Tips for Writing Cover Letters

A cover letter does exactly what its name implies: it provides a cover for your résumé, or other accompanying materials. The cover letter is the first thing a prospective employer will see, so it is important to articulate your most relevant qualifications for the particular opportunity. The challenge is to make a compelling case for why specifically you are a good match for the employer’s stated needs. In the process of applying for a job, the point of the cover letter is to match your specific skills and experiences to the SPECIFIC needs of the employer as stated in the job description.

Instead of approaching the cover letter as your opportunity to expound on your breadth of accomplishments and skills (or to provide the reader with a brief bio about you), the recommended strategy is to focus on the EMPLOYER’S NEEDS. Address only the aspects of your background that highlight the desired abilities and experience mentioned in the job description. A good cover letter is NOT about you, the applicant: a good cover letter focuses on the employer’s needs and the specific abilities and experiences you have to fit these needs.

The cover letter should capture the prospective employer’s attention, by stressing the match between the employer’s needs and your experience/ability. The cover letter should prompt the employer to read your résumé in detail. The résumé, in turn, provides additional credibility by detailing your relevant work history, education, etc.

In composing a cover letter you should follow certain “business etiquette” guidelines:

1. Laser-print your cover letter and résumé on the same professional quality stationery; use identical letterhead on both. If sending a cover letter and résumé by email, send as PDFs so that you won’t lose fonts and formatting. If you can’t convert your documents to PDFs, then keep the formatting as simple as possible (no bullets, and no exotic letterhead fonts, since the employer’s computer may not be able to translate these).

2. Address the letter to a specific name and title. Double check that the spelling and title are correct. If you are uncertain to whom you should address the letter, call the organization and ask the receptionist (unless the ad reads ‘no phone calls please’). Sending your information to “Personnel” or to “Sir/Madam” does not make a good impression — take the time to find the correct name and title of the contact. Just ask the receptionist or person who answers the phone for the information you need. Always be courteous and friendly to receptionists and assistants. They are the ones who pass on information and feedback (both positive and negative) to the person who ultimately makes the hiring decisions.

3. About the TONE and writing style of the letter: use a positive, direct, and assertive (but not aggressive or arrogant) writing style. Make sure you are respectful and show deference to the person who may hire you and supervise you. Your cover letter is the first step in potentially establishing a working relationship with the hiring manager. So don’t take a presumptuous tone by stating you are the ‘ideal;’ or ‘perfect’ match for the job or that you will ‘surpass their expectations.’ After all, that’s for the employer to decide. It’s more impressive to state concretely the experience you have that directly prepares you for a particular job. Edit to eliminate extraneous words and check grammar, spelling, and punctuation. In addition to stating your purpose, your letter demonstrates your ability to communicate.

4. Tailor each cover letter to a specific job. Do NOT write a “generic” cover letter. You need to tailor each letter to the specific needs of the employer.
5. When drafting your letter, it’s important to work from the employer’s complete detailed job description (usually found on the employer’s website) instead of using the abbreviated job posting you might read in an ad. Your letter should address the complete needs and detailed qualifications stated in the job description.

6. Keep the letter concise and to the point; do not exceed one page. Three or four detailed paragraphs should suffice. Below is the format we recommend. Think of each paragraph as having a mission.

**1st Paragraph:** State which position you’re applying for and how you found out about the opening. This is a courtesy to the employer who wants to know how candidates find listings (Craig’s list, NEC’s Bridge: Worldwide Music Connection, or Monster.com, etc.). If you have a contact at the organization or an acquaintance of the employer let you know about the opening, use that person’s name in the first sentence, or at least in the first paragraph (“So-and-So recommended I write to you concerning the opening for . . .”). Express your enthusiasm for the position, but be specific. Do some research so that you can state why you are specifically interested in working for this particular organization (is it their inspiring programming, their innovative approach, their new facility?). Do NOT write about your educational or professional background in this paragraph, save this information.

**Middle Paragraph(s):** This is the “meat” of the letter, where you build a case for why you believe you are a good match for the job. Detail at least three specific work-related experiences/accomplishments that directly demonstrate that your qualifications fit the employer’s needs. Think about it from the employer’s point of view — what are they most interested in knowing about you? Describe only the specific skills or qualifications that directly relate to that job. A technique to make sure you write the relevant information is to start the paragraph with “My relevant experience includes . . .”

Do NOT write in chronological order about your life experience. The order you use should be based on the employer’s priorities for the job, as evidenced in the complete job description and on the organization’s website.

Yes, this information is on your résumé, but here in the cover letter, is your opportunity to emphasize it. Do NOT start this paragraph with either the fact that you are a student or that you have just graduated. If you want to highlight your education credentials, do so at the end of the paragraph. Be succinct, thoughtful, and purposeful (without being aggressive or boastful).

**Closing Paragraph:** Thank the employer for considering your résumé and indicate that you will call next week to follow up. When you call, it’s to make sure they received your materials. If you are meeting a deadline, this is important, because if the letter gets lost in the mail or in the cyberspace, you can then re-send it, or fax it to them.

7. Check spelling, grammar, and punctuation, and have someone else proofread your letter for clarity and typographical errors before sending. Avoid such cover letter bloopers as: “I presented several pubic concerts in the Bay area.”

**Formatting Details**
Your cover letter should have your letterhead (your name and contact information arranged in a graphic design). Your letterhead should be professional looking and identical to what appears on all your marketing materials (your résumé, bio, etc.). On the computer, simply highlight and “copy” the letterhead you’ve created for your résumé and “paste” it on all the other documents you need to create.

These documents should all be laser-printed on professional quality matching stationery paper (higher-quality paper than photocopy paper—it has a percentage of cotton content and often a watermark). For paper colors,
white, off-white or light gray all look professional and are fine. Cream-colored paper sometimes looks too much like a wedding invitation. You should also purchase matching business size envelopes, available in most copy shops and stationery stores. This set of materials will look impressive and professional. (Note: All supplies relating to your résumé are tax deductible; save your receipts).

Regarding page layout and line spacing, if you have a lot of text, you’ll probably need to keep your letter single spaced. If you don’t have a lot of text, you can use the “line spacing” feature to spread the text out.

Don’t forget to sign the letter! It should be sent together with your résumé (letter on top) in a business sized envelope. Do not paper clip or staple the two documents together. Fold the cover letter and résumé in thirds, so that when you “open” the top flap it reveals your letterhead and opening of your letter. Place it in the envelope so that this top flap opens up parallel with the opened flap of the envelope.

**Follow Up**

If at the end of your letter you promise to follow up, make sure you do so. It will show that you are both serious and professional. And again, when you call, you are simply inquiring about whether or not they’ve received your letter, but you can follow this with, “Can you tell me when I might hear something back?” Sometimes the receptionist, if you are polite and friendly, may volunteer extra information, such as, “Oh, we were swamped with applicants and the search committee won’t get back to anyone for two months.” This is important to know, and if you don’t follow up with a phone call, you will miss out. But of course, if the job listing reads, “No phone calls please,” then you don’t call!

Keep copies of all the letters you send so you’ll have an accurate record of correspondence. It is also a good idea to keep a notebook so you can track your actions and follow-up on the opportunities you’re pursuing. Before placing the follow-up call, you should review your notes to determine what steps you have already taken.

**Creating Your Letterhead**

“Letterhead” refers to the designed information at the top of an individual’s or organization’s stationary. This should include your name (or your ensemble’s name), instrument/voice type, mail and email address, phone, and website URL. The idea of letterhead is to help the reader remember your name and what you do and to communicate your professionalism. It’s the equivalent of a logo. Your letterhead should be used on all your press materials – your résumé, bio, press releases, repertoire list, etc. In choosing your letterhead design, keep in mind that every font style (letter style), has a different look and communicates a different “personality” or image, be it elegant, established, distinctive, slick, etc. Be careful of too stiff or formal a look, or too frilly or cute a look. Remember that this is most likely the first impression a concert series presenter or employer will get of you. Your letterhead should communicate that you’re a professional. As for the printing of the letterhead, some people use a color printer so they can have a color letterhead. This is certainly not necessary, but if you do use color, make sure it’s tasteful and professional (no hot pink, please).

Your name or the name of your group should be the largest – you want the reader to remember you. Stay away from using all capital letters, as these slow the eye down and tend to “scream” at the reader. If your name is long and/or difficult to pronounce, choose a plainer, less ornate font to make it more reader-friendly. If your name is short and common, you may want to choose a font with more visual interest to help make your name easier to remember. Your address and phone are less interesting, so you should put those in a plainer font that works well with the font of your name. The computer you produce your résumé on may not have a large choice of fonts – experiment with the ones available to you to find the most effective letterhead. Here are two very different versions of two musicians’ letterheads.
Note the letterhead examples below and how different they are one from the other.

**Adea Wood, flutist**

20 Any St., Suite 100  Boston, MA  02115  Tel/Fax (617) 555-1212  awood@email.com

Upper line is Kudasai, 20 pts
Line across page is made using the Borders and Shading function, single, under “Format” in Microsoft Office
Lower line is Tahoma, 10 pts

**Georgia Gremouti, Guitarist and Teacher**

1 Main St., #5  Home Town, MA 02115  (617) 555-1212  gremouti@email.net

Upper line is Papyrus, 20 pts (name), 16 pts (guitarist, etc.)
Lower line is Ariel Narrow, 10 pts. Diamonds are made with the letter ‘U’ in zapf dingbats in 6 pts

**Georgia Gremouti, guitarist / teacher**

1 Main St., #5  Home Town, MA 02115  (617) 555-1212  gremouti@email.net

Upper line is Bauhaus 93, 16 pts (name); 12 pts (guitarist, etc.)
Lower line is Ariel Narrow, 12 pts.

**Sam Spencer, Arts Administrator**

1 Main St., #5  Home Town, MA 02115  (617) 555-1212  sspencer@email.com

Upper line is Kino in 22 pts (name), & 18 pts.; Lower line is Eurostile 12 pts.; Diamonds are made with the letter “u” in zapf dingbats 5 pts.

**Samuel Spencer**

1 Main St., #5  Home Town, MA 02115  (617) 555-1212  sspencer@email.com

Upper line is Kudasai bold 18 pts; Lower line is same, 12 pts.
Below is a sample job description, followed by the cover letter and résumé an applicant used to apply for the job. Note how the cover letter and résumé specifically address the needs of the employer as stated in the job description below.

Note: It can be helpful to work on your cover letter while keeping the job description next to your computer. You may also want to highlight the specific points you need to address and then when you read your draft, check off the points in the job description that you actually covered.

Manhattan School of Music
120 Claremont Avenue
New York, NY 10027

Administrative Assistant wanted for the Recording and Video Conferencing Department at Manhattan School of Music

9-5 M-F plus occasional evening and weekend hours as needed

**Job Description**
Assist in daily running of busy office;
Interact with students, faculty, staff;
Scheduling of special events, and equipment use;
Handle questions/customer service;
Schedule repairs and equipment updates

**Duties:**
Front office work, reception duties, handle correspondence, scheduling of equipment, troubleshooting

**Qualifications:**
Knowledge of classical and jazz; Bachelor of Music preferred; customer service and office administrative experience; computer skills and technical abilities; organization and communication skills.

**Send materials to:**
George Robertson, Director
Human Resources
Manhattan School of Music
120 Claremont Avenue
New York, NY 10027
Aisha Hosley  
Temporary: 33 Gainsborough St. #714, Boston, MA 02115 (617) 375-2889 ahosley@email.com  
Permanent: 96 Ellis Avenue, Irvington NJ 07111 (973) 374-3388

May 13, 1998

George Robertson, Director  
Human Resources  
Manhattan School of Music  
120 Claremont Avenue  
New York, NY 10027

Dear Mr. Robertson:

I read with interest about the Administrative Assistant position opening for the Recording and Video Conferencing Dept. at Manhattan School of Music in the May 3rd Sunday edition of the New York Times (found on CareerPath.com). Enclosed is my résumé in support of my application. I am very enthusiastic about the possibility of working at the Manhattan School of Music because of its fine reputation and because this position seems to be a good match with my background, interests, and experience.

My relevant computer skills include MS Word, MS Office Windows, Excel, Clarisworks, and Finale Windows. I am well acquainted with work in music school environments and have held two work-study positions at the New England Conservatory in Boston, where I will receive my Bachelor’s degree in Jazz Performance this semester.

Outside of the Conservatory, I work part-time as an Administrative Assistant at the Algonquin Club, an exclusive private social club, where I have handled a wide variety of administrative responsibilities. I have excellent customer service, organization, and communication skills, and I learn quickly. I have acquired a broad knowledge of both jazz and classical music through my studies at the Conservatory and I am interested and motivated to learn more about distance learning, video conferencing and audio technology.

Although I now live in Boston, I am planning to move back to the NYC area this summer; I will be traveling back and forth in the coming weeks and would be happy to meet with you to discuss the position. Thank you for considering my résumé. I will call next week to follow up.

Sincerely,

Aisha Hosley

Enc. résumé
Aisha Hosley
Temporary: 33 Gainsborough St. #714, Boston, MA 02115 (617) 375-2889 ahosley@email.com
Permanent: 96 Ellis Avenue, Irvington NJ 07111 (973) 374-3388

Profile
Extensive office experience: excellent organization, communication, and customer service skills; computer skills: MS Word, MS Office Windows, Excel, Clarisworks, Finale. Broad knowledge of jazz, classical, popular music. Motivated team player with willingness to learn.

Arts Administration Experience
Bindery Assistant, work-study position, New England Conservatory, Spaulding Library, Boston, MA 1995-98
• Processed books and scores for shelving
• Assisted in the repair of damaged books and scores
• Organized and sorted catalogued scores and parts for processing

Audience Service Assistant, work-study position, Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA 1993-97
• Assisted with ticket sales
• Fielded customer service complaints and concerns

Telemarketer, New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, Newark, NJ, summer 1995
• Sold season ticket subscriptions

Related Administrative Experience
Administrative Assistant, Algonquin Club, Boston, MA 1997-present
• Revised and updated daily and weekly function schedules
• Compiled weekly staff timecards and monthly inventories on spreadsheets
• Managed busy switchboard and all reception duties
• Performed general office duties: billing, faxing, typing, mailing, and copying

Program Assistant, Boys and Girls Club, Boston, MA, summer 1996
• Assisted in supervising 7 High School student counselors
• Taught folksongs
• Supervised 40 six year old children for field trips and all program activities

Computer Skills
MS Word, Clarisworks, Finale
MS Office, MS Excel

Education
New England Conservatory of Music, Boston, MA
Bachelor of Music in Jazz Performance, 1998

Honors/Awards
Scholarship, New England Conservatory 1993-98

References available upon request
Sample Cover Letter requesting an audition.

Tip: Typically, orchestral and opera/voice auditions are simply posted with the position (principal, section, substitute, etc.) or voice type being sought. Applicants apply by sending a cover letter and résumé to request an audition. Note: some orchestras as well as many opera apprentice program have community outreach performances as part of their contracts. And some have a contemporary (or early) music orientation, others have Pops seasons. It’s worthwhile to read up on the performing group’s website, so you can fine tune both your cover letter and the résumé to the needs of the employer.

Heather Kellgreen, Harpist
1/2 Westland Ave. #100  Boston, MA  02115  (617) 555-1212  hkellgreen@email.com

February 9, 2003

Mr. James Sullivan
Personnel Manager
Nashville Symphony Orchestra
30 Central St.
Hudson, MA  01749

Dear Mr. Sullivan:

My teacher, Ann Hobson Pilot, of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, recommended I write concerning the principal harp opening at the Nashville Symphony Orchestra. I have enclosed my résumé detailing my relevant training and experience.

My orchestral experience includes performances with the Boston Philharmonic, the Boston Civic Orchestra, the New Hampshire Symphony Orchestra and the Brockton Symphony Orchestra. I was principal harpist for the Texas Festival Orchestra at the International Festival at Round Top, Texas and have been a member of the Contemporary Ensemble at the New England Conservatory for three years. I have also done a considerable amount of freelance work at major hotels and conference centers in the Boston area, while earning my undergraduate degree at the Conservatory.

Thank you for considering my résumé. I look forward to the opportunity to audition for the Nashville Symphony Orchestra. I will call next week to inquire about the status of my application.

Sincerely,

Heather Kellgreen

Enc. résumé
Sample letter for teaching position

Tip: the employer is a community music school seeking candidates with teaching experience--especially with children and adults. They want someone who likes working with a wide age range, all levels, and who has teaching experience in an institution. The school also hires for chamber music coaches and theory. The teachers they look to hire should also have active performance careers.

Tiong-Kiat Yeo, Guitarist
12 Symphony Rd. #1  Boston, MA  02115  (617) 555-1212  tkyeo@email.com

May 9, 2003

Ms. Susan Tucker
Executive Director
Manchester Community Music School
83 Hanover St.
Manchester, NH  03101

Dear Ms. Tucker:

In response to your school’s notice of vacancies listing, I am writing to apply for the position of guitar instructor at the Manchester Community Music School. Enclosed are my résumé and references in support of my application.

My teaching experience includes a faculty position in Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (college level) in Singapore, where I taught classical guitar, coached chamber music, taught ear-training, and conducted an instrumental ensemble. I have also taught for many years privately, in Boston and Singapore. My performance experience includes extensive chamber music performances as first guitarist of the Singapore Guitar Quartet, as well as solo recitals in Singapore and Boston. I am a graduate of the New England Conservatory, with a Graduate Diploma in Guitar performance.

I am very enthusiastic about the guitar instructor position at the Manchester Community Music School. I will call next week to follow up and I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Tiong-Kiat Yeo

Enc. Résumé, references
Ross Monroe Winter, Violin

75 Saint Alphonsus St. #1615  Boston, MA 02120  (804) 337-8386 RossieViolin@hotmail.com

Dr. John Guthmiller
Virginia Commonwealth University
School of the Arts, Department of Music
922 Park Avenue – PO Box 842004
Richmond, VA 23284-2004

May 26, 2004

Dear Dr. Guthmiller:

I am a violinist originally from Richmond, Virginia. This August I plan to return to Virginia to make it my home. As I get settled, I hope to build a career as a teacher and performer in the greater Virginia musical community.

I am interested in your music program as a teacher and as a performer. As a young enthusiastic teacher of violin, I am seeking a place where I can develop my passion for both music making and music teaching. I am seeking a place where I can contribute to the growth of a strong instrumental program as a teacher and as a performer. I have included my Curriculum Vitae, but let me underscore the following positions and responsibilities:

- **Faculty:** New England Conservatory Summer School’s “Festival Youth Orchestra Summer Institute,” 02-04
- **Studio Instructor:** private studio teacher since 1998
- **Violin Coach:** New England Conservatory’s Youth Philharmonic Orchestra (Benjamin Zander, conductor) and Youth Symphony (Aaron Kula, conductor) since 2002
- **Audition Judicator:** New England Conservatory Preparatory School (Mark Churchill, director) since 2002
- **Masterclass Instructor:** greater New England area

My heart lies in teaching. As an enthusiastic and energetic teacher, there is no greater satisfaction for me than being able to nurture the skills and talents of young musicians. I have been blessed with many wonderful opportunities as a violinist, but none are more special to me than my work as a teacher and coach.

As a musician, performance is also a passion of mine. I have performed with numerous ensembles in a wide range of repertoire in a variety of settings ranging from halls and public schools in Boston, Carnegie Hall – New York, Richmond, and Aspen, to Amsterdam, Koln, and Brussels.

- **Orchestra experience:** Boston Philharmonic, Plymouth Philharmonic Orchestra, Roanoke Symphony Orchestra, Hingham Symphony Orchestra, among others performing repertoire from Beethoven and Schubert to Mahler and Berg
- **Chamber groups:** Beaumont String Quartet, numerous piano trios and quartets, among many other performing repertoire from Mozart and Mendelsssohn to Fauré, Brahms and Barber
- **Solo concerts:** recitalist, featured faculty soloist with NEC’s Festival Youth Orchestra, Richmond Philharmonic Orchestra, NEC’s Select Chamber Orchestra among others performing repertoire from Corelli and Bach to de Falla and Ives

I hope to call you within the next few weeks and be able to talk with you in person.

Sincerely,

Ross Monroe Winter
Sample letter for college teaching position

Kazuha Nakahara, Pianist/Educator

801 E. Hunter Avenue Apt 15, Bloomington, IN 47401 (812) 345-3176 knakahar@indiana.edu

January 27, 2007

Laura Melton, Chair
Piano Search Committee
College of Musical Arts
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, OH 43403-0290

Dear Dr. Melton:

I am writing to apply for the Piano instructor position at Bowling Green State University beginning fall 2007, as advertised on your department’s website. I believe my experiences and commitment to teaching make me well qualified to meet the needs of the Bowling Green State University’s excellent music program. I am also very happy to relocate to Ohio, where I spent my teenage years growing up in Cleveland and Columbus.

As an Associate Instructor at Indiana University, I have gained valuable experience teaching the piano to university students in both private and classroom settings. In lessons, I place strong emphasis on higher artistic interpretation and its presentation, tone production, effective learning/practice strategies, memorization skills, posture/alignment, sight-reading, music fundamentals/theory, and ear training. For non-music majors, I incorporate folk, popular and traditional music into the curriculum to match their needs and interests. I have also been an instructor for the past five years at IU’s pre-college Young Pianist program, where I provide private lessons for ages 3-18, preparing students for competitions, music festivals, and university- and college-entrance auditions.

I have completed my doctoral minor in Music Education, concentrating on both college-level and elementary/early childhood-level teaching. My coursework has covered a wide range of topics in both applications of piano and music pedagogy, and the philosophies of Music Education in the US and Europe. My project on developing a handbook for the piano literature course for undergraduate students received much positive recognition from the department. I am committed to an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship and teaching – presenting music in larger historical, social and intellectual contexts.

My performance experience includes solo recitals in the United States, Japan and the United Kingdom. I am an active chamber musician as well as a collaborative pianist– my Amaryllis Trio in London received the highest grade in the Royal Overseas League Chamber Competition, and I regularly collaborate with both instrumentalists and vocalists at Indiana University. I have performed in a wide variety of community settings, such as nursing homes, community music schools and high schools, and I am committed to both reaching new audiences and to recruiting new students. Although I am comfortable performing the traditional repertoire, I am committed to performing contemporary music, and have premiered works written by student, as well as faculty composers.

On a personal note, while growing up in Ohio, one of my first summer music camp experiences took place at the Bowling Green State University’s summer piano camp where I studied with Distinguished Teaching Professor Virginia Marks. The prospect of teaching at one of the schools where I had some of my best formative training would be a special honor and would feel like a homecoming.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss this position with you in the weeks to come. In the meantime, I am enclosing my Curriculum Vitae; letters of recommendation will arrive under separate cover. If you require any additional materials or information, I would be happy to supply it. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Kazuha Nakahara