

Cover Letter Principles

- Notice that the letter is addressed to a specific individual using his or her correct title. (If the advertisement for the position says only, "Chairman, Search Committee," try calling the department secretary for the name of the chairperson.)
- In the first paragraph the author explains how she heard about the position ("Your announcement in ... "At the suggestion of ..."), and who she is ("I am completing my Ph.D. in ... under the direction of ... ").
- In the second paragraph she explains why she is interested in the specific position and the department. Through her background research (discussions with San Jose State faculty members and perusal of the university's Web site), she knows that the institution places a high value on teaching. So she goes into some detail on her various teaching experiences, including such things as the design and development of a new course.
- In the third paragraph she provides a more detailed overview of her research, including her industrial experience.
- The key in both the second and third paragraphs is to highlight your achievements and qualifications, especially those that make you the right person for the position. You want to connect items in your background with the specific needs of the department.
- At smaller colleges or universities you should try to point out your interests in the institution as well as the department. At larger colleges or universities such as San Jose State, you can concentrate more on your interests in the department.
- In the final paragraph the author indicates what she is enclosing and offers to provide extra materials or additional information. She thanks the committee for its consideration and indicates that she is looking forward to meeting with them in the near future. This can be your ticket to an interview.
- Ideally, the cover letter should be one page, and while content is more critical than style, how you write as well as what you say is certainly important. In all cases, use simple, direct language.
- It is also critical that your letter be free of errors. This may seem obvious, but search committees see plenty of letters with mistakes. The readers will assume you had all the time you needed to put the letter together and so are likely to be unforgiving of typographical and spelling errors. Have it proofread by at least one other person.