

EFFECTIVE COVER LETTERS, EMAIL AND THANK YOU LETTERS

While many applicants feel that cover letters are a waste of time – something to be dashed off to accompany the all-important resume - in reality the cover letter provides the employer a chance to evaluate your interest in their field and specific position, your relevant skills that match up with their job requirements, and your basic writing ability and attention to detail.

Thank you letters following an informational or employment interview also make the candidate stand out from the competition and can be an effective way to emphasize your interest in the position and to summarize your candidacy. Often they can help “close” the offer with you as the top candidate.

While this material is prepared for all of SAIS students, we recognize that cultural and language differences exist across countries and encourage students to adapt content and format to business norms in the country of the intended recipient.

Why Cover Letters?

Given the challenge of crafting effective, original cover letters and the proliferation of electronic communication and resume submission, is the cover letter still important? Employers tell us that they view the cover letter as an additional screening element for their candidates. Poorly prepared cover letters result in unread resumes. Well-targeted and clearly written cover letters can make your resume float to the top of the “To Interview” stack.

Like it or not, the job hunt is in reality a marketing campaign with you as the product and your employer as a hoped for consumer. If you don’t know your market and can’t persuasively describe the product, your competition will walk away with the job.

Nine Tips for Creating a Winning Cover Letter

(Adapted from WetFeet.com)

- 1. Keep it short.** Cover letters that go over one page will most likely never be read fully. An ideal length is three or four paragraphs. A concise letter demonstrates that you are focused and have strong communication skills.
- 2. State the position.** In your first, short paragraph, tell the reader why you are writing. Is it for an internship or full-time position? Which one? Did someone refer you or did you see a posting for the position?
- 3. Explain why you want the job.** Ask yourself how the position fits into your overall career plan and what you find exciting about the particular sector and that organization. A genuine show of knowledge of the field and the firm will set you apart from those sending generic cover letters.
- 4. Clearly describe ways you will contribute.** A frequent mistake in student cover letters is an emphasis on what you hope to gain from the job or internship, not what you can contribute. Focus clearly on the value that you can add to the position. Give one or two specific examples.

5. **Match, but don't reiterate your resume.** The cover letter should motivate the reader to want to read the resume, so use one or two specific highlights from your resume that most closely match the position you seek. Don't simply regurgitate your experience; try to make it match what they are looking for in their ideal candidate.
6. **Don't say you're not qualified.** Never, never, never apologize in a cover letter or emphasize what you don't have. Keep the letter positive by focusing on your transferable skills and unusual accomplishments. Learn to market the SAIS degree in the most positive, relevant way.
7. **Keep the tone and content professional.** This applies to how your letter looks, the style of writing (humor is rarely effective in a cover letter), and how you address your candidacy. Never make a cover letter too personal in tone or content.
8. **Tell the reader what you're going to do next.** Too many job seekers never follow up after sending a resume. Make yourself stand out by saying in your cover letter that you intend to contact the recipient's office in the coming weeks to see if you can arrange for an interview. Then do it. You want to balance assertive behavior against an appearance of arrogance, but following up will make you stand out as a candidate who is truly interested in the position. The only exception is when the posting says "no calls, please."
9. **Proofread.** As obvious as this is, it's truly amazing how many cover letters torpedo an applicant's chances due to poor proofreading. Use spell and grammar checks, but go beyond this cursory nod at accuracy. Have a friend read it. If you are writing in a language that is not your native tongue, have someone who is a native speaker read your letter. Make sure you've spelled the recipient's name and the name of the organization correctly. Use correct punctuation and grammar.

Cover Letter Elements

Return Address and Date. Many students now create their own letterhead for their cover letters, often matching the heading on the attached resume. This is fine as long as it is not overdone, i.e. too large, too bold, too much information. The following is fine at the top of a cover letter:

Jonathon Engles Jones
1234 S. Washington Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22125
jjones@jhu.edu - 202-663-7714

**Don't forget to put a date on your letter. See the attached samples for where it should appear.*

Recipient's Address and Greeting. In most cases, with some sleuthing, a student can come up with the name of the person who will receive the cover letter and resume. In almost all cases, try to avoid "To Whom it May Concern" and "Dear Sir/Madam." While this isn't always possible and may take some extra time and effort on your part to identify an individual, it will show initiative and ends up being well worthwhile.

Addresses usually appear flush left and are separated from the greeting. They include name, title, organization, and full address. An example:

Margaret Applegate
Director, Economic Research
Forum for International Development
1454 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036

In terms of greeting, the industry standard is “Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. Last name:” Avoid common mistakes, such as:

Dear Margaret Applegate:

Dear Margaret:

My Dear Ms. Applegate:

When a simple, appropriate “Dear Ms. Applegate:” will best do the job. Note: The correct punctuation to follow the greeting in a business letter is a colon, not a comma. Obviously if you are writing to someone who is a personal friend, use of their first name in the greeting is then appropriate. If you are writing to an appointed or elected government minister or official, check to see what the proper protocol is for addressing such a person.

First Paragraph. The opening paragraph of a cover letter is usually very short. It should not begin with “My name is . . . “. If someone has referred you to the recipient of your letter, mention his or her name in the first sentence. Tell the reader why you are writing. Is it for an internship that you saw posted in Career Services? Are you sending your resume based on a full-time opportunity that is part of on-campus recruiting? If space permits, you could also introduce the fact that you are currently a student at SAIS. If you are writing not to apply for a position, but to request an informational interview, state that fact in your initial paragraph. Some examples:

1. Recently I was speaking with Professor Don Jones at SAIS regarding my interest in an internship in the area of defense policy. Dr. Jones mentioned that he thought your organization had an internship for the fall semester and suggested that I write to you directly.
2. Your position currently posted in SAIS Career Services for a financial analyst in the area of investment banking came to my attention and I am writing to apply. Currently, I am a second year Masters degree student at Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, where my coursework in finance combined with my past work history seem to fit well with your qualifications for the position.
3. Currently, I am a first year student at SAIS and I discovered your name and contact information through the alumni database available to students. While I am still formulating my specific career goals, I have a strong interest in international refugee organizations and would very much appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about the field and to learn more about potential career paths.

Body of the Letter. Typically you have one or two paragraphs in the main body of the letter to market yourself to the reader. It is within these paragraphs that you can mention specific components of your education, your work experience, and other special skills that seem to fit with the overall goals of the organization or the specific requirements of the position as it has been described to you.

Cover letters are read very quickly, so prioritize what you put first in these paragraphs. Often, if employers don't see what they want in the initial two paragraphs, they won't bother reading the rest of the letter. If your most marketable experience is contained within your work or internship background, lead with that in your second paragraph and highlight your relevant education or personal skills in the third. On the other hand, if you're light on experience but have the perfect coursework for the position, emphasize your education initially. Be sure to vary sentence structure. A common fault is to begin too many sentences and paragraphs with the personal pronoun, "I."

As much as possible, avoid the temptation to make these general, boiler plate paragraphs that you can use for all of your cover letters. Instead, tailor them to the reader. Do the research that will help you learn what skills and competencies are needed in their organization and then speak to those needs in these paragraphs. Do so without being arrogant in your approach, but simply state why you are interested and how you think you are qualified.

Closing Paragraph. All too often in poorly crafted letters these are awkward throwaway sentences. Keep yours short, but make it say something. Emphasize your interest in and fit for the position without being too self-aggrandizing. If at all appropriate, suggest that you'll be in touch with their office to see if an interview could be arranged.

Closing, Signature and Enclosures. We strongly recommend a simple "Sincerely," followed by space for your signature and then your typewritten name. Thus:

Sincerely,

Jonathon E. Jones

This is not the time to use phrases like, "Greetings from Washington," "Best personal regards," "Very Truly Yours." Keep it simple and professional. And don't forget to affix your signature!

If you are enclosing a resume, transcript or writing sample, it can be good to note that in your cover letter. In that way, if your materials are separated upon receipt, the reader will know that a piece of your applications materials is misplaced. The format looks like this:

Sincerely,

Jonathon E. Jones

**Enclosures: Resume
SAIS Transcript
Writing Sample**

Remember that **all cover letters must fit on one page**, so omit enclosure information if it takes you to a second page.

Email

Given widespread access to e-mail, the time it takes snail mail to arrive at international destinations, and the electronic submission of resumes and cover letters through employer websites and job search engines, email is the principal mode of communications with alumni and potential employers.

Employers and alumni prefer email to a telephone call because it is much less intrusive. An email gives them time to react to questions and allows them to decide upon the best time and place to provide information. Email not related directly to work may go unanswered, and students sometimes wrongly assume that alumni do not respond to an initial email because they do not want to help. However, not responding to a student's initial message could be the result of any number of issues including a heavy workload or being out of the office. Send at least one follow up email – perhaps after a week goes by – that politely notes a previous email and reiterates interest in setting up a meeting.

One critical error students make is sending out a generic mass email requesting informational interviews. Although the content and structure of networking and job search requests are similar, each email must clearly reflect knowledge of the recipient, the employer and the field. This shows the sender has done their research and can engage an informed discussion. Furthermore, a student must be prepared to respond in a timely fashion to every email. If an alumnus is willing to meet, a student must be ready to adjust their schedule as needed.

Quick tips for writing email to alumni and employers

- **Be concise.** Remember that reading email on the screen is often harder than reading printed communications. Long emails are more likely to be skipped or deleted. Use short sentences and do not repeat information that is in an attached resume.
- **Use proper spelling, grammar, & punctuation.** Never send your message until you have run spell check and read it carefully for errors. Be especially careful if you cut and paste from another message or are using a template for sending messages; double check that the names of people and employers are correct.
- **Use a professional, polite tone.** Use proper titles, thank you, please, and note that you appreciate any time or help the recipient can offer. Don't use abbreviations or emoticons; although they are common to instant messaging and email with friends, they are inappropriate for professional correspondence.
- **Use proper structure and layout.** If you are using the actual email message as your cover letter, use all the same information, greeting through closing that you would in your regular email. Again with email messages, the shorter the better.
- **Be careful with attachments.** Unless the recipient is expecting an attachment (i.e. you are replying to a job description that requests attachments or someone referred you to this person and told you to send a resume) it is usually best to offer to send an attachment and wait for a response. We recommend sending attachments in a PDF format, which are less likely to include a virus.
- **Enter addresses only after the document is proof read.** This will prevent sending an email before you have thoroughly checked it for errors.

- **Use plain text formatting.** Stick to basic text; common fonts, left justified, with two returns between each paragraph. Many email systems cannot handle text enhancements like bolding, bulleting, or underlining, so play it safe by using spaces and dashes -- if you need to make an emphasis.
- **Use a meaningful subject line.** Give reference to the job or the name of the person that referred you; be clear about the intent of the email or give the recipient a name they will recognize.
- **Do not request delivery and read receipts.** Not only could this annoy the recipient, the function is not supported on many personal and employee email systems. It is best to request a return email that it was received or, better yet, follow up with a phone call, which should be referenced in your email message or cover letter.

Thank You Letters After an Interview

All interviews, whether strictly for information and advice or a formal interview for a position, should be followed up immediately with a thank you letter. Such a letter will enable you to summarize the highpoints of your candidacy, reference a relevant portion of your interview and most importantly will tell the recipient of your sincere interest in the position.

Thank you letters can be difficult to write, but should be short, usually only three paragraphs and to the point. A typed, business-style letter is almost always preferable over a handwritten note or letter. The initial paragraph thanks the reader for his or her time and shows evidence of enthusiasm for the position. The second paragraph makes reference to some element of the interview, tying it to an element of your experience that best fits the position. The final paragraph might include some reference to further information (references) that you are supplying as an attachment, as well as an indication that you look forward to further discussions about the opportunity.

The tone of a well-written thank you letter is positive, though never immodest or over confident. Be enthusiastic, but avoid phrases along the lines of, "I'm confident that my background and skills will illustrate that I am by far the best candidate for this position." Let your experience and background make this point for you.

If your interviewer has suggested that you follow-up with other individuals in some way, you might want to reference your intent to do so in your thank you letter.

In Summary. Cover letters can do you great good in your search process; they can also detract from your experience if they are poorly written. Take the time and customize your letter to the reader. Proofread again and again. Follow-up your letter with a telephone call whenever appropriate. Career Services offers cover letter advice and critiques every day during our Drop In hours. If you need additional assistance, please make an appointment with a counselor. Attached to this handout, you'll find a variety of sample letters.

Sample Cover Letter to Respond to a Resume Drop or Job Posting at SAIS

Jonathon E. Jones

1234 18th Street NW, #123 | Washington, DC 20009 | jjones@jhu.edu | 202.555.1234

September 15, 2004

Mr. Hilliard Bound
Human Resources Specialist
Senate Placement Office, Rm. SH-142B
Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Bound:

It is with great interest that I apply for the position of Legislative Correspondent, recently posted by your office in Career Services at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Currently, I am a second year International Relations M.A. student at SAIS and will graduate in December.

My own interests and experience are a good match for this position. I have a good understanding of the workings of Congress. Currently, I am an intern in the Congressional Affairs office for the US Trade Representative, where my responsibilities include keeping track of recent correspondence with members of Congress and updating the biographies of Members on the fast track whip list. My writing skills were well honed when I served as the co-editor of the quarterly newsletter for the Iowa Peace Institute.

The educational course that I have pursued has also emphasized politics. At Brown, I graduated *cum laude* with a degree in International Relations. With the dual emphasis at SAIS on both policy and its practical application, I have developed excellent research, writing and presentation skills that could enable me to assist other staffers in handling a variety of tasks in the Senate offices.

Based on my background, academic training, and professional goals, I am confident that this position is a great next step for me. Given the demands on you and your staff, I will call your office in the week ahead to see if I might arrange a meeting to discuss the position in more detail.

Sincerely,

Jonathon E. Jones

Enclosure: Resume

Sample Letter to Request an Informational Interview from a SAIS alumna/us

Imogene Marie Swell

1740 Massachusetts Ave., NW | Washington, DC 20036 | imswell@jhu.edu | 202.555.1234

September 18, 2012

Ms. Allison Fleishman
Commodities Analyst
Goldman Sachs & Co.
555 New York Plaza
New York, NY 12001

Dear Ms. Fleishman:

Currently, I am a first year student at SAIS and Ron Lambert in Career Services suggested that I contact you in regard to your career path as a SAIS alumna.

I have a strong interest in finance and a well developed background in research and writing, though at present I don't see myself following the traditional investment banking analyst path. Mr. Lambert suggested that you could be a good source of advice and information about alternate career tracks in finance. Financial research, in all its forms, is one area that I'm starting to explore and I'd welcome the opportunity to talk to you about the commodities research you are doing at Goldman Sachs.

I plan to be in New York during the week of November 18 and was wondering if your schedule would permit a brief meeting with me? I'm sure your schedule is a busy one, so I'll call your office in a couple of weeks prior to my visit to see which date and time would be most convenient for you. Or, if it would be easier for you, you may contact me by e-mail (IMSwell@jhu.edu) or telephone (202-555-1212) to suggest a day and time that week which would fit your schedule.

Many thanks in advance. I look forward to meeting you and learning more about your career after SAIS. I'm attaching a resume simply to give you a little more background on what I've done before SAIS.

Sincerely,

Imogene Marie Swell
SAIS '14

Sample Thank You/Follow-up Letter After an Interview

Jonathon E. Jones

1234 18th Street NW, #123 | Washington, DC 20009 | jjones@jhu.edu | 202.555.1234

September 19, 2012

Margaret Applegate
Director, Economic Research
Forum for International Development
1454 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036

Dear Ms. Applegate:

Many thanks to you and the members of your staff for inviting me to interview yesterday for the position of Research Assistant at the Forum for International Development. After our discussions, I am more enthusiastic than ever that the position fits my professional goals and that my background and skills meet the requirements of the position.

It was interesting for me to learn from you that the ideal candidate would have both Spanish and Portuguese language skills and a specific interest in micro-finance. Given my internship in Brazil, my fluency in these languages, and my strong finance background at SAIS, I was especially pleased to hear that. I also very much appreciated the strong team commitment that I saw in your staff. It appears to be an atmosphere in which I can both contribute and grow professionally.

As requested, I am enclosing a list of references. If there is any other information that you require, please let me know. I look forward to hearing from you in the coming week and to the opportunity of joining the staff there.

Sincerely,

Jonathon Jones

Enclosure: References

Sample Email Requesting an Informational Interview

Subject Line: SAIS Referral from Julie Neill

Dear Mr. Thompson:

I am writing you to request an informational interview at the suggestion of Julie Neill in SAIS Career Services. I am interested in meeting with you because I am exploring possible internship locations for the upcoming year and I believe the World Bank is a great fit with my interests and background.

I am currently a first-year student at SAIS. My concentrations are International Development and Finance. I have worked for 5 years in the field of consulting prior to entering SAIS. If you request, I can send my resume, so you have a better picture of my professional background and skills.

I know you are busy; however, I am available to meet you at your earliest convenience. Thank you in advance for any advice you can offer. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Tom Jones
202.663.0000