Cover Letters

Cover Letters are generally one-paged, introductory documents that accompany other parts of an application or inquiry. They are most frequently used to respond to a known job position (or, in a college context, apply to business school), and serve as a personal introduction for a candidate to describe themselves and why they are best-suited for the given position. When working with a cover letter in the Writing Center, keep in mind the particular purpose and form of such documents.

Purpose:

At its simplest, the goal in writing a cover letter is to get hired. The driving purpose behind writing, therefore, should be show that you are the best-suited candidate for the job. A good cover letter, therefore, needs to go beyond displaying personal excellence and also show that that excellence is exactly what the company needs. Cover letters should show that you have real knowledge of the company and what they stand for, and that you can envision yourself fitting in perfectly. A good strategy for making your compatibility obvious is to cherry-pick words and phrases from the company’s publications, job listings, or mission statement, and insert them in your own prose. Though this may seem forced, it is highly effective, and some companies screen cover letters before even reading them, looking for applicants who do this. Beyond that, it’s important to remember that is a narrative, not just another résumé, and you need to demonstrate your personal qualities in a way that brings your character to life as well as your accomplishments. Effective cover letters:

DO:

Demonstrate writing ability.
Demonstrate attention to detail.
Demonstrate compatibility.
Demonstrate character.

And DON’T:

Rehash the résumé or c.v.
Sound arrogant.
Focus on weaknesses.
Misunderstand the organization.
Form:

All format-specific questions should be directed to the CDO. In general, however, cover letters follow standard business letter format, with a header and three paragraphs. Every paragraph has a specific function in the narrative, all while keeping in mind the primarily goal of demonstrating your personal excellence and compatibility with the company.

Header:

Follows business letter style, with the date sent, followed by the recipient’s address, followed by salutation.

First Paragraph:

Introduces who you are and why you are applying. This should state the precise position you are applying for and catch the employer’s eye.

Second Paragraph:

Explains why you are a great candidate for the company and position. This should build on your résumé, going further in demonstrating character and compatibility. You can expand on your experience, your skills, or your qualifications in the form of a narrative demonstrating your worth, or detail what you love about the company and what about yourself fits into their outlook, for instance. In any case, be sure to show both your quality and that of the company.

Third Paragraph:

Sums up yourself and what you would like to get out of the position. This should give all pertinent contact information, and indicate what the applicant intends to do next. Usually, this is merely to state, “I look forward to hearing from you,” but you may also indicate you are going to contact the employer yourself.

The cover letter ends with a valediction (usually “Sincerely”) and a signature.

Once you've reviewed the particulars of a cover letter with a student, it may be useful to brainstorm ideas for each paragraph, and construct the outline of a narrative with them. Remember, you have to show both character and compatibility, as well as treading the line between excellence and arrogance. Be sure to refer the student to the CDO and let them know where to find sample letters online. A good place to start is http://jobsearch.about.com/od/coverlettersamples/a/coverlettsample.htm/