



Cover Letters: A Guide for Undergrads

What is a Cover Letter?



The cover letter is a marketing tool – often one of the first things that a recruiter sees when considering your application. Its purpose is to advertise yourself well enough to secure an interview. It represents you – your passion, energy, accomplishments, individuality and professionalism within the context of the job to which you are applying. Each cover letter should be customized and tailored to demonstrate the skills and qualifications desired by the employer. For example, if you are applying for a position to be a research assistant for a professor, you might emphasize course work, grades, class papers you’ve written, interest in the subject, and your ability to work independently and learn quickly. If you are applying for a position as a tutor to grade school students, you might emphasize attributes that include previous experience working with children, examples of your creativity, love of learning, academic background and patience.

Before Writing Your Cover Letter, You Should:



- Do your research on the industry, field, company/ organization, and the job itself so you fully understand what the employer is seeking. Talk with a Career Advancement adviser to learn more about how to do this.
- Think like an employer—what qualities would you seek in an employee and how do your experiences reflect them? You can find hints: carefully read the job description, research the company/organization, go to company info sessions, and conduct informational interviews with individuals working in the field.
- Remember that you can include classes, class papers, hobbies, volunteer work and interests to highlight your transferable skills.

Ask yourself the following questions:



- *What qualifications does the employer want?* Read through a job description of interest and underline the attributes. These qualities are usually clear; in some positions or industries, however, the descriptions are vague. (This is where research and informational interviews come in handy.)
- *How does your experience relate to the job?* What are at least two specific accomplishments you can cite?
- *What are three qualities or experiences you want the employer to know about you?*
- *Why do you want to work for this organization or person?* What do you know about them? Look for something deeper than their being an “excellent” company. Is there something specific about their services, product, philosophy you can express?



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Undergrad Cover Letter Guide



To Craft a Successful Cover Letter, You Should:

- Write your letter in a conversational/natural, deferential, style. Stilted prose is not effective.
- Show enthusiasm for your work and the position.
- Establish your credentials early; give specific examples.
- Give them one or two compelling reasons to interview you.
- Run spell-check but check word-by-word afterwards. Also, check your phone number, email address and street address carefully. Have as many people as possible read your cover letter for mistakes, including a career adviser.
- Be attentive to details. If you merge your letter in a word processing program, check that you changed everything and are not addressing the letter to a different organization than the one you mentioned in the body of the letter.
- Address your cover letter to a specific person. If you do not have a specific name, personalize your letter to “Dear Mr./Ms./Dr./Prof.” or “Dear Hiring Manager”.
- Limit your letter to one page in length, consisting of three to five paragraphs.
- Use the active tense; avoid “i-n-g” endings when possible.
- Avoid generalizations and trite expressions (e.g. “I am the ideal candidate”).
- There is more than one way to write a cover letter. Ask different people for their perspectives, then develop your own style. Trust your own judgement.
- Visit a Career Advancement adviser to review and discuss your cover letter before submitting it to an employer.

Online Cover Letter Protocol

If someone asks you to email a cover letter and resume to apply for a position, you can do one of two things, both equally acceptable:

1. Write a brief e-mail, with the cover letter and resume attached.
2. Use your cover letter in the body of the e-mail, with the resume attached. Email format does not require you to include your mailing address, the date or the recipient’s mailing address; simply start with the salutation, for example, “Dear Ms. Smith.”

Be formal. It is not acceptable to use email/texting conventions that you would with friends (for example, lower case “I’s,” acronyms such as BTW, etc.); avoid contractions, and do not use “Hi” as a salutation.

Be very clear in your subject line so the recipient knows that he or she is not receiving spam.

Cover Letter Format

Your street address
City, state and zip code
Phone number
Email address

Date

Mr./Ms./Dr./Prof. first and last name of person
Position or title
Name of organization
Street address of organization
City, state and zip code

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr./Prof. last name of addressee:

First Paragraph:

- Give the person a reason to read on. Give an overview establishing your qualifications and cite the position.
- Do not start with "My name is..."
- What's important to mention? In general, experience in the field if you have it. Being a student at the University of Chicago is critical if you are applying for an internship, summer job or position in which the organization is specifically targeting students. This will include most positions, but there are times when you may want to de-emphasize your student status.
- If someone recommended that you write to a specific person, start with his or her name; for example, "Mark Smith recommended..."
- Mention the reason for writing to that firm if the reason is compelling.
- Do not say that you are the ideal candidate if you cannot prove it.

Second (and Occasionally Third) Paragraph:

- Elaborate on your qualifications in the context of the position—you can mention relevant jobs, courses, volunteer opportunities, etc. Relate each body paragraph back to the job description and the job you are applying for.
- Stress what skills and attributes you have to offer. Identify those parts of your experience (paid and unpaid) that will be of interest to the employer. This can be done in either one or two paragraphs.

Final Paragraph:

- Briefly discuss why you are applying to this particular company. What's the next step? Here's where you thank the person. "Thank you, in advance, for your consideration" and similar alternatives are fine.
- You can request an interview. There are many different ways (of varying levels of assertiveness) to handle this, but they will not make an appreciable difference as to the outcome.
- If appropriate, you can tell the reader you will follow up. If you will be visiting that city, indicate the dates you will be there.

Sincerely,
Your Name

Sample Cover Letters

5422 Frankford Avenue, Apt. 1
Chicago, IL 60637
(212) 333-0897
_____@uchicago.edu

February 22, 2015

Sharon Smith
Director of Logistics and Business Relations
DonorsChoose.org
134 West 37th Street
New York, NY 10018

Dear Ms. Smith:

I am a first-year student at the University of Chicago planning to major in Economics, and I am writing to express my interest in the Logistics and Business Relations Intern position at DonorsChoose.org. This internship interests me as I appreciate the mission of DonorsChoose.org and its advocacy for democratic education. I believe my background in education and research, along with my organizational and communication skills that I have developed as a result, would be a great asset to your office.

At the University of Chicago, I am the Logistics Director of Splash! Chicago, a community service teaching organization that operates educational programs to local Chicago high school students. I currently direct several Splash! programs that enable students to learn creative material taught by University of Chicago community members. I navigate multiple projects simultaneously, balancing the different needs and deadlines of various projects in a fast-paced, demanding environment. For example, I utilize my leadership and organizational skills by overseeing student recruitment efforts for our programs, leading teacher training sessions, and galvanizing fundraising to allow us to run programs without charge. I also initiated Droplet, a new program focused on hands-on learning, to fill a void in spring programming. Working with Splash! Chicago continues to invigorate my own sense of learning by allowing me to engage with the larger community and I welcome the opportunity to continue to provide students with innovative education that they would not otherwise be exposed to at DonorsChoose.org.

In addition, I gained quantitative and communication skills interning at J.P. Morgan for the past two summers. Initially, I researched Brazilian banks to analyze their real estate assets. The job became complex when I realized the documents I would be reading were only available in Portuguese, a language of which I had no familiarity. This was a challenging, but rewarding test of my ability to learn quickly and rely on myself to complete the task while balancing other responsibilities. Ultimately, my ability to be a team player and work well with others will allow me to participate in the DonorsChoose.org setting in an engaged and productive manner.

Thank you, in advance for your consideration. I would welcome the opportunity to talk further with you about this position.

Sincerely,
Mildred Canoli

Sample Cover Letters

5745 S. Everett Ave
Chicago, IL 60637
daardvark@uchicago.edu
773-221-3242

January 26, 2015

The PFM Group
222 N. LaSalle Street, Suite 910
Chicago, IL 60601

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a second year student at The University of Chicago College pursuing Economics and Public Policy. I learned about The PFM Group's Summer Internship program from my school's job board. I believe that I will be able to contribute analytical, quantitative and problem-solving skills to The PFM Group based on my past experience.

As a Summer Intern with the Strategy team at Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, I worked on measuring the competitiveness of Blue Plans in the Affordable Care Act individual insurance market and recommending strategies to maximize revenue. I learnt how to analyze data, conduct market assessments, understand trends and identify correlation between variables such as price and market share using Excel spreadsheets and functions. This taught me to approach business problems logically and systematically and allowed me to develop strong database management skills and attention to detail. I also learnt to summarize the results of my analysis as slides to be included in client deliverables. Having no prior experience in the industry, I was able to successfully learn new concepts and strategies in a short amount of time and I have no doubt that I would be able to do the same thing at The PFM Group.

With the campus group Moneythink, I worked with five charter schools to organize classes for mentoring students in making informed financial decisions, and was appointed Mentor Captain within four months of joining. I am responsible for managing our relationship with schools, developing our year-long curriculum, and ensuring adequate training and preparation. In this role, I overcame challenges posed by the implementation of a new technology-driven curriculum, and worked around staffing issues and reservations of school managements as we began expanding into new classrooms. This experience has taught me to leverage on the strengths and ideas of others while working on a team and allowed me to hone my leadership abilities and as a result, I know I will be able to make a significant impact to The PFM Group.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to experience the financial advisory environment, as well as the asset management world that PFM offers. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to an opportunity to talk with you about how my qualifications and skills are applicable to the position.

Sincerely,
David Aardvark

Sample Cover Letters

5745 S. Brim Street, Apt. 12
Chicago, IL 60637
ekim@uchicago.edu
773-221-3242

April 1, 2015

Mr. Schweppe Grey
Altshuler Berzon LLP
177 Post Street
San Francisco, CA 94108

Dear Mr. Grey:

I am a fourth-year Public Policy major at the University of Chicago writing to apply for the Litigation Assistant position at Altshuler Berzon LLP. I am confident that my experience working in the Orleans Public Defender's (OPD) Office, combined with my extracurricular pursuits and academic experience in college has thoroughly prepared me to succeed as a member of the Altshuler Berzon team.

At OPD I was asked to perform a variety of tasks for different attorneys with distinct preferences and expectations. Over the course of my two-month internship, I did hands-on, client-driven work with a partner on fifteen different cases ranging in severity from drug possession to motor vehicle theft and murder. Due to the immense workload our supervising investigator faced, we often worked independently and had to make quick decisions ourselves. Our purpose each day was to obtain all relevant information regarding a client's case; we conducted jail visits, took witness statements, interviewed our clients' friends and family, canvassed and photographed crime scenes, viewed evidence, and assisted with trial preparation, among other tasks. I regularly wrote detailed, investigative memos to keep attorneys apprised of our work, as well as provide my own insight into cases and witnesses, and became quite adept at communicating a great deal of information professionally and concisely. This internship afforded me the opportunity to tackle very complex cases in a collaborative and fast-paced work environment which I believe has helped to prepare me for the role of a Litigation Assistant.

During my third year at the University of Chicago, I served as the Logistics Chair of TEDx UChicago's 2014 conference: Make No Little Plans. I worked on a team with eight other board members to host the event for nearly 1,000 attendees from the University and greater Chicagoland area. I was singularly responsible for coordinating all logistical aspects of the conference which included ordering nametags and programs, booking flights and hotels for all speakers, coordinating volunteer efforts, and feeding 1,000 hungry conference-goers. We spent a year preparing for the conference, which taught me a great deal about time management and effective organization skills and I am confident that my attention to detail will make me a valued team member at Altshuler Berzon LLP.

I am interested in attending law school in the future and believe my abilities and interests would be well served in litigation. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to talk with you further about my qualifications. Please feel free to contact me at ekim@uchicago.edu with questions or for clarification. Thank you for your time and consideration

Sincerely,
Emma Kim