

THE JACKSON SCHOOL COVER LETTER TOOLKIT

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COVER LETTER FUNDAMENTALS

The purpose of a cover letter is two-fold: it gives you the opportunity to make a case for the match between the position being recruited for and your skills, but it also acts as an opportunity to let recruiters know about things a resume can't explain: your motivation, your enthusiasm, why you've chosen that organization, and why you've taken the time to apply to this position instead of something similar elsewhere.

Cover letters should be one page. It should fundamentally address three things: why you are applying for the job, why you are qualified to make a difference on their team, and what sets you apart from other candidates. Recruiters and hiring managers treat a cover letter as a barometer of your professionalism and your ability to produce a quality written product: it is imperative that your application materials be free of grammatical and spelling errors. Cover letters should be to the point, grab the attention of the reader, and (if they haven't already) pique the interest of the reader to read your resume closely. Above all it should be professional and compliment, not repeat, the resume.

The best cover letters "speak" to readers. In a sea of cover letters and resumes that cover similar ground, one of the best ways to do that is to do extensive research on the profile of the ideal person the employer is looking to recruit, what their needs are, and how you meet those needs. The more competitive or automated the recruitment process for a position, the more acute the need for an outstanding cover letter becomes! Have the overall tone and theme of the cover letter be about what you can do for them and how you are excited to leverage your skills and experience to help their mission.

COVER LETTER CONTENT DOs & DONTs

- A good cover letter should be structured, easy to read quickly, but rich in content. Don't waste time on phrases or paragraphs that don't answer the main questions mentioned earlier.
- With readability considerations, remember that similar to a resume, margins and font sizes should be consistent – 10-12 point font, standard margins.
- Just like a resume, the best cover letters are completely tailored to the reader and to the organization.
- Be sure to include key words from the position description when making the case for your qualifications in the cover letter. For cases where application materials are scanned/filtered automatically, this will help ensure you pass the initial screening.
- Always be truthful when representing your experience! Avoid exaggerations or lies.
- Don't forget to add context to statements and avoid generalities: repeat offenders are standalone phrases designed to check boxes like “I believe I am the ideal candidate for the position” or “I am highly organized and have excellent communications skills”. Better would be “My communications skills are excellent: I speak three languages, have extensive experience managing community outreach programs internationally, and work regularly with highly diverse clientele demographics.”
- Don't talk about irrelevant issues or use unprofessional language.
- Don't sacrifice content that answers the questions of the hiring manager for material that makes your cover letter “unique” or memorable. Remember to appeal to the values, goals, and project aims of the organization you are applying to.
- Don't assume when you mention something from your experience set that readers will understand immediately why they should care – you may need to explain the “so what?” aspect of things like Task Force or capstone research projects to turn them into assets that will separate you from the competition.

ADDRESSING THE COVER LETTER

There are conflicting opinions out there about how to approach the start of a cover letter: the addressee. Sometimes it's possible to find out a specific person to address a cover letter to, sometimes it's not. Frequently these days, applications are reviewed by a committee of people rather than an individual. Obviously, if a position description requests that materials be addressed to a specific person, follow instructions. If no name or position is given, then some further work may be required.

ADDRESSING THE COVER LETTER (Cont.)

Taking the time to research who the cover letter should be addressed to shows you care about your application and are willing to put in the effort to stand out. The primary starting point for your research should be the specific team or department hosting the job or internship position you are applying to. Team or division leaders, if listed in organization directories, can be a good place to start. Paying attention to who the direct supervisor of the position you're applying to is another area to focus on, and LinkedIn directories can also be helpful.

In a situation where you're unsure about addressing the cover letter to a committee or an individual, one possibility is to hedge your bets and do both! Example:

	Your Name 2097 Street Address, Seattle, WA address@mailymail.com 206-123-4567
Date	
The Hiring Committee C/O Individual Name, Individual Title Department Name, Organization Name Address	
Dear Ms. (or Mr.) Name,	

Some larger organizations deliberately don't want external applicants communicating with hiring managers or staff involved in the recruitment process, so it may not always be possible to find a name. Your final option is of course, to contact the department or team you're applying to directly and ask politely but directly: I'm applying to this position and was wondering - who should I address the cover letter to?

If a position description specifies no calls or emails, then this step should be skipped. If you're unable to find a direct contact for the team or department you're applying to, then it is perfectly acceptable to address a letter in a generic manner:

Date
The Hiring Committee Department Name, Organization Name Address
To the Hiring Committee:

While it's important to make the effort, as long as you have a professionally formatted, error free introduction with your contact information, the date, the contact information of your intended addressee, putting something like "To Whom it May Concern:" is not a death knell for the chances of your cover letter if you've made a good faith effort and still can't find an addressee.

Hiring managers are far more interested in the content of your resume and cover letter than they are with having a specific name or title at the top, so the main focus of your time and effort should be on demonstrating your motivation, how you can contribute to the organization, and your why qualifications should put you in the interview group.

COVER LETTER TIPS: OPENING PARAGRAPH

Key components

- This is a crucial section: you need to start quickly, get the attention of the reader, and explain why you are applying and what your connection to the opportunity is. Where did you hear about the position? What made you decide to apply? If you have the ability to mention a referral or employee you know within the organization, this is a good time to mention it.
- The opening paragraph should be relatively short and preview the content to be covered in the rest of the letter. Thanking the reader for their time is recommended, and taking the time to (re) confirm the position you are applying to means there's no danger of your application being considered for something else by mistake.
- When mentioning why the position interests you, try to focus on something like the shared values and goals you have with the organization or team in question, or how your mindset to do X or Y is perfectly geared to the industry in question. Avoid saying things like "I am interested in working for your team because "Company X is considered the best in the world", or "Organization Y top ranked in its field". These may be flattering, but provide no information about how your background or interests connect with what they do.

Dear members of the hiring committee:

Thank you for taking the time to consider my application for <position opening> at <Organization> - I recently learned about the opening via contact or place, and I am applying because the idea of insert reason here is one that inspires me. My <combined total of X years> academic and professional experience in <field> are something I'm keen to leverage for your team as your next <position>.

First, a little bit about my qualifications: I have....

COVER LETTER TIPS: BODY PARAGRAPHS

The most relevant information for why you should be considered for an interview should be in this section. Your experience set, your education, and your skillset should be highlighted in a way that makes it easy for the reader to draw parallels between you and the position requirements/ duties.

The body paragraphs of your cover letter are also a chance to add explanations to things if necessary – a resume cannot do this. This could include career shifts, geographical moves, or gaps in your resume. Keep in mind that the tone should be on what you can contribute to their cause, not how the company can help you move along in your career.

Key components

- Body paragraphs should summarize and highlight qualifications, not repeat the resume. Too often candidates will outline verbally their experience with phrases like “I have 3 years of experience doing X, Y and Z at <company name>, and before that I worked at <company name> doing X and Y. I have a degree in <field> and have excellent A, B, and C skills.” Instead, consider something like *“I have a combined total of X years of professional and academic experience in <field>, and have cultivated extensive communications skills and project management skills through my work in <X>. My technical skills include X, Y, and Z, developed through my recent work in <field>.”* The idea is we want the reader to feel compelled to learn more.
- Avoid clichés...prove what you say. Phrases like “I’m passionate about” and “I believe I’m the perfect fit” are used frequently by candidates without any kind of qualifiers. If you have passion, you need to tell the reader (a stranger to you), what developed that passion within you. If you believe you’re qualified, tell them specifically why. Don’t assume they’ll take your word for it!
- Help the reader relate to you – make sure that your body paragraphs address specifically that you can contribute what they’re looking for with a few well-chosen examples.
- Consider framing the paragraph with an opening phrase that lets the reader know what to expect. Things like “Firstly, my qualifications for the job:”, “personally, my motivation to succeed in this position comes from...” “Working and volunteering in <field> has enabled me to develop strong skills and contacts in...”
- Your Jackson training means you have developed experience in project management, policy analysis, intergovernmental relations, negotiations, global communications, advocacy, qualitative data assessment, problem solving, foreign languages, and more.

COVER LETTER TIPS: CLOSING PARAGRAPH

It's important to finish strong and make a lasting impression with your closing paragraph. The closing paragraph does not need to be long, but should summarize your case, restate your enthusiasm for the position, and outline your confidence that you can contribute to the position.

Key components

- Use this part to thank the reader again for their time reviewing your application.
- Even though your contact details should be at the top of your cover letter using a similar format to the resume, it's useful to indicate the best way for a hiring manager to reach you, e.g. email or cellphone. If you will be out of town or unavailable for periods during the search, let the employer know and provide alternate ways to contact you.
- If you are applying to a position in a different city or country from where you are presently located, this paragraph may be the best place to address potential questions the recruiter might have. A short sentence acknowledging that you are applying from out of town is fine, but you don't need to spend too much time talking about details – simply emphasize that you are in the process of relocating and that you look forward to talking in person about the position. This lets the hiring manager know you'll be available and that they don't have to worry about special considerations for logistics.
- If you have space, consider adding a scanned/ digital version of an actual, physical signature. It's not essential but can make a letter look more “formal” and add something that other candidates don't have. Remember to save your cover letter as a PDF so that images and formatting will render in the way you intended for a reader with a different system.
- If you are asked to submit application materials by email, attach the original versions of your cover letter and resume (as PDF files) and have the body of the email be a brief synopsis: you're submitting your materials for their consideration, please find enclosed, thank you for your time, any questions please contact me. Then let the formal cover letter do the rest of the talking.
- Remember, Jackson graduates have the ability to understand both the “what” and the “why” of complex global problems or trends. You're going to be a great fit for this position!