

Writing and Tutorial Center

Professional Writing That Works

This includes: cover letters for a job or internship; a personal statement or statement of purpose for a graduate school application; scholarship, fellowship, or grant applications; conference paper proposals, or other statements required for job, internship, or graduate school programs (diversity statements, artist statements, etc.).

BEFORE WRITING

Think about these guiding questions: How are you a match for this particular role? What makes you unique among your peers?

Do your research! Make sure you have a clear understanding of the purpose and expectations of the position (job, program description, etc.). Also make sure you understand the company, organization, or school that you're applying to, and what makes it different from its peers.

For academic programs: what is their area of focus? For example, if you're applying to an architecture program, it might be particularly tech-focused, theoretical, etc.

For jobs and internships: what makes the company or organization unique among similar companies? For example, it might be driven by a specific mission, be more marketing-focused than its peers, or center around a particular genre of art.

WHILE WRITING

Be clear and concise!

Paragraphs should be organized by topic and flow logically.

Cover letters should be around one page; no more than two.

Introduce yourself. Let them know who you are and where you are in your professional or academic career. This should be brief but specific, and in the first paragraph.

Include specific examples. What is it about your unique experience that makes you a good fit for this program or position? What is it about their school/organization that you connect with?

For academic programs, highlight specific aspects of the curriculum, professors' work you connect with.

For jobs and internships, connect relevant work you've done and skills you've learned—either in school or at a previous job/internship—with the specific work done there, and suggest the value you'd bring to their operations.

Use a professional tone.

Ensure language is formal, confident, and polished.

Show attention to detail.

Check if there are specific guidelines (word count, formatting guidelines, etc.) as well as any specific questions you've been asked to answer.

Here are some common mistakes you should try to avoid:

Being too generic. Often students will talk about, for example, why they want to work in a museum or why they want to pursue a graduate degree in graphic design, but fail to tailor their letter to the specific role or program they're applying for. You want to make sure that you're connecting your work to the particularities of the job/program.

Examples of experience highlighted are not relevant to the position. It can be tempting to talk about your most recent or most "prestigious" experiences instead of the most relevant; make sure that the experiences and skills you highlight are the ones that are the most closely related to the position or program.

Mistakes with the question "Why do you want to work/study here?" Many people will answer that question with some version of "it's the best program/museum/gallery of its kind" and then go on to praise the institution, which isn't saying anything about the applicant. They already know what makes them great—this answer should be a more personal one.

Too much repetition between the cover letter and resume. Talk about specific examples of things you've done, challenges you've overcome, or go into detail about a particular project you've worked on, instead of just echoing the skills and experience listed on your resume. They'll almost always have a copy of your resume too, so you don't need to repeat that information.

Talking about weaknesses. In an attempt to explain a gap in your qualifications, it can be tempting to mention a particular weakness (for example, "although I do not have much leadership experience, I have worked in many different roles..."). Instead, simply frame these as a full positive statement—so for that example, something like "I have worked in many different roles, which have given me..."

Hesitant phrases like "I think I could" or "I hope to be able to"—be confident and direct!

Overly long or dense writing. No one wants to read this.

Failure to address the application's key requirements. It can be easy to miss an aspect of the guidelines or requirements, so make sure you go over the requirements closely before writing, reference them during the process, and check over them again after you're done.

The Pratt [Center for Career & Professional Development \(CCPD\)](#) is also a great resource. They do workshops, career fairs, and other events and programming as well as one-on-one appointments where students (and graduates!) can have their resumes checked, do mock interviews, get networking advice, career consultations, and other offerings. We recommend that your first stop in the application process is the CCPD, and then meet with a writing center tutor when you're ready to review your written materials.