

WRITING COVER LETTERS

Your Goals

Cover letters, sent with your resume, are a form of persuasive communication meant to motivate your reader to take action on your behalf. Your goal is to secure an interview or to be referred to people to contact.

Situations to Anticipate

When responding to an employer's request (e.g., a recruiting company asking to hear from students interested in interviewing with them or a firm sending a job listing), you are operating in a *reactive* mode and the next step is *defined*. When writing to someone who has not solicited your interest and does not anticipate your letter (e.g., when you independently write to a manager of a firm you have identified), you are operating in a *proactive* mode and next steps *not defined*.

In the former situation, the employer is more motivated to respond to your letter and will share responsibility for taking the next step. In the latter, you must provide strong incentives for your reader to take action. You must also take full responsibility for follow through. The content and tone of your letters will differ accordingly.

Letters written in a *reactive* mode are easier to write, but face stiff competition for the reader's attention. Those written in a *proactive* mode are more difficult to write but face less competition and, when successful, result in a response tailored to your personal interests and qualifications.

Keys to Success

Whatever the situation, good cover letters:

- are addressed to a specific individual (ideally, the person who will profit from your contributions and who has authority to hire you)
- clearly state what you want from your reader
- demonstrate your understanding of the industry, company, position
- focus on company needs rather than your own
- provide evidence that you can contribute to the company's success
- amplify rather than repeat information in your resume
- communicate a clear sense of direction and commitment to your goal
- convey common sense and a positive attitude
- differentiate you from other candidates
- project professionalism and confidence
- are tailored to the situation and are original rather than generic
- are concise, clear, and creatively written
- are free of typing, spelling, and grammatical errors.