



THE CaPS GUIDE TO

WRITING A COVER LETTER



McGill CaPS

Career Planning Service
Service de planification de carrière

www.mcgill.ca/caps



WRITING A COVER LETTER

TIP

An employer will typically spend 20-30 seconds scanning your C.V. If they like what they see, they will then read your cover letter. Do not assume they will look at it first.

A cover letter is your opportunity to introduce yourself and to demonstrate the match between an employer's job requirements and your skills and qualifications. It customizes your application for a particular position, organization and industry and should always accompany your C.V.

A cover letter should add nuance to your C.V. by highlighting specific abilities, experiences and talents that make you an ideal candidate for the job. It is also an opportunity for you to demonstrate your ability to write, communicate and articulate your ideas effectively. A good cover letter will show the employer why he/she would benefit from hiring you.

STEP 1: KNOW YOURSELF

Self-assessment is the first and the most important step in choosing an occupation, planning your career, and starting a job search. It is equally important when you are writing your C.V. and cover letter.

Consider what **interests/experiences, skills, achievements and values** you want to showcase to a potential employer in your cover letter. CaPS' *C.V. Writing Guide* gives an in-depth explanation of how to do this. Please consult it for more information.

Your cover letter should not simply reiterate information from your C.V., but should highlight your most relevant activities and experiences for the position for which you are applying and add detail where appropriate.

STEP 2: KNOW THE EMPLOYER

A cover letter is not only a tool to highlight your most notable qualifications, experiences and achievements, but also for capturing the reader's interest in you, your C.V. and your readiness to work for the organization. It should motivate the employer to call you and schedule an interview. Therefore, when writing your cover letter, keep the employer's perspective in mind. He/she is interested in what value you would add to the organization (not in how the position would benefit you).

Research the industry, employer and position for which you are applying. Your cover letter should demonstrate that you know something about the organization - and not just superficial details. Use the job description as a starting point for writing your cover letter and draw as many connections as possible between yourself and the position. You may want to consider making a chart like this one:

Employer's Needs	Your Qualifications
Graphic design experience	Marketing Assistant, website design
Graphic design training	Continuing Education courses
Computer literacy	Familiar with Adobe Design Suite, Microsoft Office and Dreamweaver
Community service	Designed websites for a number of non-profit organizations

TIP

When researching an employer, begin by consulting their website. For more of an "insider's" view, you could meet with someone familiar with the industry or the organization.

McGill subscribes to *Factiva*, which provides corporate information on all publicly-traded companies. It can be accessed through the McGill VPN.

STEP 3: WRITING YOUR COVER LETTER

Your cover letter should contain the following elements in the suggested order:

A) YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION

Your contact information includes:

- Full name
- Current address
- Telephone number
- Email address

B) DATE

Place one line of space before the date.

C) RECIPIENT'S CONTACT INFORMATION

Place two lines of space before the recipient's contact information, which includes:

- Recipient's full name
- His/her title and/or department
- Organization's name
- Organization's address

D) REFERENCE LINE

Place one line of space before the reference line. Including a reference line (ex. "Re:" or "Subject:") indicates the purpose of the letter. For a job application, your letter may include the job title or the competition number. For a networking letter, it may include the position about which you are inquiring or "Potential employment opportunities."

E) SALUTATION

Place one line of space before the salutation. It is always preferable to address your application and letter to a specific individual. If you have been in contact with someone who is in a position to hire you, address it to him/her. Alternatively, if you have been referred to someone else in the organization, be sure to ask for the person's name, their title, mailing address, telephone number and email address so you can address your letter appropriately.

If you do not have a contact in the organization, contact the receptionist or Human Resource department. They may be able to provide you with the name of the appropriate individual and his/her contact information. Ask for the correct spelling of his/her name.

As a last resort, you may address your letter using "Dear Sir or Madam" or "Dear Hiring Committee" or "To Whom It May Concern."

TIP

You may wish to provide your contact information in a header that matches your C.V. to make your application look professional and cohesive.

TIP

Never make assumptions about an individual's gender. If you are unsure, avoid using "Mr." or "Ms."

F) INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH

The opening paragraph of your cover letter should answer the question: who are you and why are you sending the letter?

- If you are applying to a specific position, refer to it here. Mention the job title or competition number, if applicable, and how you learned about the opening. If someone referred you to the posting or the organization, you may mention their name. For example, “Mr. Owen Thomas in your department recommended I apply for the Graphic Designer position for which I am extremely well qualified.”
- If you are writing a letter of inquiry, indicate the position, department and/or industry you are seeking and inquire about its availability and information on the job description.

G) BODY PARAGRAPH(S)

The body of the cover letter should consist of one or two paragraphs. It should answer the questions: why are you a good candidate and why do you want to work for the employer?

In this section, select your key skills, experiences and achievements and convincingly illustrate how they can be an asset to the employer. Be sure to draw connections between your background and the job description. Throughout, incorporate references and information that reflects your knowledge of the industry, the organization and pertinent issues.

Do not restate the content of your C.V. Pull out the most relevant information. For example, if a job posting does not mention post-secondary education as a requirement, do not waste space explaining your program of study, awards, etc. (after all, that information is still contained in your C.V.). Instead, expand on the points the employer has identified as important (ex. customer sales experience).

H) CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

Conclude your cover letter by describing if and how you will follow up on your application, whether by telephone or email to schedule an interview or to discuss your background. If you indicate you will follow up, be sure to do so! This relieves the employer of the responsibility.

State where and when the employer can reach you and express your willingness to be interviewed. Finally, thank the reader for his/her time and consideration.

I) CLOSING AND SIGNATURE

Use “Sincerely,” “Truly,” or “Regards” to close your letter. Leave three lines of space and type your name. If your letter is in hardcopy, sign neatly within the blank space.

J) ENCLOSURE(S)

Indicate any enclosures by writing “Encl.” below your typed name if you are including other documents, such as a C.V., application form, letters of reference, etc.

STEP 4: FORMATTING

- Your cover letter should be no more than a page in length and be formatted like a typical business letter.
- Text should be aligned to the left and be cleanly formatted. Use a common type face (ex. Verdana) that matches the type face of your C.V. Use a legible font size (preferably 11 point).
- You may wish to include a stylized header that matches the one on your C.V.

STEP 5: PROOFREADING

It is critical your cover letter be error free. Review, review, review! Spelling, grammatical and formatting errors will make your cover letter stand out in a negative way and will not create a favourable impression. You may wish to have a friend, colleague or CaPS proofread your letter for errors.

STEP 6: SENDING YOUR LETTER

Hardcopy

- Print your cover letter on the same quality paper as your C.V. and use a laser printer.
- Do not staple your cover letter to your C.V.
- Do not fold your cover letter and C.V. Mail them in an 8 1/2" x 11" envelope.

Electronically

- Attach your cover letter and C.V. separately in an email in Word or PDF format.
- Write a brief email indicating your cover letter and email are attached.

Example of an Email:

Subject: Graphic Designer Position

Dear Ms. Thomas:

Please find attached my application for the Graphic Designer position you advertised on the McGill CaPS website. I have enclosed both my C.V. and cover letter.

If you encounter any difficulties, or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at 514-987-6543.

Thank you for considering my application.

Sincerely,

Max Richards

TIP

You could proofread your letter from bottom to top. This technique helps identify errors more easily.

TIP

It is recommended that you not copy and paste your cover letter into the body of your email. The employer may want to print off your application and if your cover letter is in an email format, it will be unattractive compared to other applicants' letters.

STEP 7: FOLLOW UP

TIP

You may wish to keep hard or soft copies of your cover letters and applications. This method will help you keep track of details and will ensure you have all your letters for future reference.

Once you start to send out job applications, it is important you follow up with the organizations you have contacted. You might want to devise a system for keeping track of what you have sent, when you sent it, and when you indicated you would follow up. For example, if you indicated you would contact an employer regarding an interview the week of April 11, it is critical you do so. Furthermore, you should keep track of what you said in each letter so your follow-up with the employer is accurate.

You may need to follow up with an employer more than once: to thank him/her for an interview, to accept a job offer, to decline an offer, or to follow up to a rejection letter.

CHECKLIST

Be sure you have written the most dynamic and powerful cover letter possible by using this recommended checklist:

Appearance and inclusion of vital information

- Is it an original letter rather than a mass-produced copy?
- Is the letter in a standard business letter format?
- Is it clear where the employer can reach you during business hours? Have you ensured that either a person or your voicemail will take the employer's call if you are not available?
- Is the letter neat, attractive and reader-friendly?
- Is it no longer than one page?
- Have you signed your name boldly and confidently?

Writing style

- Is your spelling, grammar and syntax correct?
- Does the letter tell the employer why you are writing, as well as grab his/her attention in the first paragraph?
- Have you used action verbs?
- Is the letter concise and to the point? Have you avoided needless detail and autobiographical ramblings?
- Does it avoid clichés and have you minimized the use of phrases such as “I feel” and “I believe,” which tend to weaken and dilute the statements you make about yourself?

Tone appeal to the reader

- Is it interesting? Have you read it from the employer's perspective?
- Does it project the image of a person the employer would like to get to know better? Is it confident without being arrogant?

Enhancing the value of your cover letter

- Have you quantified and given examples of accomplishments that demonstrate your skills wherever possible?
- Have you demonstrated your knowledge of the organization you are writing to?
- Have you made the most of your university experience and relevant extra-curricular activities?
- Have you ensured that your letter is not too skimpy and depend too much on your C.V. to do the work for you?

Avoidance of major cover letter mistakes

- Is it addressed to a named individual (unless it is a response to a blind ad)?
- If it is a response to a blind ad, is the salutation non-gendered?
- Have you left out everything negative?
- If it is a response to an ad, does the letter speak to the requirements of the position?
- Have you told the employer what you can do for the organization rather than what the organization can do for you?
- Have you requested action or told the employer you will call for an appointment?
- Have you used caution with “willing to learn” statements so the employer is not reminded of training time and expenses?
- Have you avoided pleading for favours or sounding desperate and “willing to do anything”?
- Have you avoided rewriting/rehashing your C.V. in your cover letter?

SAMPLE COVER LETTER

LISA SHAW

3600 MCTAVISH, MONTREAL, QUEBEC, H3H 1H1
(514) 323-3200 - LISA.SHAW@MCGILL.CA

January 10th, 2008

Disney Corporation
321 Magic Kingdom
Orlando, Florida
98765 USA

Re: Potential employment opportunity

Dear Sir or Madam.

As you and your team prepare to bring the International 2008 Women's Softball Jubilee to the Disney Sports Complex, you will be seeking people with good organizational and networking skills. I am one of those people and am highly interested in augmenting the team's operation in a legal or management capacity.

My legal experience has been mainly in government and environmental law, while my academic background has been primarily in international law and communications, with an emphasis on broadcasting and public relations.

During diverse internships as an Archivist, Law Clerk and workshop Instructor, I have developed organization and networking skills, a talent for efficiently gathering information from government officials, and written sources. I have also proven my ability to work well with clients on various projects and in various languages (English, French and Spanish).

I know I would be an asset to your team and look forward to discussing this exciting opportunity with you. Should you require any additional information prior to me contacting you, please call or email me directly. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lisa Shaw
Encl.

Programs and Services



Daily Drop In

Come to our drop-ins at CaPS to have your CV reviewed and to ask quick questions about your job search.



Career Resource Centre

We have a comprehensive collection of both online and print publications which provide information on jobs, careers, graduate schools, and more.



myFuture

Log on to myFuture for an extensive listing of jobs and internships. Register for CaPS events, browse publications and view employer profiles.



Ask a Career Advisor

Ask your career question online and one of our career advisors will get back to you, usually within 24 hours.



Job Search Workshops

Choose from a wide selection of workshops that can help prepare you for your job search, apply to grad school and more.



McGill Mentor Program

Get linked to a McGill alumnus/ae who is working in the industry/job of your dreams.



P.A.C.E

Join other students in this 10 hour/4 week program that helps you explore your personal goals, values, and interests with suggestions for possible career options.



Peer Educator Program

Help other students learn more about CaPS while developing your own leadership skills. Become a Peer Educator and promote CaPS across our campuses.



Job Finding Club

Work intensely for two weeks with other students like you to learn the best ways to get the job you want.



On Campus Recruitment

Attend fairs, information sessions and panel discussions to network with your potential future employer.

Online Resources

CaPS Website - www.mcgill.ca/caps

Our website is your main portal to the services and information offered by CaPS. We also provide links to a variety of other useful career planning websites.

myFuture - caps.myfuture.mcgill.ca

Log on to myFuture for an extensive listing of jobs and internships. You can also register for CaPS workshops and events, browse publications, and view employer profiles.

What can I do with my major? - www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/job-search/explore/

CaPS has compiled targeted career information for your major to give you some ideas of where to go next.

The Big Guide - <http://www.workingoverseas.com/user/issi/6857>

Build global career skills: Get access to the world's best international career guide with 41 Chapters of Expert Advice, 50 Quick Guides, 2,200 Profiles of International Employers, & much more.

General Job Listings - www.mcgill.ca/caps/students/job-search/jobs/

This page contains links to many job listing sites to help you find career and job opportunities.

Vault Guides - <http://www.vault.com/wps/portal/usa>

The popular Vault Guides contain career and employer profiles, industry overviews, advice articles, an internship database, and much more. McGill VPN required.

Going Global - <http://online.goingglobal.com>

Going Global provides over 100,000 worldwide job and internship listings, as well as employer profiles. McGill VPN required.

Career Cruising - www.careercruising.com

This site is an interactive career planning resource designed to help you find the career that fits you best.
Username: mcgill
Password: careers

