
COVER LETTERS for M.S. Students

A cover letter is a letter that you include with your job application. A cover letter announces to an employer that you are applying for a specific job or internship, and then uses the rest of the page to explain why you're the right fit for the job at a specific company. The only purpose of the cover letter is to convince an employer to interview you for a job or internship.

Cover letters are hard to write, but write them you must, and we will show you how. A letter of 5-7 paragraphs is usually enough. In journalism, this letter is one page. It is free of typos. It is addressed to a person whenever possible (for jobs, always; for internships, sometimes but not always).

Use business letter format, with your name, address and contact information in the upper right hand corner; date and name, title and address of the employer below that to the left. This is how it looks:

Nellie Bly
500 W. 111th St. Apartment 10B
New York, N.Y. 10027
nbly@columbia.edu
mobile: (917) 987-6543

Nov. 1, 2019

Letitia Baldwin
Editor
The Ellsworth American
30 Water St.
Ellsworth, Maine 04605

Dear Ms. Baldwin:

[The body of your letter -- 5-7 paragraphs -- goes in this space.]

Best regards,

Nel Bly

Cover Letters for Fellowships/Internships

Paragraph #1. WHAT YOU WANT/what you are applying for, in two sentences. The first sentence expresses interest in the job or internship you're applying for. The second sentence states why, briefly, you're a good fit for the job. This second sentence summarizes your particular qualifications in the briefest way possible, and reads a bit like a lead.

Example: Please consider me for the metro reporting fellowship at The Chicago Tribune. My two-plus years covering breaking news and education at the Lexington Herald-Leader, followed by my graduate education during which I've immersed myself in urban policy and analytical reporting, make me a qualified candidate.

If you've lived or worked in the region before, you would want to make that point up front:

Please consider me for your metro reporting internship at Los Angeles Times next summer. I'm fluent in Spanish, have previous daily deadline metro reporting experience, and I'm well acquainted with the L.A. area having grown up in Pasadena and worked on The Daily Bruin during my time at UCLA.

Paragraph #2-3. What you've done journalism-wise, before Columbia, and what you're doing at Columbia to broaden or deepen your skills. This section can stretch to two or three paragraphs if necessary, and the order of information — you before Columbia/you at Columbia — isn't so important. You can start with your J-school classwork and projects and back into your past experience, or you can start with your past experience and lead into why you came to Columbia and what you're learning or have learned (i.e. to be a better reporter, learn multimedia, transition from newspapers to magazines, deepen your expertise and learn from Pulitzer Prize winning experts, etc.)

Example wherein the student uses two paragraphs to describe his journalism experience before Columbia, followed by what he's learning at Columbia:

Last year I spent six months in Salt Lake reporting for two news websites on green technology, climate change and sustainability. My time in Salt Lake acquainted me well with the city's institutions, politicians, community leaders, businesses and neighborhoods, all of whom served as valuable sources for my reporting. Moreover, with Salt Lake's Latino population hovering just above 20 percent, my ability to speak Spanish could be useful in the Tribune's coverage of Latino issues.

This coming spring I will graduate with a master's degree from the Columbia Journalism School. My focus in grad school has been local reporting, and I was fortunate to arrive in time to cover a lively mayoral election. Some of my stories for class were published, including one on super-PAC contributions in local elections and another on a wily upstart political club. New York was a fascinating place to practice the craft, but I'm eager to return to the west after graduation.

Paragraph #4. Your extra spices: What else you have going for you, like language skills, or a previous career that would help you do the job better. For instance, a college athlete who is applying for a sports reporting position would want to mention athletic accomplishments. Or if you've spent time in the town before, mention it in your "extra spices" paragraph in the context of why these additional skills or facts about you will help you in the job.

Here's an example from a letter to Bloomberg News in which the student mentions her language skills and her non-journalism job that makes her somewhat of an expert in the mining industry:

In my work as a researcher for a mining company in Vancouver, Canada, it was my job to become an expert

on a given property quickly, and summarize that information for the company management. Additionally, I am fluent in Japanese and know how to analyze the mining reports that my company's geologists filed daily.

Paragraph #5. This next paragraph is usually missing from failed cover letters, and it's the reason why cover letters take time. But write it you must! This paragraph explains with specificity why you're applying to this particular news organization. It might be because you admired a past project that won a prize, or that it's got a focus or niche you want to contribute to (be specific if this is the case.). Please notice the thrust here: This paragraph is not so much about you. It's more about them. You can bring yourself up at the end of this paragraph with a nice wrap-up line that gets across this basic idea: "...and that's why I want to learn from and contribute to your newsroom." This crucial paragraph requires you to do some research to show, rather than tell, an editor why you're interested in them.

Also, let's be honest: We know it's hard to be an avid reader or listener to every company you want to apply to. So fake it! Plug in your earbuds and go for a two-hour walk through Central Park. As you listen, or read, you will pick up on themes and tone. Not every digital news magazine has verticals called "Drugs" (i.e. VICE) or Work & Money (i.e. Refinery29); not every site uses the word "fun" in its job postings (i.e. BuzzFeed). Not every site publishes essays from prisoners (i.e. The Marshall Project). Understanding a publication's uniqueness will help you think of story ideas and will help you write cover letters that ring true to the editor and address the specifics of the job at hand. Take one or two paragraphs to develop this section of your letter.

Here are some examples:

Wyoming Public Radio's stories -- whether about fracking, wolf management, same-sex divorce or the struggle to attract doctors to Wyoming - are exactly the kinds of thoughtful, engaging pieces I hope to contribute. If hired, I would use my investigative reporting skills to produce sound-rich, nuanced pieces that have a noticeable impact for WPR and its listeners.

*

In the rapidly changing media landscape in which we operate today, the prospect of working for an established news institution like the Salt Lake Tribune is tremendously appealing. Moreover, the paper's adaptation to the demands of digital news consumers, including the production of eye-catching video content, development of an engaging social media presence, and expansion of its Blogs section, ensures it will continue to be Salt Lake's news institution of record for the foreseeable future.*

*

With its reputation for accurate, late breaking sports coverage and its smart pivot to video, The Associated Press does exactly the kind of deadline reporting I thrive on. If hired as your temporary newspaper in Spokane, I will crank out game reports and never miss a deadline, as my references will attest.

Paragraph #6. A polite closing line or two. Sometimes an international student can add a sentence here explaining that you'll have full work authorization to work in the US upon graduation. If you're a citizen of more than one country, you can mention it here or on your resume. Our opinion is, if you think your citizenship will open doors rather than close them, bring it up.

I will have full U.S. work authorization after I graduate next May. Links to my work are attached, along with my resume and references. Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

In conclusion, this is the basic structure of a strong cover letter.

1. what you want and why they should give it to you, in two sentences.
2. you before Columbia
3. you now
4. your extra spices
5. why them, bringing you back into the equation by the end of the paragraph.
6. closing

Can you ever scramble the order? YES, it is OK to scramble these paragraphs. In fact, it's often advisable! Scramble the order to give emphasis to the thing that will matter substantially to the employer. Don't bury your lead. For instance, mention it up high if you've spent considerable time in their neck of the woods. In the example above, the paragraph on Wyoming Public Radio was actually contained in the student's lead.

*Students, please note! "In the rapidly changing media landscape in which we operate today" was the most plagiarized phrase we saw in cover letters in 2019. Think of your own words, PLEASE.

Cover Letters for Jobs

How does a cover letter for a job differ from a cover letter for an internship? When you're applying for an internship, you don't always know who's going to read your materials or what section or beat you'll be considered for. But when you apply for a job, the job description will tell you what an employer is looking for. So as you think about writing your cover letter, read the job description carefully. Print it out and circle key words. Carry it with you for a day or two and re-read it often. Then, only after you've let the description really sink in, can you write your cover letter. Use the same format as outlined above, but make each paragraph more specific and targeted with the job description in mind. Steal the main and/or odd keywords from the description and use them in your letter. What's an "odd" keyword, you ask? An odd keyword is a keyword that hits you as unusual or unique. For instance, you call them "stories" but the job description repeatedly uses the term "content" instead. Use their word. Or, another example: "a genuine love for and excitement about the internet" is a strange thing to say in a job description for an FBI reporter — but this job is a BuzzFeed. Many BuzzFeed job descriptions mention "a genuine love for and excitement about the internet." So this must be important to them. Furthermore, BuzzFeed doesn't capitalize the word "internet." Use their word and their syntax.

Paragraph #1. The opening paragraph should still include two sentences. The first sentence expresses interest, names the exact job you're applying for, and how you found out about it. The ideal opening line will include the name of someone in that company that encouraged you to apply. Lacking that, it's also desirable to say you learned of said job "through your contacts at Columbia Journalism School" or "through Columbia Journalism School" or "posted on your website last week."

Example:

Please consider me for the temporary reporter position at The Chicago Reporter. With a background in investigative journalism, plus a wholehearted dedication to The Chicago Reporter's mission of reporting on racial and economic inequality and injustice, I am confident that I would be a strong addition to your team.

Here's another straightforward example: *"Please consider me for the New York-based pharmaceutical reporter position I learned about from my contacts at Columbia Journalism School."*

Paragraphs #2-3. You before Columbia. Read the job description and circle keywords. Then use what you perceive to be the main ones in your letter that apply to your work. In this example, we boldface words that popped up in the job description:

*“The training I have received at The Trace, Time Inc., and Chicago magazine will make for a seamless transition to The Chicago Reporter. As a news fellow at The Trace, I published several **in-depth** stories and contributed **research** and reporting to numerous staff projects related to gun **laws** and domestic violence, the youth anti-violence movement in the wake of the Parkland school shooting and other deeply **researched** stories on gun violence.*

*In addition, I am well versed in **social media** and **content strategy**. In my role at Time Inc.’s xoJane.com and xoVain.com, I launched and produced two daily newsletters, managed the day-to-day operations of our content management systems, led Pinterest social media outreach and wrote stories for the website.*

Paragraphs #4. You at Columbia.

“In addition, I am a graduate of the Columbia Journalism School, where I learned cutting-edge journalism skills and wrote a final project on Harlem’s thriving arts and culture scene, 100 years after the Harlem Renaissance. I attended the University of Missouri and interned at Redeyechicago.com, a subsidiary of the Chicago Tribune, and two tech media outlets in the U.K.

Paragraph #5 Your extra spices

Moreover, I was raised in Chicago’s west side and grew up in a home where dinner conversation frequently circled back to Chicago’s social issues. My parents are Cook County correctional officers, and their experiences are what inspired me to tackle issues like criminal justice, housing and education inequities through the prism of journalism.

Paragraph #6. The love letter part. This is the “why them?” paragraph that is always present in strong cover letters. The first half of this paragraph expresses something specific and sincere; the closing words bring you back into the conversation.

Example: My commitment to public service journalism is why I want to be involved with The Chicago Reporter. I believe in the potential impact of The Chicago Reporter’s big initiatives like the “Settling for Misconduct” Chicago police lawsuits project and I can think of no greater honor than to join your team.

Here’s another example:

American Metal Market appeals to me because it’s geared to delivering the practical needs of its readership for real-time and comprehensive industry news. At AMM, I would use my deadline reporting skills and tenacity to make an important contribution.

Paragraph #7. The closing.

I look forward to meeting you in the near future to further discuss this opportunity. My online portfolio with links to my work and a current resume are attached. Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

*Best regards,
Your Name*