Cover Letter Handbook

What is a Cover Letter?
A cover letter is a one-page persuasive document that explains how you would fit in and contribute to the success of a particular organization. The reader should understand why you are enthusiastic about the position, and what knowledge, skills, and personality traits you would bring. It is also an example of your writing abilities, so proper grammar, formatting, and proofreading are critical.

Do I Need Both a Cover Letter and a Resume?
• Yes. A cover letter accompanies your resume when you submit an application for a position.
• The cover letter tells a story: who you are, what you’ve learned, and where your ambitions will take you. Your resume corroborates that story, by providing facts and evidence for the claims you make in your cover letter.
• Warning: The worst thing you can do is copy and paste text from one cover letter to the next. You will need to rewrite your cover letter for every job you apply to because the strongest letters are tailored to individual organizations and job descriptions.

The Basics
• A cover letter is professional correspondence. A properly formatted cover letter shows employers that you understand and can follow standard business conventions appropriately.
• Your cover letter should be no more than one page long. Try to format your letter so that there is approximately the same amount of white space above and below the body of your letter.
• Use clear, direct language and specific examples. Avoid exclamation points, smiley faces, hyperbole, or abbreviations that may not be generally understood.
• Eliminate typographical errors. Remember that spell check software does not catch grammar mistakes.

Electronic Submission
• Most employers prefer the .pdf format for resumes and cover letters. A .pdf ensures that your document will appear the way you formatted it – no matter what software the employer uses. Unless otherwise specified, submit your documents as a .pdf file.
• Double check your letter after you convert it from Word to .pdf. Occasionally there are glitches in the conversion, so make sure that the finished product is error free.
• It’s always a good idea to include a cover letter explaining your interest in a position. If you can only include one attachment, consider making a single two-page document that consists of your resume and your cover letter.

Paper Submission
• If you are mailing or hand-delivering your cover letter, be sure to use paper that matches your resume and envelope color.
• You can purchase high-quality paper for your resume and cover letter, and matching envelopes, at the Bowdoin Bookstore or in any office supply store. Choose white or ivory.

Important Note
• Remember, the best cover letters are individual, and cannot be adapted from a guide. You must identify your specific reasons for applying for each position, and be clear about what makes you different from other applicants. It is your job to showcase what you can offer an employer and it is their job to decide whether or not you are the best candidate for the position.

Meet with a Career Advisor to Review Your Application Materials
• Once you’ve completed a solid draft, please make an appointment to review your cover letter with a career advisor. To schedule a time, call us at 207-725-3717, email cpc@bowdoin.edu, or use our online form careerplanning.bowdoin.edu/appointment-request/
Know the Job

Your first task is to deconstruct the job description and prioritize the key requirements that you will address in your letter. A strong cover letter emphasizes the ways in which you meet the qualifications listed in the position description.

Sample Job Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Title: Environmental Project Intern</th>
<th>My Notes: Must know about wetland ecology and habitat restoration. Be sure to mention my outdoor work!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description: Stantec, a full-service environmental services firm, is seeking an interested student with a focus in natural resources to join our Environmental Management Group in N. Springfield, VT. Responsibilities include current project work in our Environmental Management water resources group involving large and small scale wetland delineation, natural community mapping, vernal pool assessment, RTE species surveys, environmental permitting, and wetland mitigation/restoration.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Qualifications: This position requires the willingness to travel throughout New England and the ability to spend long days on foot through inclement weather. Primary function on projects will be to collect GPS data with a backpack unit and work with an experienced wetland scientist on delineations throughout the Northeast. |

Cover Letter Structure

Employer Contact Information

- Whenever possible, direct your letter to a specific person. You may need to make a phone call to identify the appropriate individual. Use LinkedIn, the company website, and Google to do your best to figure out who should receive your letter. If you can’t figure it out despite your best efforts, you may address it to a role (e.g. “Dear Hiring Manager” or “Dear Internship Coordinator”).

Opening Paragraph

- Before you begin, ask yourself – why do you want this job? This is an important early step, because if you are not truly interested in the organization, it’s likely that the employer will be able to detect a lack of sincerity in your cover letter.
- Your first sentence should indicate your reason for writing by stating the specific position title for which you are applying. The rest of the first paragraph should focus on answering the following questions demonstrating clarity of thought: Why do you want this position? Why do you want to work for this particular organization?
- If you know someone at the organization and have talked to them about their work, this is the place to say so.

Second Paragraph

- Match your employment skills to the job description. Begin by offering specific examples of past work experiences that you’ve had. It is up to you to clearly connect your past experience and qualifications to the responsibilities listed in the position description. This will indicate to the employer that you have the skills necessary to fulfill the job requirements.

Third Paragraph

- Highlight additional skills and/or personal traits that qualify you for the job. What will the employer get if they pick you? Where does this position fit in your career ambitions? This is where you can list experience related to your coursework, athletics, extracurricular activities, and volunteer service. You can also list personal traits in this section.

Closing Paragraph

- Identify the next step you will take and convey your eagerness to set up an interview. Thank the addressee for his or her time and consideration. You may wish to mention that you will call within a specified time in the hope of arranging a meeting. If you already have plans to travel to the area, indicate the dates you will be available.

Signature

- Sign your letter by hand if you are mailing your letter. If you are submitting your letter electronically, you have several options: your name in a script font, your name preceded by /s/ to indicate an electronic signature, or a scanned image of your signature inserted as a small picture in the signature space. All are acceptable conventions. The Bowdoin Career Planning Center has a scanner if you would like to create your own signature image.
James Fish, Senior Project Scientist  
Stantec, Inc.  
30 Park Drive  
Topsham, Maine 04086

Dear Mr. Fish:

I am writing to apply for the Environmental Project Intern position with Stantec’s Environmental Management Group. I learned about the opportunity from a Bowdoin alumnus, Kent Cook, who currently works as environmental specialist at your Portland branch. My conversation with Kent confirmed that Stantec shares the same ideals that I value at Bowdoin – a work ethic built upon personal integrity and a commitment to community service. I would love to contribute to Stantec’s work.

I offer Stantec my background in research and natural resource management. Last summer, I mapped and catalogued all open space parcels in Brunswick, Maine using Microsoft Excel, ArcGIS and Google Earth as intern for the town’s Planning and Development office. In this role, I regularly traveled to several sites to monitor water quality. Additionally, as a researcher for the Nature Conservancy, I compared salt marsh restoration techniques and presented my findings on future restoration needs to the management team. In each position, I was recognized by my supervisors for demonstrating my commitment to the protection of the natural world. This experience will help me support the Environmental Management Group’s clients.

Furthermore, I believe that my skills are a strong fit for this internship due to my rigorous experiential course work in Environmental Studies at Bowdoin. I practiced wetland surveying in Environmental Hydrology and developed an understanding of environmental permitting in my Natural Resource Economics and Policy course. I am comfortable working in an outdoor research setting as evidenced by my experiences as Climate Change Researcher in the Canadian tundra and as trip leader for the Bowdoin Outing Club. Leading outdoor trips for groups of Bowdoin students taught me to be a resourceful planner and guide, and my energetic personality is suited well to working independently or with a team of colleagues.

I want to work for Stantec because I admire the company’s ability to hold true to its original mission of supporting small communities in need of better resource management systems while also maintaining the high standards demanded of an international firm. I welcome the opportunity to further discuss my qualifications with you. Thank you for considering my application.

Sincerely,

Sarah Bowdoin
**Style Notes**

**Be specific wherever you can.** Specific writing is more credible and persuasive than generalities. Compare these two applications for a research assistant dealing with health policy matters. Which one sounds more credible and informed?

*Health care is one of the most pressing issues facing Americans today, and the Council is one of the foremost policy groups addressing this important issue. I am passionate about applying my research skills in a prominent organization dealing with international issues.*

**vs.**

*I have been following the work of the Council on Foreign Relations ever since reading an OpEd about patent reform by Peter Navario for my Health Policy class sophomore year. I was therefore delighted to see the opening for a Summer Research Assistant when I visited your website last week.*

The first example is broad and non-specific. Although the student may be sincere, it is impossible to tell — an insincere student might say exactly the same things. The second example is much more specific. It is clear that the student writing it is well-informed about the organization and the issues.

**Strike the right tone.** Getting the tone right in a cover letter is tricky. You want to highlight the experience, attitude, and talent that you bring, without sounding arrogant or overconfident. Remember that it is your job to showcase what you can offer an employer, and it is their job to decide whether or not you are the best candidate for the position. Compare these three ways of writing about the same experience. Who would you hire?

*My experience as an Editor of the Bowdoin Orient makes me a perfect fit for the Associate Editor position, because it gave me invaluable leadership skills and the ability to write superb copy under extremely demanding deadlines. This opportunity would allow me to pursue my goal of becoming a nationally syndicated columnist by the age of 25.*

**vs.**

*Although I do not have the two years of work experience your job posting requires, I believe that I am qualified to be Associate Editor because of my work on the campus newspaper. I would be thrilled to learn from the distinguished staff of the New Republic.*

**vs.**

*I offer the New Republic two years of editing experience in a widely-read campus weekly, research and writing skills honed by a rigorous liberal arts curriculum, and the energy and temperament to learn quickly. Contributing to the production of a magazine I have admired for years would be very motivating, and I can promise you diligence, curiosity, and enthusiasm.*

The first example may come across as overconfident and unrealistic — “superb”, “invaluable”, “perfect” and “extremely demanding” together all sound like hyperbole. The second example is too hesitant — the student points out her own deficiencies, instead of putting forth the reasons she is qualified. The third example strikes a good balance between confidence and humility. Words like “offer” and “contributing” may help you present your qualifications while putting the organization and its needs first.

**After Submitting Your Application, Always Follow Up**

You show initiative, confidence, and motivation when you call an employer to follow up. We recommend that you follow up with the employer as early as a few days to two weeks after you send your letter, unless the job posting says “no phone calls”. When you call, you should express your continued interest in the position, ask if they have a complete copy of your application, and ask about the time frame for the review of applications.