

career  
development manitoba



A PRACTITIONER'S  
GUIDE TO  
**WRITING  
COVER  
LETTERS**  
AND OTHER  
EMPLOYMENT-RELATED  
LETTERS

YOUR FUTURE YOUR WAY

Manitoba 



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# Introduction

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The client resource, **A Guide to Writing Cover Letters**, contains information and worksheets to support clients in writing job-search related letters. The detailed information found within the client resource is not repeated here. Instead the focus of this guide will be to provide facilitators with additional information, tips and strategies for conducting a cover letter writing workshop or working with individual clients.

The information in this guide covers the core concepts related to writing cover letters. Practitioners are encouraged to adapt materials to their personal style and needs of their clients.

## Guiding Frameworks

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Many skills can be developed through writing cover letters. In the following sections, relevant skills/competencies are identified from three frameworks: Blueprint for Life/Work Designs, Essential Skills and Employability Skills 2000+.

### Blueprint for Life/Work Designs

Writing cover letters develops the following Blueprint competencies:

- Competency 2 – interact positively and effectively with others
  - Level 2 – develop abilities for building positive relationships in one’s life
- Competency 5 – locate and effectively use life/work information
  - Level 2 – locate, understand and use life/work information
- Competency 7 – secure/create and maintain work
  - Level 2 – develop abilities to seek and obtain/create work

### Essential Skills

Writing cover letters will enhance the following Essential Skills:

- reading text
- document use
- writing
- thinking skills
- computer use
- working with others (if in a workshop)

## Employability Skills 2000+

Writing cover letters will develop:

- Fundamental Skills
  - communicate
  - manage information
- Personal Management Skills
  - demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours
- Teamwork Skills (if working with clients in groups)

## Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners

Supporting individuals to write cover letters is an important role for career development practitioners. To do this well, practitioners would need all of the core competencies outlined in the Standards and Guidelines: Professional/Ethical Behaviour, Interpersonal Competence, Career Development Knowledge and Needs Assessment and Referral Expertise.

In addition, supporting individuals to write cover letters overlaps with several Areas of Specialization in the Standards and Guidelines, including:

- Career Counselling
- Information and Resource Management
- Facilitated and Individual Group Learning
- Work Development

# Preparing for Your Workshop or Individual Session

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You will need to review and gather the following items as you prepare to deliver the workshop or work individually with a client. Some practitioners like to use photocopied handouts of the charts and activities in the guide; this leaves the client guide fresh and clean for individual use after the session. Others prefer to have clients write directly on the guide, ensuring that all of the topical information stays in one place. Feel free to tailor your workshop to your personal style and participants' needs. Your personal preference will impact the resources you need to gather as you prepare for your workshop or individual session.

## Required:

- **A Guide to Writing Cover Letters** (one copy per participant)
- pens, pencils
- for workshops:
  - o computer, LCD projector and screen
  - o flip chart paper and markers

## Optional:

- PowerPoint slides, printed three or six slides per page; one set per client
- handouts from the client guide
  - o worksheets can be printed separately
- computer lab – one computer per client/participant
  - o allows participants to build their cover letter on the computer, rather than on paper.
- use the Resume and Cover Letter Builder found on the Manitoba Career Development Gateway – **[www.manitoba.ca/careerdevelopment](http://www.manitoba.ca/careerdevelopment)**

# PowerPoint Slides

The following presentation contains 29 slides. Reviewing the slide content, engaging in discussions with participants, and completing the activities should result in a four hour workshop (times listed are estimates and may depend on factors including number of participants). Discussions and activities can be expanded or contracted depending on the time you have available to conduct the workshop. Where applicable, the facilitator notes will mention how to make adjustments for time constraints. Note: the content within the following slides may be challenging to read due to size; see the PowerPoint document to review the complete content.



Welcome participants to workshop.

Introductions

- Have participants introduce themselves.
- An icebreaker activity can be incorporated; see Icebreakers/Energizers section for more information.

Time:

- Expect introductions to take three-to-five minutes per participant. Icebreakers may take longer. Workshop time will need to be adjusted accordingly.



Briefly review agenda to provide participants with an overview of the workshop.

Time:

- three-to-five minutes

### Why Write a Cover Letter?

- Provide information not in your resume
- Highlight key skills and attributes
- Outline how you're the right person for the job
- Show interest and enthusiasm for the job
- Set yourself apart from other applicants

Source: [http://resume.monster.ca/7184\\_en-CA\\_p1.asp](http://resume.monster.ca/7184_en-CA_p1.asp)

A cover letter should be used every time a resume is submitted. The only exception will be online applications; however those often have space to anchor comments such as "explain why you feel you are the right candidate." Participants should use that space for a form of their cover letter.

Time:

- five-to-seven minutes

### That Important First Impression

- Ensure your cover letter highlights your
  - Professionalism and attention to detail
  - Ability to communicate effectively
  - Qualifications and strengths
  - Personality

Attention to detail can also be demonstrated but only through submitting a cover letter without errors – this point can't be stressed enough (though is covered later in the workshop). A cover letter is usually the first thing an employer "sees." A well written resume can't make up for a poorly written cover letter.

Time:

- five-to-seven minutes

**You never have a second chance  
to make a first impression.**  
- Author unknown

This is a transitional slide. Explain meaning of quote.

Time:

- two-to-three minutes

### Three Kinds of Cover Letters

- Response letter
  - Targeted to a specific job posting
- Broadcast letter
  - No job posting or information about a specific job
  - Can help to uncover the hidden job market
- Referral letter
  - Links you to the employer through a mutual contact
  - Usually no job posting to respond to

A response letter is exactly that...responding to an ad or posting (ex: Website, sign in window):  
“I was excited to see the post, on Monster.ca, for a...”

Broadcast letters are sometimes called cold letters (think cold calling from sales). It is important to go beyond “I’m looking for work” but to grab the employer’s attention:  
“Congratulations on becoming one of the top 50 employers to work for in Canada”.

Referral letter – there often isn’t a job posting but the purpose of this letter is to use a mutual contact to set yourself apart and get ahead of other applicants. It is important to be confident that the person “linking” you to the employer is a respected employee:  
“My good friend Bob Smith, suggested I apply at your organization”.

Use one of the client examples and job descriptions as an example of a response cover letter (see the **Cover Letters – Real World Examples** section of the client guide).

Use Melanie Wong’s cover letter as an example of a broadcast cover letter (See **Appendix A** of the client guide).

Use Amrit Singh’s cover letter as an example of a referral cover letter (See **Appendix A** of the client guide).

Time:

- 10 minutes

### Targeted Cover Letters

- Written with a specific job in mind
- Tailor the first and last paragraphs to the job
  - Use language from the advertisement
  - Visit company website for more information
- Make a strong link between your skills and job requirements
- Highlight what you bring – not what you need
- Proofread

Have participants review Sarah’s job ad and targeted cover letter in the client guide. Review each section of the letter and how it was targeted to the ad. If time permits make this an activity such as:

- Find one thing you think is a great idea.
- Find one thing you would change.

If an Internet connection is available review examples of websites that provide job duties which can help with writing cover letters:

- Working in Canada  
[www.workingincanada.gc.ca](http://www.workingincanada.gc.ca)
- Manitoba Job Futures  
[www.mb.jobfutures.org](http://www.mb.jobfutures.org)
- Manitoba Labour Market Information  
[www.gov.mb.ca/tce/lmi/index.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/tce/lmi/index.html)

Time:

- 10 minutes
- 15 - 20 minutes with activity

### Sample Cover Letters

- New Graduate
- New entrant into the labour market
- Construction
- Quality Assurance Coordinator/HR Trainer
- Newcomer to Canada
- Retail

Examples of unpaid experiences:

- volunteer work, internships, work practicum, co-op terms
- participation in school associations
- courses or projects completed
- awards or scholarships received
- summer jobs
- participation in sports
- family responsibilities
- other extracurricular activities

Have participants review Jennifer Meyer’s cover letter (see the **Cover Letters – Real World Examples** section of the client guide).

If time permits, have participants complete the “**Unpaid Work Experiences**” activity in the client guide. This is valuable information for anyone – not just new graduates.

Time:

- 10 minutes

### Write Effectively

- Identify your reader(s) and tailor your language
- Review each sentence and ask
  - “Does the reader need to know about this?”
- Make sure your cover letter is clear and to the point
  - Long sentences are awkward to read
- Don't use words you wouldn't normally use

Remind participants that being too “wordy” or providing non-relevant information wastes key moments. Employers do not want to read anything not relevant to them nor do they want to waste time searching for information.

Give an example of tailoring language to the reader – if the cover letter is going to the head of the IT department, don't hesitate to use technical language. If it's going to the company's HR dept., avoid using technical terms the reader wouldn't be familiar with.

Getting help writing a cover letter can work but the letter must be in the participant's “language” – having someone use a word that the participant doesn't normally use (or a thesaurus to find “big” words) doesn't work. Remind participants – “If you get the interview, you don't talk like that”.

Time:

- 10 minutes

### Be Prepared Before You Write

- Ensure you have what you need to write your letter
  - Job ad or posting
  - Job description, if possible
  - Information about the company
  - Your resume and career portfolio
  - Reference letters
  - Performance reviews

When reviewing job ads or postings, encourage participants to highlight key words and phrases to include in their cover letters. Straight copying isn't the best but they can weave in the same language.

Remind participants to make note of any specific instructions on how to apply for the job.

Refer participants to the example of highlighted job ad (see the **Before You Start Writing** section of client guide) and compare to the Retail Cover Letter Sample (see **Appendix A** of the client guide).

If participants have a job ad they want to apply to encourage them to use the ad for this exercise.

Time:

- 15 minutes

### Use Active Voice

- Talk about things *you* did
- Highlight what you accomplished
- Use action verbs
  - Assigned, collected, designed, implemented

As the facilitator, ensure you understand the difference between active and passive voice and review with clients. Here is a concise description and example:

#### Passive Voice

- “On the other hand, passive voice (as in this sentence) is characterized by passive verbs and is a description of a state of existence. Because passive voice is generally weak, avoiding it is beneficial. Some passive verbs include be, is, was, were, are, seem, has, and been.”

#### Revising the preceding paragraph for active voice results in the following:

- Passive voice, on the other hand, characterized by passive verbs, indicates a state of existence. Because passive voice generally weakens writing, try to avoid it.”  
Source: <http://ca.dummies.com/WileyCDA/how-to/content/using-cover-letter-language-that-snaps-crackles-an.html>

#### In groups of three or four brainstorm:

- Active verbs to include in your cover letter
  - o ex: Achieved, communicated, developed, planned
- Passive verbs NOT to include in your cover letter
  - o ex: Be, was, were, are, seem

Choose one group member to record the words. In a large group have each group share their words.

Create a master list of words on a piece of flip chart paper.

Time:

- 20 - 25 minutes

**Active voice makes your writing  
more dynamic and interesting.**

**It identifies who does what —  
and how!**  
-Wiley Publishing

This is a transitional slide. Explain meaning of quote.

Time:

- two-to-three minutes

### Introductory Paragraph

- Paragraph 1 is your introduction
- Include
  - Reason for writing
  - Job you're applying for
  - How you heard about the job
  - Why you're interested
  - A statement to catch employer's attention

### Examples:

#### The position you're applying for

- As a recent graduate from Assiniboine Community College, I am eager to learn and full of knowledge to share in the Assistant Network Administrator Jr. position I found on Monster.ca.

#### Why you're interested in the position

- I recently completed my Systems Technology diploma and I am excited for the opportunity to put my educational knowledge and skills developed during my practicum experience to use in this position.

#### How you heard about the position

- I found the position on Monster.ca
- I am currently employed by (insert company name)
- I was made aware of the opening for an Executive Assistant through my dear friend Lisa Clancy who works as a recruiter with your HR department.

#### Why you are interested in the company

- I recently read in the Manitoba Business Magazine that your organization was rated amongst the top 100 companies to work for and I'm very motivated to work for your company.

Time:

- 15 - 20 minutes

### Paragraph 2

- Paragraph 2 will Highlight your skills and qualifications
  - Demonstrate how you are a good fit for the job
  - Introduce relevant soft skills
  - Describe how the company would benefit from hiring you
- Bulleted list of skills/accomplishments works well

Remind participants to ensure their skills, duties and experiences are relevant to the position they're applying for. Refer to the following examples:

#### **Elements from the job description (skills, duties, responsibilities):**

- During my educational experience I became knowledgeable with various computer products including Windows Server 2003 environment.

#### **Reasons why your experience qualifies you for the position or how the company would benefit from hiring you:**

- I gained experience providing technical support; sourcing, installing, and maintaining new software; setting up new users in connecting to networks; and communicating (both written and verbally) with managers, supervisors, and co-workers.

#### **Any relevant courses completed:**

- I received top marks in courses such as Computer Programming 1 and 2; Customer Support; Networks 1, 2, and 3; Technology Essentials; Emerging Technologies; and Research and Report Writing and excel at maintaining in-house mail and file servers, providing desktop support, administering backup software, maintaining the security of networks, maintaining user accounts, and writing.

Remind participants that a 3rd paragraph may also be necessary if there is too much information to fit into one paragraph or if they want to highlight different types of information:

- highlights of education
- highlights of work experience
- highlights of community/volunteer activities

Time:

- 15 minutes

### Limited Work Experience

- Capitalize on unpaid experiences
- Emphasize your eagerness for learning
- Demonstrate skills and accomplishments
- Link job requirements to relevant school projects
- Highlight enthusiasm and excitement

### Paragraph 3

- Paragraph 3 will be the closing
  - Thank the reader for his/her time
  - Express your interest in an opportunity to discuss the job
  - Outline the best way to contact you
  - Confirm intention to follow up

### Examples

#### Your interest in meeting the employer

- I look forward to an opportunity to meet you at your earliest convenience.
- I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss my qualifications and the position in further detail.
- I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss my credentials with you at a mutually convenient time.

#### The best way to contact you

- I can best be reached by phone at 204-555-9312 or by email at **Melwong@x.com**.
- I can best be reached by the phone number or email provided above.
- For more information or to arrange an interview, I can be reached at 204-555-3535. This phone has call display so I can return any missed calls.
- To arrange an interview, I can be contacted at 204-555-4887.

#### Time:

- 10-15 minutes

### Signing Your Letter

- Sign off on your cover letter with one of the following
  - Sincerely,
  - Best regards,
  - Respectfully yours,
- Insert three spaces after your closing salutation for typed name
- Be sure to sign printed versions of your cover letter
- For online submissions consider creating an electronic signature

If a computer with printer/scanner is available, walk participants through creating an electronic signature:

- sign name using normal signature
- scan into computer, save as an image file
- insert the “picture” into a cover letter

This is a great way to handle signing cover letters that will be sent via email.

Time:

- five-to-seven minutes
- 10 - 12 minutes if demonstrating

### Getting Started

- In groups of 3 or 4, brainstorm
  - Attention-grabbing opening sentences
  - Relevant skills and qualifications
- Individually
  - Complete the activity in your workbook

Have participants complete the activity noted on the slide; refer them to the “**Cover Letter Exercise**” worksheet and the **Cover Letter Samples** as a guide.

Note: the **Cover Letter Exercise** worksheet is available in the **Writing the Content of Your Cover Letter** section of the client guide.

Additional Resource – you may want to print out the list of active verbs if participants have difficulty brainstorming their own:

<http://www.writeexpress.com/action-verbs.html>.

Time:

- 20 - 30 minutes

### Creating a Format

- Select appropriate paper
  - White, cream, light grey
  - Avoid paper with colour or patterns
- Select an appropriate font
  - Arial, Tahoma, Times New Roman, Calibri
  - Size 10 to 12 point
- Aim to be consistent with your resume

Remind participants that employers will likely contact them by phone, ensure:

- Anyone answering the phone can take a complete message.
- Your answering machine/voice mail message is appropriate.

Ask participants about the kinds of inappropriate phone messages they may have heard, some examples are below:

- Young children’s cute greeting.
- “I listen to \_\_\_\_” radio station contest entry.
- Abrupt “At the tone, you know what to do!”

### Creating a Format

- Create a standard “header” for contact information
  - First and last name
  - Address, phone, and email
- Every contact with an employer makes an impression
  - Avoid using “To Whom it May Concern”
  - “Dear Hiring Manager” is acceptable

Email can be a similar problem...many participants may have an email address that wouldn't be appropriate to give to an employer (ex: **toughguy@email.com**). With the availability of free email accounts, encourage participants to have a separate work-related email and to check it often!

If working on computers, have participants create their header – encourage some design features (ex: a coloured line, write their name in larger font) but remind participants of the importance of keeping it simple.

Time:

- 15 minutes
- 20 - 25 minutes if using computers

### Creating a Personal Brand: Linking to Your Resume

- Use a consistent style
  - Header, contact information, font, colour, paper
- Don't repeat information
  - Use letter to highlight, expand, and target information to the job
- Refer to resume
  - “As mentioned in my resume”

Be sure to explain the concept of creating a “Personal Brand”.

Example: Darel McDonald, who you met earlier, included in his resume “Fluently bi-lingual (English and Cree).” In his cover letter he expanded on this point by noting how his ability to speak two languages is beneficial: “In my ability to speak both English and Cree, I can easily interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds”.

Time:

- 10 - 12 minutes

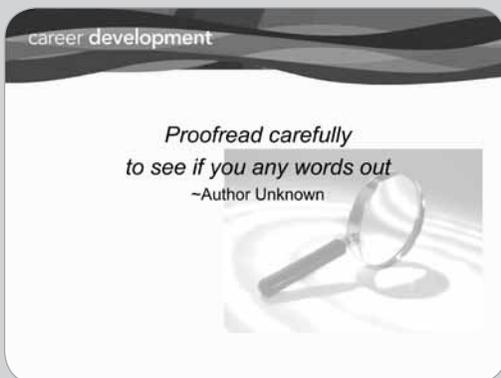
### Cover Letter Tips

- Personalize your cover letter
- Be clear and to the point
- Use language from job descriptions
- Limit the use of the word “I”
- Use examples of real accomplishments
- Have someone else proof read
- Matches same style as resume
- Spell out all words and avoid using acronyms and abbreviations
- Use active language

Additional tips are listed in the client guide. Be prepared to briefly speak to each point

Time:

- five-to-seven minutes



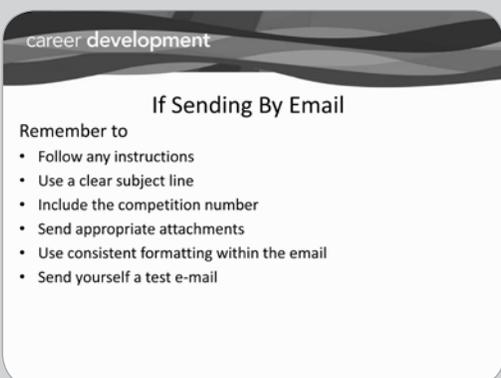
Note that there is a word missing...quote should read:

Proofread carefully to see if you left any words out.

Remind participants that most word processing programs will have a red "squiggly" underline for misspelled words but it won't pick up correctly spelt words that shouldn't be in a sentence or words that are left out. It is crucial that participants proofread...reading out loud is one of the best ways to find errors.

Time:

- five-to-seven minutes



Advise participants that the competition number should go in the subject line.

Remember that attachments can do strange things when opened on another computer. Also, if the employer doesn't have the same software it won't be possible to open. Try to encourage participants to work in a common word processing program such as Microsoft Word. If a free PDF creator can be used then their documents can be converted.

Time:

- 10 minutes



Many people don't bother with a resignation letter...they simply tell the employer they are quitting. However, a letter that is clear and thanks the employer for the opportunity is very respectful, professional and will leave the door open for a possible return...and a reference letter.

Refer participants to the resignation letter sample (see **Resignation Letter Sample** section of the client guide).

Time:

- five-to-seven minutes

### Reference Letters

- Highlight skills, knowledge, qualifications, accomplishments
- Typically written by employers or other individuals
- If drafting your own reference letter
  - Include only positive information
  - Provide details on how the reference knows you
  - Ask your reference for a quote to include
  - Showcase relevant skills
  - Highlight relevant accomplishments
  - Quantify relevant personal characteristics

Participants may think it strange to write their own reference letter but it is a common request – employers are busy so ask to have it started and they'll "fill in the blanks".

Review self-written reference letter sample (see the **Self-Written Reference Letter Sample** section of the client resource).

Time:

- five-to-seven minutes

### Summary

- When writing anything it is important to identify your reader(s)
- Use cover letters to introduce yourself to potential employers
- Review your cover letter to make sure that it's clear and to the point
- Use an active voice as opposed to a passive voice
- Use the **first paragraph** as a way to introduce yourself
- Use the **second paragraph** to highlight your skills and qualifications
- Use the **third, or closing, paragraph** to finish up the cover letter
- Don't duplicate your resume

Summarize the topics discussed; try to weave in stories from the discussions that occurred.

Time:

- 10 minutes

*It is not doing the things we like to do,  
but liking the thing we have to do  
that makes life blessed*  
-Goethe

Review quote; use this time to allow participants to ask questions about the workshop.

Time:

- five-to-seven minutes



Thank participants for their time. Advise them where they can go to get further assistance.

If desired, have participants complete a workshop evaluation form (see **Appendix A**).

Time:

- two-to-three minutes; more if an evaluation is being completed

## Additional Tips and Strategies

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- There are many cover letter formats. Take time to introduce the samples in the client resource to participants.
- If email is available, demonstrate how to email a cover letter
  - as an attachment
  - in the body of an email

## For More Information on Writing Cover Letters

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### Preparing Your Resume and Cover Letter

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/govjobs/info/resume.html>

Provides brief tips.

### 201 Killer Cover Letters, The CD-ROM Edition

<http://career-lifeskills.com/career-building-1/cover-letters-35/201-killer-cover-letters-the-cd-rom-edition-11-462.html?zenid=b2511c0f744976532d03149fcd6b1cf8>

Provides hundreds of sample cover letters and downloadable templates.