

COVER LETTER WRITING FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Sharon Fleshman
Career Services

Chia-Ying Pan
Weingarten Learning Resources Center

Rosette Pyne
Career Services

What we will cover



- What is a cover letter and its purpose?
- Grammar and style (Chia-Ying)
- Content and structure (Rosette and Sharon)
- Questions and Answers

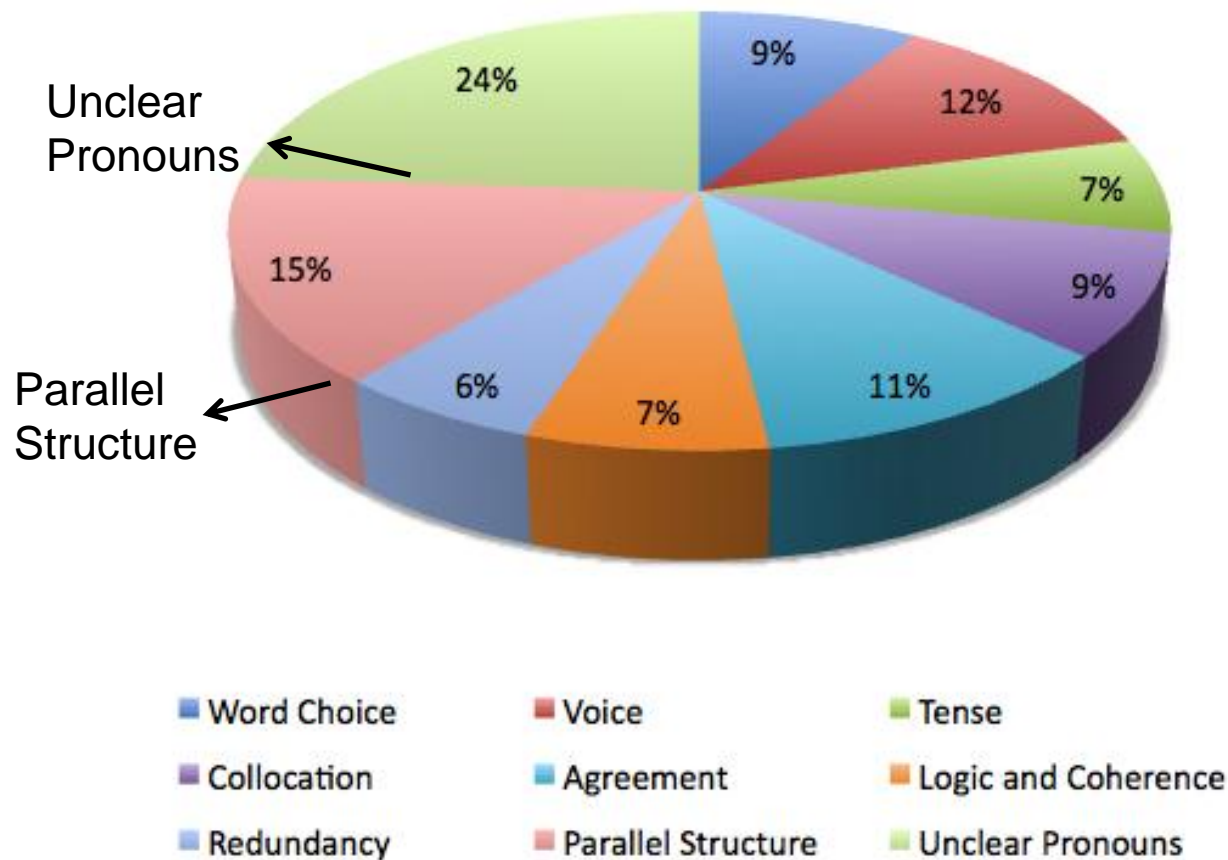
What is a cover letter and what is its purpose?



A business style letter that:

- Accompanies resumes when applying for jobs
- Introduces you to the employer
- Expresses your interest in and knowledge of the organization and the position
- Highlights your specific qualifications, including education and experience, for the position
- Serves as a writing sample
- Facilitates the next steps

Common Cover Letter Mistakes made by Non-Native Speakers of English



Source: 83 cover letters written by non-native English speaking students at Penn

[Collected from 2006-2010]

Issue 1: Unclear Pronouns



Unclear:

- I believe that this should bring profit to your company and make a great contribution.
- I tried very hard to understand and resolve this. As a result, I was promoted to assistant director.

Clear:

- I believe that this approach should bring profit to your company and make a great contribution.
- I tried very hard to understand and resolve this issue. As a result, I was promoted to assistant director.

Issue 2: Parallel Structure



Not Parallel:

The production manager was asked to write his report **quickly, accurate, and in a detailed manner.**

Parallel:

The production manager was asked to write his report **quickly, accurately, and thoroughly.**

Issue 2: Parallel Structure



Not parallel: My professor characterized me as hard working student because I always started early to study for the exam, completed my lab problems in a detailed manner, and my motivation was high.

Parallel: My professor characterized me as a hard working student because I always started early to study for the exam, completed my lab problems in a detailed manner, and maintained a high level of motivation.

Issue 3: Agreement



- **Incorrect:** My education and experience **has** prepared me.....
 - **Correct:** My education and experience **have** prepared me.
- **Incorrect:** As a future teacher, it's important for me to learn the different **way** I can help **student**.
 - **Correct:** As a future teacher, it's important for me to learn different **ways** that I can help **students**.

Issue 4: Voice/Tone



Incorrect: These two examples have a somewhat “desperate” tone.

- I am available for employment right away.
- As an perspective intern, I aim to learn as much as possible. My focus is on learning, low pay does not concern me.

Incorrect: This example sounds too opportunistic.

- I would like to apply for this job because I see this as an opportunity to build my career. This job serves perfectly as a stepping stone to a full-time job.

Issue 5: Word Choice



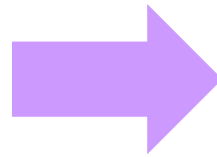
Awkward word choice: I would like to **reveal** to other international students that without being a native speaker, we still **maintain** our outstanding abilities in many aspects and opportunities to achieve success.

Better word choice: I would like to **inform** other international students that without being native speakers, they still **possess** outstanding abilities in many aspects and opportunities to achieve success.

Issue 5: Word Choice

The words on the right are more professional in tone:

look at/into
figure out
come up with
make up
get rid of
show up
keep up
go down
look over
run into
bring up



investigate, examine
determine
develop, create
constitute
eliminate
appear, emerge
maintain
decrease
review
encounter, face
raise, introduce

Issue 6: Redundancy



Too repetitive: Because of my background and preparation for work and advancement with your company and new enterprise, I have a concern and comment to implement and put into effect my skills and abilities for new solutions and achievements above and beyond your dreams and expectations.

Better: Because of my background and skills, I can contribute to your new venture by.....

Issue 7: Tense



Incorrect: I **have learnt** to make the class be students-oriented, not teacher-fronted and I **knew** how to make students focus on their studies and really acquire something after the course. Meanwhile, I **learnt** the teaching methodologies, styles and strategies that can help students learning (subject).

Correct: I **am learning** the teaching methodologies, styles and strategies that can help students **learn** (subject). For example, I **have learned** to make the class student-oriented, not teacher-centered. In addition, I **know** how to help students focus on their studies and apply what they learn after the course.

Issue 8: Repeating Resume Information



Tip: Don't just list items that are on your resume. Select aspects of your background that are particularly relevant to the job and focus on them in your letter. Highlight accomplishments that demonstrate your ability to do the job.

I have over X years of XXXX teaching experience at cram, elementary, and professional training schools in country A, country B, and country C. More recently, I worked as a curriculum developer and senior teacher at a start up school in country E known as XYZ program.

Better: My previous teaching experience in various types of schools in diverse locations has provided me with a foundation for developing curriculum that empowers teachers. As curriculum developer and senior teacher at XYZ program, I noticed a need to promote more collaborative approaches to curriculum development. Therefore, I proposed and coordinated a quarterly planning session where teachers and curriculum developers exchanged ideas on adapting the curriculum to the needs of the students. The morale and level of collaboration among the teachers increased, resulting in more effective teaching.

Issue 9: I-Strain



I read you have a need for a teacher. I am very much interested in this position. I have been teaching for many years in both high schools and elementary schools so I have a lot of experiences.

Better: As an experienced elementary and high school teacher, I am very much interested in this position.

.....

Later on, I traveled to Thailand where there is a high demand for English teachers. I not only taught high school students a new language, I also had the chance to explore a new culture which broadened my view of the world.

Better: Later on, I traveled to Thailand where there is a high demand for English teachers. While there, I taught a new language to high school students, explored a new culture and broadened my view of the world.

Issue 10: Lack Action Verbs



List of action verbs:

Communication/ People Skills:

- Developed
- Formulated
- Collaborated
- Negotiated
- Interpreted
- Promoted

Creative/ Leadership Skills:

- Created
- Customized
- Designed
- Funded
- Shaped
- Initiated

Data/ Financial Skills:

- Administered
- Reconciled
- Reduced
- Corrected
- Conserved
- Budgeted

Issue 10: Lack Action Verbs



List of action verbs:

Organizational Skills:

- Standardized
- Systematized
- Executed
- Incorporated
- Provided
- Validated

Research Skills:

- Conducted
- Analyzed
- Examined
- Investigated
- Measured
- Compared

Teaching Skills:

- Advised
- Facilitated
- Instructed
- Coached
- Motivated
- Individualized

Issue 11: Incorrect Use of Articles and Prepositions



Incorrect: As a graduate student in TESOL program, I have **the** background **on** second-language acquisition and started my teaching internship **in** the beginning of the semester.

Correct: As a graduate student in **the** TESOL program, I have **a** background **in** second-language acquisition and started my teaching internship **at** the beginning of the semester.

Good Cover Letters



-
- Are tailored to the position and organization
 - Are a clear presentation of your interest, skills and relevant experience
 - Have a professional and personal tone
 - Follow a traditional business letter format
 - Pay close attention to grammar and organization

Cover Letter Structure



-
- Your Street Address
City, State Zip Code (Or Country)
 - Today's Date
 - Person's Name
Title
Organization
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code (Or Country)
 - Dear Ms./Mr./Dr. Last Name: *(or, Dear Recruiter: if you couldn't get a specific name)*

Opening Paragraph



- Explain why you are writing
 - Introduce yourself
 - Indicate the position you are applying for
 - If you have already talked to the person you are sending the letter to, mention it
 - If you have a connection to the company or organization, let them know
- Explain why you are interested
 - Demonstrate that you know the organization and its mission and core values
 - Explain how the position/company is a good fit with your career goals and interests
 - Example: "I was interested to read the article in *The Austin Times* which addressed the growing international student population at your university. I am moving to Austin next month and am eager to continue my work with international students. "
 - Example: "Your county-wide commitment to a whole language philosophy and your high level of parental and community involvement makes me extremely interested in your district."

Middle Paragraph(s)



-
- Elaborate on a few specific strengths or experiences that match with the position.
 - Emphasize what you can do for the employer, not what the employer can do for you
 - Expand on information in your resume
 - Highlight your qualifications by discussing your contributions/accomplishments
 - When applying for a specific position, refer to the job description AND refer to your resume
 - Example: “Based on your job description, I understand that you are seeking a self motivated employee who has demonstrated proficiency in C++. As the enclosed resume indicates, during my last summer job, I.....”

Final Paragraph



- Pave the way for an interview
 - Express your interest in an interview

- End the letter by thanking the recruiter for their time and consideration of your application
 - Example: "I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you personally to discuss my qualifications further. Feel free to contact me at 215-222-3333 or dstudent@gse.upenn.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration."

Signature



-
- Sincerely,
 - [*Signature*]
 - Your Name (typed)

Questions?



Please contact us!

University of Pennsylvania
Career Services

Suite 20, McNeil Bldg., 3718 Locust Walk

(215) 898-7531

www.vpul.upenn.edu/careerservices