

The Cover Letter

In Class Informal Writing Assignment

(With thanks to Professor Thomas Jehn, Harvard University, who designed this)

The Philosophy of the Cover Letter

Writers, whether students or veterans, often find that writing a cover letter about their drafts and revisions to be very helpful in becoming a stronger writer. The philosophy for this technique is that you give yourself a chance to reflect on your writing process, stepping back from what you just wrote in your paper to consider honestly (1) what the research and writing process was like; (2) to affirm what you like so far about what you've done; and (3) to assess as best as you can **through your readers' eyes** what in your piece might not be working for your audience.

You could just write out such thoughts for yourself, which would also be useful. But the idea of writing a letter to your reader is to begin making real for yourself the transition we need to make from creating writer-based prose (when we're naturally trying to get all our ideas down in fairly chaotic ways) to **reader-based prose** (when we can be more concerned about how *readers* are understanding our meaning). It's not that writing our rough drafts means we have to be anxious about whether we've *successfully* conveyed *all* of our ideas to our readers; that is, we're not creating a polished piece at the draft stage. Instead, we are *beginning* our semester's transition to creating reader-based or audience-based prose.

You can benefit in an additional powerful way by writing cover letters to me or other readers: You give your reader(s) a way to begin discussing your drafts. I (or other readers) can respond to your concerns as writer; with the cover letter, you initiate a conversation that your reader(s) then further develop through comments they make on your writing or in conversation, and then we as authors respond to their comments, and so on.

Directions

Your cover letter does not have to be long. For today, a one-page handwritten letter will suffice. I am looking for honest self-reflection, but not "beating yourself up." I want you to share with me your experience of working on this very difficult assignment, a sense of what you like about the paper you have written and a sense of where you suspect there may be problems. Do you have particular questions or concerns about your paper that you hope I address in my commentary on this draft? What are those concerns? What issues/sections/writing concerns do you hope I pay attention to when I comment on your draft?

Do consider the tone with which you write this letter since I will be reading it. Be serious rather than flip or sarcastic. This is ultimately designed to help you, after all.

Address your letter "Dear Professor Christiansen" or "Dear Adrienne" (address me in the way that feels most comfortable to you). You have a lot of flexibility in what you might write about in the cover letter. I suggest several possibilities here, but you will not be writing about all of them. Pick one or two and write about them at length. For example, consider discussing what the writing process was like for you (you could talk about what you found difficult to do; or anxiety-producing or enjoyable). You could talk about what you were trying to accomplish in your assignment or what you think is actually working in the draft. What aspects about it do you like so far? Conversely, you could write about what you think needs work. You can ask me to address any particular issue or element of your draft on which you would like particular advice. And so on. Please sign your letter and turn it in to me before you leave class today.

The cover letters will not be graded, but I will comment on them and will use them as a guide when I read drafts of your paper to insure that I address concerns that you have.

If you end up revising your assignment in an attempt to improve your grade, you will write a second cover letter similar to this one and also addressed similarly. Be sure to sign that letter with your name and attach it to your revised paper.