

Wellington Careers and Employment Career Essentials—Cover letters

Your cover letter may be the first thing a potential employer discovers about you. Unless the job advert specifically asks you not to, you should write a personalised and customised letter. It often accompanies your CV or résumé. Your cover letter must convince the employer that you are very interested in the industry, their organisation and the job itself. Every employer will read your cover letter thinking: can they do this job, and do they really want this job?

Your strategy

What are you offering? You are promoting... yourself! Like any good salesperson, you're aiming to clearly convey the features and benefits of the product. To do this well, you need to clearly identify what you are offering as a potential employee and how your skills would be of benefit to the employer.

Who will read it? Try to identify the person who will make the decision about hiring you and address the letter to them. This is not usually the HR or recruitment manager, but perhaps the team leader or department manager. If possible, try to have a brief conversation with that person prior to sending in your application. Prepare a few genuine questions that will provide more clarity about the role.

What is the organisation about? Do your research to find out the employer's needs. Start with the duties listed in the job advert or job description. You may be applying for a position that hasn't yet been advertised, but either way you will want to learn everything you can about the industry and the organisations you are interested in. See if you can contact someone who currently or previously worked there.

Content

Your task is to convince the reader that you have the skills, interest, energy, and enthusiasm to do the job. Focus on the main skills and experience that the employer asks for. Include personal examples and ensure you address the selection criteria. Be specific about the aspects of the organisation that you admire, and why you want to work there. Your letter should be clear, crisp, concise, polite, and business-like. Avoid language that is overly formal or legalistic. Sentences and paragraphs should be short and to the point. Use strong verbs that demonstrate your accomplishments (e.g., organised, supervised, coordinated). Avoid exclamation marks.

Layout

Your details Name, address, email, and phone.

The date e.g., 9 January 2022

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Employer details The name (if known) and job title of the hiring person, the organisation, and the city. The full postal address is not required. Target your letter to department heads and hiring managers. Ensure correct spelling.

Salutation “Dear” is the usual salutation, followed by the person’s name. Decide based on the culture of the organisation or application instructions whether to use the person’s first name or title and surname (e.g., “Dear Mr...”, “Ms...”, “Mrs...”, or “Dr...”). Depending on the job or organisation, “Tena koe...” is also acceptable. Avoid “Dear Sir/Madam” or casual greetings such as “Hi” or “Hello”. “To whom it may concern” is acceptable.

Opening paragraph Briefly explain why you are writing. If applying for a job, provide the job title, job reference number, and the source of your information (e.g., NZUni Talent, Seek, or a personal contact). Include a strong positive statement about yourself and your suitability for the role. You may have already spoken to the person who will read your letter, or someone has referred you to this organisation. If so, mention this.

Second and third paragraphs Briefly describe your current situation. Explain why you want the job and how your skills and experience qualify you for it. Give evidence of how genuine and developed your interest is. The covering letter is an opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge of the company, the industry, markets, and the economic climate in which it operates. Your unique skills, interests, aptitude, and experiences relevant to the role should be mentioned in the covering letter. Keep the emphasis on what you can offer the company, not on what they can offer you.

Closing paragraph The closing paragraph must be positive. Request an opportunity to discuss your application in an interview. If there are any restrictions on when you would be available for an interview, make this clear. When making an application that hasn’t been advertised, state that you intend to follow up the application, but be clear about when and how you will do this. Finish by thanking the reader for their time and consideration.

Signature The cover letter usually closes with ‘Yours sincerely’. Normally you don’t need to print the letter, so simply type your name underneath. Don’t forget to enclose or attach materials as required, for example, CV, testimonial, academic transcript, and company application form.

Essentials

- One-page maximum. Plenty of white space. Correct spelling and grammar throughout.
- Professional tone and interesting to read.
- Consistent font with no graphics, unless the role specifically needs this skill.
- Have you expressed your interest in the job and organisation clearly?
- Try not to use the word ‘I’ too many times.
- Have you concisely communicated your skills and experiences necessary for this role?
- Have you ended the letter in a positive and proactive manner?
- Finish with an electronic or written signature

