

How to Write a Great Letter



Forwarding a résumé is only part of the written communication you'll have with a potential employer. In addition to a résumé, you will write many different types of letters as well: requests for an interview, thank you letters, and cover letters to name a few. They are all part of how you market yourself to an employer. So, make sure that you take as much care to write a quality letter as you do when writing a quality résumé.

Remember that the objective of any type of letter you write is to show your value to the employer. Before beginning to write a letter, you should first take a closer look at the requirements and needs of the employer. Then you should plan out the letter by putting the most important items first, supporting them with facts and examples. Show how your education, experience and background can be of value to the employer. This will help you demonstrate that you are a good match for the position and that the employer should interview you.

KEY POINTS WHEN WRITING EACH LETTER

- **Show Interest.** Do research on the employer and then personalize the letter. Knowing something about the employer shows a serious interest in the company. This works much better than sending out dozens of identical form letters.
- **Emphasize one or two of your most significant accomplishments.** This draws attention to your most noteworthy skills and demonstrates that you are an above average candidate.
- **Be brief.** This shows that you value the employer's time.
- **Be persuasive.** Don't just describe your background. State your objectives concisely and make the employer want to take a closer look at you.
- **Be positive.** Write the letter clearly and with a positive attitude. Do not add information that may call attention to your weaknesses or inability to do the job.
- **Use strong action words.** Use the active voice which will convey a sense of energy and grab the employer's attention.
- **Be organized.** Group similar items together and arrange the paragraphs logically so that they flow from one thought to another. Don't just lump unrelated information together.
- **Avoid jargon or clichés.** Although it is tempting to use phrases like "proven leadership skills" or "proven track record", these buzzwords might suggest that you're parroting a phrase instead of using an original thought.

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW REQUEST LETTERS

Going on "informational" interviews can be an excellent way of finding out more about a particular company, to locate potential job leads, and to learn more about various career fields. *When writing this type of letter make it clear that your purpose is to gather information -- not to get a job.* Introduce yourself and state your purpose. Indicate that you will follow up with a phone call to the employer to arrange

a meeting time or a telephone interview -- whichever is convenient for the employer. *Do not enclose a résumé -- your purpose is not to ask for a job.* If the lead was provided to you by another individual, include it in the letter.

When requesting an informational interview:

- Introduce yourself and your purpose for writing.
- Briefly describe your background and why you are interested in the employer's industry or organization.
- Let the employer know how they can help you.
- Let the employer know when you will be following up by telephone.
- Be brief and professional.

COVER LETTERS

NEVER send a résumé without a cover letter unless the employer specifically requests that you don't send one. The purpose of a cover letter is to introduce your resume and to emphasize the skills and experience you have that are most relevant to the position you are seeking. A cover letter is most effective when written for a specific employer and a specific job opening. Researching the employer allows you to personalize the letter and make connections between the job opening and your qualifications.

Questions your cover letter should answer:

- Why are you writing?
- Why are you interested in the job and/or the company?
- Why should the employer be interested in you?
- What is your next step?

The above questions should be answered in these sections:

- **Introduction**
Introduce yourself and state the purpose of the letter. Indicate which position you are interested in, how you heard about the opening, and (if appropriate) who referred you. Briefly explain why you are the best qualified candidate for the position.
- **Body**
Make the connection between your experience and background, and the requirements of the job. This should be accomplished in one or two concise paragraphs. Summarize your experience and give examples. Do not repeat what is on your résumé -- expand on what is written on your résumé and indicate how it relates to the job and to the employer. Identify any transferable skills, accomplishments, or results.
- **Closing**
Use a brief closing. Summarize what you have written and indicate that you have enclosed your résumé. Choose an ending that indicates a next step -- use an active statement such as an offer to contact the employer within a specific period of time (usually within 1-2 weeks). Confirm your contact information and sign the letter.

THANK YOU LETTERS

Send a thank you letter after every job or informational interview within 24 hours. This is your chance to express your appreciation for the time that the employer spent with you, and to reassert your interest in the position or organization. If necessary, you can also clarify some of the points you made at the interview. Send a thank you letter to anyone who has helped you along the way.

Tips on writing thank you letters:

- If you were interviewed by more than one person, send a thank you letter to each person in the interview process and personalize each letter. They are likely to discuss your candidacy together.
- When writing to the person who coordinated the interview, mention the name of every person you met.
- Use plain, light colored stationery.
- Mention the date you spoke with the person, and highlight a useful piece of information you received or offered.
- Keep the letter brief, usually limiting it to three short paragraphs.

ACCEPTANCE AND DECLINE LETTERS

In any job search, you will eventually have to accept or decline a job offer. First respond by telephone, and then follow up with a letter. Confirm your decision in writing to avoid confusion later on.

When writing an acceptance letter, be sure to include the details of the position, including salary, bonuses and relocation package (if appropriate), job title, start date and location. Also include a short message of enthusiasm for the position and thank the employer for giving you this opportunity.

If you are declining an offer, be sure to include a statement of appreciation for the offer, and your reasons for declining it. Including a statement that leaves the "door open" for some future contact is always a good idea as well.