

Writing A Letter Of Intent

If you think you don't need to put much effort into writing a Letter of Intent -- or don't need to send them at all because nobody reads them -- think again. Many prospective Department Heads view the Letter of Intent as a way of getting their first impression of you. The letter reveals:

- how well you communicate
- what your experience and qualifications are -- briefly
- your level of professionalism
- clues to your personality
- how detail oriented you are (i.e., are there typos or other errors?)

To make the best first impression, you need to know exactly what a Letter of Intent is and to put some thought into it before you start writing. You also need to understand what to include -- and not to include -- and to be aware of some cardinal rules of Letter of Intent writing.

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What is a Letter of Intent?

A Letter of Intent is an introduction, a sales pitch and a proposal for further action all in one. It gives the reader a taste of what's to come by highlighting the aspects of your background that will be most relevant to the reader. A Letter of Intent also demonstrates that you can organize your thoughts and express yourself clearly and appropriately; in other words, it reflects your communication skills and, to some extent, your personality.

Letters of Intent are typically one page documents. Like lots of things in life, they have a beginning, middle and end:

1. Usually an introduction saying who you are and why you are writing (why you want to get into the program you are applying for);
2. Followed by a sales pitch of what you have to offer (volunteer or work experience, education, skills); and
3. Then a closing in which you propose steps for further action (what you will do with the education you want to receive from attending your program of choice).

These three components often amount to three or four paragraphs, but there are no hard and fast rules about exactly how you break up the information.

Five Things to Think about Before Writing

If you find yourself struck by writer's block at about the "Dear Mr. or Ms. So-and-So" point, then you probably need to take a step back and put some more thought into your cover letter before diving into it. Asking yourself the following five questions will help you build a foundation for your Letter of Intent and will make the actual writing go much more smoothly.

1. What does the prospective department head want from you? Which skills, knowledge and experience would be an asset in the educational program you are applying to?
2. What are your objectives? Are you trying to get an interview or simply hoping to get into the program?

3. What are two to four qualities that you would bring to this program?
4. How can you match your experience to the program entrance requirements? What are some specific accomplishments you can mention which give credence to the qualities you identified in question number 3?
5. Why do you want to get into this program? What will it do for your long term goals?

When you've addressed these five issues, you're ready to put fingers to keyboard and start hammering out that letter.

Anatomy of a Letter of Intent

If you're bewildered by how you're actually going to write a cover letter, it can help to break the letter down into its various parts and concentrate on just one section at a time. Here's what goes into each of the four main sections of a cover letter:

The Opening

This is where you tell BCIT Department Heads who you are, why you are writing and how you heard about the program. The "who you are" part is a brief introduction of yourself with a phrase like: "I am a senior at XYZ High School/University/College graduating in June." Just mention the basic facts about you and your situation, choosing the ones that will be most relevant to the program. The "why you're writing" part is where you mention where you heard about the program why you have chosen to go into this field of study.

The Sales Pitch

In this section, it's best to get right to the point. The objective of this part of the letter is to list -- either in paragraph form or as an actual list of bullet points -- the reasons why the reader should see you as a viable candidate. It's best to start with a statement that provides an overview of your qualifications, then go into them more specifically, using the examples you identified before you started writing. A typical opening statement might sound something like: "As a computer systems technology (CST) major and former Trades Person, I offer the following skills and accomplishments."

The Flattery

This is the "why them" section of your letter. It's where you flatter the reader a bit by commenting on something positive about BCIT or the Department. You might mention BCIT's or the Department's reputation, culture or anything else that they take pride in. Program Heads like to know that you have chosen them for a reason and that they are not just one of many educational institutions you are writing to as part of a mass mailing.

The Request for Further Action

Some people think of this final section of a cover letter as the closing, but it's much more than that. The closing paragraph is not just about thanking the reader for taking the time to read your letter or for considering you as a candidate for the program. It is also about where to go from here -- about opening the door to a response....either for an interview or acceptance into the program.

Once you've gotten these four sections of the letter completed in terms of content, go back and smooth out any rough edges of your writing and check for typos, misspellings and grammatical errors. Then you're ready for "Sincerely" or "Best Regards" and your signature.

10 Cardinal Rules of Letter of Intent Writing

1. Tailor your letter as much as possible to the targeted reader.
2. Talk about what you can do with this education.
3. Convey focused career goals.
4. Don't say anything negative about your educational experience or your life in general.
5. Cut to the chase -- don't ramble.
6. Don't make empty claims that aren't backed up with examples.
7. Don't write more than one page unless the prospective employer has asked for a detailed or extended Letter of Intent.
8. Check, recheck and triple check your letter for typos and other errors.
9. Get other people to proof-read your letter before you send it.
10. Keep accessible copies of all letters you mail, fax or email along with a log of when letters were sent.

Portions of this article were excerpted from the book "Cover Letters" (of The Princeton Review Job Notes series) by L. Michelle Tullier. Random House/Princeton Review Books, 1997.