Cover Letters

Main differences between e-mail and hard copy correspondence:

Format: your **signature block** (address, etc.) goes below your name in e-mail, while it goes at the top of the page on hard copy.

E-mail requires a **subject line** logical to the recipient. E-mail subject lines can make or break whether your e-mail is opened and read. Hard copy can have a subject line too, but it's on the letter (after recipient's address block and before "Dear...," and it's seen after the letter is opened.

Signature: Of course you won't have a handwritten signature on e-mail, but don't forget this on hard copy.

All cover letters should:

Explain why you are sending a resume.
Don't send a resume without a cover letter.
Don't make the reader guess what you are asking for; be specific: Do you want a summer internship opportunity, or a permanent position at graduation; are you inquiring about future employment possibilities?

Tell specifically how you learned about the position or the organization — a flyer posted in your department, a web site, a family friend who works at the organization. It is appropriate to mention the name of someone who suggested that you write.

Convince the reader to look at your resume.
The cover letter will be seen first.
Therefore, it must be very well written and targeted to that employer.

Call attention to elements of your background — education, leadership, experience — that are relevant to a position you are seeking. Be as specific as possible, using examples.

Reflect your attitude, personality, motivation, enthusiasm, and communication skills.

Provide or refer to any information specifically requested in a job advertisement that might not be covered in your resume, such as availability date, or reference to an attached writing sample.

Indicate what you will do to follow-up.

In a letter of application — applying for an advertised opening — applicants often say something like "I look forward to hearing from you." However, if you have further contact info (e.g. phone number) and if the employer hasn't said "no phone calls," it's better to take the initiative to follow-up, saying something like, "I will contact you in the next two weeks to see if you require any additional information regarding my qualifications."

In a letter of inquiry — asking about the possibility of an opening — don't assume the employer will contact you. You should say something like, "I will contact you in two weeks to learn more about upcoming employment opportunities with (name of organization)." Then mark your calendar to make the call.

Page margins, font style and size

For hard copy, left and right page margins of one to 1.5 inches generally look good. You can adjust your margins to balance how your document looks on the page.

Use a font style that is simple, clear and commonplace, such as Times New Roman, Arial or Calibri. Font SIZES from 10-12 points are generally in the ballpark of looking appropriate. Keep in mind that **different font styles in the same point size are not the same size**! A 12-point Arial is larger than a 12-point Times New Roman.

If you are having trouble fitting a document on one page, sometimes a slight margin and/or font adjustment can be the solution.

Serif or sans serif? Sans (without) serif fonts are those like Arial and Calibri that don't have the small finishing strokes on the ends of each letter. There is a great deal of research and debate on the pros and cons of each. Short story: use what you like, within reason; note what employers use; generally sans serif fonts are used for on-monitor reading and serif fonts are used for lengthy print items (like books); serif fonts may be considered more formal. Test: ask someone to look at a document for five seconds; take away the document; ask the person what font was on the document; see if s/he even noticed the style. A too-small or too-large font gets noticed, as does a weird style.

Should your resume and cover letter font style and size match? It can be a nice touch to look polished. But it's also possible to have polished documents that are not in matching fonts. A significant difference in style and size might be noticed. Remember that you can have your documents reviewed through advising, and that might be a fine-tuning question you ask.

Sample cover letter format guidelines:

(Hard copy: sender address and contact info at top. ***Your address and the date can be left-justified, or centered****.)*

Your Street Address
City, State Zip Code
Telephone Number
E-mail Address

Month, Day, Year

Mr./Ms./Dr. FirstName LastName
Title
Name of Organization
Street or P. O. Box Address
City, State Zip Code

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. LastName:

Opening paragraph: State why you are writing; how you learned of the organization or position, and basic information about yourself.

2nd paragraph: Tell why you are interested in the employer or type of work the employer does (Simply stating that you are interested does not tell why, and can sound like a form letter). Demonstrate that you know enough about the employer or position to relate your background to the employer or position. Mention specific qualifications which make you a good fit for the employer's needs. (Focus on what you can do for the employer, not what the employer can do for you.) This is an opportunity to explain in more detail relevant items in your resume. Refer to the fact that your resume is enclosed. Mention other enclosures if such are required to apply for a position.

3rd paragraph: Indicate that you would like the opportunity to interview for a position or to talk with the employer to learn more about their opportunities or hiring plans. State what you will do to follow up, such as telephone the employer within two weeks. If you will be in the employer's location and could offer to schedule a visit, indicate when. State that you would be glad to provide the employer with any additional information needed. Thank the employer for her/his consideration.

Sincerely,

(Your handwritten signature [on hard copy])

Your name typed
(In case of e-mail, your full contact info appears below your printed name [instead of at the top, as for hard copy], and of course there is no handwritten signature)

Enclosure(s) (refers to resume, etc.)

*(**Note: the contents of your letter might best be arranged into four paragraphs. Consider what you need to say and use good writing style***. See the following examples for variations in organization and layout.)*