

Engage and persuade from the start!

How to write a proposal cover letter



Writing a winning cover letter

Writing a cover letter is an art that gives you the key to getting ahead of the competition from the moment a client opens your submission. You may be completely unfamiliar with this art – you may not be submitting cover letters at all. Or, you may already submit a cover letter with every bid, based on a standard template where you only change the client’s name and a few details each time.

Whatever your current approach is, this guide gives you some essential tips to apply best practices and give yourself a winning edge. If you are using a standard or ‘boilerplate’ cover letter – stop now. Instead, start your journey to crafting cover letters that put you ahead of the rest.



What is a cover letter?

It’s a brief letter that thanks the client for the opportunity to submit it and gives them an overview of your strategy for meeting their needs. A cover letter is professional but also gives the client a feeling of personal connection to your company. It should be signed off by a suitable senior manager. This is the opening piece of your submission and a powerful tool; don’t underestimate its role in helping you win.

Where should I place it in the submission?

As its name suggests, the cover letter is one of the very first things the client should see in your bid. For example, you may have your proposal cover, followed by your index/table of contents, then your cover letter, and finally your executive summary.

How long should it be?

Keep your cover letter to one page or, at a maximum, two pages.

Who should sign it?

The highest-level person in your organisation that the customer personally knows (and has signature authority) should sign the cover letter. Do not dual signatures unless a strategic partnership between two companies is making the offer. Remember to place the cover letter on your company letterhead.



“You need to make the client feel as though you are speaking directly to them.”

Kori Warriner
Marketing Coordinator
KCI Technologies

When should we write it – where does it sit in our bid process?



Examples of win themes

Time is limited in the business of writing proposals. But if you want to hone your internal process and ability to win, the below process is a good one to follow. Try it again and again, bid after bid, until you get it right.

If the client’s hot-button issue is saving costs, your win theme could be “Lower cost. Using technology, we can meet the production schedule using less staff and lower the total project cost.”

1

Read to understand the client: Read the RFP deeply and at least twice. Understand the client’s burning challenges—their “hot button” issues.

2

Develop your win strategy and “win themes” Once you understand the client’s particular needs, you can develop what “win themes” you need in your cover letter. Win themes are the most persuasive reasons this specific client should choose your offer over a competitor’s.

3

Write the cover letter. Start writing it as soon as you have defined your win themes and know your win strategy. It’s best to do this early on in your bid process, ideally at the same time that you write your executive summary. Don’t leave the letter for the last minute.

4

Review, sign off and sign the letter. Polish your cover letter, get executive approval for the text, and get it signed by the signatory with plenty of time to spare before submission.

If the client is concerned about reliable supply, your win theme could be “Reliability. Our proven reliability means you can count on us to deliver operations continuity regardless of circumstances.”



What should the cover letter contain?



There are various persuasive structures (scan the code for a few cover letter examples). The below structure makes for a winning cover letter.

- Address the letter to an individual (usually the contact person noted in the RFP/RFQ), not to the client company.
- The first paragraph should address the client and their needs. Briefly note their “hot button issues” and note that your company looks forward to the opportunity to help them address these points.

- Next, give your win themes and what makes you stand out from the competition.
- At this stage in the letter, you could also grab attention and reassure the reader by mentioning anything the client might think of as a weakness in your offer. Turn them into positives. For example, if your business is small, you could say that you have “formed a tight team who have exceeded performance expectations and worked together for years,” as recommended by Eileen Kent, President of Custom Keynotes.

- Briefly outline your personalised offer. Do not go into detail. As Cristina Miller, Proposal Writer at Gallup, suggested in your cover letter, “Choose the top 3–5 features of your solution and describe how they will benefit your customer in a single line. Be direct: here’s what we offer. Here’s how it will solve your problem.” Leave the details for your executive summary in a separate document after your cover letter.
- Give a closing statement: This one paragraph should use simple language that will connect with the person reading your letter. Briefly recap your strengths. In your preferred words, you could say that you look forward to the next step in the client’s process.



Mirror your win themes in the proposal cover, title, cover letter, and executive summary. When these all ‘hang together’, it adds up to a persuasive consistency that will sway the reader in your favour.

Wrapping up: practice for perfection.

Writing winning cover letters is not something that happens overnight. It’s okay to take your time to develop this skill. As you can see, although every cover letter should be different and designed specifically for the client in question, you can use a broad persuasive structure each time that is proven to win work and keep you ahead of the crowd of other bidders. Putting your heart and mind to work, your cover letter can form an instant connection with the reader that will then carry through into the rest of your submission.

Who should write it?

This can change from case to case, but the cover letter should usually be written by the same person or persons who are writing the executive summary. The two documents must complement each other and reflect the same winning themes.

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