

# STEP 3: GUIDE TO PREPARING AN EFFECTIVE COVERING LETTER

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## What is a covering letter and why is it important?

Your covering letter acts as the introduction to your application or CV, and is your personal sales pitch. You should include your interest in the vacancy, the organisation and convey your skills, abilities and achievements that will make you an ideal candidate. You should also try and show how enthusiastic you are about the job on offer. The cover letter also gives you a chance to explain anything in your CV that an employer might question, for example gaps in employment or low grades.

As this is the first thing that an employer will look at, if it is poor quality they may choose not to read your CV or application form. This might sound incredibly harsh, especially if you spent weeks completing an application. Do not throw away all of your hard work, and an opportunity of a new job by attaching a poor covering letter.

## When to use a covering letter

### 1. Applying for an advertised vacancy

As a general rule, if you are applying for a position that has been advertised, you should include a cover letter. If you are applying electronically, this will be sent as an email, or attached separately as a Word document. Your CV and cover letter are a package, and it is important that you see how they work together.

If you are sending an application form, check the application pack to see if a cover letter is required.

### 2. Speculative applications

If you are making a speculative application (contacting an employer where no vacancy has been advertised) or contacting someone for networking, it is strongly advisable to send a covering letter. Much of the content is similar to a standard covering letter, but you will need to explain exactly why you are contacting them, and what you want from them. For example: to arrange an interview, work experience or to discuss opportunities of potential future employment. If you need help with the format of a speculative cover letter, see the [Sample Covering Letter for a Speculative Application](#).

## Tailoring your cover letter

Each covering letter must be individually written. Producing a typical cover letter and copy and pasting different company details runs a risk of your letter sounding impersonal, and means you may accidentally send a letter with incorrect details inserted.

Some things will stay the same in your cover letter but you need to read about each organisation and their requirements. Give emphasis to the skills and experiences that they require, and mention why you want to work for them.

### Starting your covering letter

It is usual to reply to the named person on the application pack. If a name is not given, or you are sending a speculative application, you can call the organisation and ask for a named individual who deals with recruitment. It is advisable to address your covering letter to someone, and if you do – spell their name correctly. If you are not able to find the name, address your letter to Dear Sir/Madam.

Your letter should always begin formally, with 'Dear' and include their title (Ms, Mr, Dr) and their surname. If they have not specified their marital status in previous correspondence, it is safer to use Ms.

### The content of the covering letter

You are expected to show that you match the position and organisation. The secret to writing a good covering letter lies in using your qualifications and experiences and showing that you are the best person for the job. One way to do this is using your covering letter to highlight your achievements. Move on to focus on the employer, and why you are applying for the job, including interesting facts about their organisation. Show them that you are capable, are highly motivated and proactive.

### The language of the covering letter

Throughout your covering letter (and your CV or application), it is important that you use strong, positive language to sound enthusiastic and passionate. Recruiters are very interested in finding out about your specific contribution rather than an overall achievement of a group. Highlight your own responsibilities and achievements and personally take credit for them.

Your covering letter should include short, concise sentences and gripping paragraphs. They should engage the recruiter and make them want to know more about you!

### Formatting and layout

In general, cover letters are no more than **one side of A4 paper**, or about 400 words. They are set out like a business letter. The letter should be three or four paragraphs long, each separated by a single line. We have included some samples including [Sample Covering Letter for a Career Change](#), [Sample Covering Letter for an Experienced Professional](#), [Sample Covering Letter for Management](#) and [Sample Covering Letter for a Speculative Application](#) to help.

### Adding addresses

Your name and address should be clear at the top of the letter on the right hand side. Even though you have this information on your application or CV, you must put this on your covering letter. Firstly, this looks professional, and secondly, your CV and covering letter could become separated easily.

## Signing off the covering letter

The convention in the UK is to sign the letter off as 'Yours sincerely' if you named the person at the beginning of the letter. If you did not know the name of the person, and needed to use 'Dear Sir/Madam', you would need to sign off with 'Yours faithfully'.

## Emailing an application form or CV

Nowadays a lot of applications are made online, and employers ask you to email in an application form or CV. Always follow their instructions. If you do need to send a covering letter along with an email, think about whether you write this as part of the email, or as a separate document.

- Do not simply write 'see attached' in the email - treat your email as part of your covering letter
- Use the subject of your email to explain your purpose e.g. job title and reference number

If you are sending speculative CVs, think about whether an email or a postal application will have more impact.

- Emails are easier to read but can be quickly deleted
- A covering letter and CV arriving through the post make a nice change but may not be read

**Solution:** Try both options, post a CV and covering letter, and follow up several days later with an email asking if they have received it.

If you are not sure about how to format your cover letters, we have provided a number of templates in this guide, including [Template Covering Letter for a Career Change](#), [Template Covering Letter for an Experienced Professional](#), [Template Covering Letter for Management](#) and [Template Covering Letter for a Speculative Application](#).

## Relevant websites

- <https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/get-a-job> - see 'How to write covering letters'
- <http://www.monster.co.uk/career-advice/> - see 'How to write a cover letter'
- <https://www.reed.co.uk/career-advice/how-to-write-a-cover-letter/>
- <http://www.jobsite.co.uk/worklife/category/cvs-applications-cover-letters/>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/careers/cv>
- <http://www.interview-skills.co.uk/free-information/interview-guide>

## Related documents

- [Sample Covering Letter for a Career Change](#)
- [Sample Covering Letter for an Experienced Professional](#)
- [Sample Covering Letter for Management](#)
- [Sample Covering Letter for a Speculative Application](#)
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