smith,

It is with great enthusiasm that I submit my application for the position of Visitor Services Specialist (June 2019-September 2019). As a customer service associate for almost two years now, and having multiple leadership roles on campus, I know my diverse skills and qualifications will make me an asset to the Museum of Science.

Opening paragraph  
focuses on value  
she offers. Brief  
and to the point.

I am applying, first, because I believe that I am the kind of self-motivated, highly organized, Visitor Services Specialist you seek. During the last two years, I have continuously sought to learn the many aspects of the customer service industry by serving as an associate at CVS. For example, daily I am tasked with assisting hundreds of customers with an array of different needs, questions, and concerns. I handle most of these customers on my own because I run the front of the store, and I take pride in resolving every customer concern. I believe this experience prepares me well to successfully assist the high volume of visitors I would be helping in the Visitor Services Specialist position.

The original body  
paragraph is now  
two. Notice: (1) the  
clear topic  
sentences, (2) the  
specific examples,  
and (3) how she  
connects her past  
experience to her  
ability to do the job  
she's applying for.

I am also applying for this position because I excel at the combination of multitasking and organization needed for such work. For example, I have organized and presented science classes and activities for children from elementary school and up, through the Women in STEM club at Clark University. And, when I worked at Summit Montessori, I organized field trips while also planning activities constantly, to keep the children both engaged and safe. As a result, I understand how to engage my audience while also taking care of the behind-the-scenes details that make a program run. If hired for the Visitor Services Specialist position, I would bring this same level of dedication to the Museum of Science, no matter what my task.

Thank you for your consideration. I am enthusiastic about working at the Museum of Science and believe I would be a valuable employee. I would greatly appreciate an opportunity to talk with you about the ways in which I could serve the museum.

Closing  
thanks the  
reader and  
makes a polite  
request.

Sincerely,  
Amanda Cortez

More formal  
closing

# COVER LETTER LAYOUT

Your name and contact information as they appear on your resume

Date of Writing

Name of person who is hiring

Title of that person

Organization Name

Organization Address

Dear First Name Last Name,

**Opening Paragraph:** State the position for which you are applying and your enthusiasm for applying. State in 1-2 sentences why you are interested and/or why you think you will be a great fit.

**Middle Paragraphs:** Talk about your best qualifications. Begin each paragraph with a clear topic sentence and include specific examples of what you have done or achieved from your resume as proof. Two or three smaller, more focused paragraphs are better than one long one. Connect these skills and personal qualities to your ability to do the job well. Make it clear why the person hiring should choose you over the other applicants.

**Closing Paragraph:** This short paragraph thanks the reader for considering you and restates your interest or summarizes your qualifications. Then, either make a polite request for a meeting or tell them you will look forward to hearing from them (depending on the process outlined in the job posting).

Sincerely (or Sincere Regards),

Your Name

## How to Send Your Cover Letter

- **PDF before emailing:** Generally, save your resume as a PDF before sending so the formatting doesn't change when opened.
- **Name your PDF:** Use your full name, "cover letter" and (optional) the position you are using it for in the title, e.g. "MichelleFlintCoverLetter.pdf" or "MichelleFlintCoverLetterClarkLibrary.pdf."
- **Save all versions:** You should definitely alter your cover letter for specific applications (even if you recycle parts of it). Save each version you send; if contacted for an interview, you will know which version the employer is reading.