

Writing a Better Cover Letter

Ashley E. Brady, Ph.D.

ASPIRE Program Manager

BRET Office of Career Development

ashley.brady@vanderbilt.edu

**(adapted from Dr. Kim Petrie's *Resume 101*
and Impact Resources on CVs and
*biosketches, and Cornell University)***



ASPIRE Postdoctoral Café
April 19th, 2018

Why write a cover letter?

- Express interest in a specific position.
- Mention a referral, if relevant and appropriate.
- Explain *why* you are applying and *how* you fit their needs
 - What attracts you to this position? To this company?
 - Highlight your most relevant qualifications and accomplishments.
- Demonstrate your professional writing skills.
- Make connections for the reader b/w your skills/experience and job description

Common Questions

Does anyone read it?	Some people do, some don't. Assume, "Yes."
To whom should it be addressed?	Ideally, the hiring manager, by name (<i>Dear Dr. Smith</i>). Alternatives: "Dear Hiring Manager" or substitute a subject line (<i>RE: Senior Scientist position</i>) for a salutation.
How do I close?	<i>Sincerely</i> , or <i>Best regards</i> , [Your first and last name]
How long should it be?	1 page max; not too wordy.
Should I use my institution's letterhead?	For faculty positions. Others, no.
Should I attach it to an email?	For faculty positions. Others, probably not. Use the body of the email as a cover letter.
How do I stand out?	By writing well and professionally! A "creative" cover letter usually won't fly.

Cover letter do's and don'ts

DO

- Your homework. Tailor the letter to the position, company, and audience.
- Focus on tangible accomplishments.
- Know your strengths and highlight how you will help the company.

DON'T

- Rehash your résumé.
- Mention weaknesses or liabilities.
- Describe how the position will help you.
- Under- or oversell your experience.
- Use technical jargon.

Cover Letter Structure

- 1 page
- Typically 3-5 paragraphs
 - Intro paragraph (3-4 sentences)
 - 1-3 paragraphs highlighting your skills (focus on your top three matches with job description)
 - Closing paragraph (2-3 sentences)
- Don't just regurgitate your resume!

Paragraph 1: Introduction

- What position are you applying for?
- Explain where you learned about the position (personal contacts, search engine, etc...)
- Why are you interested in this organization and for this job in particular?
 - Match with your long term career objectives?
 - Match with the skills outlined in the job description?
 - What can you offer?

Paragraphs 2-4: Demonstrate Skills

- Highlight your skills (pick 1-3 that match well with job description)
- Cite personal qualities that make you a good fit
- Explain how specific past experiences make you an ideal candidate/valuable to the company (quantify if possible)
- Do your research and highlight important achievements, milestones, or values at the targeted organization*
- Use summary statements
 - I have over 10 years of experience in....
 - I have expertise in project management and grant writing.....

*Important achievement/milestone at the targeted organization

“ I am impressed to see that your company was recently awarded several qualifying Therapeutic Discovery Program grants and believe that my skills would be an asset in your critical time of growth”

****Shows you have an interest in company and have done your homework****

Closing Paragraph

- Reiterate your interest in the position and why you think you are qualified
- State your interest in hearing back from them to discuss the position further (i.e. getting an interview!)
- Thank them
- Let them know the best way to contact you
- Can mention when you will follow up with them

It's all in the details...

- Grammar errors or misspelled words reflect your ability to communicate and write well. NO EXCUSES!
- The reader should not have to guess your intent– it should be obvious:
 - Why you are applying for the job
 - Why they should hire you
- Make sure your contact information is on the document
- Save and submit the final version as a **pdf** with a clear title that matches your other supporting docs.
 - i.e. Brady AE_cover letter_Pfizer.pdf

Ashley E., Ph.D.
Nashville, TN. 37232 Phone: 615-123-4567
E-mail: ashleybrady@gmail.com

December 11, 2012

Mark Zuckerberg, Chief Executive
Facebook Corporation
217 Fake Street, Menlo Park, CA 94025

RE: Software Engineering Internship

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Suspendisse sem. Sed augue. Vivamus vel erat in tellus lacinia adipiscing. Nunc eget augue. Cras convallis, ligula non blandit venenatis, neque tellus aliquet augue, id posuere dolor massa a neque. Nulla massa. Donec vestibulum est eu sapien. Praesent at dui. Sed sollicitudin nulla non enim. Aenean vel neque. Duis id augue. Ut vestibulum tortor vel wisi. Aliquam erat volutpat. Quisque id nunc vel turpis malesuada porta. Mauris euismod eleifend elit. Nunc nisl eros, aliquet vitae, fermentum id, euismod quis, lectus. Aliquam lobortis metus sed quam. Proin iaculis fermentum purus. Suspendisse potenti. Maecenas eu massa nec tellus fermentum tempus. Phasellus ut felis vel nunc molestie vestibulum. Ut lobortis. Aenean tellus. Sed consequat ante vel est. Pellentesque odio. Quisque massa. Vestibulum quis tellus. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Quisque in pede eget lacus suscipit hendrerit. Morbi vel urna. Integer consectetur. Maecenas consectetur, magna eget bibendum cursus, tortor sem porta nibh, et auctor odio odio sit amet purus.

Suspendisse lectus arcu, tincidunt sed, rutrum vitae, consequat eget, sapien. Duis orci. Aliquam erat volutpat. Nam vel ipsum. Maecenas sit amet dui. Nullam placerat hendrerit lacus. Aenean imperdiet tincidunt turpis. Vivamus pharetra. Mauris neque. Donec at odio ut tortor consequat iaculis. Morbi faucibus. Proin varius feugiat sapien. Morbi blandit nulla vel odio. Aenean metus tortor, feugiat quis, facilisis vel, vestibulum a, tortor. Phasellus magna. Pellentesque sed est. Donec ullamcorper sapien ut felis. Donec eleifend venenatis eros. Sed ipsum. Suspendisse risus. Ut et metus vitae enim tincidunt scelerisque. Aenean imperdiet tincidunt turpis. Vivamus pharetra. Mauris neque. Donec at odio ut tortor consequat iaculis. Morbi faucibus. Proin varius feugiat sapien. Morbi blandit nulla vel odio. Aenean metus tortor, feugiat quis, facilisis vel, vestibulum a, tortor.

Training experiences and skillsets directly transferrable to the internship:

- Nullam iaculis sem vel turpis. Cras tincidunt. Donec justo lacus, pharetra sit amet, congue id, placerat semper, leo. Sed blandit augue vel magna.
- Ut at augue. Nulla facilisi. Donec diam massa, auctor vel, tincidunt at, dictum et, justo. Duis commodo. Cras dapibus erat sit amet justo.
- Suspendisse non nunc vel justo lacinia rutrum. Suspendisse urna. Fusce ac velit semper ipsum bibendum laoreet. Ut a nunc in libero vestibulum molestie.
- Maecenas eu massa nec tellus fermentum tempus. Phasellus ut felis vel nunc molestie vestibulum.

In summary, I believe my unique combination of experiences and skillsets are an excellent fit for the internship position and that I would succeed in making contributions to Facebook. Thank you for taking the time to consider my application.

Kind regards,



Ashley E. Brady, Ph.D.

To whom it may concern,

Suspendisse non nunc vel justo lacinia rutrum. Suspendisse urna. Fusce ac velit semper ipsum bibendum laoreet. Ut a nunc in libero vestibulum molestie. Phasellus mauris risus, vulputate at, tempus et, tincidunt eu, odio. Nulla facilisi. Nunc nec nunc. Ut wisi nibh, dignissim non, porta ac, malesuada vitae, tellus. Donec nec sem sed lacus faucibus consequat. Curabitur neque. Duis ac velit. Praesent vel orci. Etiam nunc. Nulla odio. Nulla facilisi. Sed vehicula. Nulla facilisi. Aenean vel turpis semper risus fermentum bibendum. Donec ligula neque, vestibulum id, varius ac, molestie non, elit. Proin pede. Vestibulum metus arcu, dapibus id, imperdiet non, ullamcorper et, dui.

Ut at augue. Nulla facilisi. Donec diam massa, auctor vel, tincidunt at, dictum et, justo. Duis commodo. Cras dapibus erat sit amet justo. Nam eu mauris. Pellentesque nulla arcu, mattis at, tempus vitae, pharetra id, urna. In massa nisl, dapibus vitae, nonummy eget, imperdiet et, lacus. Ut lobortis, lectus eget consectetur dapibus, leo sapien vehicula lacus, eu dignissim velit turpis non metus. Nullam vulputate sem at felis. Curabitur nec velit. Suspendisse pretium, erat et mattis facilisis, diam nibh ultrices urna, ut malesuada magna wisi eget dui. Donec euismod. Aenean euismod lacus quis eros. Etiam semper. Maecenas eu mi in sem rhoncus lacinia. Nulla facilisi. Proin varius diam id lectus. Ut justo. Quisque nonummy.

Nulla massa. Donec vestibulum est eu sapien. Praesent at dui. Sed sollicitudin nulla non enim. Aenean vel neque. Duis id augue. Ut vestibulum tortor vel wisi. Aliquam erat volutpat. Quisque id nunc vel turpis malesuada porta. Mauris euismod eleifend elit. Nunc nisl eros, aliquet vitae, fermentum id, euismod quis, lectus. Aliquam lobortis metus sed quam. Proin iaculis fermentum purus. Suspendisse potenti.

Best,

Ashley E. Brady

Examples (1)

- Science Writer position at Science journal
- PhD Biol Chem and Mol Pharm

123 Fake St. Apt. 2
Anytown, MA 12345
April 4, 2011

New Cancer Journal Editorial Office
Cancer Research Society
Publications Department
456 Fake Ave., 17th Floor
Anycity, PA 67890

Dear *New Cancer Journal* Editorial Team:

I am writing to apply for the *New Cancer Journal* Senior Science Writer position advertised on Jobwebsite.com. I have recently received a Ph.D. in Biological Chemistry and Molecular Pharmacology from Harvard University, and have had a long-standing interest in the analysis and communication of biomedical research.

While in graduate school, I took advantage of many opportunities to develop my skills in critical reading of biological literature. In addition to coursework in Analysis of the Biological Literature, Reviewing Submitted Manuscripts, and Science Communication, in which I evaluated both published and unpublished scientific journal articles, I have participated in a weekly graduate student "journal club" for over 5 years, in which we discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of recently published studies in many different journals and areas of biology. Indeed, some of my favorite aspects of being a scientist are keeping abreast of current publications and important research trends, as well as sharing and discussing published results with my colleagues.

Another focus of my graduate training has been to acquire experience in scientific editing and writing. I have been frequently relied upon by my advisor and colleagues for editing of manuscripts, posters, cover letters, grant applications, and dissertations. I was also recently hired for a contract scientific editing position at Curis, a drug development company focusing on targeted small molecule drug candidates for cancer, and in 2009 was commissioned by Abcam to write a resource article on genomic instability in cancer for their website. Furthermore, I have also received training in communicating research to the public through my participation in a workshop at Harvard titled "Scientists as Citizens," which was led by a former Science Editor of *The New York Times*. In this workshop, I gained valuable experience in explaining complex scientific topics in lay language while avoiding alienating jargon.

As a graduate student in the Department of Pediatric Oncology at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, I have seen firsthand that clinicians and scientists do not read the same literature, and frequently fail to communicate their findings to one another in an inclusive and effective manner. This disconnect hinders both the dissemination of important breakthroughs and the development of potential collaborations that could result in therapeutic benefit. For these reasons, I am very excited about the creation of *New Cancer Journal*, which will undoubtedly be a valuable resource for all those who study and treat cancer. I feel that the *New Cancer Journal* Senior Science Writer position would be a rewarding way in which to utilize my training in cancer biology and one to which I can bring highly relevant experience and skills. My CV is attached. I look forward to discussing this exciting opportunity further. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth S. McKenna, Ph.D.

Having trouble spotting keywords?

- **Wordle** the job description (www.wordle.net)
- Generates "word clouds" from text
- Words that occur frequently in source text appear larger.
- Unimportant words are not shown (e.g. and, or, the...)



New Cancer Journal Sr. Science Writer

“Wordle”

www.tagxedo.com



Examples (1)

- Science Writer position at Science journal
- PhD Biol Chem and Mol Pharm

123 Fake St. Apt. 2
Anytown, MA 12345
April 4, 2011

New Cancer Journal Editorial Office
Cancer Research Society
Publications Department
456 Fake Ave., 17th Floor
Anycity, PA 67890

Dear *New Cancer Journal* Editorial Team:

I am writing to apply for the *New Cancer Journal* Senior Science Writer position advertised on Jobwebsite.com. I have recently received a Ph.D. in Biological Chemistry and Molecular Pharmacology from Harvard University, and have had a long-standing interest in the analysis and communication of biomedical research.

While in graduate school, I took advantage of many opportunities to develop my skills in critical reading of biological literature. In addition to coursework in Analysis of the Biological Literature, Reviewing Submitted Manuscripts, and Science Communication, in which I evaluated both published and unpublished scientific journal articles, I have participated in a weekly graduate student "journal club" for over 5 years, in which we discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of recently published studies in many different journals and areas of biology. Indeed, some of my favorite aspects of being a scientist are keeping abreast of current publications and important research trends, as well as sharing and discussing published results with my colleagues.

Another focus of my graduate training has been to acquire experience in scientific editing and writing. I have been frequently relied upon by my advisor and colleagues for editing of manuscripts, posters, cover letters, grant applications, and dissertations. I was also recently hired for a contract scientific editing position at Curis, a drug development company focusing on targeted small molecule drug candidates for cancer, and in 2009 was commissioned by Abcam to write a resource article on genomic instability in cancer for their website. Furthermore, I have also received training in communicating research to the public through my participation in a workshop at Harvard titled "Scientists as Citizens," which was led by a former Science Editor of *The New York Times*. In this workshop, I gained valuable experience in explaining complex scientific topics in lay language while avoiding alienating jargon.

As a graduate student in the Department of Pediatric Oncology at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, I have seen firsthand that clinicians and scientists do not read the same literature, and frequently fail to communicate their findings to one another in an inclusive and effective manner. This disconnect hinders both the dissemination of important breakthroughs and the development of potential collaborations that could result in therapeutic benefit. For these reasons, I am very excited about the creation of *New Cancer Journal*, which will undoubtedly be a valuable resource for all those who study and treat cancer. I feel that the *New Cancer Journal* Senior Science Writer position would be a rewarding way in which to utilize my training in cancer biology and one to which I can bring highly relevant experience and skills. My CV is attached. I look forward to discussing this exciting opportunity further. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth S. McKenna, Ph.D.

Examples (2)

- Consulting Position
- PhD Neuroscience

Christopher M. Stern, Ph.D.
Address • Phone Number • Email

L.E.K. Consulting
Date

Dear Hiring Manager:

I am writing to apply for a Life Sciences Specialist position at L.E.K. Consulting. I am excited about the opportunity to move from "bench science" to applying the business of science to strategic recommendations. My ability to apply scientific knowledge and training to a business setting would fit well with L.E.K.'s client work and firm culture. I would contribute three core strengths to the L.E.K. team: healthcare consulting experience, entrepreneurial skills, and coaching abilities.

I am pursuing my interest in healthcare consulting as a Project Manager with the Stanford Healthcare Consulting Group - a collaboration between the Stanford Graduate School of Business and local healthcare organizations. Currently, I am leading the effort to shift "non-critical" tasks from physicians to medical assistants for a Silicon Valley family medicine practice. During the Autumn quarter, I will manage a team of four consultants, including scoping and structuring work, guiding team problem-solving sessions, and collaborating with group management to design and implement a formal training curriculum. I am eager to continue expanding my skill set through experiences with the life sciences industry as an L.E.K. consultant.

Concurrently, I have developed my entrepreneurial skills by launching the Stanford Biotechnology Business and Finance Group. In my postdoctoral program, I observed a lack of career preparation and networking opportunities for Stanford life science graduate students interested in business and finance. The group currently provides 40 students with sorely needed career-planning resources including weekly digests of industry news, career panels, and a series of social networking events.

Finally, I have developed my coaching skills through my Ph.D. training. For example, I spent two semesters teaching the capstone class for undergraduate Neuroscience majors at the University of Minnesota. My responsibilities included leading weekly discussion sessions, promoting strategies to enhance participation, and mentoring 20 students through the semester-long development and implementation of a novel, independent literature review that culminated in a formal scientific talk and term-paper. I took great pride in facilitating student development of critical scientific thinking and presentation abilities. Importantly, I learned that I enjoy coaching and mentoring others as much as I appreciate developing my own skill-set.

Given my background, I believe that I would both grow from and contribute to L.E.K. as a Life Sciences Specialist. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best

Christopher M. Stern

Examples (3)

- Faculty Position
- Material Engineering Dept.
- PhD Materials Science and Engineering

Name of search committee chairperson

Address

Dear Professor XXX:

I am responding to your advertisement in the [name of journal] for a faculty position in the Materials Engineering Department at San Jose State University. I am a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford University in the Department of Materials Science and Engineering. My thesis work is in the area of process modeling for semiconductor fabrication and my specific research topic is the diffusion of dopants in gallium arsenide. My thesis advisor is Professor [name], Director of the Integrated Circuits Laboratory in the Department of Electrical Engineering.

I am particularly interested in a faculty position in a department that values teaching. As you may note from my résumé, I have taken every opportunity to teach while at Stanford University, and I have also participated in various educational projects outside of the university environment. These included the Computer Literacy Project, which I founded and directed for three years in a predominantly minority middle school in [city], and Expanding Your Horizons at San Jose State University, a workshop for young women interested in pursuing careers in math and science. At Stanford University, in addition to being a grader and teaching assistant in several electrical engineering courses in semiconductor processing, I helped design and teach a materials science and engineering laboratory course. I also designed and co-taught a new course for undergraduates entitled Electronic Materials Science.

In addition to teaching, I am looking for a research opportunity that would allow me to continue my work in electronic materials processing, structure and properties. At Stanford University I have accomplished original research in pursuit of my degree, as well as contributed to the development of a fabrication line for GaAs digital technology. While working at [name] Corporation I designed and supervised construction of a thin film laboratory research facility and initiated a research project in amorphous semiconductor thin films.

I expect to finish my degree in [date]. I have enclosed my curriculum vita, including a list of publications, a list of references, and a copy of my passport as proof of U.S. citizenship. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Name

Phone: (123) 456.7890

Email: drwho@gmail.com

Source: Richard M. Reis

<http://chronicle.com/article/The-Basics-of-Cover-Letter/46259/>

Cover Letter Resources

- CV/Resume Drop-In clinic, BRET Office of Career Development Wednesdays, 12:30-1:30pm (Light Hall, Suite 340) BRET Office of Career Development <https://medschool.vanderbilt.edu/career-development/resume-cv-writing>
- Versatile PhD. <http://versatilephd.com/>
- The Muse: Career Guidance and Resources <https://www.themuse.com/>
- BioSpace (Resources): <http://www.biospace.com/>



Thank you!

Examples (4)

- General example
- Non-scientist
- Sales and Marketing position

Before

Dear Hiring Manager:

Your posting on LinkedIn for a Sales and Marketing Coordinator recently caught my eye, and I think you will find I am an exceptional candidate for this position.

I am an accomplished administrative professional and a junior in the Marketing & Management program at ~~Riverrun~~ University. Over the past ten years, I have provided high-level support in a variety of industries and across multiple functional areas. I am now seeking a position that will make the most of my administrative experience while offering additional opportunities for personal and professional development.

In exchange, I offer exceptional attention to detail, highly developed communication skills, and a talent for managing complex projects with a demonstrated ability to prioritize and multitask.

My accomplishments and qualifications are further detailed in the attached resume. I welcome the opportunity to meet with you and discuss the value that I can bring to your organization.

Warmest regards,

~~Xxxx~~

After

Dear Hiring Manager:

It is with great enthusiasm that I submit my application for the position of Sales Coordinator for the ~~Westeros~~ Castle Project. As an administrative professional with over ten years' experience, I know my diverse skills and qualifications will make me an asset to the ~~Westeros~~ project team.

As you will see from the attached resume, I've built my career in a variety of roles and industries, mostly in small companies where I was not just the admin but also gatekeeper, technology whiz, bookkeeper and marketing guru. I'm not only used to wearing many hats, I sincerely enjoy it; I thrive in an environment where no two work days are exactly the same.

In addition to being flexible and responsive, I'm also a fanatic for details – particularly when it comes to presentation. One of my recent projects involved coordinating a 200-page grant proposal: I proofed and edited the narratives provided by the division head, formatted spreadsheets, and generally made sure every line was letter-perfect and that the entire finished product conformed to the specific guidelines of the RFP. (The result? A five-year, \$1.5 million grant award.) I believe in applying this same level of attention to detail to tasks as visible as prepping the materials for a top-level meeting and as mundane as making sure the copier never runs out of paper.

Last but certainly not least, I want you to know that I'm a passionate ~~Westeros~~ fan and a longtime supporter of the new castle. I've been following the new castle movement since the earliest days of the original "Save the Tombs" campaign, and I am so excited to see this vision becoming a reality. I've already checked out the new castle website, and the renderings of the new throne and great hall are stunning, to say the least – I particularly love the vintage murals and art featured throughout the building. Nice touch!

In closing, I am thrilled at the possibility of being involved in the new castle almost literally from the ground up, and would love the opportunity to meet with you and discuss the value that I can bring to the ~~Targaryen~~ organization and the ~~Westeros~~ Castle Project. I appreciate your consideration and look forward to hearing from you.

Warmest regards,

<http://www.askamanager.org/2014/02/heres-a-real-life-example-of-a-great-cover-letter-with-before-and-after-versions.html>