What is a Cover Letter?
The cover letter is a supplement to the resume and affords you the opportunity to: (1) expand on some items in your resume, (2) discuss your motivation for seeking employment in that industry, field, organization or company, and (3) explain why you would fit in well in the position. The cover letter also serves as a de facto sample of your written communication skills. As with any piece of writing, think carefully about your audience and what kind of evidence or argument might persuade them. Just as with the resume, every piece of information in your cover letter should speak directly to the position announcement. The ultimate goal is to be invited to an interview, where the employer can learn more about you (and you can learn more about them).

This guide provides basic information regarding cover letter writing. It is designed to help you get started with writing your own cover letter. You are strongly encouraged to have your cover letter reviewed by a trusted friend or co-worker before submitting it to an employer.

Do not simply restate the information in your resume. Instead, cite accomplishments and attributes that would be of special interest to the employer; elaborate on a project you worked on or a task you carried out to illustrate that you have the skills, knowledge, and experience the employer seeks. If you’re transitioning to a new career field, the cover letter is your chance to highlight your transferable skills by drawing an explicit connection between your past experiences and this new venture. Your emphasis should always be on what you can do for the employer, not what you hope to gain from the experience.

All employers want to hire individuals who will “fit in” well within their organization or company. You should do some research on the organization as well as the job field so that you can make a persuasive case stating that you would fit well with them in this position.
Informational interviews, which should be conducted before you begin applying for positions, are a great way to learn the ins and outs of an industry and employers.

Your letter should be directed to a specific person within the employing organization, preferably the individual who is making the hiring decision. Carefully follow the application instructions. If you are contacting an employer directly, call the company and ask for the name, title, and correct spelling of the head of your prospective department. Don’t forget that this letter also conveys your writing skills—so make sure you craft the document well.

**Composition Notes**

Format. Follow basic business-letter format in composing your letters.

Submit the cover letter as a PDF attachment. This allows you to “freeze” the formatting on your document so that no matter who opens it, the document will appear the way you intend it to appear. You should also do this with your resume. When sending your cover letter/resume through email it should be sent as an attachment.

Proofread. Check your letters carefully for grammatical and typographical errors.

Hard copies. If you provide a hard copy of your letter, use good quality matching bond paper for your letter, resume, and envelopes in white or ivory. Other colors may not present you as a professional. Address the letter to a person. When possible avoid using the generic “Dear Sir/Madam” or “To Whom it May Concern.” Instead, find out the name of the person in charge of the hiring process and address the letter to him or her. It is especially risky to use “Dear Sir,” since both men and women make hiring decisions. When addressing females, use “Ms.”, not “Mrs.” or “Miss.”

Tailor your letters. Employers will spot a “form letter” immediately; so take care to individualize your letter.

**Cover Letter Structure**

**First Paragraph: Introduce Yourself (Briefly)**

Be succinct. This paragraph should not be more than 3 or 4 sentences. State upfront why you are writing (i.e. to apply for XYZ position). Give the reader a quick review of your most relevant skills and abilities and a sense of why you want to work for them. This is not the time of elaboration or detailed explanation; that will come in subsequent paragraphs. The key questions the reader will be asking are:

- Why are you writing?
- Who are you and what are you doing now?
- Why, specifically, are you interested in this position, company/organization?

First Paragraph Example

I am writing to apply for the Analyst position posted on Chicago Career Connection. I expect to receive my master’s degree in June 2014. My quantitative and analytical skills combined with my leadership experience make me a great fit for a consultant position in a company that helps businesses understand how to operate more efficiently in an increasingly competitive market.
Second (and Third) Paragraph(s): Highlight Your Skills and the Value You Bring as an Employee

Think about your audience. How can you convince the employer that you would be an asset to them? Expand on what you said in the first paragraph. It’s best to “show” rather than “tell” – illustrate as much as possible with specific examples and relevant details. In each paragraph you have an opportunity to elaborate on your experiences in a way you cannot in a resume (remember that a cover letter complements a resume). Again, think about what would be most compelling from the employer’s perspective. Read the job description carefully and use its language/vocabulary as much as possible so as to frame your experiences in terms easily understood by the employer.

The key questions you should address here are:
• How did you develop the relevant skills/attributes required for the position?
• How have you been successful in achieving your goals?
• Why should they hire you?
• What makes you unique or more valuable than other job candidates?

Remember that you can draw from paid and unpaid activities – academic, extracurricular, volunteer, etc. – as long as you can explain the transferability of your skills.

Following the first paragraph example above, your second paragraph would discuss your analytical experience, and your third paragraph would describe your leadership experience. Make sure each paragraph has a strong, clear topic sentence.

Second Paragraph Example
I developed strong analytical skills in the course of completing my master’s thesis, a project in which I consistently met self-imposed deadlines and produced work that received praise from my faculty advisors. I conducted a literature review of over 30 articles and books, in which I absorbed and mastered large amounts of information, oftentimes laced with technical terminology, and identified questions/issues not yet explored (or underexplored) by others in the field. This skill would serve me well as a consulting analyst, where I will need to acquire a near-expert level of knowledge in a short time frame in order to compose solutions for business-related problems. [You might go on to describe additional examples and clearly explain how those situations have prepared you for this position].

Don’t forget to discuss how you fit in with the position and the company or organization:
• Why do you want this job (as opposed to any other)?
• Why do you want to work for this employer (as opposed to another)?
• What is it about the nature of the work that you find appealing?
• Are you committed to the employer’s mission?

Remember that you will have to back up your claims with evidence.

Third Paragraph Example
I learned how to lead when I served as liaison to my firm’s civic engagement office, an initiative designed to focus employee’s energies around community service goals. I set a fundraising goal of $10,000 dollars for a local cancer 5K, and reached the goal by devising a plan to tie recruitment and fundraising to friendly rivalries between the firm’s several offices. I really enjoyed finding a creative path to reach a challenging goal and I believe working as a consultant in your company will allow me to put my rigorous analytical training to good use in an environment where outside the box thinking is encouraged.
Closing Paragraph: Final Words and Details
In closing, indicate your interest in discussing the position and request an interview appointment. Thank the reader for his/her time and consideration. Make sure to include your contact information. Let the reader know what your next step will be.

Closing Paragraph Example
I welcome the opportunity to discuss my quantitative, analytical and leadership skills in more depth and determine how I can put these skills to use for you. I'm available for an interview and can be reached via phone (312) 555-0987 or email myemail@uchicago.edu. I will follow up with you in one week to ensure you received my application materials.

Sometimes a job advertisement will ask you to state your salary history and/or requirements. In general, you should put off discussing salary until after you have a job offer. At the same time, your job application preparation should include research on salary standards for someone with your background and degree.

Here's how you can address these issues when you’re required to do so:

Discussing Salary History
Over the last two years while completing my degree, my positions have been geared toward making money to cover my educational expenses and gaining practical work experience.

Salary Requirements/Expectations
My research indicates that a position such as the one described in your advertisement typically pays $____ to $____. I would be willing to consider a salary within that range, depending on the responsibilities and expectations of the position.