Covering Letters

General points and guidelines

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

Use a computer

It's normal to use a computer to write and print out your covering letter. Most employers will prefer covering letters to be done in this way. It makes it easier for them to read and easier for you to make any changes or corrections before you print it out.

You might be asked to handwrite your covering letter. This is normally so employers can see what your handwriting is like. Make sure you follow any instructions you're given. Take your time, make sure you've not made any mistakes and that your handwriting is clear. You could do a draft first, ask somebody else to check it for you and then re-read it and check it yourself.

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 included in your CV. For example, 'doing the weekly stock take helped me to sharpen my math's skills and spot sales trends'.

Make it personal

Don't send out identical covering letters without any details about the employer.

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

Use the right language and tone

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

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. However, use your judgment carefully, 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 picked these up as these are valid words. It 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 spot any mistakes or errors.

It's a good idea to ask someone else to check it over for you, to get a different perspective. 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 to the point. A maximum of five short paragraphs on a single page should be enough to get your message across. It will also be short enough for employers to read 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.