



## **Graduate College Career Services Office**

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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# **COVER LETTERS FOR NONACADEMIC JOBS**

The purpose of a cover letter is to introduce yourself and to demonstrate the fit between your background and the position or organization to which you are applying. Your cover letter is an opportunity to very briefly tell your “story,” especially if you are applying for a position that is not clearly linked to your previous experiences. Use your cover letter to guide the employer’s attention to the most significant portions of your résumé, to explain how your particular experiences have provided you with the skills you need to be successful in the position, and to convey enthusiasm for the position for which you are applying. Your emphasis should always be on what you can do for the organization, not what you hope to gain from the job experience.

A cover letter should generally accompany any résumé you submit for a nonacademic job. If you are posting/dropping your résumé online, however, there may not be a place to include a letter. Career fairs are also generally not venues that require cover letters. In these instances, you should take extra care to ensure that you have clearly indicated on your résumé what type of job you are seeking.

## **Content and Structure of a Cover Letter**

Although most cover letters follow a similar structure, you should tailor each one for the job to which you are applying. Research the organization or institution you are applying to, especially its philosophy and internal structure. Identify the areas you find most interesting and think about ways in which you could make a contribution to the department or the organization as a whole. Work this information into your letter. This research personalizes your letter and demonstrates your interest and initiative.

Prepare your opening paragraph with great care, since it sets the tone for the rest of the letter. Introduce yourself, mentioning the degree you are pursuing and the university you attend. Refer to the specific position for which you are applying, and indicate how you learned about the position or organization. If you have not yet finished your degree, you should state when you expect to receive your degree or defend your dissertation. You may also want to briefly mention what attracted you to the organization to which you are applying. If someone else has referred you, be certain to use that person’s name.

The body of your letter should consist of one or two paragraphs that highlight your interest in the position, your strongest attributes and your strong qualifications. This is your opportunity to “sell” yourself. Use this opportunity to elaborate upon the distinctive strengths and qualifications you would bring to the position and attempt to persuade the reader that you are a highly qualified candidate deserving additional consideration. Many people find this type of self-promotion difficult, and are concerned that such comments

sound arrogant. Modesty is not rewarded in the job search, and you may be the only voice articulating your qualifications.

Conclude your letter by reinforcing your interest in the position and in obtaining an interview. If you are applying to a position in another city and have planned a trip to that area, mention the dates you will be there. You may state that you will contact the employer by a particular date to follow up on your letter. Be realistic about how long it will take the letter to land on someone's desk and how long it will take them to read it when determining your deadline to follow up. Offer to provide extra materials or additional information if necessary, and thank the reader for his or her consideration.

## **Technical Aspects of Cover Letters**

### ***Cover Letter Salutation***

Whenever possible, the letter should be directed to a specific person within the organization, preferably the person who makes hiring decisions. If you are sending an unsolicited résumé, contact the employer and ask for the name, title, and correct spelling of the head of the department in which you seek employment. Whenever possible, avoid using the generic "Dear Sir/Madam." Never address your letters to "Dear Sir" since both men and women make hiring decisions. When addressing females, use "Ms.," not "Mrs." or "Miss."

### ***Length and Format***

Cover letters for jobs outside of academia should never exceed one page in length. It is customary to single space text and double space between paragraphs. Use high-quality paper (at least 24-pound) that matches your résumé. Some individuals use a consistent heading on the cover letter and résumé, and this can help unify the two documents.

### ***Writing Style***

Write as concisely and effectively as possible, since cover letters are a sample of your writing ability. Have at least one other person proofread your letter.

## Sample Cover Letters

***Rebecca A. Meyers***

912 S. State Street. ▪ Urbana, IL 61801 ▪ (217) 321-2165 ▪ rmeyers@uiuc.edu

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October 25, 2003

Joe Romby  
Target Inc.  
100 Hire Me Street  
Anywhere, IL 61284

Dear Mr. Romby,

I am interested in applying for the Operations Group Leader position, as advertised on your web site on October 20, 2003. I am currently a master's student in human development and family studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where I will complete my degree in December. I am extremely interested in working for Target because of its commitment to employee development and its excellent benefits. I believe that the skills and abilities I have developed while working at the University of Illinois would make me an excellent addition to Target's team.

As a teaching assistant at the University of Illinois, I had the opportunity to lead four discussion sections of undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory sociology course. In this capacity, I developed and graded all assignments for the sections, and met with students individually to discuss their progress in the course. I learned how to give both positive and negative feedback diplomatically to students, a skill that I believe will be very valuable throughout my entire career. My teaching evaluations for the course reflected that I was able to interest and inspire the students in my sections, and several of the students commented that my course made them want to enroll in other courses in that field.

As the assistant to the head of our department and as a research assistant, I had the opportunity to work in a team to organize several projects and conferences. Specifically, I organized a visiting weekend for prospective graduate students, where I was responsible for all logistics of the weekend, including social activities for the students and faculty members. I really enjoyed organizing this event, and I think I was able to present our department very positively to these prospective students.

I believe I would be an excellent asset to the team at Target. I have had experiences both leading groups and working as a part of a team, and have had opportunities to apply both the organizational and the analytical skills that I have developed as a graduate student at Illinois. I look forward to discussing with you how I can fit into Target's "fast, fun and friendly" culture, and will follow up with you in a few weeks to ensure you received my résumé. Thank you again.

Sincerely yours,

Rebecca Meyers

809 W. State Street  
Urbana, IL 61801  
January 25, 2004

Ian Fischer  
The Nature Conservancy of Nevada  
100 Hire Me Street  
Anywhere, NV 89503

Dear Mr. Fischer,

I am applying for the Conservation Planner/GIS Specialist position, as advertised on your web site on January 20, 2004. I completed my master's degree in May 2003 in environmental engineering from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As a trained forester, ecologist, and engineer, I have an unusual combination of skills that I believe would fit your requirements well. I am extremely interested in this position because of its multi-disciplinary approach to conservation and because of the organization's commitment to protecting lands and promoting good science.

As first a research assistant and then a research associate in the aquatics ecology lab at the University of Illinois, I had the opportunity to enhance my knowledge of ecological systems. I have nearly three year of experience on GIS systems and even developed a new 3D component to use on our lab's ArcView software system. I also had to work collaboratively with a variety of different groups, including the students who I oversaw and the scientists and administrators who funded our lab.

As a teaching assistant at the University of Illinois, I had the opportunity to lead summer fieldwork sessions and work one-on-one with undergraduate students enrolled in a forestry field studies course. I also developed and graded many assignments, met with students individually to discuss their progress in the course, and learned to give both positive and negative feedback diplomatically to students, a skill that I believe will be very valuable throughout my entire career. My teaching evaluations for the course reflected that I was able to interest and inspire the students in my sections, and several of the students commented that my course made them want to enroll in other courses in that field.

I believe I would be an excellent asset to the Nature Conservancy. I have developed the technical experience required for the job through my education and research experiences, and have also been able to hone my leadership, communication, and organizational skills through my positions as a teaching assistant and a research associate. I look forward to speaking with you in person soon, and will follow up with you in a few weeks to ensure you received my résumé. Thank you again.

Sincerely yours,

Jonathan Michaels