



Cover Letter Guide

For Students and Graduates or Early Careers



How to write a cover letter that gets read, whether you are sending it as an email or attaching it to your application.

What Is a Cover Letter and Why Does It Matter?

A cover letter is a short, tailored piece of writing that accompanies your CV. Its job is simple: to explain who you are, why you want this particular role, and what you can bring to the employer. Done well, it is the thing that turns a good CV into a compelling application.

For students and graduates, a cover letter is especially important. Your CV may be shorter than someone with years of experience, so the cover letter is your chance to fill in the gaps, show your personality, and demonstrate that you understand the role and the organisation.

Key point: A cover letter will not get you the job on its own. But a poor one, or no cover letter at all, can cost you an interview before anyone has even looked at your CV.

Email or Attachment? What Students and Graduates Need to Know

This is one of the most common areas of confusion for students applying for their first graduate roles. The honest answer is that most cover letters today are sent as emails, not as separate attached documents.

Unless the job advert specifically asks you to attach a cover letter, write your covering message directly into the body of the email. An empty email with two attachments looks lazy. A well-written email that introduces you and your CV looks professional and considered.

When to Write in the Email Body

- The advert says to send your CV by email and does not mention a cover letter attachment.
- You are making a speculative application to a company that has not advertised a role.
- The application process is informal or the company is a small business or startup.
- The advert says to include a covering note or a brief introduction.



When to Attach a Separate Cover Letter

- The advert specifically asks for a cover letter to be attached.
- You are applying through a formal graduate scheme or structured recruitment portal.
- The employer has provided a specific format or template to follow.
- You are submitting a printed application in person or by post.

Good to know: If you attach both a CV and a separate cover letter, your email still needs a short covering note explaining what is attached and which role you are applying for. Never send a blank email with attachments.

What a Good Covering Email Looks Like

Your covering email does not need to be long. Three short paragraphs is enough. Here is an example of the right structure and tone:

To: recruitment@companyname.co.uk
Subject: Application for Marketing Graduate Scheme, Ref MKT2026

Dear [Name / Hiring Manager],

I am writing to apply for the Marketing Graduate Scheme advertised on your careers page. I am a final-year Marketing student at the University of Nottingham, graduating this summer with a predicted 2:1.

I have attached my CV for your consideration. I am particularly drawn to this role because of your focus on data-led campaigns and the rotation structure of the scheme, which aligns closely with my experience running social media and analytics projects during my placement year at Step Recruitment.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss my application further and am available for interview at your convenience.

Kind regards,
[Your Name]
[Phone Number]

What to Include in Your Cover Letter

Whether you are writing in an email or as a separate document, the content and structure are the same. Keep it to one page or the equivalent in email form, and structure it across four clear sections.

Cover Letter Structure at a Glance

- **Opening paragraph:** who you are, what role you are applying for, and where you saw it advertised
- **Second paragraph:** your key skills, strengths, and relevant experience matched to the job requirements
- **Third paragraph:** why this company specifically, what you know about them, and your career direction
- **Closing paragraph:** thank the employer, confirm your availability, and invite further conversation

Opening Paragraph

State clearly what role you are applying for and where you saw it. Include your degree and graduate status if relevant. Keep it brief and confident, not apologetic.

Example: I am writing to apply for the Human Resources Graduate Scheme advertised on your website. I am a final-year Business Management student at Nottingham Trent University, due to graduate this summer with a predicted 2:1.

Second Paragraph

This is the most important part. Match your skills and experience directly to what the job description is asking for. Do not just repeat your CV. Use this space to expand on your strongest examples with specific detail.

As a student or graduate, your examples can come from university projects, part-time work, placements, volunteering, or society and committee roles. You do not need corporate experience to write a compelling second paragraph.

Example: During my placement year at [Company], I led a team of four to redesign the customer onboarding process, reducing average handling time by 18%. This experience strengthened my project management and stakeholder communication skills, both of which are central to this role.

Third Paragraph

Explain why you want to work for this employer specifically, not just why you want a job in the sector. Employers can tell when this paragraph is generic. Reference something specific: their values, a recent campaign, their training programme, or their market position.

Good to know: Do not describe what the company does back to them. They know what they do. Tell them what it is about them that appeals to you and why that connects to your own goals.



Closing Paragraph

- Thank the employer for their time and consideration.
- Confirm when you are available to start or for interview.
- End with something that moves things forward: say you look forward to discussing your application.
- Sign off with yours sincerely if you have used a named contact, or yours faithfully if not.

Using AI to Help with Your Cover Letter

AI tools like ChatGPT, Claude, and others can be genuinely useful when writing a cover letter, but there is a right way and a wrong way to use them.

What AI Can Help With

- Getting started when you are staring at a blank page.
- Checking your grammar, spelling, and sentence structure.
- Suggesting how to rephrase something that sounds clunky.
- Giving you feedback on whether your letter sounds too generic.
- Helping you identify which of your experiences might be most relevant to a role.
- Generating a first draft that you then rewrite in your own voice.

What AI Cannot Do

- Write a cover letter that sounds like you. AI-generated letters tend to sound polished but hollow, and experienced recruiters notice.
- Know your actual experiences, personality, or genuine reasons for applying.
- Tailor your letter properly without you providing detailed, accurate information about yourself and the role.
- Replace the judgment of a real person who knows your story.

Our advice: Use AI as a thinking partner and a proofreader, not as a ghostwriter. If you paste an AI-written letter straight into your application without editing it, the letter will not represent you accurately. Worse, if everyone is doing the same thing, your application will look and sound like everyone else's.

Use AI for this	Not for this
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use AI to generate ideas and prompts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit an AI-written letter unchanged
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask AI to review your draft for clarity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use AI if you have not read the job description first
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use AI to check spelling and grammar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let AI invent examples you have not actually done
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask AI to suggest stronger phrasing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the same AI draft for every application
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use AI to help structure your thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rely on AI instead of asking a real person for feedback

Format, Length, and Presentation

Do	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep it to one page maximum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using a template you found online without adapting it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the same font as your CV for consistency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the same letter for every application
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three to five focused paragraphs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeating everything already in your CV
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match the tone of the company: formal for law and finance, slightly warmer for creative roles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting every sentence with "I"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proofread carefully before sending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using jargon or overly formal language that does not sound like you
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask someone else to read it before it goes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sending without checking the employer name and role title are correct

Common mistake: Sending a cover letter that names the wrong company or the wrong role. It happens more than you might think, especially when applying for multiple roles at once. Always check before you send.

Researching the Employer Before You Write

A cover letter written without research is easy to spot. Before you write a single word, spend time understanding who you are writing to.

What to Research Before Writing Your Cover Letter

- The company website: their values, mission, and what they actually do
- The job description: read it line by line and note the key skills and behaviours they are asking for
- LinkedIn: look at the company page and, if possible, the person you are addressing
- Recent news: have they launched something new, won an award, or expanded into new area?
- Their tone of voice: is their website formal and corporate, or relaxed and conversational? Match it.
- Glassdoor or The Job Crowd: what do current and former employees say about the culture?

Before You Send: Final Checklist

Cover Letter Checklist

- ✓ The role title and company name are correct throughout
- ✓ You have addressed a named contact where possible
- ✓ Your opening paragraph clearly states the role and where you saw it
- ✓ Your second paragraph links your skills directly to the job requirements
- ✓ Your third paragraph shows specific knowledge of this employer
- ✓ You have not simply repeated your CV
- ✓ The letter is one page or a short, well-structured email
- ✓ You have proofread for spelling and grammar errors
- ✓ A second person has read it and given feedback
- ✓ If attaching, your covering email explains what is attached and which role you are applying for

**Need help with your application?
We are here.**



0115 871 8740



CV@step.org.uk