

BEYOND BARNARD COVER LETTER GUIDE

Cover letters give job candidates the space to provide employers with clear evidence of interest in, knowledge about, and passion for the company, institution, or organization to which they are applying. Above all, cover letters provide specific and compelling reasons why a candidate is a **strong fit** for a position or role.

Cover letters serve as succinct writing samples. They are no more than a page long. It can be helpful to think of them as short argumentative essays. Just like strong essays, well-written cover letters should have a **main claim** about why a candidate is a good match for a particular position. They should also provide the reader with reasonable **evidence** to support this claim throughout the entirety of the letter. Well-executed cover letters create narrative context for the information found in a candidate's resume, fleshing out the skills, knowledge, and experiences that hiring managers will find there.

Finally, cover letters work **in tandem with the resume**. Hiring managers will not *necessarily* read the cover letter *first* and then move onto the resume. It's likelier that a hiring manager will move back and forth between resume and cover letter. The cover letter should not merely repeat the content of the resume, but *complement* it.

INITIAL BEST PRACTICES

- Write to a **real person** whenever possible (use "To Whom it May Concern" as an alternative):
 - Find out the hiring manager's name and address the letter to him or her
 - Writing "Dear [FirstName LastName]" or Dear Mr. / Ms. [x] is best
 - If you can't find it in the job description, try to figure it out by looking on LinkedIn
- Don't "bury the lede." That is—after a brief opening sentence expressing your interest in the position—state your affiliation with Barnard and your major.
- Tell the reader **what's exciting about this job** in the first paragraph
 - Answer the question: "Why are you interested in / excited about *this position*"
 - Mention *substantive* conversations or connections with current employees
- Move quickly into **specifics about skills or experience** you would bring to the job
 - Remember that it's not just about what you will get out of the job
 - It's about how you will make the kind of contribution that they need
- Give **narrative shape** to resume or CV, using specific examples in each paragraph
 - Don't repeat your resume in paragraph form!
- No more than 1 pg. Include your signature, which you should capture digitally and paste into the text

DESCRIPTIONS AS PROMPTS:

If one can think of cover letters as essays, it's similarly possible to think of job descriptions as essay **prompts**. Each job description contains specific information about what the organization is hoping to find in a new hire.

Just as resumes should be tailored for each position, **cover letters should respond to each specific description**.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT THEM:

- Too often, students are in a hurry to explain their skills and experience. But hiring managers also care about the fact that candidates have taken the time to learn about their company or organization. Answer the question "**why do you want to work for us?**"
- How many times does the company's name appear?: The name of the organization should be in every paragraph. Make it easy for the hiring manager to discern that you've tailored the document to them.

BEYOND BARNARD COVER LETTER GUIDE

COMMON QUESTIONS:

- **Do I need to include my address?** No. Your address is on your resume. Don't waste space!
- **Should I mention conversations with other individuals at the organization?** Yes! To the extent that you have had *meaningful* interactions with employees (perhaps recruiters, alumnae, or other professionals), you can certainly mention them *provided that you first secure permission* from the person you want to mention. **REMEMBER:** don't merely name drop. Rather, talk about why and how your *meaningful* connection with an individual motivated you to apply.
- **Should I include references in the letter?** No.
- **How should I end the letter?** Tell the reader that you "would look forward to talking more about this position in person."

WRITE CONFIDENTLY:

Too often, students will include sentences that begin, "Although I don't have exactly the experience you're looking for [...]."

Avoid this construction! Instead, argue **confidently** about how your experience as a student, as a member or leader of campus organizations, and as an intern at diverse institutions will fit directly into the position. Advisors at Beyond Barnard can help you make this case.

DON'T FORGET FORMAT:

Your Resume and Cover Letter should both be in the same font (Beyond Barnard recommends fonts like Garamond, Century Gothic, Palatino Linotype, and a few others).

Don't shrink your font or margins just to make the page limit. Show that you care about the hiring manager's time and keep your letter concise.

There's no need to include your full address in addition to the employer's address. You will most likely be submitting materials via email! Don't waste valuable space in your documents.

USE STRONG EXAMPLES:

Whereas your first paragraph makes your letter's **main claim**, your supporting paragraphs need to give strong examples that support the main claim.

- Each body paragraph (that is, paragraph after your opening) should draw on 1-2 specific episodes that demonstrate a specific skill, experience, or area of knowledge that you embody.
- The purpose of using examples is to help flesh out the qualifications that you list on your resume. Show the reader how you put your skills, experience, and knowledge to work in **the process of pursuing a goal**.
- Examples can come from all aspects of your academic (including coursework, classroom projects, labs, etc.), professional (including internships, externships, and more), extracurricular, and service experiences. Extracurricular activities are often the best source of great examples for cover letters. It's important not to write them off!
- In each example that you use, it should be clear what contribution *you made*. Strong examples often show the candidate working in a team context, but playing a specific and necessary role.

CHECKLIST:

Before meeting with Beyond Barnard advisors, it's helpful to have thought of and done some of the following things. This work can really improve the efficiency of our conversations with you!

- Your letter is 1 or 1.5 pages (we can help cut)
- It uses 0.7" to 1" margins and a standard font
- It has specific references to why you want to work at the organization
- The organization's name is in each paragraph
- It uses 1-2 examples of your work experience or skills in each paragraph
- It does not **just list** what's in the resume
- It is signed with your **actual** (digital) signature