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# Handout

## Covering letters

Usually, when asked to apply by CV, you will also be expected to send an accompanying covering letter. This letter acts as the advertising campaign for your product (i.e. you) and should draw the recruiter's attention to the good match between what you have to offer and what they need; what motivates you about the post; and your interest in their organisation. This is partly done through the evidence you have provided in your CV but the letter brings all the key elements together. You will often be judged on the quality of the letter you write – some recruiters may not read your CV if your letter fails to impress. The content is crucial but so is appearance, the use of appropriate English, correct spelling, grammar and general 'professionalism' of what you write.

Below is an example of the 'formal' framework you should use to set out your covering letter along with the key points you need to cover when you write.

Mr B Vigilant  
Graduate Recruitment Manager  
United Sprockets  
Sprocket Tower  
Industry Street  
London SE2 4MM

5 Humble Street  
Humbleton  
Yorkshire  
S12 3NB

16 October 2011

Dear Mr Vigilant,

**Re: Sprocket Marketing Trainee (job ref: AB123)**

Start your letter with a short introduction: Say why are you writing to the recruiter. If it is in response to an advertised vacancy, say where and when you saw it advertised. If you are making a speculative enquiry be clear about the type of work or opportunity you are asking for.

Include a paragraph about why you are a good candidate: Referring to the evidence in your CV, state clearly how you match what the recruiter is asking for in the advertisement (skills, experience, qualifications, etc). With a speculative application, think about what you would expect them to be looking for given the nature of the opportunity that you are seeking.

State why you'd like the job / study / research opportunity: Describe what motivates you and attracts you to this opportunity – show that you have a realistic understanding of the role and can draw parallels with positive experiences you have already had, whether in a similar role or in a completely different setting.

Be clear about why you have chosen to apply to them: Say why this organisation appeals to you. Draw on the research you have done (eg, their website, brochure, contact with one of their representatives at careers events, work experience etc) and outline what appeals to you about the recruiter – if you can change the name of one organisation with another and what you have written still makes sense, you haven't been specific enough about why them. Don't waffle or make it up.

End with a positive conclusion: Your final words obviously depend on the context within which you send your letter but, most likely, it will be appropriate for you to express your expectation of a reply, eg, "...I look forward to hearing from you in due course." If appropriate, indicate when you are/are not available for interview.

Yours sincerely  
*Anne Other*  
Anne Other (Ms)

**NOTE:** You don't have to use the above order of **why you**, **why this opportunity** and **why them**; vary the order to suit your style of writing, as long as it flows logically. **ALLOW ABOUT 1 FULL SIDE OF A4 FOR YOUR LETTER.**

## Top tips for covering letters

**Style:** There is no one 'right' way to write a formal letter such as a covering letter but you need to be sure that the reader understands why you are writing and can easily follow the main points you are trying to get across. Your letter must create the right impression for its purpose. Make your letter easy to read, express yourself clearly and group similar ideas or points together in concise paragraphs in a logical order. Use simple everyday words or vocabulary suitable for the subject of the letter. You may prefer to use a 'bullet point' approach in parts of the letter if it will get the message across more clearly. Look at the style and vocabulary commonly used by the recruiter that you are writing to (look at their website or recruitment literature, for example). Try to reflect a similar style in your letter so that you are both 'speaking the same language'.

**Be concise:** Covering letters must be concise and to the point whilst still getting your message across. Avoid jargon, pomposity, exaggeration and clichés. Do not use colloquialisms, slang and abbreviations. If it helps, write a more spontaneous rough copy first then edit it into 'formal' shape. This way you will not lose sight of your main points whilst searching for the right words or phrases. The recruiter is probably a very busy person so make your letter clear, logical, easy to follow and interesting to read.

**Punctuation and spelling:** A staggering amount of applications are rejected by recruiters because of poor spelling and grammar. Brush up on punctuation if it is not your strong point ('Eats, Shoots and Leaves' by Lynne Truss is a handy book). Common mistakes: You can omit full stops at the ends of lines in addresses and after Mr, Mrs or so on. Capitals should be used at the start of a sentence, for proper nouns (names of particular people, places, organisations, months etc.), adjectives derived from proper nouns (e.g. French) and the pronoun 'I'. Never use 'i' as you do when texting. Get a trusted friend or relative to check your letter. Do not rely on spell checks on word-processing programs - be sure to use the UK English version and check again after using them.

**Addressing:** Wherever you can, address the letter to an individual, rather than 'Dear Sir or Madam'; you can always check the organisation's website or phone and ask for the name of the Recruitment Manager or similar. If the recipient is a woman but you don't know whether she is a Miss or a Mrs, use Ms.

**Signing off:** If you begin 'Dear Sir or Madam'; sign off 'Yours faithfully'. If you use a name 'Dear Mr Vigilant'; sign off 'Yours sincerely'. Always state your name and title under your signature.

**Emailing your application:** Many recruiters now ask candidates to email their CV rather than post it. In theory, you could use the main body of the email as a sort of covering letter. However, it is a good idea to send a covering letter as an attachment alongside your CV so that, when viewed on screen or printed out, the recruiter can see that you are capable of writing a decent, formal letter. This can also create a much better impression than a poorly formatted email.

**Sending your application in the post:** Use good quality, preferably white, unlined paper. A4 is usual. Choose envelopes to match the size and, preferably, colour of your paper. Type, write or print in black, on one side of the paper only, as your letter may be photocopied. Use First Class stamps and if requesting information or hoping for a reply to a speculative enquiry include a stamped, self-addressed envelope. It is usual to type your letter although sometimes a 'hand-written' letter is requested in a job advertisement.

**Beware the perils of cut and paste:** Check that you have been consistent and that you have not applied to 'Bloggs and Co' at the top of the letter whilst extolling the virtues of 'Megacorp Inc' in paragraph three. Getting the names of recruiters mixed up happens all too often!

**Keep a copy:** You will need to remember exactly what you wrote.

## Further help

- Sample covering letters and CVs are available on the Careers Service website: [www.shef.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/letters](http://www.shef.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/letters) - none of them are 'perfect' but each will give you an idea of how to set out a covering letter and the sorts of things to include in one.
- If you'd like feedback on your draft covering letter (and CV), book an appointment at the Careers Service -Tel: 0114 222 0910 or call in to see us at 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield.