

How to Write Effective Cold and Cover Letters

What's the difference between a cold letter and a cover letter?

A “cold letter” is one that is submitted, with or without your resume, in the hopes of securing an interview with a company that interests you. A cold letter is one that you send into the unknown, often blind, as you may not know if the company is looking to hire new staff or not. Simply put, it's a shot in the dark.

A cover letter is written to address an existing opportunity at a company. Let's say you spoke to someone in the human resources department. They said, “Yes, send us a resume, here's our address.” A well-written cover letter starts by referencing that this submission is being sent in response either to a specific job opening or to a company's request to review your resume and qualifications.

The cover letter accompanying your resume for a specific opportunity should also state why you believe you are qualified for the position in question. Don't assume that the resume screener will proceed far enough into

your resume to the location where your carefully crafted worth points reside.

Restate two or three key attributes and worth points in your cover letter, and end on a positive and enthusiastic note. Remember that the same care that went into your resume should be invested in your cover and cold letters: be sure that there are no typos, use good grammar, leave a little white space, and include your name and contact information on the letter, as it may become separated from your resume. Keep your letter to a maximum length of one page.

On the next page is a sample of a well-written cold letter I received a number of years ago. I took the time to read it and the attached resume, which looked promising. But this person never secured a phone or in-person interview with me. Why? She never took the next important step. She never made the follow-up call to see if I would give the time for an interview. Her letter said, “*I look forward to meeting with you and will be calling you in the next few weeks to arrange a mutually convenient time.*”

Dear Mr. Hatschek,

Your name came up in my research of the music business in the San Francisco region as someone whose effectiveness and influence on the industry has been exemplary. You are clearly an individual whose knowledge and experience would be invaluable to anyone hoping to enter this highly competitive and relatively closed field.

I am a musically literate, well-spoken, and enthusiastic recent college graduate whose greatest passion in life has always been music. Please be assured that I do not expect you to know of any specific positions in your or other companies. Rather, I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you briefly to discuss the business in general and get the benefit of your comments and advice.

In addition to a lifetime of collecting and listening, I have worked extensively with local acts in both promotion and staging, and am myself a singer and a songwriter. I would be happy to discuss this and other work experience in more depth when we meet.

I look forward to meeting with you and plan to call in the next few weeks to arrange a mutually convenient time.

Sincerely yours,

Jane Doe

That call never came. It may have been due to the huge number of letters she sent out, or that she landed her dream gig. But if you take the time to write a strong letter and send it out, you should budget adequate time to do at least one follow-up call for each submission.

Although I wasn't hiring at the time, I would have given this person time for an informational phone interview based on the quality of the letter and the attached resume, and that would have been a positive learning (and networking) experience for her.

Remember, often the people who have valuable information may not hire you today, but they could refer you to someone else in the industry that is hiring. So invest the time and effort to make your cold and cover letters strong, concise communicators—especially if they're aimed at what I call "Targets of Opportunity," which we will investigate in the next chapter.

A Final Thought on Originality and Accuracy in Cover Letters

I'm often asked, "Once I have one really good cover letter can I just use that as a form letter for all the jobs I respond to?" No, you must always customize each cover letter. It doesn't matter if you have thirty jobs you're

responding to this week. Break it down into short-term goals for that day.

Write a letter. Carefully double-check the accuracy of the spelling and the address. Pay special attention to the name of the person to whom you are sending the letter. If you are unsure of any of the contact information, call the company. "Hi, I'm sending a letter to Keith Hatschek. I just want to make sure I am spelling his last name right. Is it H-a-t-c-h-e-c-k?"

Receptionist: "No, it's got an 's' in there and no 'c' at the end."

"Oh, thank you, H-a-t-s-c-h-e-k."

You accomplished two things during that phone call. You have gotten your prospective boss's name right. And you made an impression with a person at that firm who is likely to remember that you took the time to call and find out how to spell the boss's name correctly. People remember things like that. So the cover letter originality and accuracy are very important to serious job seekers. You can and should use some of the same sentences and bullet points for similar jobs, but don't fall into the trap of sending out a generic cover letter. You're missing an opportunity to further separate yourself from the pack if you take that path. ☉