

WRITING A COVERING LETTER

Your covering letter is a document individual to you and the job you're applying for, but there are some general rules to stick to. Here are some general points about covering letters to get you thinking along the right lines.

Your CV and covering letter is your chance to show an employer the best of what you've got. It's about selling your skills and experience, and showing them you're the right person for the job.

How you write your CV and covering letter is up to you, but there are some basic rules to follow if you want to create the best impression.

Advice for writing your covering letter

Pay attention to the following advice to ensure your covering letter is well constructed.

Use a computer

Usually, you should use a word processor on a computer and print out your covering letters. Most employers prefer covering letters to be done this way. They are easier to read.

However, a small number of employers ask for a handwritten covering letter. Usually, this is so they can see what your handwriting is like. If you're asked to do this, make sure you follow their instructions. Take your time to make sure there aren't any mistakes and that your handwriting is clear. It is advisable to do a draft first so that you can re-read it and check it.

Push your strengths

Your covering letter should draw attention to your most relevant skills and achievements.

You can provide more information on the skills and experience that are relevant to the job. You could explain how a particular experience helped you develop the skills detailed in your CV. For example, 'doing the weekly

stock take helped me to sharpen my maths skills and spot sales trends'.

Make it personal

Do not send out identical covering letters without any detail about the employer.

It's much better to show that you've done your research on the company and know what they do. Make it clear you've thought about which skills they want and how you can provide them. The more specific, the more attention your letter will attract. It's better to spend time writing ten personalised covering letters than sending out 50 identical ones.

Consider explaining CV gaps

You can use a covering letter to explain gaps in your CV, such as unemployment, gap years or time spent in prison.

Don't be worried about mentioning difficult subjects like this even though you're trying to sell your positive points. It's a good opportunity to explain how you dealt with these difficult times and learnt from them.

Put yourself in the employer's shoes – if you say nothing on your covering letter and the employer reads '2002 to 2005 – unemployed' on your CV, they haven't got anything positive to grab hold of, and they might draw their own conclusions.

Whatever the reason for gaps in your CV, explain what you've learned. If you've been unemployed you could mention how organised you were in your approach to job hunting, training courses you've been on, or any volunteering you've done.



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If you've been in prison you could describe any learning courses or other activities you got involved in. If it's relevant, you could also describe the circumstances leading up to your offence, but keep it brief. You could also explain that you've learned from it, and how you have changed. Show that you understand responsibility.

Provide information about your disability

If you have a disability, it's up to you whether you mention this in the covering letter or in your CV or not at all – you're not legally obliged to do so. Disclosing your disability at application stage can give you an opportunity to say which skills you've learned as a result of your disability.

Use the right language and tone

When applying for most jobs, use clear, business-like language.

However, if you're applying for a creative role, such as an advertising copywriter, you could show your originality and word skills in the language and tone you use. Use your judgment, based on what you can find out about the company and their approach to recruiting.

Check it and then check it again!

Always check your covering letter for spelling and grammatical errors.

Don't rely on word processing spell checkers, as they don't pick up everything. (If we had written 'pack', 'peck', 'pock' or 'puck', a spell checker would not have known that the word we wanted to use was 'pick'!)

It helps if you leave some time after completing the letter before checking it. This way you'll look at it with fresh eyes. When you've been working on one piece of work for a while, it can be difficult to look at it objectively.

Even better, ask someone else to check it over for you. Just like the employer, they will be reading it for the first time. They might also be able to make helpful suggestions and check that it flows well.

Keep it brief

Keep your covering letter short and succinct. A maximum of five short paragraphs on a single page is sufficient. It is easy for employers to read it quickly.

Keep the format consistent

If you use the same font and text size on your covering letter and CV it will look neat and professional.

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