Guide to Cover Letters

The purpose of a cover letter is to share with the hiring agency that your abilities are a match for the position for which they are advertising. The goal is to create a cover letter that ultimately results in an interview. This is best accomplished by highlighting the skills that best match the needs of the position and supporting those skills with examples of practice from your own employment, educational, or volunteer history. Your cover letter allows you the opportunity to designate yourself as unique among the applicant pool and demonstrate your personality and experiences beyond the resume.

In general, a cover letter should be brief and to the point, covering approximately one page and no more than one and one-half pages. Your letter should be designed as a professional correspondence and include all of your contact information in the way of letterhead or signature. A new letter should be created for each position for which you apply to best address the exact needs of each position and how you, as a candidate, are best suited to meet and exceed those needs. However, since each letter should have the same format, individual letters are easily revised to meet the needs of each position for which you apply.

Sections of the cover letter
The body of a cover letter should include four consecutive sections which address the following questions:

1. Who are you? & What do you want?
The first section should be used to introduce yourself and the position for which you are applying. You can also address how you heard about this position and/or any personal connections or previous history you may have with the organization.

2. What do they want? & What do you have?
The second section addresses the skills, talents, and experiences which the position description or advertisement have noted as desirable and which you meet. This brief section serves as an introduction to your next area which addresses two or three of the desired skills which you possess and examples of how you have gained and proven these to be a part of your skill set.

3. Which of your skills best meet their needs? & How have you acquired or demonstrated those skills?
You should select two or three skills which the hiring company has noted as being crucial to the job and then write a brief paragraph addressing each skill in terms of your ability to manage those functions. Use concrete examples of how you have been able to demonstrate those skills and in what capacity you have done so. You may also note special training or educational experiences which highlight these skills.
4. What do you want to happen next?
Finally, close by thanking the hiring person(s) for taking the time to review your materials and note your desire to further discuss your qualifications during an interview.

Note: If a position description or advertisement instructs that certain other information be addressed in your cover letter, you should include it near the beginning of the letter. It may also be necessary to use a cover letter to address anything which may seem incongruent in your history; such as lapses in work history, your desire to seek new employment opportunities, etc. If this is necessary it can usually be best facilitated between the third and fourth sections of your letter and should only be added if it can be addressed as a positive attribute… A cover letter should never note deficiencies or negative language!

How to proceed
Steps to creating your cover letter:
1. Review position description / advertisement and note the skills, educational levels, trainings the hiring agency desires.
2. Review your resume and skill set list and note matches between what the hiring agency seeks and what you offer.
3. Choose two or three skills to highlight in your letter and make notes as to experiences and/or training you wish to discuss in order to demonstrate your knowledge in these areas. It is best if you choose these examples from experiences which you gained in similar settings as the one for which you apply.
4. Begin writing the letter using the business letter format and the sections as discussed above.
6. Have someone else review the letter for both grammar and content. Provide them with a copy of the job description / advertisement to be sure you address the skills and talents the hiring agency seeks.

Note: If a job announcement does not provide detail as to the specific skills the hiring agency is looking for you will need to find another way to determine what skills to highlight in your letter. You may begin by reflecting on your past experience as an applicant for similar positions or by researching similar openings at other organizations in order to see what normal criteria are for such positions.

Tips to remember
The following list contains helpful tips to remember as you put together your cover letter.
1. Address your letter to a specific person whenever possible.
2. Show that you know the organization by using their language and focus.
3. Print your letter on the same high-quality paper as your resume.
4. Use concrete language and active voice.
5. Sell yourself.