

# ENGINEERING THE PERFECT COVER LETTER



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Sooner or later, your career may turn on a single piece of paper: the infamous cover letter. How can yours avoid being filed under Recycling without a second glance? Approached purely as a piece of persuasive writing, drafting the perfect cover letter can drive good people mad with stress and self-doubt.

We prefer to treat the cover letter as an engineering problem, with three functional goals and two design constraints. Let's deconstruct the notoriously stressful cover letter into a clean, reusable schematic.

## Functional Goals

The objective of your cover letter is not to land the job, but to make it through the first filter in the hiring process. In larger firms, this could be an HR staff person or intern, keyword-scanning documents against a list of skills and qualifications. Companies with flatter hierarchies may have an executive assistant, or senior staff, review incoming applications to fill a very specific vacancy.

In either case, your cover letter has two immediate objectives: avoid being filtered as garbage and make it appear worth that person's time to review your resume.

To that end, there are three goals to achieve within the text of your cover letter:

1. Express interest in a specific position
2. Show you understand and are qualified for the job
3. Encourage further communication

We will divide these three functional goals into yet simpler components in our schematic, but let's keep a simple foundation for now.

## Design Constraints: Time and Attention

The most critical limiting factors to consider while writing your cover letter are time and attention.

Consider an HR staff person at a large engineering firm. Having advertised a vacancy, they receive several dozen applications of varying quality. The reviewing personnel has a limited time in which to filter this initial set of responses and determine which applicants warrant further attention.

Their limited time per cover letter determines our ideal word count. Setting the reading speed of our model HR staff person at 500 words per minute (near the middle of the 'skimming speed' range), and assuming they will devote no more than 30 seconds per cover letter, you are left with 250 words to achieve your three goals.

Attention is the second limiting factor. Faced with several dozen applicants to review, our HR staff person will perforce adopt a keyword search strategy. This is easily turned to your favor with a little preparatory research. Carefully review the job posting itself, as well as any public statements the company makes regarding your desired position or the goals of the department to which you're applying. Observe how the company describes their ideal candidate's qualities, backgrounds, and objectives, and be sure to describe yourself the same way.

## Preparatory Research

Before settling in to write your cover letter, research the company itself. Deep background and history aren't necessary, but you need to know enough about their operations and business model to describe yourself as a good fit.

Simply put: what does the company do, what else may it want to do, and what kind of people do they pay to do it? These seem like obvious questions, but you'd be surprised how many applicants don't bother to answer them before applying. "Electronics Engineer Wanted" may mean different things to a company which designs and manufactures interactive CPR/First Aid training dummies than to one specializing in home security systems or consumer electronics.

Unless you've a contact within the company, the Internet is a convenient research tool. A half an hour scanning trade publications, web postings, and LinkedIn groups will tell you what aspects of your background and qualifications to highlight in your cover letter.

## The Cover Letter Schematic

Having done your homework on the target company and position, and with your three functional goals in mind, you're ready to approach writing the letter itself.

Start by copying the following schematic into a blank document:

Your Mailing Address  
City, State Zip Code  
Telephone Number  
E-mail Address

Date

Mr./Ms./Dr. Full Name  
Title  
Company  
Mailing Address  
City, State Zip Code

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. Full Name:

1. Express interest in a specific position (maximum one sentence each):
  - What is the exact title of the position to which you are applying.
  - Where or from whom did you hear of this position.
  - If a contact within the company recommended you apply, say so here.
2. Show you understand and are qualified for the job (maximum two sentences each):
  - Summarize your relevant professional background.
  - List the specific skills and experiences you have which apply to the posted position. (Bullet points are ideal.)
  - Demonstrate knowledge of the company and industry by highlighting a specific aspect of your background from your resume.
  - Mention your enclosed resume
3. Encourage further communication (maximum one sentence each):
  - State that you are interested in an interview to learn more about the position or company.
  - If you plan to be in the area in the near future, offer that as a convenient time to schedule an interview or site visit.

Notify the company of when and how you plan to follow up.

Thank them for their consideration.

Sincerely,

[Sign Here]

Your Name

If applying over email, you can omit the mailing addresses and date from the schematic. Add your contact information below Your Name, at the bottom, and don't forget to attach your resume. (Trust me. It happens.)

With your schematic in place, replace the text of each bullet point with the text of your cover letter. When you're satisfied, rearrange the text into paragraphs, and check the word count of the resulting document. If the body of the text comes in at or around 250 words, you've done it. Send it along, and start the next one.

That's it. No sweat; no stress. By approaching the cover letter as an engineering problem, stripping it down to a question of objectives and constraints, you've reduced hours of agonized revision to an eleven-point schematic.

## Have more suggestions?

If you've worked out your own process hacks for job applications and cover letters, why not share them with fellow engineers? You can tweet us [@EngineerJobs](#) or [leave a comment on the original article](#).