

Before you start

**Three major differences between  
Cover letter and Resumes and CVs  
are the length, the purpose and the  
layout.**

# What is a cover letter?

- A cover letter is a one-page document that is sent and read in conjunction with your CV. It highlights relevant skills and achievements.

## **What is the purpose of a cover letter?**

- The cover letter is a chance for you to highlight the skills and achievements which are especially relevant to that particular employer. It will be a brief summary of your experiences to date, tailored to the competencies that are required by the employer. It is also a chance for you to demonstrate your knowledge of the organisation to which you are applying and your motivation for working there. Some recruiters will also use your cover letter to assess your written communication skills.

## What needs to be included in a cover letter?

Recruiters expect you to show that you match the position. The secret of writing a good cover letter lies in using your qualifications and experience to show that you are the best person for the position.

- One way of going about it is to begin your cover letter by focusing on your relevant achievements: academic, extra-curricular, work experience and other interesting aspects of your life.
- Then move on to focus on the employer, why you are applying for the job, including some interesting and relevant facts about that organisation.

Show them that you are capable of thinking clearly and you are a motivated, proactive learner. Write in a clear and logical manner and remember, the way you write and present yourself says a lot about you.

.

## **What type of language should be used?**

- Aim for short, sharp sentences that make for concise, gripping paragraphs, which are good for busy recruiters who can't spend a long time reading each application.

## **What is the correct layout of a cover letter?**

In general, cover letters are one side of typed A4 and are set out like a formal business letter. The letter should be about three to four paragraphs long with each separated by a single line. Do not indent the paragraphs as this is considered old-fashioned.

- **How should be addressed in it?**

- Your name and address should be clearly shown at the top, right-hand corner of the letter. Don't think that because this information is on your CV you don't need to put it on the cover letter. Pages can become separated easily

- **How to write it?**

- It's usual to reply to the name used in the advert or application pack. If a name is not given, call the organisation and ask for a named individual who deals with recruitment. It is strongly advised that one should address a cover letter to a named person.



- Do make sure you use the correct spelling of their name. If you are not able to find a named individual, you can use “Dear Sir/Madam”.
- The correct greeting in a business letter is always formal. It normally begins with “Dear” and usually includes the person’s last name and title, ie, Professor, Dr, Mr, Ms etc.
- If addressing a female, does the job advert specify whether they are Mrs, Miss, or Ms? If it doesn’t say then it is best to use Ms.

## **Can bullet points or subheadings be used in a cover letter?**

There is nothing to stop you using bullet points or subheadings to help structure your cover letter. However remember that you are still writing a formal business letter which needs to be written clearly and concisely.

## **How do I sign off?**

The convention in the UK is if you address the letter to a named individual, sign off with “Yours sincerely”. If your letter begins with “Dear Sir/Madam”, end with “Yours faithfully.”

## **How long should the cover letter be?**

Where possible, follow the employer's instructions and any advice offered by them. If this is not available, something around 400 words is about right and certainly not more than one page of A4 paper

## Which is more important, the CV or the cover letter?

They are both important. If you want to maximise your chances of success you should treat them both seriously. The cover letter is often the first thing the recruiter sees and will set their expectations for what is to follow.

A good cover letter will highlight your key strengths and motivations for wanting to work in a particular organisation, the CV will then go into more detail about what you have achieved. The recruiter will form an impression of you based on both documents.

## **How information should be presented in a cover letter?**

One need to think about the needs of the employer that you are approaching and try to present the information to meet those needs, emphasising the transferable skills that you have acquired. You do not need to focus on all aspects of your life to date in the letter, only those areas in which you feel the employer will be interested and which are relevant to the role.

## **How can we have a standard cover letter?**

The cover letter should be tailored to one specific vacancy (or to a particular employer if you are applying speculatively). Recruiters will be able to spot generic cover letters and furthermore, you will not be able to show specific research you have done into a particular organisation.

# Top tips: cover letters

- Keep the language friendly but formal. Think about how you would speak to an employer at interview.
- Be positive! Use action words but don't lose sight of your own style.
- Avoid repeating key words or phrases.
- Always end on a positive note. You can end by reaffirming your enthusiasm or your suitability.
- Check your letter several times, and then get a friend to check it, then go away and check it again later.

- **Curriculum Vitae**

# Basic principles

- Relevance Curriculum vitae means “story of your life”. However, with only one or two pages for your CV you can’t afford to treat this literally. Be selective about what you include. Always ask yourself the question “Is this going to be relevant to the employer who is reading this?” If it isn’t, then discard it.



# Tailoring

- Your CV needs to match the particular job you are applying for. For example, if the job requires skills in teamwork and creativity, you need to ensure the employer can clearly see that you have gained these skills somewhere in your life.
- Maybe you worked in a team on a course project or perhaps you had a creative idea for an event which a society organised. The important thing is that the employer can see that your CV is tailored to them and not a generic CV that is being sent to every employer

# Layout and design

You can influence where the employer looks on your CV by the amount of space you allocate to certain sections. For example, in your education section for most circumstances you'll want to draw employers to your degree. You can do this by giving it more space than any other courses or degrees you have done. You should also think carefully about your choice of headings to highlight key experience.

# Language

- Using positive, action oriented words creates the impression of a positive, proactive person. Use words such as “achieved”, “created” and “organised” and avoid tentative words such as “maybe”, “attempted” and “perhaps”. The aim is to make your CV as persuasive as possible. Present information in the most positive light but remember there is a clear distinction between doing this and exaggerating. Make sure your spelling and grammar is accurate.
- .

# Spellings and Grammar

Always use the spell check on your computer (but remember it's not fool-proof) and make sure that it is set to UK English. If English isn't your first language, you may find it useful to ask a native English speaking friend to read what you have written

# Gaps in your CV

- Employers can be suspicious about extensive periods of unexplained time on a CV and as a general rule, it is always best to explain these gaps. Obviously, you don't need to account for every week or even every month, but if, for example, you took a year between school and university to go travelling, it is best to account for it and mention it on your CV.

- However if there are very personal or sensitive reasons which prevented you being in work or study (including things like criminal convictions, long periods of illness and caring for family members) then you do not have to declare these on your CV.
- You should, however, be prepared to talk about any gaps in your CV at interview. There is a balance between explaining everything that has happened and deciding what information is strictly relevant to an employer. If you are unsure about your situation then come in and see a careers consultant.

# Truthfulness

- As well as it being against the law to lie on your CV, you should be willing to talk about anything on your CV at interview, even details in your interests and extra-curricular activities sections. You don't know what kinds of things your interviewer might also be interested in or have knowledge about so make sure they can't expose anything that isn't completely accurate.

In most cases you'll use a chronological CV, which has standard sections such as education and work experience. Your achievements in each section will be ordered in reverse chronology (i.e., most recent first).



- However, there may be occasions where you start off with a section on the skills you have gained, with examples of where you gained them; this is a “skills based” CV.
- It’s most commonly used when you have significant relevant experience or an existing career and are looking to change direction and need to emphasise skills that are transferable.

- Colours should not be used in CV.
- Black ink on white paper is standard.
- Using more exciting colours will certainly make you stand out, but perhaps not in a positive way unless you're applying for a creative or design role.

# Fonts

- Arial and Calibri are recommended as they are clear and simple. If you use something different, make sure you're consistent and the font doesn't detract attention from your content. It's also important to remember that some fonts take up more space on a page than others.

- A PDF will look the same on any computer, whereas sometimes a Word document might look different (overflowing to three pages for example) depending on the version of Word the recruiter has.

# References

- are usually requested by an employer on an application form or after the interview stage if the candidate has been successful. It is generally assumed that you will be able to provide references so you don't need to mention them on your CV.

- Print out your CV to see what it looks like in reality. Is there a lot of white space or too much text? Are the margins too large or small? Your CV could be read in as little as 8 seconds. Make sure it's immediately appealing to the eye.

# Top tips: presenting your experience

- Your CV may form the framework of your interview. Be comfortable with what you have written and be prepared to elaborate and talk enthusiastically about anything on your CV.
- Be clear about your individual contributions to the achievements you list and be ready to explain them at interview.
- Avoid obscure abbreviations, jargon or slang.
- Your CV should be an aid to the employer helping to direct them to the skills and experience they have asked for.

- Remember that you shouldn't lie or misrepresent any information in your application - employers can dismiss you if you do.
- Don't underestimate your experiences. If you can demonstrate the skills you acquired and apply them to the role you are applying for, then any experience can be of interest.



Format to impress:

Make your CV and cover letter as easy on the eye as possible, keep them succinct (we recommend no more than two pages for a CV), ensure you structure your achievements in a logical and clear way, and proof-read for spelling and grammar errors.”