
Chapter 1

Cover Letter

**The advantage of love at first sight is that
it delays a second sight.**

Natalie Clifford Barney¹

At a Glance

What Else Is It Called?

- Transmittal letter or letter of transmission

When Is It Used?

A cover letter should be sent whenever it is not prohibited. With some requests for proposal, there is a strict page limitation with explicit directions to follow for every page. In this case, a cover letter is not usually appropriate. However, you can leverage a cover letter to make an excellent first impression so it should be included whenever possible. Normally with proposal to a foundation or a state program, a cover letter can be included. Often with a federal grant program, a cover letter is not included.

Why Is It Used?

A cover letter is an introduction. It is a lot like making introductions in person. It is a way of getting started on the right foot by introducing yourself instead of launching into the request right away.

Key Concepts

- Brief.
- Positive and confident.

¹ Natalie Clifford Barney (1876–1972), U.S.-born French author, *Samples from Almost Illegible Notebooks*, no. 299 (London: Adam, 1962).

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- Concise and inviting.
- Thank you.

Formatting Issues

Make the letter one page only, keeping it as brief as possible. The letter should be printed on original letterhead. The type should be a 12-point text font, and the margins should be generous, which means at least one inch. We suggest you not fully justify your text (straight margins on both left and right). Use left justification and leave the right margin ragged (rag right). There should be a reference line between the inside address and salutation that clearly identifies the grant program for which the proposal is being submitted.

The salutation should be to a specific person. You may not use “To whom it may concern” or “Dear Colleague” salutations. They show that you have not done the basic research to determine the grant program contact person. The letter should come from (be signed by) the highest ranking person possible in your organization (the correspondent). The letter should be signed by a person, not a machine or a computer and preferably with blue ink. A letter signed with blue ink is indisputably an original. Don’t forget to include the “prepared by” line at the bottom of the letter. Show professionalism in all ways—including the smallest.

Detailed Discussion

A cover letter is an opportunity for you to make an inviting introduction to the grant maker about your organization and also about your project. This is a place for creativity but not elaborate language. You want to warmly invite the reader to read about your excellent project.

The cover letter is one place to push the most obvious “hot buttons.” What is a hot button? It is an issue that is critical to the funder. As we have explained in detail in our other books, you must meet the funder’s agenda to receive an award. By reading every bit of information you can find on the funder, you will see recurring topics and themes. Perhaps the funder is particularly interested in diversity, or projects that promote preventive health care, or projects that promote family unity. These are hot buttons—issues that are at the heart of the reason the funder has gone to the trouble of setting up funds to grant.

Funders do not just decide to offer grants willy nilly. There is a problem or several problems they want to solve. If they had enough funding to solve the problem themselves, they would certainly try to do just that. For

example, assume one grant maker wants to stop drug and alcohol abuse in the United States. How much money would it take to do that? More than even our federal and state governments have. So with the funds the grant maker has, they “seed” projects that, in their opinion, have a good chance of making an impact. They fund projects that can be modeled by other groups to help in their communities. Do they fund projects to set up animal shelters? Or water conservation? No, they fund projects that obviously and rationally directly impact drug and alcohol use in this country. This is just one reason why it is a huge mistake to write one proposal and send it to dozens of funders—you are wasting your time if your project does not match the hot buttons of the funder.

How do you find out about a given funder’s hot buttons? You read their literature—all of it. You read about projects they have funded in the past. You read any articles you can find about the funder. Most funders have an Internet presence now and that makes it a lot easier, but some are glad to mail you information about their programs. Funders do not keep their key agendas secret and they are not playing a game with you—they want to invest in the very best projects they can.

Let’s look at a couple of examples from actual information published by grant makers.

The Ford Foundation² is a resource for innovative people and institutions worldwide. Our goals are to:

- *Strengthen democratic values,*
- *Reduce poverty and injustice,*
- *Promote international cooperation and*
- *Advance human achievement*

This has been our purpose for more than half a century.

A fundamental challenge facing every society is to create political, economic and social systems that promote peace, human welfare and the sustainability of the environment on which life depends. We believe that the best way to meet this challenge is to encourage initiatives by those living and working closest to where problems are located; to promote collaboration among the non-profit, government and business sectors, and to ensure participation by men and women from diverse communities and at all levels of society. In our experience, such activities help build common understanding, enhance excellence, enable people to improve their lives and reinforce their commitment to society.

The Ford Foundation is one source of support for these activities. We work mainly by making grants or loans that build knowledge and strengthen organizations and networks. Since our financial resources are modest in comparison

² The Ford Foundation, 320 E. 43rd St., New York, NY 10017, www.fordfound.org.

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to societal needs, we focus on a limited number of problem areas and program strategies within our broad goals.

Let's look at what the Ford Foundation says about itself. What are its hot buttons? The obvious ones are the four bulleted items, but what are the less obvious issues critical to the grant maker, the Ford Foundation?

First of all they write, "we believe the best way to meet this challenge is to encourage initiatives by those living and working closest to where problems are located." What does this mean? It means that the Ford Foundation wants to fund efforts at the grassroots level. It is not going to look kindly on a proposal by a think tank in California wishing to solve a literacy issue in the rural Midwest. It will, however, consider a proposal that meets one or more of the obvious criteria (the ones in bullets) and that is submitted by a group of organizations actually located in the rural Midwest.

So how do you use this information in a cover letter? Well you might write an initial paragraph like the one below.

Our project will go a long way to effectively offering literacy education classes right in the communities in which our most rural citizens live. Our organization is located centrally among five counties with the highest poverty ratings and lowest educational achievement in the state. Our illiterate citizens have failed in school and thus do not want to go to a school house for help. They are much more comfortable in their churches, grange halls, and local grocery stores. So we are taking our programs to them.

Here is another example from the David and Lucille Packard Foundation.³

The mission of the Conservation Program is to ensure a healthy future for all life on earth. The Conservation Program embraces an ecological approach that draws together the people, institutions, resources, and ideas that can best address our environmental crisis. Our primary goal is to conserve biodiversity resources in our core geography of California, Cascadia, Hawaii, the Western Pacific, and Mexico. To accomplish that, we support field-based projects in those areas. In addition, other program areas address some of the drivers of biodiversity loss and environmental decline; these program areas include Marine Fisheries, Energy, Western Land Use, and, in conjunction with the Population Program, Population-Environment.

The primary goals are pretty well clarified in this statement. However, take notice of the phrase, "draws together the people, institutions, resources,

³ The David and Lucille Packard Foundation, 300 2nd St., Ste. 200, Los Altos, CA 94022, www.packfound.org.

and ideas that can best address.” This indicates that this grant maker subscribes to the practice of partnering to solve a problem. This is a growing issue among grant makers around the world. The theory is that partnerships make best use of all resources and reduce redundancy in the use of resources. The following is a paragraph for a cover letter that addresses both the primary issues and the hot button.

In our coastal area, pollution from area industry has raised temperatures of the bay so that the native fish and shellfish are dying or are contaminated by bacteria. This interrupts the ecosystem and interrupts the carefully and environmentally sound management of our fishing industry. Through a coalition of concerned citizens, managers of the local fish processing plants, representatives of the fishermen, and key top managers of the local industries, we believe we have developed a solution to the problem—one with lasting effect.

What have you done with this introductory paragraph in your cover letter? You have let them know that you understand their agenda, and moreover, you meet the essence of their standard. In doing this, you are predisposing them to like your proposal because you clearly understand their key considerations and, moreover, you agree with them.

What is another thing your cover letter accomplishes? It places your organization and project in the state, country or world. You know your community intimately. But remember, the readers who read your proposal may not know anything about your type of community. Many government grant makers bring in people from all parts of the country and not one may be from your part of the world. Even within a state, one part of the state may not know a thing about the problems and pressures of living in another part of the state. So one thing you do in a cover letter is try to give a thumbnail picture of your part of the world and the target population your project intends to serve.

Remember: A grant maker intends to solve a problem. Your project must be targeted to solve the problem that interests the grant maker. The proposal is the way you describe your project so that the grant maker knows enough about it to be sure it is a good investment. Your project must serve a target population—it must benefit someone—so it is important that you describe your target population so the grant maker can picture the beneficiaries.

Here is an example of how you might briefly describe your location and target population in a cover letter.

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Our area is rural and our population is diverse due mostly to a large number of migrant workers. There are few cohesive communities with recognizable structure. Our people mostly work the land or work in the few small industries scattered across the three counties we intend to serve. Most adults reached no more than eighth grade and most clearly live in poverty.

Here is another example from a different type of environment.

We are a second tier city of half a million people. Most of our citizens work in steel or heavy manufacturing facilities. During a significant portion of the year, the climate is such that citizens rarely get out except to go to work. Loose communities surround each manufacturing plant. Other than school, there is little for our young people to do and there are many hours of isolation without adult supervision. For these and other reasons, we have a growing alcohol abuse problem both with adults and, significantly, with our young people.

It is also important to state your purpose for submitting a proposal. You do not need to go into detail but you need to say something more than “we need money.” They know that. Few, if any, funders will fund the entire budget of a project. This is not a money issue as much as a philosophy issue. If the grant maker funds the entire budget, what will happen after the grant funding inevitably runs out? The project will die. Other than entitlements, grant funding is not intended to go on forever. It has a limited time span and no grant funder wants to fund a project that dies when the funding runs out. They want to fund lasting efforts that are good investments.

So the grant maker wants to see your investment, and that of all the other partners and stakeholders in the effort. This is the overall project budget. There is a smaller budget that represents what you are asking of the grant maker. Here is an example of what you might say as a purpose for submitting the proposal.

Though we have funding internally and from our partners for the planning phase and for the actual structures within which the project will run, we do not have enough funding to cover all of the equipment necessary to accomplish the project mission.

Here is another example of a concise statement of purpose.

Our project is designed so that once it is implemented, project income and donated staff from our partners will insure continuation. However, for the project to be initiated, we need funding for staff training, for resource materials for our community resource center, and for the technology to manage the continuing project.

Next to last, it is important to thank the grant maker for the opportunity to submit a proposal. Everyone likes to be thanked and the representatives of the grant maker are no exceptions. It is an opportunity that you would not have if the people that set up the fund had not worked hard, first of all, to establish the fund and, second, to review, select and evaluate worthy projects.

Finally, give information on the project contact person. The project contact person is the one person in your organization who knows more about the project than anyone else. At this time, the contact person is probably the proposal writer rather than the project director. It is also probably not the cover letter correspondent. The contact person must be able to answer questions about the project, especially budget questions. Give the name, telephone number, fax number, and e-mail address for the contact person. If there are any special directions for making contact, such as time restrictions, include this information also.

Putting It All Together

Now that we have discussed all the pieces of the cover letter, what is an appropriate order in which to organize them? Your one-page cover letter should probably consist of four paragraphs in the following order. Each paragraph should contain this information:

1. Introduction to your organization, community, and target population.
2. Statement about the project that includes the two key hot buttons.
3. Purpose for submitting the proposal.
4. The “thank you” for the opportunity to submit the proposal and the contact person information.

Authorship

The question arises, “Who should write this letter?” The answer is that the proposal writer should craft the letter. Submit a carefully crafted letter to the correspondent as a “draft” for changes. Make any changes, print on letterhead, and return to the correspondent for signature. Almost no one will turn down the offer of someone else writing a draft from which to work.

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Cover Letter

Checklist—Cover Letter⁴

- ✓ On letterhead.
- ✓ One page.
- ✓ 12-point, text font.
- ✓ Generous margins.
- ✓ Left justified.
- ✓ Reference line.
- ✓ Salutation to a specific person.
- ✓ First paragraph introducing the organization, community, and target population.
- ✓ Paragraph about the project including two key hot buttons.
- ✓ Paragraph explaining the purpose for submitting proposal.
- ✓ Final paragraph expressing thanks and providing contact information.
- ✓ Correspondent is the highest ranking person possible in the organization.
- ✓ Signed by a human with blue ink.
- ✓ “Prepared by” line.
- ✓ Enclosure line.

Last Words

The cover letter is the first impression the funder has of your organization. It is important to take the opportunity to make points by indicating your fit with the funder's agenda. This can be done subtly by showing that you are an organization that can handle the project, that you fit with the funder's hot buttons, and that you understand what the funder is looking for. Writing cover letters is something of an art because you need to say a lot in a little space.

Examples of Cover Letters for Four Projects

The following four examples (1.1 to 1.4) offer sample cover letters used by four diverse organizations to request a grant. The elements described within this chapter have each been implemented in the letters.

⁴ Remember that a grant maker's directions (instructions/guidelines) take precedence over any and all other considerations. You must absolutely, positively follow the grant maker's directions exactly, precisely, and painstakingly.

EXAMPLE 1.1**After School Program—Cover Letter****Sunnyvale School District**

One Academy Lane • Sunnyvale, Mississippi 39200

August 31, 2004

Sarah Smith, Ph.D., Director
After School Grant Program
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, D.C. 20500



REF: September 1, 2004—After School
Grant Program Competition

Dear Dr. Smith:

Sunnyvale School District serves 12,000 students from a rural, largely farming area in north central Mississippi. Our five middle schools serve 4,000 students, 1,200 of which we propose to serve with our After School Program. We propose to serve those middle school students most at risk of failure due to academic or behavior problems.

Our proposed After School Program includes student activities in three areas: academic, recreational, and social. We have established a community-wide consortium of 16 stakeholder organizations both public and private.

Focus groups held throughout the district identified as needing immediate attention, the problem of children with no adult supervision between the time school is out and parents return home from work. The district's long-term plan is to implement after school programs in all grades. To begin the process, we are requesting financial assistance to begin the process in our middle schools.

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1**Cover Letter****EXAMPLE 1.1** *(Continued)***After School Program—Cover Letter, page 2**

We appreciate this opportunity to compete to be among the growing number of schools nationwide providing a quality after school alternative for the youth of their communities. For the answers to any questions you may have, please contact Jane Jones: voice 999-555-1111, fax 999-555-2222, or e-mail jjones@ssd.k12.ms.us.

Sincerely,

John J. Doe, Ph.D.
Superintendent

JJD/kbf

Enclosures: Proposal, 1 original with original signatures
Proposal, 6 copies

EXAMPLE 1.2**Senior Citizen Wellness Center—Cover Letter*****The Senior Citizen Wellness Center***

100 Main Street
AnyTown, AnyState 99999

August 31, 2004

Cynthia Smyth, Director
Geriatric Grant Programs
Gigantor Health Care Foundation
One Funding Way
Grants Pass, Oregon 97526

REF: September Cycle—Geriatric Grant Programs

Dear Ms. Smyth:

The Senior Citizen Center has been created to serve our large and growing elderly population through a partnership between the city and several service organizations, both public and private. Our midsize city is in the early stages of economic revival, but is experiencing the problems inherent with an older than average population.

We propose to use a comprehensive approach to the problems of the elderly, including activities aimed at health, wellness, life skills, and social enrichment. We also propose to create a single entry point to all the various services available to the elderly through a series of partnerships with local service providers.

The lead agency for this effort, the city, intends to place a bond referendum before the voters in 2006 for long-term funding of the Senior Citizen Center. We are requesting financial assistance to enable us to establish a pilot program that demonstrates the benefits of success thereby improving the chances of success with the referendum.

(continues)

1**Cover Letter****EXAMPLE 1.2** *(Continued)***Senior Citizen Wellness Center—
Cover Letter, page 2**

We are indebted to Gigantor Health Care Foundation for the guidance and help we have been provided in the development of our project and the enclosed proposal. Win or lose, we have benefited already from our relationship. Aspects of our planning will move ahead regardless of outside funding, though our efforts would be enhanced greatly by your assistance. For answers to questions about our proposed project, please contact Jennie Carter: voice 999-555-3333, fax 999-555-4444, e-mail jcarter@email.com.

Sincerely,

Jack J. Doe
Director

JJD/kbf

Enclosures: Proposal, 1 original with original signatures
Proposal, 3 copies

EXAMPLE 1.3**Fire and Rescue Project—Cover Letter****Quad-County Fire and Rescue Association**

123 Middle Junction Road
Central City, AnyState 12345



August 31, 2004

Don Jones, Director
Fire and Rescue Improvement Grant
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20472

REF: September 1, 2004—FRIG Competition

Dear Mr. Jones:

Quad-County Fire and Rescue Association is a cooperative effort of the 47 volunteer fire and rescue departments in Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison counties. The purpose of the association is to pool scarce resources to improve training, recruitment, and community programs and outreach.

The purpose of the proposed project is to improve our abilities and capacity in fire prevention, fire fighting, and emergency medical services. The activities we will undertake in pursuit of this purpose include neighborhood fire prevention programs, a junior fire marshal program in the schools, centralized training, centralized recruitment, and improved purchasing power through standardization and coordination.

We need assistance in expanding the collaborative effort on behalf of the fire and rescue departments in the Quad-County area. It is widely accepted that the association concept has promise, but for the true strength of the association to become real, we need to show concrete results. FEMA assistance will enable us to overcome this hurdle.

(continues)

1**Cover Letter****EXAMPLE 1.3** *(Continued)***Fire and Rescue Project—Cover Letter, page 2**

Thank you for the opportunity to apply for the funds to improve fire and rescue services in our service area. Please contact me for answers to any question that may arise: voice 999-555-4321, fax 999-555-9876, or e-mail moleary@quad-cnty-fire&rescue.org.

Sincerely,

Mabel M. O'Leary,
Executive Director

MMO/kbf

Enclosures: Proposal, 1 original with original signatures
Proposal, 12 copies

EXAMPLE 1.4**Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program—Cover Letter**

**INNER CITY ALCOHOL AND
DRUG PREVENTION COMMISSION**

44 RIVER ROAD • RIVER CITY, ANYSTATE 12345

August 31, 2004

Bernard Benrard, Director
Substance Abuse Prevention Initiative
Mega-Industries
100 Mega Circle
Mega, New York 12080

REF: September Cycle—Substance Abuse Prevention
Grant Initiative

Dear Mr. Benrard:

Our Alcohol and Drug Prevention Commission serves the old inner city portion of River City. Our population consists of older, long time residents and young families and singles. We do not have many middle-aged citizens, though this segment of the population is slowly increasing as our economic base revitalizes.

The proposed project uses a community-wide consortium of partners including schools, community centers, business and industry, and substance abuse service providers, both public and private. Project activities include education outreach into schools and communities, a hot line and 24-hour crisis team, and a performance art group to dramatically disseminate the message against substance abuse.

(continues)

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Cover Letter**EXAMPLE 1.4** (Continued)**Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program—
Cover Letter, page 2**

The Commission receives funding from state, city, and federal sources for its regular programs and activities. The proposed project combines expansion of existing work (outreach), a new communication effort (hot line), and a cutting edge effort to get the message out (performance art).

On behalf of the commission and its partners, thank you for the help you have provided to us during the application development process. Even if we are not awarded a grant, we have benefited greatly from Mega-Industries involvement. We are grateful for the opportunity to become a Mega-Industries Anti-Substance Abuse Community. For answers to questions about our application, please contact Sue Smithson: voice 999-555-8888, fax 999-555-7777, e-mail ssmithson@email.com.

Sincerely,

John J. Jingleheimer
Executive Director

JJJ/kbf

Enclosures: Proposal, 1 original with original signatures
Proposal, 4 copies