



Tips for Writing Cover Letters

Overview

A cover letter, exactly as its name suggests, is an introductory letter that accompanies your resume. The goal of a cover letter is to frame the experience and skills an employer will find in your resume and make a compelling case for why you are a good match for the employer's stated needs. Writing a cover letter, like promoting a performance or project, challenges you to think critically about the unique value you have to offer. The added challenge of a cover letter is linking that value to the requirements of the position you are seeking.

In most cases, your cover letter is the first thing a prospective employer will see, so it is important to invest time tailoring the letter to the specific position. It's wonderful to have a "master version" of your cover letter with language you can use and adjust according to the position. That said, a successful cover letter has to be carefully crafted and personalized—it's easy to sense when an applicant has simply "cut and paste." Be prepared to heavily edit your letter or add new material to thoughtfully address the qualifications outlined in the job posting.

The more you know about the position and the hiring organization, the better you will be able to frame your experience to match an employer's needs. Spend time reviewing the job posting closely, peruse the organization's website, and collect information about the projects you would be contributing to, if known.

Once you have a clear sense of the job requirements and the mission of the organization, review your resume and think about which elements of your professional background most closely match the demands of the position you are applying for. A cover letter should ideally be kept to one page, which means you will likely only have space to cover 3-4 topics, skills or ideas. Before you start writing, list the broad topics/skills you want to address in the letter—this could include topics like "success teaching music in a variety of contexts," "multi-genre artist," or "creativity as an arts producer." Having a broad outline in place will help you write with purpose.

Writing a clear and compelling cover letter is challenging and time consuming. It's always advisable to enlist the help of a friend, family member or colleague—someone whose writing and editing skills you appreciate. The guidelines set forth in this handout will help you craft a solid, professional cover letter but you may wish to experiment with tone, format, and language. Using less formal language, offering personal reflections, or even telling a story can help set your letter apart. Although some employers may find these touches off-putting, it's not a bad idea to find small ways to infuse your writing with personality.

The sections that follow include: directions for formatting your letter; tips on writing clearly and convincingly in this format; and sample letters that you can use as templates for your work.

Format

1. Most employers will ask you to submit a cover letter and resume via email. Be mindful of how you name your files—ideally your full name and the word "resume" or "cover letter" should appear in the title (e.g. Jane Rhodes_Cover Letter_Date). This will ensure that when an employer downloads your attached resume and cover letter, it will be easy to identify who the materials belong to.
2. Your cover letter should have the same letterhead you used on your resume. "Letterhead" refers to your name and contact information arranged in an attractive graphic design at the top of all

your materials – your cover letter, resume, bio, repertoire list, etc. In choosing your letterhead design, keep in mind that every font communicates a different image—elegant, established, distinctive, slick, etc. Choose a font that reflects your style. Including your letterhead will ensure that an employer is able to easily locate your contact information, no matter which piece of your application they are reviewing (see cover letter samples for examples). If nothing else, it creates a clean and uniform look for all of your materials.

3. The cover letter should follow basic letter format, even though you will likely email it as an attachment. This means the date should appear at the top, followed by the name, title, organization and address of the person who is listed on the job posting. If there is no specific person listed on the job posting, research the organization and try to find out the name and title of the person who does the hiring for the job you're interested in. If you are unable to locate the correct contact, you can use the generic term 'hiring committee' or the opening 'to whom it may concern' (see examples below for letter format).
4. Due to the fact that most cover letters are submitted via email, you don't need to physically sign the letter—simply use a standard closing such as "Sincerely" and type your name at the bottom of the letter.

Architecture of a Cover Letter

1st Paragraph: The first paragraph of your cover letter should be fairly brief and include the title of the position you are applying for. If you have a contact at the organization or have a mutual colleague, use that person's name in the first sentence, or first paragraph ("So-and-So recommended I write to you concerning the opening for . . ."). It is also advisable to include a sentence that sets up the topic/focus of the subsequent paragraphs. For example: *I am excited by the prospect of bringing my background in cello performance and experience as a creative arts educator to the Rivers Music School.*

Middle Paragraph(s): This is the "meat" of the letter, where you build a case for why you believe you are a good match for the job. As stated above, you should plan to craft 2-3 body paragraphs that address different elements of your professional background and qualifications for the position. Below are a few general tips to help direct your writing:

Creatively frame your experience—set yourself apart. You'll want to be careful to avoid a simple enumeration of the positions you have held in the past—this information is included in your resume. A cover letter is your opportunity to highlight your strengths and clearly demonstrate how your experience has prepared you to excel in the open position. Think carefully about what might set you apart as an applicant—have you held a similar position in the past? Do you have exposure to a culture or discipline that is central to the job? Do you have long standing relationships within a professional community that you can leverage for the organization? Claim these unique strengths, again, always as they relate to the demands of the position.

Show, don't tell. It's much more impactful to show, rather than tell, an employer that you possess a desired skill-set through rich description of your experience. A sentence like, "I am very detailed oriented and able to juggle multiple projects simultaneously" would be a classic example of "telling." Here, you are telling an employer that you are good at multi-tasking, and you're asking them to take you on your word. Why not craft a paragraph about your experience in a previous place of work, where you were responsible for multiple projects, and show them that you are organized and flexible? This still conveys that you are able to handle a diverse portfolio of work, but it is expressed in a more creative and credible fashion. It is okay to do some "telling" especially as you set up the topics of your body paragraphs, but make sure to back up any statements about your skills with rich description of how you have brought those skills to bear.

Be precise with your descriptions. Whenever possible, bring specific examples of your professional achievements. Instead of simply saying you held a particular position within an organization, share what you accomplished or learned in that position. This approach will make your letter come across as concrete and credible and will help an employer imagine the kind of impact you could make within their organization.

Closing Paragraph: You can use the closing paragraph to share a final thought, recap what you put forward in the body of the letter, or deliver a more personal assessment of your strengths as an employee. Many people have important skills that don't necessarily shine through their work experience—you can use your closing paragraph to address these hidden strengths. You should conclude the letter by thanking the employer for considering your resume and request an interview in some way. You can use euphemistic phrases such as “hope to have the opportunity to discuss my qualifications further” or “I look forward to discussing my possible contribution to...” instead of plainly requesting an interview.

Cover Letter General Format

LETTERHEAD

Month Date, Year

Name of Contact

Title (e.g. Director of Music School)

Name of Organization

Address

City, State Zip

Dear _____,

Intro Paragraph

Please accept this cover letter and resume as my application for the position of _____. Follow with a “thesis sentence” that sets up the skills and experience you will highlight in the subsequent paragraphs.

Body Paragraph #1:

Provide explanation of point #1 you raised in your thesis sentence

Body Paragraph #2:

Provide explanation of point #2 you raised in your thesis sentence

Body Paragraph # 3 (optional):

Provide explanation of point #3 you raised in your topic sentence

Conclusion Paragraph:

One sentence summing up the points you've made in the previous paragraphs, or highlighting a strength that may not come across in your resume or work history. Conclude with a simple thank you and request, in some way, an interview or audition.

Sincerely,

Your Name

Sample Cover Letter: Audition

Tip: Typically, orchestral and opera/voice auditions are simply posted with the position (principal, section, substitute, etc.) or voice type being sought. Applicants apply by sending a cover letter and resume to request an audition. Note: some orchestras as well as many opera apprentice programs have community outreach performances as part of their contracts, some have a contemporary (or early) music orientation, and others have Pops seasons. It's worthwhile to scan the performing group's website, so you can fine tune both your cover letter and resume to the needs of the employer.

Heather Kellgreen, Harpist

1/2 Westland Ave. #100 Boston, MA 02115 | (617) 555-1212 | hkellgreen@email.com

February 9, 2003

Mr. James Sullivan
Personnel Manager
Nashville Symphony Orchestra
30 Central St.
Hudson, MA 01749

Dear Mr. Sullivan,

My teacher, Ann Hobson Pilot, of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, recommended I write concerning the principal harp opening at the Nashville Symphony Orchestra. I have enclosed my resume detailing my relevant training and experience.

My orchestral experience includes performances with the Boston Philharmonic, the Boston Civic Orchestra, the New Hampshire Symphony Orchestra and the Brockton Symphony Orchestra. I was principal harpist for the Texas Festival Orchestra at the International Festival at Round Top, Texas and have been a member of the Contemporary Ensemble at the New England Conservatory for three years. I have also done a considerable amount of freelance work at major hotels and conference centers in the Boston area, while earning my undergraduate degree at the Conservatory.

Thank you for considering my resume. I look forward to the opportunity to audition for the Nashville Symphony Orchestra.

Sincerely,

Heather Kellgreen

Sample Letter: Arts Education/Teaching Position

Cale Israel

69 Thor St. Jamaica Plain, MA 02130 | (999) 999-9999 | emailaddress@gmail.com

June 26, 2012

Leigh Kaulbach
Administrative Assistant
Zumix
260 Sumner Street
East Boston, MA 02128

Dear Ms. Kaulbach,

Please accept this cover letter and resume as my application for the position of FAO Schwartz Fellow with Zumix. I believe my diverse teaching, performance and administrative experience would be an asset to your organization.

I have a wide variety of teaching and leadership experience, including tutoring English, working as a counselor at the Interlochen Summer Arts Camp, leading sectionals with the New England Conservatory Youth Jazz Ensemble, and private one-on-one music instruction. As a music faculty member at Camp Shalom in Ontario, I also gained valuable experience teaching group drum lessons to students ages 7-13, focusing on basic technique, rhythm, and creative expression. In all of these contexts, I aim to tailor my instruction to the students' musical interests and learning styles. In addition to my teaching, I have also worked in an administrative capacity to support university and youth education arts programs, most recently at the New England Conservatory in the Jazz Studies Department.

As an active performer, I have played regularly in Boston in NYC with a range of ensembles spanning genres such as Jazz, Rock, and R&B, among others. Originally trained as a drummer and trombonist, I have also performed on keyboard, guitar and bass. I have started and performed with ensembles that have appeared at such venues as, The Bitter End, B.B. Kings Blues Club, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Symphony Space, and Glasslands in NYC and Jordan Hall and Yes.Oui.Si in Boston. Through my studies at the New England Conservatory, I also became fluent in key music software including Reason, Ableton Live, GarageBand, and Finale.

Zumix's mission to empower youth through music resonates with me deeply, as I have experienced firsthand music's ability to instill a strong sense of community, confidence, and teamwork. I would be excited to contribute to Zumix's work, giving back the wealth I have received in my years of study with great artists and mentors.

Above all else, I think my success in both artistic and educational contexts stems from my ability to forge strong connections with people of all backgrounds. This is in large part what has drawn to a life in music—the opportunity to connect with others on a deep level in the service of art. Thank you for your consideration and I hope to have the opportunity to discuss my qualifications and this position further.

Sincerely,

Cale Israel

Sample Cover Letter: Arts/University Administration

Anne Davis

81 Oak Street, Apt. #3 | Cambridge, MA 02139 | annedavis@gmail.com

October 12, 2012

Rachel Roberts
Director of Entrepreneurial Musicianship
New England Conservatory
290 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115

Dear Rachel Roberts,

Thank you for the chance to introduce myself. Please accept this cover letter and resume as my application to the position of Program Manager in the Entrepreneurial Musicianship Department. I am excited about the prospect of bringing my experience in arts programming and entrepreneurship education to the New England Conservatory.

As program coordinator at the New Center for Arts and Culture, I launched *Prism*, a new initiative to engage young adults through targeted arts programming. Through my organizational and creative leadership, *Prism* produced a successful season of public programs, and is now a central piece of the New Center's mission.

Over the last year, I helped to launch the CJP/PresenTense Social Entrepreneur Fellowship in Boston, a five-month program that enables young, socially-minded entrepreneurs to turn their envisioned ventures into reality. As a steering committee member, I oversaw curriculum development, assisted with outreach and marketing, conducted program evaluation, and served as a mentor to one of the twelve fellows.

At Hebrew University, I was part of an interdisciplinary team of researchers that developed an open source website to highlight the University's music collection and serve as a central source of information for students, researchers and performers in the field of Jewish music. I contributed essays, biographies, music reviews, and online exhibitions to the *Thesaurus of Jewish Music* – the website's central e-resource. My work at the Jewish Music Research Centre, which was intellectually rigorous, creative, and collaborative reinforced my desire to support university arts initiatives.

My success working in both non-profit and academic settings stems from two core strengths – my clear and intelligent writing style and my ability to take initiative. These skills have enabled me to make a significant impact in all of my places of work.

Thank you for your consideration and I hope to have the chance to discuss my qualifications further and learn more about this exciting job opportunity.

Sincerely,

Anne Davis

Sample Letter: College Teaching Position

Kazuha Nakahara, Pianist/Educator

801 E. Hunter Avenue Apt 15, Bloomington, IN 47401 | (812) 345-3176 | knakahar@indiana.edu

January 27, 2007

Laura Melton, Chair
Piano Search Committee
College of Musical Arts
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, OH 43403-0290

Dear Dr. Melton,

I am writing to apply for the Piano instructor position at Bowling Green State University beginning fall 2007, as advertised on your department's website. I believe my experiences and commitment to teaching make me well qualified to meet the needs of the Bowling Green State University's excellent music program. I am also very happy to relocate to Ohio, where I spent my teenage years growing up in Cleveland and Columbus.

As an Associate Instructor at Indiana University, I have gained valuable experience teaching the piano to university students in both private and classroom settings. In lessons, I place strong emphasis on higher artistic interpretation and its presentation, tone production, effective learning/practice strategies, memorization skills, posture/alignment, sight-reading, music fundamentals/theory, and ear training. For non-music majors, I incorporate folk, popular and traditional music into the curriculum to match their needs and interests. I have also been an instructor for the past five years at IU's pre-college Young Pianist program, where I provide private lessons for ages 3-18, preparing students for competitions, music festivals, and university- and college- entrance auditions.

I have completed my doctoral minor in Music Education, concentrating on both college-level and elementary/early childhood-level teaching. My coursework has covered a wide range of topics in both applications of piano and music pedagogy, and the philosophies of Music Education in the US and Europe. My project on developing a handbook for the piano literature course for undergraduate students received much positive recognition from the department. I am committed to an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship and teaching – presenting music in larger historical, social and intellectual contexts.

My performance experience includes solo recitals in the United States, Japan and the United Kingdom. I am an active chamber musician as well as a collaborative pianist– my Amaryllis Trio in London received the highest grade in the Royal Overseas League Chamber Competition, and I regularly collaborate with both instrumentalists and vocalists at Indiana University. I have performed in a wide variety of community settings, such as nursing homes, community music schools and high schools, and I am committed to both reaching new audiences and to recruiting new students. Although I am comfortable performing the traditional repertoire, I am committed to performing contemporary music, and have premiered works written by student, as well as faculty composers.

On a personal note, while growing up in Ohio, one of my first summer music camp experiences took place at the Bowling Green State University's summer piano camp where I studied with Distinguished Teaching Professor Virginia Marks. The prospect of teaching at one of the schools where I had some of my best formative training would be a special honor and would feel like a homecoming.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss this position with you in the weeks to come. In the meantime, I am enclosing my Curriculum Vitae; letters of recommendation will arrive under separate cover. If you require any additional materials or information, I would be happy to supply it. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Kazuha Nakahara