

## Cover Letters, Personal Statements, Applications, and Short Answer Essays

Job, educational, and scholarship applications can be remarkably intimidating: they're often high stakes and require writers to reflect on and write about their own experiences in ways they may be unused to. The following guide provides information on three types of application writing genres including expectations, common issues, and advice.

### Cover Letters

*A cover letter is a short, formal letter written to a person, organization, or company, usually associated with job applications: often, companies ask for them along with resumes. As such, they're usually accompanied by other documents. Cover letters are also often included in academic applications.*

### Contents of a Cover Letter

Typically, cover letters include the following pieces of information, in approximately this order:

- A mailing layout with your name and address, the date, and the name and address of the person you're addressing.

Joe Miner LinkedIn Placeholder		
<u>School Address</u> 1234 Example Ave. Rolla, MO 65401 <a href="mailto:examplemail@umsystem.edu">examplemail@umsystem.edu</a>		<u>Home Address</u> 1234 Home Ave. Rolla, MO 65401 (123) 456-7890
Jan. 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2022		
Recipient Name Title 1234 Company St. Location, MO 12345		

- A salutation specifically addressing someone in the company who is likely to see your cover letter
  - Find someone specific, perhaps someone in HR or recruitment
  - If it is not possible or applicable to find someone specific, you can address it to a committee or organization.  
 Ex: *Dear Joanna Miner,*  
 Ex: *Dear Missouri S&T Writing Center,*
- An explanation of your interest in the position and/or field, including:
  - The specific title of the position  
 Ex: *I am writing to apply for a R&D summer internship position.*
  - Specific interest in the company or organization  
 Ex: *I am currently a senior at Missouri S&T, and I am writing to apply for the assistant mining management position posted on mstjobs.com by your company. This company has made impressive strides in the mining industry, and I am particularly interested in the work that the company has done in clean environment mining management. It would be a privilege to have the opportunity to work here.*

- An explanation of why you in particular are an excellent candidate, which might include:
  - Soft skills (as demonstrated by employment and academic record)  
Ex: *(Leadership and communication skills) I was the lead mining expert on the mining design team for 2 years and facilitated communications between the team and our project sponsors on a regular basis.*
  - Company values and how you exemplify them
    - Honesty, integrity, inclusion, diversity, teamwork, flexibility, enthusiasm, learning  
Ex: *(Learning) I have always enjoyed learning, and I take every opportunity I get to expand my knowledge and skills.*
  - Goals for the position  
Ex: *In the future, I intend to learn what it means to be a leader in the mining industry by doing this company proud in any way I can.*
  - **Note:** Try to align your discussion of your experiences, skills, values, etc., with the organization's values and the position's responsibilities as explicitly as possible.
- Conclusion with a call to action
  - Contact information and/or a means of contacting you
  - An invitation to interview  
Ex: *Thank you for your time and consideration! Please feel free to contact me with any further questions or concerns via my email, [jminer150@mst.edu](mailto:jminer150@mst.edu), or phone, (123) 456-7890, and I look forward to hearing from you.*
- A closing salutation as well as:
  - Your signature (can be digital)
  - Your name, typed  
Ex: *Sincerely,*  
*Signature: [Insert signature/digital signature here]*  
*Joe Miner*

### **When Writing a Cover Letter, Keep in Mind . . .**

- The length of a cover letter can vary significantly based on the position being applied for and the experience of an applicant, but most of the time the full document will be around one page long, single-spaced. For academic positions or for very experienced applicants, they will often be longer.
- A cover letter is a great opportunity for you as an applicant to discuss your soft skills and aspects of your experiences that are difficult to cover in a resume. However, it is important to support those skills *with evidence*. Are you a good communicator? Describe concrete ways that you have used or developed those communication skills. Find a balance between listing and descriptions and be concise; this document shouldn't read like a list of experiences.
- When trying to decide what skills and values would be relevant to the position, refer to the job/position's posting and the company's website. If there are any qualifications that are specifically asked for which you do not fulfill, consider using the cover letter as an opportunity to explain why you are qualified despite that.
- Cover letters can be a brief story of your development as a person. Consider how your "story" should be set up: chronologically, linearly, or by theme.
- Be cautious when using cover letter templates. They can be beneficial because the templates can be conducive to the auto-reading or filtering programs that some companies use. However, they may not always be in the best format for you, so be aware of this and alter the format as needed to work most effectively for your purposes.

## Personal Statements

*A personal statement is an important part of many application processes, including those for graduate and medical schools, grants, and fellowships. It is written in the first person and tells a story about your goals and aspirations within your field. In the explanation of your interests and goals, you may also want to include relevant experiences and events as a way to help you stand out as an applicant. Typically, a personal statement is about 4,000-6,000 characters (medical school applications usually have a 5,300 character limit), so make sure that the writing is clear and concise to meet the requirements.*

### **Contents of a Personal Statement:**

Typically, personal statements include the following pieces of information in some way or another, though the order can be very much based on what works best for you.

- Your goals (career, educational, etc.)
- Your motivation
- Your interests and field specific focus(es)
- Your plan for achieving your goals

### **When Writing a Personal Statement, Keep in Mind . . .**

- The length of a personal statement is often based on the prompt given by a particular school or organization, but the standard personal statement is generally one full page, single-spaced.
- Personal statements will often prompt a story or narrative. Make sure to tie the story you tell into your interest in the field or position as well as the prompt.
- A personal statement frequently includes personal information or anecdotes, but it is still a professional document and should read like one. Make sure the tone is professional. Avoid slang and contractions. Also, be cautious about your content. Avoid getting too philosophical and avoid graphic content, unless you are certain that including that content will make your statement more effective.
- Keep your purpose and your audience in mind. Your personal statement should give the reader the impression you are someone they want to work with, so be personable and specific. The audience/hiring manager should be able to get a better idea of you as a person at the end of the statement.
- Since the organization of personal statements can vary, make sure there is a logical progression of thought that your audience can follow.
- Do not try to write a personal statement in one sitting or in one draft! It is important to receive feedback and make revisions multiple times in order to make your personal statement the best it can be.
- Be clear and concise in your personal statement, but do not limit yourself when writing your initial draft. Your personal statement can be shortened and condensed once you have a solid idea of what you are writing about.
- *Be mindful of cliches in your writing*—Being unique is better and will help you more.
- *Showing vs. telling*—Try to be concrete and vivid while being mindful of your space limitations.  
 Ex: “*Seeing people struggle with mental illness*” → “*Volunteering at a VA with military veterans experiencing PTSD*”  
 Ex: “*I’ve been interested in medicine since I was a child*” → “*The first book I ever read was about a little girl with appendicitis*”
- *Remember that this is NOT a statement of purpose.* Technically speaking, a statement of purpose is different from a personal statement. As the name would suggest, personal statements are more

personal; they tend to be more about your motivations than your goals. However, some schools or organizations may not differentiate them, so let the prompt be your guide.

### **Application and Short Answer Essays**

*Application essays and short answer essays are typically found in applications to jobs, programs, or organizations. These essays help the audience to understand how you think, what motivates you, and how you approach or handle situations. They often have a small character limit, and most applications will have several essay prompts for you to answer.*

#### **Content of Application and Short Answer Essays:**

These essays typically address prompts provided by the organization you are applying to. Though these essays are answering prompts, they will often include personal information and stories—similar to a personal statement—in a very condensed format.

#### **When Writing Application and Short Answer Essays, Keep in Mind . . .**

- *Varying character limits*—The way you structure these essays will vary based on the character limits that you have. Keep them in mind when deciding how to answer the prompts.
- *Address the prompt immediately*—Due to the length of the essays, you will want to answer the prompt as quickly as possible! Avoid meandering about with your thought process, and make sure that the response is clear and concise.
- *Create bullet-point outline*—When answering the prompt, it can be very beneficial to create a bullet-point outline for your response. This will help you ensure that the prompt is answered fully and that your audience can follow your thought process.
- *Tone*—Try to establish a consistent tone for your responses that reflects the prompt.
- *Be cognizant of cliches*—Cliches can prevent you from standing out to your audience. As you are answering the prompts, keep in mind common cliches and ensure that you are not following them with your response.
- *Grammar*—These issues can stand out much more because the document is relatively short. When writing, make sure you check your grammar, punctuation, and spelling before you are finished!
- *Repetition*—Make sure you aren't repeating anything within the essays for one school or job. It may help to have a document where you list the topics for each essay response by organization.
- *Feedback*—Remember that these are not going to be finished in a single day. Getting feedback and revising multiple times can help ensure that your points are getting across clearly to your audience and that the prompts are fully answered. The Writing Center is the premier source for such feedback.

#### **Common Issues**

There are many traps to fall into when writing cover letters, personal statements, and short answers essays.

- Understanding the Prompt
  - A lot of people struggle with understanding the prompt. If you feel like you may not fully understand it, try asking a professor, advisor, or Writing Center consultant for clarification or if they can explain expectations to you more clearly.
- Tone
  - Maintaining a professional tone while talking about personal experiences can be tricky. One method that may help is to read what you have written aloud. Listen for spots that may sound awkward, confusing, or overly casual, and try revising those spots to maintain a professional tone.

- Consistent voice and appropriate tense can also be challenging to maintain. It is important to make sure that you keep your individual and collective experiences in the proper voice, as well as in the correct tense. Read back through what you have written to ensure that the audience will not be confused by any switching tense or voice.

Ex: *Active vs. passive voice:*

- *Active:* I developed the remote control sensors for the rover.
- *Passive:* The remote control sensors for the rover were developed in a lab by me.

Ex: *Inconsistent tense vs. consistent tense:*

- *Inconsistent:* Our design was recognized by many organizations. This includes prizes at the 2013 Dry Rub Festival in O'Fallon, Missouri.
- *Consistent:* Our design has placed in numerous competitions. This includes earning first-prize at the 2022 Catfish Fry and Bingo Festival science exhibition.

- Character Limits
  - Be aware of the requirements and length that the prompt has specified
  - At the same time, try to avoid being *too* aware of the limits. This can cause just as many issues as not knowing the limits and requirements. Especially for the first draft, try writing it out and *then* trimming it down to size.
- Broad Claims
  - When making broad claims in your writing, make sure you are providing warrants or supporting evidence. You need to be able to back up any claims made, so avoid spurious or unsupported statements.
- Full Ideas
  - When discussing your goals and accomplishments, ideas sometimes don't get fleshed out.
  - To combat this, create an outline. This doesn't mean you have to spend hours working on writing out a detailed outline of your idea; it simply means having a clear idea, or even just a bullet point list, of what your main points are, keep you on track, and prevent confusion for you and your audience.
- Content
  - Many writers struggle with discussing what *they* did or do rather than just the outcome of a project. If you are talking about a project, especially one where you worked with others, make sure that you cover what *you* did yourself. Potential employers want to know about you, not just what the team did as a whole.
- Expanding and Recognizing Relevance
  - Determining what experiences and knowledge are relevant can be tricky. Try writing out a list of your experiences, skills, or knowledge that may be relevant to a position, and then expand on them to see how and/or why they are or could be relevant. This will allow you to see aspects that could be useful from a different perspective, which can help you decide which ones to use.

Ex: *Past work experience:*

*Experience*—I worked as a cashier.

*Knowledge*—I learned telephone etiquette.

*Skills*—I interacted with customers, which built my communication skills, and provided support and assistance to customers, which improved customer relations.

*Conclusion*—This experience would be useful to a future employer if the job requires customer service, telephone etiquette, or communication skills.

### **Myths and Common Confusions**

*“Employers only look at your resume.”*

- Personal statements, cover letters, and short answer essays are very important, and help market yourself to potential employers. It’s your chance to convince them that you are interested in the position, are a good candidate for it, and have the experiences, qualities, and qualifications to succeed.

*“None of this is relevant.”*

- Experiences do not necessarily have to be directly related to the job that you are applying for; there may be aspects of seemingly unrelated experiences that demonstrate a reason you would be a good candidate for the position. For example, attending a foreign language school or program may not have direct relevance to a certain position, but you can use it to demonstrate your adaptability, determination, communication skills, and dedication.

### **Advice from consultants**

“I try to challenge the writer to dive deeper into their experiences: what did they specifically do during their Co-op? What specific projects did they complete in the Honors Academy?” —*Anna*

“I like helping students untangle the value of experiences that don’t always seem relevant: mowing lawns, student organizations, and volunteer work can all be relevant” —*Teague*

“Talking the writer through the audience perspective (what are audiences expecting, what will audiences think when they see *this*, etc.) always helps” —*Keillyn*

“I start by making sure we understands the goal of the document so we can identify the motivation in general for writing” —*Grace*

“Just talking about experiences to help brainstorm is a good place to start” —*Susan*

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