

Cover Letters / Cover Notes

The various UN agencies have different requirements when applying for a position. Some require both electronic forms (P11s) and CVs with covering letters. Others ask for hard copy submissions. The UN Secretariat and several other agencies use the Galaxy system for online applications (PHPs).

If you are applying through the Galaxy system, you will need to complete a cover note. A box will appear upon your completion of your PHP and before you can submit the document. Whether you are applying online through the Galaxy, or by hard copy with a P11 personal history form and attached cover letter, the same principles for writing apply.

The cover note/letter plays a critical part in creating a hiring manager's sense of you as a person – your written communication style, your level of self-knowledge, your ability to be concise, etc. It may be the deciding factor in whether your application goes beyond the initial sorting process.

You should view your cover note/letter as an opportunity to distinguish yourself from the other applicants by highlighting what makes you the most suitable person for the position. It is vital that you make an impact in a relatively short space to ensure that the reader reads on. Use the cover note/letter to convey more fully who you are. You have an opportunity to go into more detail about key aspects of your background that relate to the job opportunity in a creative and concise way. Be conscious of the initial impact you are creating by keeping your cover note/letter short, and be careful not to be repetitive by repeating information that can be found in the PHP or CV/resume.

The cover note/letter should be brief, three to four paragraphs, and as targeted as possible to the position for which you are applying. A standard communication structure that gives clarity and readability is 1) Open with a motivational statement – one short paragraph – emphasising why you are particularly interested in the position. 2) Summarise qualifications, experience and competencies – one to two paragraphs – describing those which best match the new position. Here you can briefly emphasise a few strengths and personal qualities related to the type of position you are seeking; 3) Close with a brief recap, one or two sentences recapping your key points.

For Galaxy, there is a limitation on the number of characters that can be used for the cover note. Draft the cover note in MS Word or similar – and keep a copy once you have submitted the PHP. The Galaxy system stores only the last application submitted. Therefore, if you are applying for several vacancies, and you are tailoring your PHP to best match each specific vacancy, it is important that you keep a record for your own future information.

There is no such limitation for cover letters, beyond their being as concise as possible while still conveying the essential elements that can attract the interest of the reader to study your application in further detail. However, using the limitations as defined for the cover note in Galaxy can be a useful guideline for cover letters.

Cover Letters, while following the same structure as the cover note, should be addressed to an individual, wherever possible, including his/her title (Example: Dear Ms Everywoman, ...), and should end with an action (Example: I would welcome the opportunity to further discuss my interest and suitability for this position).

Finally, whether submitting a cover note with your PHP application, or a cover letter together with a P11/CV or resume, make sure you answer two critical questions: why you are interested in the particular position (your motivational statement), and why the organization should consider you (the value you can bring with your experience, expertise and competencies).

Summary:

- Be natural, positive and professional
- Be specific

- Proofread carefully – not only using the spell check
- Ask someone to review your cover note/letter and give feedback
- Be concise – while the character limitation for the cover note in Galaxy can be a guideline – there is no need to use all the space. The shorter the better.
- Make your words count – use the language of the vacancy announcement (and competencies) as a guide for keywords
- Use a variety of action verbs
- Avoid passive constructions
- Focus on achievements and experience. Don't be modest, but don't exaggerate.
- Target – customising your cover note/letter shows you have carefully read the vacancy.