

# Cover Letter Basics

---

The resume is NEVER mailed to a prospective employer without an accompanying cover letter. It should complement, not duplicate, resume information and focus the prospective employer's attention to pertinent areas of experience. In the cover letter, you get a chance to draw connections between your experience and their requirements, linking concrete items from your resume with broader ideas and skill areas.

The cover letter is ALWAYS composed for a specific person or organization and is not mass-produced. If the contact person is not given in the job listing (or if you are sending an "unsolicited" letter of inquiry), here are strategies for finding a name of an appropriate individual:

- Go online and search the company's website
- Call the company directly and ask for a contact person
- If you found it through your school website, contact the career services at your school

**There are four sections in a standard cover letter:**

## 1 - The Opening

Use the opening paragraph to capture the prospective employer's interest and let them know why you are writing this letter – be specific! State the exact position or area you are interested in. Describe your academic qualifications (degree level and major—if relevant). Tell them how you learned of the position or organization (a personal referral, posting on their employment web site, ad in the newspaper, etc.). Consider closing this section with a sentence or two that summarizes what you are going to focus on in the rest of the letter.

## 2 - Your Skills and Experience (*Why they should hire you*)

Relate your qualifications to the specific job requirements and type of organization using examples of your experience to make your points. Briefly describe your educational and work experience and how they would make a good match with the ongoing and/or future needs of that specific organization. This section answers “Why should we consider you as a candidate?”. Justify the employer's interest in you, “What is your competitive advantage over other candidates?”. Let your personality come through, “Why are you excited about the position or organization?”. DO NOT simply repeat, word-for-word what is already on your resume; instead make associations and draw your experience and qualifications together.

## 3 - Demonstrate Employer Knowledge (*Why you want to work for them*)

Discuss why this specific employer, industry, or organization appeals to you. You need to do some basic research on the industry, organization, and position. Employers reading your letter want to know you respect and like their organization. This paragraph is an opportunity to show the employer that you have gone the extra mile to gain information. Discuss things that you have discovered which genuinely impress you. This is also an opportunity to discuss how your career interests and experiences fit their organizational philosophy.

## 4 - The Closing

Use the closing paragraph to request an interview at the prospective employer's convenience. Give them your phone number and email address where you can be reached. It is also acceptable for the applicant to initiate the next response by indicating that you will call to follow up with them. If the prospective employer is not located in the applicant's immediate geographical area, it is to your advantage to mention if you will be in that general area at a particular time. You may also mention if you are willing to relocate or already plan on moving to that area. Be sure to thank the employer for their time. End the letter with “Sincerely” and your name.

## The Salary Question

Applicants are sometimes asked to include salary requirements. The cover letter is the place to do this. As a recent grad, your salary history doesn't necessarily reflect your abilities. Here are a few key salary tips to keep in mind if asked about this:

- Never give a specific dollar amount, but instead list a range
- Let your prospective employer know that salary isn't the only criteria by which you judge a job offer
- Do some research on salary for comparable positions and comparable companies/cities on [www.rileyguide.com](http://www.rileyguide.com) (Salary Guide)

## **Applicant Follow-up**

Applicants who have not heard from an employer after two to three weeks can do a follow-up either by email or telephone. It should be directed to the original contact person and should take a "low key" approach--state the date the original letter was sent; ask if it was received; restate your interest in that specific company; and ask where they are in their selection process. It is important that the follow-up does not come across to the prospective employer as, "Why haven't I heard from you?"

## **SAMPLE COVER LETTER**

1106 County Line Road  
Waukesha, WI 53188

January 7, 2012

Katherine Richardson  
Communications Director  
CUNA & Affiliates  
P.O. Box 431  
Madison, WI 53701

Dear Ms. Richardson:

I am writing to apply for the Communications Associate position at CUNA & Affiliates. I recently saw the opening posted on the CUNA Career Opportunities web site. I would like to take this opportunity to show how my background in writing, research, and leadership make me highly qualified for the position.

From my experiences both inside and outside of the classroom, I have honed my writing, research, and leadership skills. In my coursework, researching and writing a variety of pieces for diverse audiences helped me learn to effectively target a piece to the reader. As the Event Management Intern at The Memorial Union, I worked with numerous patrons in order to plan their programs and events. Supervising other student workers required superior oral communication skills. As the President of the writing club at UW-Waukesha, I led a group of 15 members during my sophomore year. I was also Editor in Chief of UW-Waukesha's Observer, contributing articles on campus events, sports and news. My familiarity with desktop publishing would be an asset in working with CUNA's many publications and newsletters.

I was very impressed to see the amount of high quality press that CUNA offers its constituents. The Credit Union magazine, for example, is not only informative but has a very polished look and layout. I was very excited to see that CUNA writes about cutting edge topics for many audiences including executives, Credit Union members, and law makers. I am confident that my skills in writing, research, and web design would be assets to the Communications Associate position.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I can be reached at 262-555-3471 and via e-mail at [plschmidt@wisc.edu](mailto:plschmidt@wisc.edu). I will contact you in the next week to confirm that my materials have arrived.

Sincerely,

Priscilla Schmidt

# SAMPLE RESUME

## Priscilla Schmidt

1106 County Line Rd Waukesha, WI 53188 | plschmidt@wisc.edu | 262-555-3471

### Summary of Qualifications

- Over 30 credits in writing & research intensive coursework
- Technical skills include word processing, spreadsheets, and desktop publishing
- Extensive experience in program planning and management
- Effective leadership and writing skills as Editor in Chief of UW-Waukesha's Observer

### Education

#### University of Wisconsin-Madison

Bachelor of Arts, May 2013

Double Major: English and History

#### Relevant Courses

Computational Statistics

Contemporary Economic Issues

Database Management Systems

Technical Writing

#### International Study Program, Selected Participant

University of Oslo, Norway

June – September 2011

### Leadership and Event Planning Experience

#### Event Management Intern, Memorial Union, University of Wisconsin-Madison, June 2012 – Present

- Coordinate use of center and campus reservation facilities
- Assist student, faculty and community groups in planning programs, conferences and major events
- Develop promotional materials with PageMaker and Photoshop
- Hired, trained and supervise 5 office personnel, using excellent communication skills
- Arrange event set-ups which include food service, parking, and technical resources
- Commended for attention to detail and accuracy

#### Editor in Chief, UW-Waukesha's The Observer UW-Waukesha, August 2010 – June 2011

#### Sports Editor, UW-Waukesha's The Observer, August 2009 – June 2010

- Advised and led 10 – member student led club
- Wrote and contributed 2 articles per month (events/sports/news sections)
- Reviewed copy before sent to print
- Led in-person interviews of features

### Customer Service Experience (While financing college education)

**Wait staff**, Olive Garden, Madison, WI; September 2011 – Present

**Receptionist**, Inacom Information Systems, Waukesha, WI; October 2009 – May 2010

**Service representative**, Ameritech, Waukesha, WI; May – August 2009

### Professional Affiliations:

Public Relations Student Society of America, Women in Communications

University of Wisconsin-Waukesha

1500 N. University Dr. Waukesha, WI 53188 | 262-521-5459 | [www.waukesha.uwc.edu/jobs](http://www.waukesha.uwc.edu/jobs)