First impressions are everything, and your cover letter is your first chance to impress a potential employer. A strong cover letter showcases both your job qualifications and your writing ability. This handout will help you craft a strong, concise cover letter.

Before You Write

Consider Your Audience
Imagine that you have to read a stack of 50 cover letters and then ask yourself, “What would I look for in these cover letters to speed up the reading process?” Most people answer with ideas like “strong topic sentences,” “relevant experiences,” or “keywords from the job listing.” Regardless of your answer to this question, writing with your work-laden audience in mind will help you be more direct and concise.

Customize Your Letter
Readers can easily notice when your cover letter is generic and recycled. To avoid this, tailor each cover letter to the specific job to which you are applying. Make sure you understand both the responsibilities of the position and the values of the organization. Though a complete reworking may not be necessary for each application, adding relevant experiences will demonstrate that you put in the time to customize your letter.

Establish Fit
Just as puzzle pieces must have corresponding shapes to fit together, you must establish that your shape—your experiences, aspirations, and qualifications—is a good fit for the position. Your audience has an idea of what candidates need: demonstrate that you are who they are looking for by including relevant experiences. Choose the stories or experiences that best illustrate the qualities that you wish to emphasize in the letter. Make sure your letter clearly shows why you are the best candidate who will be an asset for them.

Remember Your Purpose
Ultimately, the purpose of a cover letter is to get an interview. As you choose which experiences and information to include in your letter, remember that you do not need to present a full autobiographical portrait or touch upon everything from your résumé—you only need to include a sketch of relevant details. It is a chance to elaborate on and illustrate the most significant elements in your résumé. Most of all, it’s a chance to show your personality and what makes you unique.
Cover Letter Elements

Subject Line
If you e-mail your cover letter, the subject line is your chance to set the tone of your email. The subject line should be professional and clearly state who you are and what job you are interested in.

**Vague Subject Line:** Elizabeth Bean's Résumé

**Appropriate Subject Line:** Posting 653- Harvard Graduate Elizabeth Bean is Interested

Heading
The heading is where pertinent information is given to the recipient of your letter. This includes your contact information (i.e., name, address, phone number, and e-mail address), the date you are writing, as well as the address of the company to which you are applying.

Example:

Jane Doe
1234 Main Street
Baltimore, MD 21224
C: (410) 555-5555
jane.doe@university.edu

June 23, 2016

James Smith
University of Maryland, Baltimore
620 W. Lexington Street
Baltimore, MD 21201

Salutation
Try to address your letter to a specific person as opposed to starting with a generic greeting. If the job advertisement doesn't list a contact person, look on the company's website or call to find out to whom the letter should be addressed. If a name cannot be found, then address a group of people at the company (e.g., Dear Selection Committee).

Introduction
Readers of your cover letter will probably have a large stack of them on their desks. This means that your introduction has to be to the point and grab their attention. This can be accomplished by writing where you found out about the job, mentioning a colleague you and the readers have in common, or referencing any previous contact you have had with your audience.


**Job Posting:** Your posting on the American Medical Association website caught my eye because I...

**Common Colleague or Reference:** John Brown, a resident at the University of Maryland Medical Center, recommended that I contact you...

**Previous Contact:** I met you briefly at the National Association of Social Workers conference and am following up on your recommendation to apply...

**Body**

The body of the cover letter is where you can demonstrate to readers how your prior experiences have shaped you into a professional worth interviewing. Readers are asking themselves, “Do I want to work with this person?” This is your chance to answer them.

A cover letter is not a reiteration of your résumé—it is an elaboration on your past experiences. Rather than listing adjectives that you feel describe you and your work ethic, tell a story to show how you have applied these characteristics. This not only shows that you have the abstract qualities but that you can also apply them to real-life situations.

When you write about your past experiences, include what you learned or what skills you developed that you can use in the position you are applying for as well as how this knowledge and these abilities make you uniquely the best person for the job.

If you are switching fields, you can take this opportunity to explain some of your formative experiences, motivations, and reasons for switching. You can also emphasize how your skills and experiences in other fields will make you successful in this new field.

Though you do not want to come off as pompous, this is the place to brag in your letter. Referencing any awards or special accomplishments will help set your letter apart from others.

**Closing**

Your cover letter should end with a strong summarization of why you are qualified for the job. Include the best way to reach you—this assures your readers that they have your correct and current contact information. Finally, end with a call to action: ask for an interview or give them a specific time you will call to follow up.

**Example:** I welcome the opportunity to speak with you further about my ability to positively contribute to your pharmacy internship program. I can be reached at jane.doe@university.edu as well as on my cell phone at (410) 555-5555. I look forward to hearing from you, and I thank you for taking the time to review my application.

**Cover Letter Format**

**Length**

Limit your cover letter to one page in order to respect your readers' time. You will have a better chance of keeping your readers' attention by getting straight to the point.

**Margins and Spacing**

Use 1 inch margins on all sides of the letter.

Single space the text in your body paragraphs. However, be sure to double-space between the address and date in the heading, between the date and the salutation, and between each paragraph.
Font
The font of your cover letter should be an easy-to-read 11 or 12-pt. typeface. Make sure the font of your cover letter and résumé match.

After You’ve Written

Proofread
With any written work, proofreading is a necessary way to make sure that your paper is error-free.

Have a friend or relative read over the letter in order to find mistakes you may have missed. If this is not possible, reading your letter out loud can help you catch errors or awkward wording.

Note: For more information on proofreading, please see our handout on this topic.

Follow Up
Calling the company a few days after sending your cover letter and résumé can help you stick out. It also shows that you are truly interested in the position and the company to which you have applied. If you end the letter saying that you will call, then make sure that you do. However, avoid badgering the job contact; one follow-up phone call or email is sufficient.

References