



Planning Out a Cover Letter

A cover letter is a vital document in selling yourself directly to the company or position for which you're applying. It's your opportunity to directly relate your experiences to the job itself. Unfortunately, if you're not an English major or a general fan of writing, a cover letter can seem rather intimidating. Hopefully this 3 paragraph strategy can alleviate some of the frustration while getting you on your way to a solid cover letter.

A quick note: Cover letters are meant to be tailored to a specific company and job and work best when tailored to a specific individual. Until you need a cover letter — and it should be pretty clear if you need one or not — it's best to not bother with writing one.

Paragraph 1 – Your Hook

The first paragraph has a lot of responsibilities: explain what job you're applying for, highlight why you'd make an excellent candidate, and preview the rest of the letter all while making sure the audience is interested (hooked) in you as a candidate.

But keep in mind: this isn't your opportunity to get too creative. It's not a short story, but a specific piece of business writing.

Your first sentence should clearly explain what job you're applying for and where you found the job. It's not necessary to say "My name is Jacob Gordon, and I'm writing to..." If you formatted your cover letter correctly, your name should be in the header (the same header from the top of your resume). Instead, get right into the point of the message. Something like, "I am writing to express my interest in the Data Analyst position I found on HireRawls.com," works great. It gets right to the point (why are you writing this letter) and lets the reader know exactly where the job opening was found.

Your next sentence should somehow connect your experiences, education, or skills directly to the job. Be sure to really analyze the job ad to understand exactly what the position is asking of candidates. This sentence should only focus on the experiences, education, or skills you discuss in the next paragraph. This way, you're not only connecting your background to the job, but you're providing a preview of the rest of the letter. Something like:

"My experience in [some experience from your background] allow me to [some duty/responsibility from the job ad]."
"My ability to X, Y, and Z at my internship with ... ensures I can [some duty/responsibility from the job ad]."

Both examples directly connect some aspect of your background to the open position, which is the intended goal. You want to make a strong connection between your background and the job opening, enticing the reader to continue reading. Essentially, you're letting your relevant/impressive experience hook the reader into continuing on with the letter.

The third, and last, sentence of your paragraph should reiterate your confidence in your candidacy for the position. Something like, "I'm confident I have the skills and qualifications needed to succeed as the Data Analyst for General Motors." From a writing standpoint, this transitions from the introduction to the next paragraph. However, from a tonal standpoint it helps to build confidence in the reader that you know you can succeed at the job. Now, do be careful because how you set up your tone can have drastic effects to your letter. Too confident and you sound arrogant; too modest and you sound unsure.

That's it. Three sentences for your intro and you're on to the second paragraph.

Paragraph 2 – Your Claim to the Position

Your second paragraph should build on the momentum from your intro by focusing on one experience or skill set. That's right: one. Keep the phrase "quality over quantity" in your mind here. It's more impressive to a recruiter if you can

clearly connect some experience or skill to the job rather than just list a bunch of seemingly relevant skills or experiences without a connection. So in this second paragraph, stick to the one skill set or experience you discussed in the first paragraph. (Don't forget, the resume will be accompanying the cover letter, so that can fill in the quantity aspect.)

Let your topic sentence transition from the first paragraph by stating what your experience taught you in general language. Something like, "As a Data Analysis intern for Morningstar, I worked alongside the Data Analysis team to create bi-weekly reports that were distributed throughout the company." Notice how we're just focusing on one experience from the resume. You'll want to pick the strongest, most relevant experience to discuss here.

The next sentence or two should focus on detailing the skills performed at this position. Really zero in on the transferable skills held at this position, remembering to only focus the discussion on the one or two most important ones. Think about how you developed those skills, why they were important, and who (besides yourself) benefitted from those skills.

The last sentence or two should have a clear turn. From talking about what you did at this previous experience, you'll now talk about how that experience can help you succeed at the new position. And don't be afraid to make the turn pretty obvious. Something like "I can use my experience at Morningstar to succeed at General Motors by...." Now, you'll want to focus on how that past experience can transfer into the new job. These are pretty important sentences because you'll be trying to sell yourself in that position to the recruiter. Make sure to carefully read the job ad to help connect your experiences better.

This paragraph should be your longest in the letter, especially because it's doing a lot of the heavy work. You're going from discussing what you did in a previous position to discussing how that experience will help you succeed at a new one.

Quick note: if you're finding you have a lot of room after just 3 paragraphs, you may be able to fit a second paragraph that focuses on selling another past experience as success for the new job. Start with the 3-paragraph model and then add if you need it. For the additional paragraph, the same ideas still apply.

Paragraph 3 – Conclusion

Time to wrap everything up. I recommend starting the conclusion with a sentence that shows a clear turn. Something that is still confident but isn't in that salesman tone the rest of the letter may be. Going with, "I'm excited at the prospect of working as the Data Analyst for General Motors," has that confidence we want in a cover letter, but is less concerned about selling the applicant as a fit for the position and more focused on demonstrating eagerness to work for the company. I also find that kind of wording works for a nice transition out of the heavier paragraphs that focus on the experiences/skills.

Your next sentence could then mention an interview. Mention, not demand. You don't want to be afraid of saying "interview", but you don't want to be too forceful either. "I will call you next week to schedule an interview" is a bit too forceful and can be off-putting for many recruiters. Something like "I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss my qualifications further during an interview at your earliest convenience." We still have the idea of an interview brought up confidently, but the decision to schedule an interview still lies with the recruiter. Compare that to the original example when the writer was saying when he or she would schedule the interview.

From there, you should provide your contact information. A telephone number and email address work great. "I can be reached at 123-456-7890 or at firstlastname@gmail.com," does a nice job of being direct and to the point. (Make sure to remove hyperlinks from emails!)

Lastly, close by establishing some goodwill. Thank the person for his or her time and include some interest in continuing the discussion later. "Thank you for your time and consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you soon," works great.