

# OITE CAREER SERVICES

# Guide to Cover Letters



## DISCLAIMER

*This guide is to be used as a general overview and cannot take each reader's own unique experiences into account. It is intended to be used as a starting point for more in-depth discussions with mentors, career counselors, and others in your network. Please bear in mind that, in actuality, there are very few rules and many different opinions regarding cover letters.*

*Updated August 2015*



## Overview

### Purpose

Your cover letter is often the first document an employer sees. It serves not only as an introduction to your résumé or CV but to you and your writing style. Take advantage of this opportunity to expand upon your qualifications. A cover letter also allows you to:

- » Elaborate on important experiences/skills and relate them to job requirements.
- » Explain your experiences through anecdotes that work in conjunction with the information provided on your résumé/CV.
- » Highlight the fact that you took the time to tailor your job application.
- » Provide a sample of your written communication skills.
- » Demonstrate your fit with the organization.

### Length

- » No longer than one page!  
There is some flexibility with this rule when applying in academia.
- » 3-4 paragraphs

### Format

Should be kept in business letter format  
(See next page for a sample of business letter format)

### Use

A cover letter should always be sent with your résumé or CV, unless the position explicitly states otherwise.

## Tips

### PERSONALIZE

Do your best research to find out who you should address your cover letter to if it is not listed in the position description. Utilize your networks or call HR to find out to whom your letter should be addressed. Try not to default to “To Whom it May Concern” or “Dear Sir/Madam.”

### PROOFREAD

A poorly written or error-laden letter will quickly get you eliminated from the employer's list of potential candidates. Take time to review your letter and have it read by a second set of eyes.

**Avoid** beginning every sentence or paragraph with the word “I.”

**Demonstrate** enthusiasm for the role and show you have done research about the position and organization.

### EMAIL ETIQUETTE

Most of the time, cover letters are emailed instead of sent in a hard copy version. When emailing a cover letter and a résumé, you have two options:

1. Write a brief but professional message basically stating to see your attached résumé and cover letter for their review.
2. Attach your résumé and copy your cover letter (in a basic font with formatting removed) into the body of the email. In this option, there is no need to keep the letter in business letter format and you can delete the address and date.

*\*Note:* When emailing your cover letter, while it is a nice added touch, you aren't generally expected to include a hand written signature scanned in.

## Format

Your street address  
City, state, zip code

Date

Dr./Ms./Mr. Recipient's First and Last Name [Note: Not both Dr. and PhD] Title  
Organization Name  
Street Address  
City, state, zip code

*Note: This part is removed if sent in email body*

Dear Dr./Ms./Mr. Last Name:

### PARAGRAPH #1

Express interest and explain why you are writing and how you found out about the position. If you have a good contact or a connection with the organization, state it here. Also, try to answer the question "Why them?" If possible, clarify how their mission aligns with your own.

### PARAGRAPH #2

Focus the second and the third paragraphs on two to three particularly relevant qualifications from the position description which highlight that you are a good match for this role. Explicitly list skills, but be sure to back these up with specific examples of how you obtained these skills and when you used them.

### PARAGRAPH #3

Continue to create your narrative for the employer by elaborating on your qualifications. Refer to examples on your resume, but don't repeat bullet points. Remember to use the second and third paragraphs to answer the question "Why you?" The aim: make it easy for them to see that you are exactly what they are looking for. Perhaps even highlighting how this position fits into your over-all career plan.

### PARAGRAPH #4

Quickly summarize your skills and reiterate your enthusiasm for this opportunity. Express you plan to follow up via email or phone within a certain period of time or invite the employer to contact you for more information if needed. Last but not least, thank the employer in advance for her/his time and consideration of your candidacy.

*content tips*

Sincerely,

Your handwritten signature (if sending a hard copy letter)  
Your full name (typed)

## COVER LETTER SAMPLE 1: Graduate Student Applying to Industry Position

123 First Street  
Alexandria, VA 20000

June 24, 2014

Dr. C.K. Louis  
Deputy Director  
Research Agency  
Anytown, USA 00001

Dear Dr. Louis:

I am writing to express my interest in the XXX position within the Research Agency Division at XXX (Position ID: 123456) as advertised on your company's human resources website. My former colleague, Dr. Blank, Researcher at XXX, brought this job posting to my attention. This is an exciting opportunity to utilize my unique skill set in order to support XXX's mission of providing innovative approaches to biomedical research.

My analytical skills have been honed during my doctoral training where I have been able to design and conduct original research in the field of x. Independently, I developed protocols which detailed the use of a variety of data collection instruments including a, b and c. Through this experience, I also had the opportunity to collaborate with other multi-disciplinary investigators from different institutes. By successfully liaising with other scientists, I was able to discover a novel approach to x. This ultimately resulted in a featured publication in X.

In addition to my research and communication skills, I have sought opportunities to develop my leadership skills. This was evident during my time as a graduate student where I served as the Chair of the Graduate Student Research Committee. I focused on many projects during my tenure as Chair; the most notable being the implementation of a new graduate student policy and an inaugural mentoring event. This position strengthened my project management skills and my ability to facilitate coordination not only of programs but also of people. During the mentoring event, I was able to work with six undergraduate students, teaching them a variety of lab techniques. The satisfaction I gained from teaching and mentoring was immense. It is why I have continued to seek mentoring opportunities during my postdoc; currently, I am mentoring three postbacs.

I would welcome the opportunity to expand upon my qualifications in an interview. I feel my combined research, leadership, and written communication skills would make me an excellent match for this role. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. Please feel free to contact me at email@email.com or (123) 456-7890 if you need additional information.

Sincerely,  
Pat Rylee

## COVER LETTER SAMPLE 2: Postdoc Applying to Non-Bench Position

123 First Street  
Alexandria, VA 20000

June 24, 2014

Dr. Sherryl Rockefeller  
Program Director  
Education Nonprofit  
Anytown, USA 00001

Dear Dr. Rockefeller:

I was very excited to see the job announcement for the Program Manager at XXX Education. I learned of this opportunity from conversations at National Postdoc Association meetings. I am interested in combining my passion for science and my experience in event planning. I feel that this job offers a tremendous opportunity to make a proactive contribution to the education and career development issues concerning young scientists.

Your position advertised on the XXX web site is an excellent fit with my qualifications and experience. My background includes a successful science career and a commitment to the organization of events to educate and inform my colleagues. By coordinating a variety of programs in the past I have obtained the skills to design, develop, and execute programs for career advancement. As a graduate student I organized a career forum that included speakers from industry, AAAS science policy fellows, scientific journalists and more. I have successfully developed, coordinated, and marketed more than ten events for the Biochemistry Department at XXX University.

At XXX Center, where I am currently employed as a postdoc, I have developed my communication skills in a variety of ways. Firstly, by establishing a Central Postdoctoral Association to provide a voice and resource to postdocs at my institution. Spearheading this association helped hone my communication skills as I built relationships with the Center's administration. On top of my communication skills, I also have strong presentation skills that would be necessary in this Program Manager role. I have experience presenting program material on various topics to large audiences. Scientifically, I won a competitive award for a poster presented at the 2014 FASEB meeting. This award was based on my communication skills and my enthusiasm for the science I was presenting.

I know that my experience could enhance the team at XXX and hope that you will seriously consider me for this position as a Program Manager. My salary requirements would be between \$XX,000-\$XX,000\*. This would be dependent on the benefits package offered; the numbers of hours required beyond the traditional work-week; and the opportunity to negotiate for future pay increases based on performance and experience in the position. I will contact you shortly to confirm that my resume was received and discuss the possibility of a meeting face-to-face.

Best regards,  
Andy Wallace

*\* Typically, you would not include your desired salary range; however, this position specifically requested salary requirements.*

## COVER LETTER SAMPLE 3:

### Postdoc Applying to Faculty Position with a Focus on Teaching

March 1, 2015

Faculty Search Committee  
XXX College of Arts and Sciences  
Division of Math, Science and Technology  
X University  
1234 College Lane  
Anywhere, MD 12345

Dear Search Committee Members:

I am pleased to respond to the posting for the Faculty of Biology position in the XXX College of Arts and Sciences at X University. I am currently a postdoctoral fellow at the National Cancer Institute and will serve as an Adjunct Professor for the undergraduate microbiology course at X College in the spring semester. I received my Ph.D. in Microbiology and Immunology from the University of XX and have experience with teaching and mentoring elementary-through graduate-level students from diverse backgrounds. The courses I am interested in teaching include but are not limited to: microbiology, general biology, genetics, immunology, anatomy and physiology for both majors and non-majors.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to be able to combine my passion for science with my love of teaching. During graduate school, I taught an undergraduate microbiology laboratory course for three semesters. The format of the class allowed me to integrate different learning techniques including active, collaborative, and problem-based approaches. By teaching the same course several times, I realized that each group of students was unique, and therefore, I needed to adapt my teaching style to fit their style of learning.

During my postdoctoral training, I have sought opportunities to gain teaching experience via attending teaching workshops, mentoring a high school student in my laboratory, participating in elementary outreach programs, and teaching a course at a local college. These experiences have been rewarding and have strengthened my desire to pursue a career in academia. As a researcher, I do a lot of reading to keep up to date with the literature in my field. I design experiments for both myself and my student and am constantly learning new computer programs to run equipment needed for experiments. I plan to take these practices into the field of teaching by staying current with the latest teaching methods, designing experiments for laboratory courses and learning the latest technologies that aid in class interaction and active learning.

My overall research interests have been focused on ABC and the regulation of XYZ factors. My graduate school research contributed to the understating of XXX. As a postdoctoral fellow, I am conducting research on the role of the stringent response in the pathogenesis of ABC, an infection that can lead to cancer. In the future, I would like to combine my graduate and postdoctoral research and study the role of the stringent response in YYY pathogenesis. Specifically, I would like to focus on XXX, all of which have been shown to play a role in the pathogenesis of several species of bacteria, but have not been characterized. I have access to XXX and my research could be done at X University and would be very well-suited for undergraduate researchers.

I hope to be a professor at X University so that I can share my personal and professional experiences with students and help them achieve their academic and career goals, as so many mentors and teachers have done for me. In addition, I feel that being an active member in the college community is important. Participating in faculty meetings, serving on committees, inviting guest speakers, etc. are all ways I would like to make a contribution to the growth of the College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Math, Science and Technology at X University.

I would welcome the opportunity to expand upon my qualifications in person.  
Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely, Name, Ph.D.

## COVER LETTER SAMPLE 4: Postdoc Applying to Faculty Position with a Focus on Research

June 4, 2015

Members of the Search Committee  
Department of Cell Biology  
Division of Biological Sciences  
University or College  
1234 College Lane  
Anytown, CA 12345

Dear Members of the Search Committee:

I am writing to apply for the tenure-track Assistant Professor positions in Cell Biology in the Division of Biological Sciences in response to your recent advertisement in *Nature*. I am very excited about this opportunity as I share the department's research interest in understanding the genetic and cellular basis of X disease. I believe my collective experiences would strongly complement and synergize with ongoing research endeavors within your department.

My pre-doctoral, doctoral, and post-doctoral training have focused on using multidisciplinary genetic, biochemical, and cell biological approaches to dissect X of development and X. I received my doctoral training at X University, where I extensively studied X and Y. While in this lab, I received two graduate awards for my thesis work. One award was from a highly competitive national competition. Currently, I am conducting my post-doctoral research at the National Institute of ABC in Dr. XYZ's Lab where my research focuses on studying the role of X in regulating Y. Utilizing in vitro assays, I discovered XX which has resulted in the elucidation of YY. The results of this work is currently in press at *Cell*.

As an independent investigator, I plan to use Y model to study how X regulates Y in the YY process. Specifically, I will use my previous work from X project in order to continue work on developing Z. My long-term goal is to dissect cellular mechanisms within X and Y. I am particularly interested in the pathway of DEF.

In addition to my research strengths, I have a long-standing and dedicated interest in teaching and mentoring undergraduate and graduate students. I taught high school, college and graduate level students in a course at the NIH where I served as the Lead Instructor. I have also sought opportunities to continue to mentor junior scientists in the lab. Furthermore, to demonstrate my ability to secure extramural funding, I wrote a post-doctoral research grant which was funded by the *Professional Society of X*.

I have enclosed my curriculum vitae, statements of research and teaching interests, a statement on my approach to diversity and the names of five references. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you in the future.

Sincerely,  
Aspiring Faculty Member, PhD

**EMAIL SAMPLE:****Postbac Email Inquiry about Lab Openings\***

*\*Use this format to inquire about Postdoc positions too!*

