February marks the opening of Internship Season when many students launch into full-throttle efforts to land the perfect opportunity that will boost their careers. Securing an internship has always been a competitive process but as the economy has cooled, the competition for top spots has intensified. Although the application process varies across organizations, a common denominator among internship and employment applications is the cover letter that accompanies the application materials.

A cover letter is a paper handshake. Whether for an internship or paid employment, the cover letter is a way of introducing yourself to the person who is going to review your application. Although a great cover letter alone is not enough to land a position, a poorly written letter can sink your chances.

Writing a great cover letter is challenging because there’s no set format and no required content. Moreover, the letter should be tailored to each application and each organization. Therefore, a great cover letter for one application does not automatically translate into a great letter for every application. What follows below is a suggested format for a single-page cover letter, with explanations and examples of what to include and what to avoid in the first, middle, and closing paragraphs.

**What About E-mailed Letters?**

If you’re submitting your application by e-mail, the current “standard practice” is to send the cover letter as an attachment. Whenever possible, it is recommended that you convert all Word documents to PDF file formats to protect the document’s look and formatting. Be sure to include your e-mail address and phone number on your cover letter (below your name, last items on the page) because your application won’t stay attached to your e-mail. For the same reason, label the electronic file with a helpful, professional tag such as “Your Name- Application for 2011 Summer Intern –Elder Care Program”
Suggested Format for 1-page Cover Letter
11 or 12 pt. font, 1.5 line spacing

Your Street Address
City, State ZIP Code

Today’s date

Person’s name
Title
Organization
Street Address
City, State, ZIP Code

Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms./Dr. + last name [If you couldn’t get a person’s name, use Dear Recruiter, Dear Personnel Director, Dear Head of Human Relations]

The first paragraph is your introduction to the reader and creates a lasting impression. Clearly state your reason for writing and your interest in working with the organization. Be direct, be organized, and be friendly. You not only need to capture the reader’s attention but also impress the reader as someone he or she might want to have around for 8-10 hours a day. Just like a handshake, this paragraph should be firm and not too long (3-4 sentences). The organization might have several open positions or multiple internships, so clearly state if you are responding to a posting for a specific position or if you are inquiring about possible openings. Mention how you became aware of the organization or the position (e.g., learned about them through an article, referred to the internship by a professor). Don’t hesitate to be a namedropper! If you can establish a connection with the reader by mentioning the a name of a professor, a former student who had the intern position, a friend who is on the
organization’s advisory board, then you’ve upped the chances of getting eyes on your resume.

Avoid:

Trite, tired phrases: “To whom it may concern” — Even if you couldn’t get the name of the person who will review your application, don’t rely on this tired phrase that often indicates less than full effort. If you were not able to find a person’s name because the posting requested “No Phone Calls” mention that you honored that request because the person reviewing the applications may not be the person who posted the position description.

Insipid language: “I would like to apply…” “I am writing to apply…” – These phrases come across as weak and wishy-washy. If you want to, then go ahead and do it! I prefer “I am applying for the position of…” because it is simple, direct, and to the point.

Stilted language such as, “After studious consideration of the opportunities that I might pursue during my academic hiatus, I find that I am most impressed with the benefits your organization affords to its interns. Herewith, I make my application for the summer internship position with…” Would you want to work with this person 8 hours a day/5 days a week?

Boilerplate language, broad generalizations such as,
- “I would like to work in a challenging environment with opportunity for advancement.” Doesn’t everyone?
- “I have excellent communication skills and work well with others” Everyone says this, even if they don’t.

Middle Section

Whether one long paragraph (if you must) or three short paragraphs (preferred), the middle section of your cover letter is your opportunity to toot your horn, highlight your qualifications, and call attention to your special skills. This section makes up the bulk of the cover letter and aims to make a strong connection between the needs of the organization and your skills, qualifications, or interests. What points in your resume are the most relevant to the position? Your education and experience? Or a special interest that might be overlooked in a resume? Use these paragraphs to highlight those points, give additional detail, and create enough interest in you as a potential candidate that the reader will review your resume.

Focus on what you bring to the position – the “added value” — that comes from hiring you rather than someone with similar qualifications. In other words, “Ask not what the potential employer can do for you, but what you can do for the employer.” (Career Services, University of Pennsylvania).

- Don’t repeat the whole resume, rather elaborate on key points by noting your qualifications (be specific!) and discuss how those qualifications will enable you to contribute to the organization or the internship program.
- Responding to a posting for a specific position? Refer to specifics in the job description. Example: “Based on the job description, I understand that you are looking for a licensed clinical social worker to conduct online therapeutic support groups. In addition to having the necessary licensure and clinical experience, I have experience in creating and maintaining websites using html. Last year, I started a therapy blog…”

Keep it Positive!

Although it might seem unnecessary to state that you should keep your cover letter positive, it’s amazing how often applicants draw attention to their shortcomings, point out their lack of experience, or create an overall negative tone through poor word choice. Simply using a string of negative words such as despite, lack, inadequate can create a lingering negative image. For example, the following sentences highlight the same accomplishment of one applicant but create far different impressions:

Ex. 1: Despite inadequate funding and lack of trained staff for the children’s summer camp, I managed to get enough volunteers so we could finish out the season.
Ex. 2: I overcame budget and staffing challenges by recruiting energetic community volunteers, which enabled the children’s camp to complete another successful season.

Closing Paragraph

Last paragraph: Deliver a firm handshake and stick your foot in the door.

Congratulations! If you’ve persuaded the reader to follow your story this far, then the reader is likely to at least skim your resume. The aim of the closing paragraph is to convert the reader to an interviewer. That is, in the closing paragraph you want to pave the way for getting an interview by expressing your interest in having an interview and by mentioning that you will follow-up on your application. If you’re in a different town from the employer, I think it’s a great idea to include that you are planning to visit the employer’s city and would be available to meet with the employer during that trip. I usually suggest “meet” rather than “interview” to avoid appearing pushy; for the same reason, don’t suggest a specific time or date.

I’m not a fan of the phrasing that you’ll often see in sample cover letters regarding follow-up contact: “If I do not hear from you within 10 days, I will follow-up by contacting you via the e-mail address listed on your organization’s website.” I definitely have a very negative reaction to applicants who set a deadline and then make veiled threats about what will happen if I miss their deadline! (Okay, perhaps Human Relations isn’t my forte!) I prefer less abrasive phrasing such as, “I will contact your office next week to follow-up and answer any questions you might have.” The closing paragraph is also the place to indicate if your references or transcripts are being sent directly to the employer; mention the names of the persons sending references. End the paragraph by thanking the reviewer for his or her time and consideration of your application.

Avoid

“References supplied upon request” – This is one for the “Duh” file. If the job description specifies that the application should include references, then you clearly don’t need this line. If the description didn’t mention references, are you going to refuse to provide a potential employer with references when requested? Duh, no!

Bland, vapid language that smacks of desperation: “I hope to hear from you soon...” “Please call me if you have questions...” “I will be anxiously waiting to hear from you...” If the employer is interested and has questions, of course he or she will call. Although “hope” might have been intended to be optimistic, the phrasing gives all the power in this dynamic to the potential employer. Remember the firm, strong handshake you used to make a good impression at the start of the letter? You want the same kind of firm verbal handshake to leave a lasting impression of you as a strong candidate for the position.

Example:

“I am planning to travel to the Asheville area March 3-5 and would welcome the chance to meet with you to discuss the possibility of interning with your program. My letters of recommendation from Donald Trump, the Dalai Lama, and Oprah Winfrey are being sent directly to your office. Thank you for considering my application. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

[Your Name, typed]

[Make it easy on recruiters by including contact info next to your name]

AbeLincoln@logcabin.com

919-555-5555
Other Resources:
The Internet is littered with sites offering samples of cover letters and letters of inquiry about internships. Some are great, some aren’t. When you look at these examples, put yourself in the role of the recruiter—What’s your first impression of the applicant based solely on the words on the paper?
Nearly every university has an office of career development that offers advice on cover letters. A few recommended online sites include
Career Services, Uni. of Pennsylvania: http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/careerservices/gradstud/samples/
Virginia Tech: http://www.career.vt.edu/JobSearchGuide/CorrespondenceIndex.html