Teacher Portfolio & Preparation Series

TiPPS for Writing and Tailoring Cover Letters

What Purposes Do Cover Letters Serve?
- Introduce you to an employer (and thus, serves as the employer's first impression of you)
- Interest an employer in you and your CV
- Explain what special skills and qualities you can bring to the job (as opposed to what the institution can do for you)
- Tell the employer how and when they can contact you
- Help you to get an interview (either for informational interview or a job interview)
- Show the employer how well you can communicate and how well you write
- Help personalize information in your CV (the CV provides information about your past; the cover letter should suggest how you can help the employer in the future)
- Highlight specific information from your CV and from your background that applies to a specific field or position
- Help highlight that you meet the minimum requirements for the job but also shows what additional benefits hiring you would bring
- *"A cover letter is an opportunity to tap into an individual employer's aspirations and anxieties. Your resume is about you, but employers don't really care about you. They care about what you can do for them – the problems you can help them solve and the opportunities you can help them take advantage of."* (From Gary Will's Worksearch: Cover Letters)

And What Bad Cover Letters Do
- Tempt the employer to put aside your CV without even reading it
- Send the message "I can't even make the effort to write a specific letter" and broadcast that you're mass-mailing résumés (which may be the case, but don't shout it)
- Sound like a plea for an interview
- Unintentionally criticize an institution's current practices (e.g., "I can improve the department's curriculum" may be read as, "your curriculum is subpar"; better: "With over 5 years' experience in curriculum development in K-12 contexts, I would be greatly interested in contributing to the department's future projects and collaborations.")

Format for Cover Letters
- Consider creating a personal letterhead that includes your full name and contact information, consistent across your cover letter, CV, and additional application documents.
- Paper and ink
  - Don't use colored paper as a gimmick – employers can spot a gimmick.
  - Heavier paper has a nicer feel, if it's within your budget.
  - Use black ink; it looks more professional.

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- Font
  - Use fonts that are easy to read and readily available on most computers (in case the employer scans it)
  - 10-12 font size
- Margins – A minimum of 1 inch all around
- Format – business letter format
  - your return address and the date of the letter right centered at the top
  - the employer's name and address left centered
  - a salutation to the appropriate person(s) (e.g., "Dear Dr. ___," "Dear Search Committee," etc.)
  - one blank line between paragraphs
  - a closing salutation (e.g. "Sincerely,"), followed by four blank lines, followed by your typed name (you sign your name, preferably in black ink, between the salutation and your typed name)
- Be succinct! Try very hard to limit the letter to one or two pages at the very most. Remember the employer is busy and wants to see the facts in an easy-to-skim format.
- Always double-check and maybe triple-check your spelling (perhaps getting someone else to proofread it)
- The generic overview:
  - *Introduction* - State who you are and what position you are applying for. If you are applying through a contact, mention the contact's name in the first few sentences. No matter how you begin, get right to discussing the value you think you'd bring to their organization. One way would be to say something like "Here's what I will bring to/can offer [organization] as a [position]" and start describing the benefits they'd receive in hiring you. It tells them right away why you're writing and brings you immediately to communicating the value you offer.
  - *Show Interest* - Explain why you are interested in the position, the organization, its products/outcomes or services, and what you can do for the employer. Highlight any research you've done into the organization.
  - *Show what you have to offer* - especially from the point of view of how it meets the employer's needs. Be sure to refer them to your CV/résumé.
  - *Closing* - Indicate your desire for an interview. Suggest possible dates and times you are available (this is especially true if you are merely planning to visit a city, not already living there) or let them know how flexible you are about scheduling. Tell them how to reach you (e.g., phone, email). And don't forget to thank them.

Guidelines for Writing Cover Letters

Selling Yourself
- Remember that your cover letter is like a sales proposal, and all good sales letters are written with the reader's interests foremost in mind. A good strategy is: 1) differentiate yourself from the competition and 2) help the employer see the value of those differences.
- Avoid vague statements. It's much harder to create reader involvement with a letter that could have been sent to anyone (and probably has).
- Tailor your letter to each specific job. Check the duties and qualifications of the job, think of where your experience and training matches these, and focus your cover letter on these areas of

good fit in a way that appeals to the employer's interests. You can use some of the key phrases from the job ad to do this. For job listings that are short and vague, draw from your personal research of similar employers to infer what skills and abilities might be required. Especially, use details gathered from your information search about the organization (refer to http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/tipps/?page_id=62).

- Think about the employer, the people they serve (e.g., students), and the work you see yourself doing. Imagine yourself in the position – what abilities and traits do you possess that would be useful and successful in this position? What makes you different from the 50 other people who are applying for the same position? If you're not sure, research your background to uncover areas where you excel.
- Describe relevant employment or volunteer experiences fully to illustrate how your particular qualities fit the employer's needs well.
- Confidently and objectively state what you can do (for them), neither downgrading nor overinflating yourself. If you have trouble talking about your accomplishments or if it is not what you are used to doing culturally, focus on objective facts or words from others (e.g., evaluations from colleagues, students, supervisors) to show what you are capable of. Sometimes other people's words will have a stronger impact but still showcase your skills.
- For advertised openings, it is a good idea to indicate the job number (if available) and exact title of the position you are applying for early on in your cover letter. This is to allow for easy reference in the case that multiple jobs are being advertised, or for various entities (including Human Resources departments) involved in the hiring search.

Writing Style
- Write in a style that is mature but clear. Vary sentence length (but avoid sentences that are too intricate). Use action verbs and the active voice to convey confidence, optimism, and enthusiasm coupled with respect and professionalism.
- Use appropriate terminology for the field/position and for the potential audience who will be reading your cover letter.
- Translate your academic experiences as a student into language that shows how your scholarly activities have prepared you for this specific job.
- Avoid empty cliches, like "hard worker" or "self-starter." Likewise, be careful about using general descriptive words like "efficient" and "effective." First, ask yourself, "What was so efficient and effective about what I did?" If you have trouble answering this question, don't fake it -- it's better to leave it out. However, if you find a clear answer to this question, write about how that example illustrates your abilities.
- Show your real personality, but don't use overly clever or corny attention grabbers, which may irritate the reader you're trying to impress
- Be self-confident but don't brag. Don't be apologetic or negative. Also, be honest -- if you get the interview, the employer will expect you to be the person portrayed in the letter.
- Use **bold** or *italics* to draw attention to key points, but don't overuse them.

Other Guidelines
- Address your letters to the person who makes hiring decisions. If you don't know who this is, call to find out. Make sure you know if it's Mr., Ms., Dr. etc. If you still can't find this information, you may want to use "Dear Selection Committee:"

- If you're asked about salary expectations, you may want to just give a broad range or say "negotiable." (Too high a number and you could miss the cut. Too low a number and you may feel compromised later if offered the job at the range.)
- Send letters so they will be received on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday. Monday is the busiest mail day, and on Friday people's minds are on the weekend.
- For cover letters being emailed out: Maintain the formatting as you would any formal business correspondence, and include your cover letter within the text of your email, as well as a clearly labeled, printable, signed PDF attachment (e.g., FirstnameLastname_CoverLetter_Job8888.pdf).

For additional cover letter writing resources, visit the TiPPS website: http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/tipps/