The Carleton Career Center Cover Letter Guide
What’s a cover letter?
A cover letter is a document that introduces you to a prospective employer. Your cover letter (along with your resume, reference sheet, and sometimes other documents such as a transcript) is a vital component of your application correspondence. If you’re wondering whether or not you need to send a cover letter along with a resume, the answer is quite simply, “Yes!” Even if a particular job posting or online form doesn’t state that you must send a cover letter, it’s a mistake, and a missed opportunity, to send a resume without one.

Cover letter fundamentals
An effective cover letter is tailored to the particular position to which you are applying. This means that you must write a unique cover letter for each position, and you must research the organization to which you are applying. The cover letter’s job is to clarify for the employer why you are the right person for this particular position and this particular organization.

The cover letter should not be a restatement in prose of everything that’s listed in your resume. Rather, use the cover letter to highlight a few things about your experience and background that speak to your interest in and qualifications for this position in one page. One strategy for deciding what to include in a cover letter is to review the position description closely, and highlight 3-5 qualities the employer seems to be seeking. Address these qualities and experiences in your cover letter, and provide a little more detail and specifics than you do in your resume. For example, if the position description indicates that the employer is seeking an applicant who has strong teamwork skills, use your cover letter to provide examples of times you’ve worked successfully as part of a team.

The tone of the letter should be professional, but don’t be afraid to show your enthusiasm about the position and the organization. What is it about this position that appeals to you? What about the culture of the organization is a fit for you? Be careful to talk about what you can contribute; don’t just focus on what you can gain from this position.

After you have written your letter, check to see that you have varied your sentence structure. (For example, do not start all of your sentences with “I.”) As with any correspondence you send to a potential employer, make absolutely certain your cover letter contains no typos or errors. As you’re
Ms. Lucy Laws  
Davis Polk & Wardwell  
Corporate Legal Assistants Group  
123 Lexington Avenue  
New York, NY 12345

Dear Ms. Laws:

I was delighted to learn about the legal assistant position openings at Davis Polk & Wardwell. The prospect of assisting in the Corporate Mergers and Acquisitions Group sounds like the perfect opportunity for me to contribute my skills in an area that is deeply interesting to me. In speaking with Carla Carlgrad, a current legal assistant on your staff, I have learned that Davis Polk is a friendly and diligent community of professionals who push themselves to use their skills and experience to the fullest capacity. I am drawn to this type of environment, and I am confident that your firm will find my educational background, personality, experience, and skills to be an excellent match for the legal assistant position in the Corporate Mergers and Acquisitions Group.

As an East Asian Studies major with a focus on history and political science, I have taken full advantage of numerous opportunities to develop my research, writing, and analytical skills. For example, I have independently conducted several research projects on the evolution of the Chinese legal system. I spent a trimester in Beijing, where I conducted in-depth research on China’s foreign trade sector, and on the socioeconomic and political implications of China’s entry into the World Trade Organization. I also actively participated in a two-week intensive simulation analyzing reforms and budget allocations for China’s various economic sectors.

Throughout my years at Carleton, I have been active in numerous clubs and organizations that have honed my leadership and management skills. I serve on the student senate budget committee, and work with a small group of peers to allocate approximately $350,000 to over eighty student organizations and club sports. Moreover, my ability to plan and coordinate community service projects resulted in my being awarded a scholarship for community service.

I am very interested in discussing the legal assistant position with you in further detail. I plan to travel to New York in the next few weeks, and hope to have the opportunity to meet with you then. I will call to follow up with you and to inquire about a meeting time. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to talking with you and learning more about the legal assistant positions at Davis Polk & Wardwell.

Sincerely,
A. Spiring Lawyer
proofreading your letter, try reading it aloud to yourself to see how it sounds.

An important consideration when writing a cover letter for a mission-based or non-profit organization is to explain in your cover letter why you support the mission of the organization. If possible, give examples of ways you have supported or even researched the mission in the past.

**Elements of a cover letter**

*Your Contact Information:* At the top of the page, list your address, city, state, and zip. You may include your email address and phone number if you choose. After your address, leave one blank line, and then type the date.

*Employer’s Contact Information:* Following the date, leave a blank line, and then type the name, title, organization name, and address of the employer.

*Salutation:* Address your letter to a specific individual, if at all possible. If a specific contact person is not named in the job listing, try looking at the employer’s website or calling their main phone number to ask for the name of the proper contact person. Be sure to use the appropriate title of the person to whom you’re addressing the letter (e.g. “Ms.” “Mr.” “Dr.”). If you don’t know whether the address should be addressed Mr. or Ms., use both the first and last names of the individual (e.g. “Dear Chris Smith”). If it proves impossible to find the name of a specific individual, you may use the more generic salutation of “Dear Hiring Manager” or “Dear [Name of Organization].” Note that the salutation in a business letter should be followed by a colon rather than a comma.

*First Paragraph:* This is your chance to grab the reader’s attention. Use the first paragraph to introduce yourself and explain why you are writing. Make it clear what position you’re applying for, and state how you learned of the opening, if there’s a specific connection you wish to highlight. Be sure to convey some enthusiasm about the organization and the position. If you are writing an inquiry letter when there is no immediate opening that you know of, identify the type of position or general professional area in which you are interested.

*Middle Paragraph(s):* Use this section of your cover letter to make a case for why you’re the best person for the position. Make reference to qualities listed in the position description, and explain how you have demonstrated/developed these qualities yourself. Point out any specific achievements or accomplishments of yours that are particularly applicable.
300 North College Street  
Northfield, MN 55057  
March 25, 2014  

Ms. Hiring Manager  
Director of Human Resources  
Omaha Art Museum  
234 Main Street  
Omaha, NE  12345  

Dear Ms. Manager:  

I am excited to apply for the open Program Coordinator position with the Education and Community Programs Department at the Omaha Art Museum. I will graduate from Carleton College with a major in art history in June, and am eager to apply my education and arts management experience as I begin my career in the arts. This position is especially exciting to me, as I grew up in Nebraska, and have enjoyed the collections and programs at the OAM throughout my life.  

Last year, I spent a trimester in Turkey studying art history and interning in art galleries. This experience gave me the opportunity to learn about the complexities of managing traveling art exhibits. I developed my skills in coordinating flexible travel details, communicating information through social media, and organizing discussions among public audiences and artists. I also had the opportunity to travel throughout the country interviewing female artists. By building these relationships, I was able to coordinate a discussion and workshop among fellow students and local artists at a newly established gallery. My research, and the subsequent publication and presentation of my work, expanded my written and verbal skills, while simultaneously deepening my knowledge of outsider art.  

As a tutor at Northfield Elementary School, I work with academically at-risk students to improve literacy and implement classroom programs that engage students in art activities. This position has helped increase my awareness of the need for art education for young people. My most recent project entailed developing lessons to teach students about the role of art in community building. I created a series of experiential modules, and have developed variations of the lessons for different grade levels. Through this work, I have seen students embrace arts education, and begin to develop what I hope will be a life-long love of art.  

My commitment to improving my own community through education initiatives led me to work as an Outreach Coordinator for the Midwest Bicycling Association. In this position, I traveled to college campuses throughout the Midwest, recruiting volunteers, training members of campus outreach committees, and fundraising for bicycle campaigns. By organizing travel itineraries and workshops, I developed an attention to detail and an ability to engage a diverse group of people.  

My combination of work and volunteer experience, academic research and education, and strong communication skills, will allow me to make a meaningful contribution to the Omaha Art Museum. I am eager to meet with you to discuss how my qualifications and experience can contribute to the Education and Community Programs Department.  

Thank you for your consideration.  

Sincerely,  
Art Student
to the position. You may also speak to how your academic training has prepared you for this position. If you are applying for a position with a nonprofit organization, you should be sure to explain how your background coincides with the organization’s mission. You can elaborate on points you’ve made in your resume, but take this opportunity to go into more depth on a few of the particularly relevant ones.

Closing Paragraph: Reiterate your interest in the organization/position, and thank the reader for considering your application. You should also indicate that you will follow up on this letter (and make sure that you do so with a phone call in a week or so!)

Signature: Most business letters are closed with “Sincerely.” If you are printing and sending a hard copy of your resume, leave three or four blank lines and then type your name. In the blank space above your typed name, sign your name in black or blue ink. If you are sending an electronic copy of your resume, simply type your name without leaving extra blank spaces.
Dear Dr. Park:

I was very excited to learn of your summer GIS internship. Mapping thermal features in Yellowstone sounds like exactly what I would love to do this summer. Having spent time in Yellowstone, I have a deep appreciation for the environmental and geological features of the park, and would welcome the opportunity to apply my GIS skills to create a database that can serve future researchers as they study this area.

As a geology major at Carleton College, I have had the opportunity to develop both technical and field skills that would enable me to be successful in this internship. My experience with GIS using ArcView includes importing, rectifying, digitizing, and registering maps; writing metadata; and doing analysis with both vector and raster data. I have experience with post-processed differential GPS (using Trimble GeoExplorers and the accompanying Pathfinder Office software), and I have the background knowledge of datums and coordinate systems that is necessary for interfacing GPS data with a GIS, as well as for viewing layers together within a GIS. Through a variety of field research projects—including an extensive research project on the Bighorn Mountains, an ecological project in Costa Rica, and a geology off-campus studies program in Italy, I have gained experience making relevant field observations and taking thorough field notes. Furthermore, I am an avid photographer, and my experience includes some work combining photography with GIS using ArcView.

Finally, I am familiar with Yellowstone, having worked for two summers at Roosevelt Lodge. As a food and beverage payroll clerk, I became good at rapid and accurate data entry. More importantly I had the opportunity to explore Yellowstone by hiking and backpacking on the weekends. These summers in the park fostered in me a deep love for Yellowstone. I can think of nothing more satisfying than returning to Yellowstone this summer and applying my technical skills to contribute to the knowledge base about this very special place.

I think that I could make a valuable contribution to your team this summer. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this internship position with you, and look forward to learning more.

Sincerely,
Gia Logy
Dear Mr. Sez:

I was very excited to learn about the opening for a Facilities Asset Analyst at Sightlines. I will be graduating from Carleton College in June with a major in economics, and am committed to pursuing a career in financial analysis and consulting. The position at Sightlines seems perfect for me.

During my four years at Carleton I have taken courses not only in economic principles and econometrics, but also applied courses in managerial economics, where I learned how economic principles can be applied in the business world. My coursework has introduced me to basic accounting principles and to the use of quantitative spreadsheet analysis in making business decisions. I am currently researching a senior thesis about the impact of big box stores on the prices of consumer goods, which has involved collecting over 90,000 data points on prices in 212 cities around the country. As a part of this research, I am combining data management techniques in Microsoft Excel with econometric analysis.

Outside of academics, my internship last summer at the United States Embassy in Paris allowed me to hone my communication and research skills. I was responsible for gathering information from several government agencies and the French press in order to draft regular communications to Washington, D.C. I have also had experience working independently and as a team member. For the past three years, my on-campus work as piano accompanist for the choral program has required me to learn large amounts of music in a short time period while also collaborating with the choir director and section leaders to make each rehearsal and performance a success. This position, as well as my frequent performances as a solo pianist, requires me to perform well under pressure.

I would welcome the opportunity to become a member of your team, and would be delighted to discuss the Facilities Asset Analyst position with you. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Carl Grad