Preparing Professional Cover Letters

The purpose of a cover letter is:

- to lead the reader to want to know more about you and the potential fit between your skills and interests and the needs of their organization. Cover letters encourage the employer to read beyond the letter to your resume, and ultimately, to contact you to request additional information or to arrange a phone or in-person interview.
- to demonstrate your writing and communication skills.

Good cover letters:

- are targeted to a specific position or organization and reflect your research of the organization.
- are balanced in content between demonstrating your interest in the position and your ability to do the job (with specific examples to support your claims).
- highlight the fit between your skills and background and the needs/requirements of the position. Past performance is the best indicator of future success. Show the employer that you have done similar work or have used similar skills (even if on different policy issues). Employers will be looking for such 'transferable' skills. They will be reading your materials to see if you demonstrate (from your stated interest in the position and your skills/experiences) the potential to do the job and/or to grow into it.
- are written for the READER, which means they emphasize why you are a good fit for the employer, not why the employer is a good fit for you. This is known as WIIFM…What's In It For Me (where 'me' is the employer reading your letter). This difference in tone and emphasis separate strong covers letters from mediocre (or weak) ones. In other words, your letter should not be about what the employer can do for you but about what you can do for the employer. See the Africa Fund sample letter to read this difference in tone.
- are grammatically correct and typo free…and have been proofread by many people!
- are well formatted (with readable fonts and at least 1 inch side margins) and printed on good quality paper.
- whenever possible, should be addressed to a specific person rather than 'To Whom It May Concern'.

Getting Started

- The first thing to do before beginning to write your cover letter is to read the job description, underlining the tasks and qualifications stated in the description. Now ask yourself and write down the answers to the following:
  - What is it that energizes and interests me when I think about myself in this job/organization?
  - What have I done (through prior work experiences and courses) that demonstrates my ability to accomplish the stated job tasks? Write down specific examples.
  - In what ways are this organization's goals/mission consistent with my own philosophy or approach to policy?
- Once you have brainstormed your answers to the above questions, you are ready to begin drafting your letter. Cover letters generally require several edits to get them to effectively say what you want them to say. If you get stuck on an opening sentence, move beyond that and start writing where you can. You can fill in and edit your letter later.

So What Do I Say… and How Do I Say It?

The following provides a sample format and detail on the content of each paragraph of your cover letter. Cover letters are typically between 3-5 paragraphs in length and no longer than one page single-spaced. Please note that the following format sample is only a guide. All your letters do not need to follow this exact structure.

Your full address
Your phone number
Date

Employer's Name
Title
Organization
Full Address
City, State, ZIP

Dear Mr./Ms. Last Name: (if at all possible, address to a specific person)

The first paragraph should tell the reader who you are, why you are writing to them, and express your interest and enthusiasm in the position. Are you writing at the suggestion of an alum referral? Did you see a job listing? If so, where? Was the employer on campus for a presentation? Express your interest and enthusiasm in the position. Are you applying for a full-time or internship position? What degree are you pursuing? What year are you in? Expected graduation date? Be sure to explicitly mention the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy and the University of Michigan. These catch the attention of employers who hold in high regard the reputation of UM and the track record of former interns and alums working there.

The second paragraph begins the targeted marketing of yourself to the position/organization. State why you are interested in their organization. How can your background and experiences contribute to the organization's goals and objectives? You may want to add in some of the research you have done about the position/organization. Read through the job description carefully, looking for phrases describing the work tasks (analyze data, cost estimating, lobbying, economic analysis, etc.). These are the key skills and experiences the employer is seeking in their new hire. Demonstrate your ability to perform these tasks by providing examples from your work experiences and course work.

Continue to state and support (with examples of prior work/courses) what you have to offer them. This isn't a rehash of what's on your resume – it's your chance to emphasize your skills and experiences in the context of their needs. Give concrete evidence to support your ability to do the tasks you underlined in the actual job description.

The closing paragraph should suggest your interest in further discussing your potential fit with the organization moving toward some further action, e.g., your interest in interviewing when the employer is on campus; that you will be in DC over Spring Break and would be interested in setting up an interview; that you look forward to hearing from them soon, and how to best reach you, etc.

Sincerely,

Your full name, signed

Your full name, typed

Editing Your Draft

- Once you have a rough draft, go back to the job description to check that you have indeed addressed what the employer feels are the most important tasks and qualifications for the job.
- Read through the letter as if you were the employer. Ask yourself the following: If I were hiring for this position, does this letter (and resume) tell me enough about the candidate to convince me that he/she wants to do this job (rather than just desperate for any job)? Is he/she truly interested in this organization and does he/she understand what we are about? Does this person have the necessary background and skills to do the required work or to learn it quickly? What questions remain about this candidate?
- Are you writing from the perspective of what's in it for the employer? If all your paragraphs and sentences begin with "I", this might be an indication that you are writing more about what's in it for you.
- Revise and edit as needed. Reread your letter word for word, frontward and backwards looking for typos. Spellcheck doesn't catch every typo. Typos in cover letters reflect upon your attention to detail. Check carefully and have friends read and reread your letters as well. And definitely, do not rely on Career Services to catch your typos!

A Few Words About Technology

- If you forward your materials to an employer via email, it is generally a good idea to still send hard copy via snail mail.
- When using email, it is all too easy to become "informal" in sentence structure, punctuation, and overall professionalism. In general, unless you have already had extensive contact with an employer and have already submitted written materials, it is in your best interests and professionally most appropriate to submit a formal cover letter as the body of your email (or as a separate attachment with a short note in the email referring the employer to the attachments.) As with all issues surrounding your correspondence with employers, when in doubt, ask Career Services.
- On occasion, employers may have specific standards and guidelines for formatting your materials (no more than one page, no bullets, etc.). This is more true of the private sector where scanning is fairly common. Be sure to read job descriptions carefully and follow the guidelines specified.

SAMPLE COVER LETTERS – AFRICA FUND LETTER

1st Draft – this letter is more about what the candidate will get from the job than what she will contribute; she talks about her skills very generally, not supporting them with specific examples.

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to apply for the position of Project Director, State & Municipal Affairs.

I recently received a Masters degree in Public Policy from the University of Michigan. The program provided me solid skills in international economic and political analysis, as well as a keen understanding of cross-cutting international issues such as trade, foreign aid, and human rights.

Although much of my professional experience has been oriented toward programmatic and field work, I am enthusiastic about putting my talents to use in a new way. I have a longstanding interest and involvement in sub-Saharan Africa and U.S. policy toward Africa and my experiences as a student of public policy have honed my skills in policy analysis and political advocacy. The Project Director position would provide an exciting opportunity to apply these skills to promote positive change in U.S. policy.

I welcome the opportunity to talk with you about my fit with the Africa Fund. I appreciate your consideration and look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Sincerely,
Tentative Job Searcher

Final Version – written with the reader in mind; here she substantiates her fit with specific work experiences.

Dear Ms. Andrews:

I am writing to apply for the position of Project Director: State and Municipal Affairs with The Africa Fund. The organization's mission to advocate for a U.S. policy that promotes human rights, democracy and equitable development in Africa is consistent with my experience and my personal career goals.

My work with the Carter Center demanded thorough knowledge of specific international issues and US policy positions, the ability to work with a range of individuals and organizations, and the capacity to competently brief superiors on key issues and developments. Moreover, my close involvement with the Guyana field office gave me a strong sense of the impact of U.S. and multilateral policies on the ground. These skills were further honed at the Ford School of Public Policy, where I spent two years immersed in international economic and political analysis and deepening my understanding of cross-cutting international issues such as trade, foreign aid, development, and human rights.

My commitment to the mission of The Africa Fund is based on my longstanding interest and involvement in sub-Saharan Africa and U.S. policy toward Africa. My professional and academic experience have provided a solid foundation for fulfilling the needs of your organization, and I welcome the opportunity to talk with you about my fit there. I appreciate your consideration and look forward to hearing from you in the near future at xxx@umich.edu or by phone at (734) 999-1234.

Sincerely,
Confident Job Searcher who understands the organization and supports her qualifications w/examples

LETTER SUBMITTED FOR FORD SCHOOL RESUME DROP PRIOR TO CAMPUS VISIT

21B 2nd Street
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
(734) 615-0123
November 7, 2001

Donna Mastroianni
Graduate Recruiter
New York Federal Reserve Bank
33 Maiden Lane
New York, NY 10001

Dear Ms. Mastroianni:

I am a second-year graduate student at the University of Michigan School of Public Policy, concentrating in international trade and economic policy. I recently attended your presentation in Ann Arbor, and I enjoyed hearing the first-hand account of activities at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Your presentation highlighted the dynamic environment of the Bank and further fueled my interest in pursuing full-time employment. Additionally, I learned of the many opportunities in the Bank Supervision Group and wish to be considered for the Bank Examiner position within the Financial Examinations Department.

This past summer I worked for two agencies in the Executive Office of the President conducting research, providing analysis, and making recommendations on courses of action responsive to agency needs and goals. Specifically, I worked with the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative to forward the Administration's policy objectives for increasing trade flows with Sub-Saharan Africa. At the Office of Management and Budget, I performed budget analysis to determine possible funding allocations for a federal health agency. Prior to attending graduate school, I also worked in a variety of capacities where analytic skills were applied to making assessments and offering solutions to problems, including positions with a law firm and with non-profit associations.

I am very enthusiastic about employment possibilities with the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and hope to apply my professional experiences to the exciting work of the Bank. Namely, I hope to bring analytical, communication, leadership, and computer skills to bear as an Examiner with the Bank Supervision Group. As such, I have enclosed a resume for your review and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Candidate A's signature

Candidate A

LETTER SUBMITTED FOR SUMMER INTERNSHIP

Your Address
City, State, ZIP
Phone
Date

Ms. Juliana Kinal
Internship Coordinator
Business Information Service for the Newly Independent States (BISNIS)
U.S. Department of Commerce
International Trade Administration
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Ms. Kinal:

Please consider this letter an expression of my interests in the BISNIS internship within the ITA. I am a first year Master of Public Policy student concentrating in International Policy at the University of Michigan Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. My particular policy interests are in the development issues of the NIS, as well as ways of facilitating market growth through trade and investment within the transitional economies of the former Soviet Union. A summer internship within BISNIS, a department dedicated to these issues, would provide an excellent opportunity for me to utilize my interpersonal, analytical, writing and language skills on work of importance to your group and consistent with my areas of policy interest.

My qualifications are based on a combination of coursework and experience. Ford School courses such as Macroeconomics, International Economic Policy, Benefit-Cost Analysis and Foreign Policy have provided me with valuable tools for competent writing, in-depth research and analytical thinking. Aside from my solid academic training, I gained significant work experience in my positions at the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination and at Cravath, Swaine & Moore. My employment record reflects increasing responsibility, independent thinking, diversified job assignments, and solid accomplishments. I am accustomed to a fast-paced environment where deadlines are a priority and handling multiple tasks simultaneously is the standard. Moreover, having been born and raised in the Soviet Union, I have insight into the milieu in which BISNIS operates. I would like to use these qualifications to enhance BISNIS' goals and objectives.

Enclosed please find my resume for your review. If you require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at (734) 327-1111. Thank you for your consideration and forthcoming response. I look forward to speaking with you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Candidate B's signature

Candidate B

Enc.