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## OFFICE *of* CAREER SERVICES

# SMITH MS PROGRAM COVER LETTER BASICS

Are cover letters really important or necessary? The answer is yes and yes. The cover letter is often the first impression a prospective employer will form of you. A well-written cover letter will persuade a prospective employer to read your resume, which may result in an interview. Therefore, you should put as much effort into preparing your cover letter as you do your resume.

### COVER LETTER FORMAT

- Letter must be typed.
- Letter must not exceed 1 page.
- No more than 3-4 paragraphs
- Your cover letter should have the same header (name, contact info) as your resume.
- Block format (no indents), 12 point font, left justified
- There are 3 main sections in a cover letter
  - Introduction (1 paragraph)
  - Body (1-2 paragraphs)
  - Closing (1 paragraph)

### COVER LETTER DOs and DON'TS

#### **DOs**

- DO address your letter to a specific person
- DO tailor each letter to the specific company/job you are applying for
- DO keep it to one page
- DO be concise, direct and positive
- Do tell the employer what you can do for them
- DO sign the letter (if submitting cover letter electronically, use a font that mimics an actual signature)
- DO vary the way you begin sentences

#### **DON'Ts**

- DO NOT repeat what is in your resume
- DO NOT use words that express doubt, such as "I hope" or "I believe"
- DO NOT list high school activities
- DO NOT tell the employer what they can do for you
- DO NOT use a generic letter
- DO NOT over use "I" statements
- DO NOT include an objective or summary statement

## GETTING STARTED

### PHASE I: IDENTIFY COMPANY “WANTS”

Carefully identify employer requirements and preferences. This will help you understand what skills and experiences are important to the employer. Read through the job description and web site and highlight key clues as to what the employer is looking for in a candidate. Include skills, knowledge, personality and experience-related items. Here is a sample:

**Job Description** As a Tax professional, no two days are the same. The **challenges you will face will change continually**, and the solutions you devise will be critical to the success of the business. In order to succeed, **you need to be creative and analytical; dynamic and collaborative; a strategic thinker and possess a consistent passion to learn.** This is Tax at PricewaterhouseCoopers. And we invite you to become a part of it.

**Position/Program Requirements** Job Duties

Play an integral role in providing tax services to our clients as a professional in PwC's core tax practice.

Participate in all phases of tax compliance engagements, including planning, execution and completion.

Research tax laws, rules and regulations and analyze their application to specific situations.

Participate in a wide range of projects; consistently **demonstrate creative thinking and individual initiative.**

Consistently **demonstrate the ability to work effectively in a team environment**; understanding personal and team roles; contributing to a positive working environment by building solid relationships with team members; and proactively seeking guidance, clarification and feedback.

Identify and address client needs: **build solid relationships with clients**; develop an awareness of Firm services; approach clients in an organized and knowledgeable manner; **deliver clear requests for information**; and **demonstrate flexibility in prioritizing and completing tasks.**

Job Requirements

**A solid understanding of the technical aspects of tax compliance services**, including planning, strategy and execution.

General knowledge of federal and state tax laws.

**Demonstrated ability to research and analyze tax laws, rules and regulations and to analyze pertinent client, industry, and technical matters.**

Experience **demonstrating strong problem solving skills** and the **ability to prioritize and manage multiple tasks.**

**Ability to interact with various levels of client and firm management** through both written and verbal communications.

**Demonstrated self-motivation** and has a desire to take responsibility for personal growth and career development.

Completed Bachelor degree in Accounting (provided all of the minimum requirements are met for CPA licensure per respective state regulations), **Master of Accountancy or Taxation preferred.**

**Commitment to become credentialed** with appropriate primary credentials, which include CPA, JD, or Enrolled Agent certification/license (may vary by practice).

## PHASE II: ALIGN YOUR COMPETENCIES TO THEIR REQUIREMENTS

Identify the capabilities that you possess which align with the employers requirements, by creating 3 Situation-Action-Results (SAR) stories. **Do not exaggerate your experience.**

For each of the employer requirements you highlighted, identify an experience that demonstrates you have that skill or ability. Be sure to **use relevant and recent examples.**

## PHASE III: WRITING THE COVER LETTER

Combine phases I-III and create your targeted cover letter. Use the core competencies highlighted in the job description or from conversations with the employer in your cover letter as bullet points under the category headings. Typically, a maximum of three categories is best. You can combine categories where appropriate and condense bullets where possible.

- Do not duplicate OR restate your resume in the cover letter.
- Research the company/position to determine wants/needs and how your skills and background match.
- Customize each cover letter to fit the job. Each cover letter should contain the company name, job title, and contact information, if it is available. It should also illustrate your interest in the position, the company, and indicate why the employer should hire you. Be sure to highlight relevant accomplishments and skills that set you apart from other candidates.
- Describe how your interests and skills fit the position to which you are applying. Your cover letter should incorporate the company research you have done, i.e. state how the company's strategy, culture, growth or new initiatives motivate you to explore career opportunities with them. Be specific! Use facts and figures taken from the company's web site or business news when describing the firm's characteristics.
- Avoid starting too many of your sentences with the word "I". To improve sentence flow, you can begin sentences with "My skills would enable me . . .," "My experience includes . . .," "My background . . .".
- Don't use long, run-on sentences. Long sentences may indicate a lack of clarity in your thought.
- Be sure to ask for what you want in the closing paragraph, for example an interview, brief phone call, etc.
- Be sure that it is clear to an employer how and where to reach you during business hours. If you indicate your mobile phone number, **only answer the phone if you are prepared to have a discussion and can take the call in a quiet place.** Be sure to answer your phone in a professional manner.
- Make sure the voicemail greeting on your mobile phone and / or home phone is professional.
- Proofread your cover letters before sending out! You will be applying to a number of opportunities, and it is imperative that you do not mistakenly send your cover letter to a company with the wrong company name, contact name, and/or job title.

## SAMPLE COVER LETTER FORMAT #1

Duplicate the heading of your resume – your name, contact information, etc. This helps to brand your letter and resume together, and provides all necessary information.

Date (Month Date, Year)

Mr./Ms./Dr. Full Name of Recipient  
Title of Recipient, Company Name  
Recipient Street Address  
City, State Zip

Dear Hiring Manager OR (Mr. /Ms.) \_\_\_\_\_: (Use a person's name whenever possible)

### **Introduction:** (First Paragraph)

- Identify who you are (e.g., your year in school, focus area, and career interest).
- Mention the position you are applying for.
- How you learned of the opportunity (e.g. saw the position advertised on HireSmith or someone recommended that you contact them).
- States why this job and company are of particular interest to you - tailor this as much as possible. This is a great place to show that you have researched the organization. What are they doing that is innovative, interesting, garnering headlines?

### **Body:** Middle Paragraph(s) (Narrative or Bullet Format is permissible)

- Address the employer's needs and the position requirements in terms of experience and skills.
- Reflect on your personal experiences – full-time, part-time, and summer jobs, internships, related volunteer experiences, extracurricular activities, academic background, unique skills, certifications and/or interests – and choose what is most relevant to the position you are applying to.
- Next, prepare a brief description or SAR story that demonstrates how your experience meets the need of the employer. Do not make broad generalizations about your skills. Instead, include specific examples and include an accomplishment as a result of your actions.
- Show that you have researched the field/organization.

### **Conclusion:** Final Paragraph

- Summarize your strengths using different terms than those listed.
- If known, include a brief sentence about how well you fit with the company culture if applicable and not already mentioned.
- State what action you would like taken (schedule an interview or phone conversation to further discuss your qualifications).
- If you include a statement about follow up, be sure to honor your word.
- Thank the contact for his/her time and consideration.

Sincerely,

(Your Handwritten Signature)

(Type your name here)

(SAMPLE)

## Karen Student

100 Baltimore Ave. #2 ° College Park, MD ° 20785 ° (301) 245-0000 ° karen.student@rhsmith.umd.edu

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January 2, 2014

Ms. Holly Jones  
Talent Acquisition Manager, PWC  
1100 Big Four Road  
McLean, VA 22182

Dear Ms. Jones:

It is my great pleasure to apply for the position of Audit Specialist as listed on HireSmith at the Robert H. Smith School of Business. A May 2014 Accounting Master of Science graduate of the Smith School, my focus is on audit and consulting. PWC's commitment to collaboration and teamwork, as well as your passion and drive for data analytics make me a great fit for the organization. I met John Partner of PWC's Baltimore office at a recent University of Maryland basketball game and was thrilled to have the opportunity to discuss PWC even further. My internships in audit and accounting, as well as my CPA studies make me an excellent candidate.

- **Solid knowledge of tax laws; demonstrated ability to research and analyze tax laws:** At the Smith School, I am a Graduate Assistant to Professor Rebecca Hahn, whose research includes US and global tax standards. For the past year my duties have included research and analysis of US GAAP and non-GAAP accounting standards, as well as, tax practices of multinational firms. The research has culminated in the acceptance of a paper for publication in the American Tax Journal; I will be listed as third author.
- **Building solid client relationships:** I was an audit intern at KPMG in the summer of 2013, serving in a client-facing role. My role on the team included regular updates to the client on project progress; through frequent, respectful, transparent contact I built the relationship to an extent that remains within that team today.
- **Demonstrated self-motivation:** While an undergraduate student in Accounting and a Masters student in Accounting, I have been a student affiliate member of the American Institute of CPAs. Dedicated to achieving my CPA, I have attended three AICPA national conferences, including the AICPA National Auditing Tax Symposium. I formed a study group within the Smith School Accounting Program, recruiting ten follow students, and have successfully passed the first two levels of the exam, although the Smith School does not offer a formalized CPA study program. I intend to achieve the CPA within my first two years of work.

My talent for research and my passion for teamwork make me an excellent candidate for the Audit Specialist role. PWC's commitment to diversity, respect for its teams and commitment to corporate responsibility appeal greatly to me as I consider my career goals. I know that PWC will be interviewing at the Smith School in February 2014. I hope to meet with you then and look forward to hearing from you. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,  
*Karen Student*  
Karen Student

(SAMPLE version 2 – narrative paragraph)

Karen Student

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As a graduate assistant in Accounting, I have demonstrated a strong ability to research and analyze tax laws. Professor Rebecca Hahn tasked me with analysis of client and industry matters for a major global retailer and the tax implications that retailer faces both within GAAP and non-GAAP accounting standards as well as in global expansion. My research contributions provided the retailer with \$1M in potential tax savings over a three year expansion plan. During the course of the project I also interacted with members of the client firm from the managerial to the C-suite level, demonstrating my ability to communicate with client management, a skill critical to consulting.

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Sincerely,  
*Karen Student*  
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