MyPLUS STUDENTS' CLUB

Series 2 : CVs, Application Forms and Disability

Ebook 2 : Writing cover letters

REALISING NEW POSSIBILITIES



COVER LETTERS REGARDING DISABILITY:

STAND OUT FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

AN EXPERT GUIDE TO WRITING COVER LETTERS THAT WILL GET YOUR PROFILE ON ANY RECRUITER'S RADAR.

INTRODUCTION

The most effective way to inform a future employer about your disability or long-term health condition is to have a conversation with them. However this is not always possible and you will frequently be asked to provide information about your situation in your application.

In this ebook, we go through examples of the type of information you could provide in a cover letter to an employer, when informing them of your disability or explaining a certain aspect of your application form.

This ebook comprises of two sections. In the first section, we will provide examples and advice on how to write a standout cover letter by:

- Focusing on the positives
- Sharing only what is relevant

In the second section, we will cover examples of what to write in the following situations:

- Explaining lower academics
- Accounting for a gap in your education
- Accounting for a lack of work experience

Remember that these are simply examples and you will need to personalise your cover letter to suit your own situation.

This is the second ebook of the CVs, Application Forms and Disability series. Visit www.myplusstudentsclub.com for careers advice and more information on applying with a disability. Become a member on the website to download more ebooks on topics such as informing an employer about your disability and requesting workplace adjustments.



FOCUSING ON THE POSITIVES

A cover letter is your opportunity to demonstrate to an employer why you would be the best candidate for the job, so think positively about your experience with disability and highlight the additional strengths you have gained as a result of managing a disability alongside your degree.

For example:

"During my second year of university, I was diagnosed with cancer in my lower leg. Despite my absence from several weeks of lectures and tutorials, I coordinated with professors, tutors, and peers to ensure that I did not fall behind while recovering from my illness.

Managing various doctor appointments, meetings, and study groups helped develop my time management skills; my academic performance has not suffered since my illness due to this collaboration. This experience has revealed my strength and resilience when facing a significant challenge, and demonstrates my ability to adapt to any situation."

What our recruitment experts say:

This student starts by providing a short explanation of his/her medical situation, along with the impact this had on his/her studies (task). They go on to explain the strategy and action they took to succeed in spite of the setback, and the positive results.

You can describe your experiences effectively by using with the STAR technique:

- Situation (disability or long term health condition, dyslexia, poor mental health etc.)
- Task (impact or challenge presented by your disability)
- Action (steps you took to overcome this challenge)
- Result (what was the outcome? How has the experience equipped you with the right skills /mindset to excel in your role?)

Employers look for graduates with skills such as resilience and adaptability, who can bring value to the team. So think creatively about your experiences and skillset and why they make you an asset to the organisation.



SHARING ONLY WHAT IS RELEVANT

When writing a cover letter the reason for informing an employer about your disability is to get the consideration and support that you may need. You do not have to go into detail about your disability. Instead, provide the information that will enable the employer to understand what you need and why.

For example:

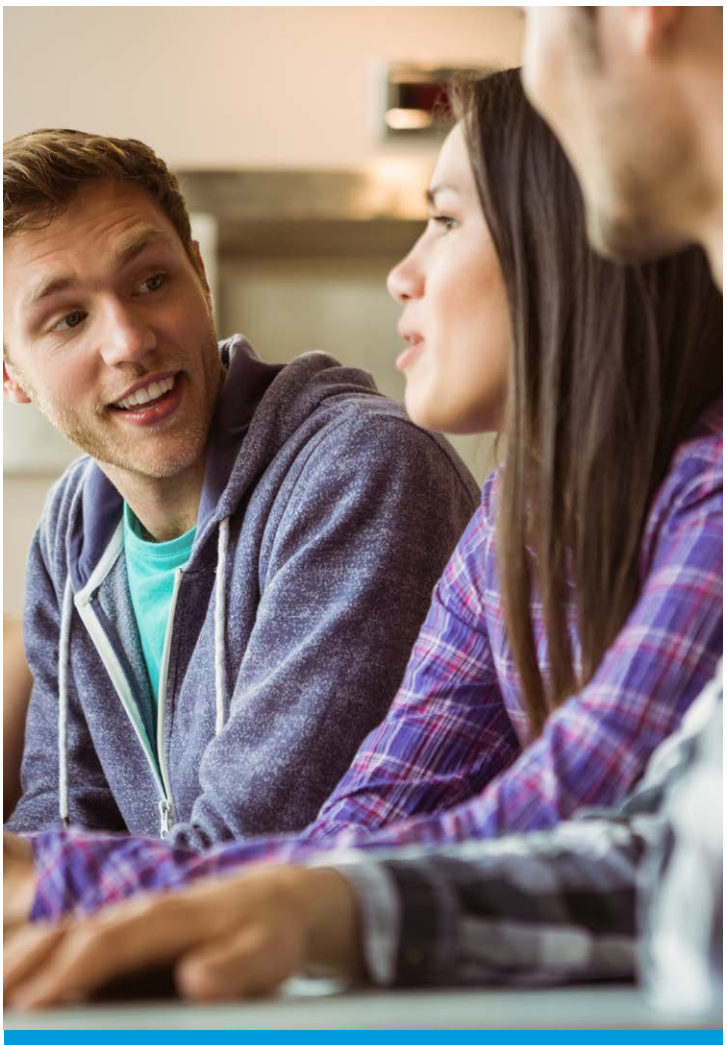
"I am a wheelchair user as a result of a childhood spinal tumor. I am unable to walk and use a wheelchair at all times. Therefore if an interview is arranged, I will require wheelchair access and an accessible toilet at the venue.

During my past internship at (FIRM NAME), my manager made a number of physical adaptations for me at the office. I would find it helpful to be able to visit the office or arrange a call to discuss any potential issues and adjustments prior to attending an assessment day at the office."

What our recruitment experts say:

This student is open about his/her disability and the implications of this in the recruitment process. They have communicated their requirements in a way that is concise and effective, and provided actionable solutions to an employer in order to support them better.

When sharing information with an employer in a cover letter, resist the urge to provide too much information and avoid using medical terms/ jargon that won't mean anything to those reading it. Share only what is relevant to obtain what it is you require, and use every day language that people will understand.



EXPLAINING LOWER ACADEMICS

If your disability or long term health condition has prevented you from meeting certain criteria e.g. graduating with a 2:1 or achieving higher marks for a module, you may explain this to an employer in your cover letter and ask for these mitigating circumstances to be taken into account.

Example 1:

"As you can tell from my application I have, overall, achieved at a very high level academically. However, I have found some modules at university a challenge. This was due to the exam-based assessment with which I was unfamiliar since previously I had been assessed through cumulative academic assessment.

For several years, I have experienced anxiety and panic attacks when under severe stress. I experienced anxiety attacks during the exams for (MODULE) and (MODULE), resulting in a lower mark for these modules. Since I did not fail, I was ineligible to re-sit these exams. I trust that (FIRM NAME) will take this into consideration when reviewing my application."

Example 2:

"Throughout my studies I have found reading, taking notes, and gathering my thoughts when writing essays a challenge. I seemed to find it more of a challenge than my peer group and thought perhaps this was due to dyslexia.

Shortly after my first-year exams, my university's Disability Services organised an assessment to determine whether I have dyslexia. The assessment confirmed that I did have dyslexia and I communicated with my university's Disability Services to obtain adjustments that have significantly improved my ability to study and learn. My considerably improved second-year exam results show that I only required a few simple adjustments to succeed, and I anticipate further improvement in my final year. I trust that (FIRM NAME) will appreciate this when considering my application."



What our recruitment experts say:

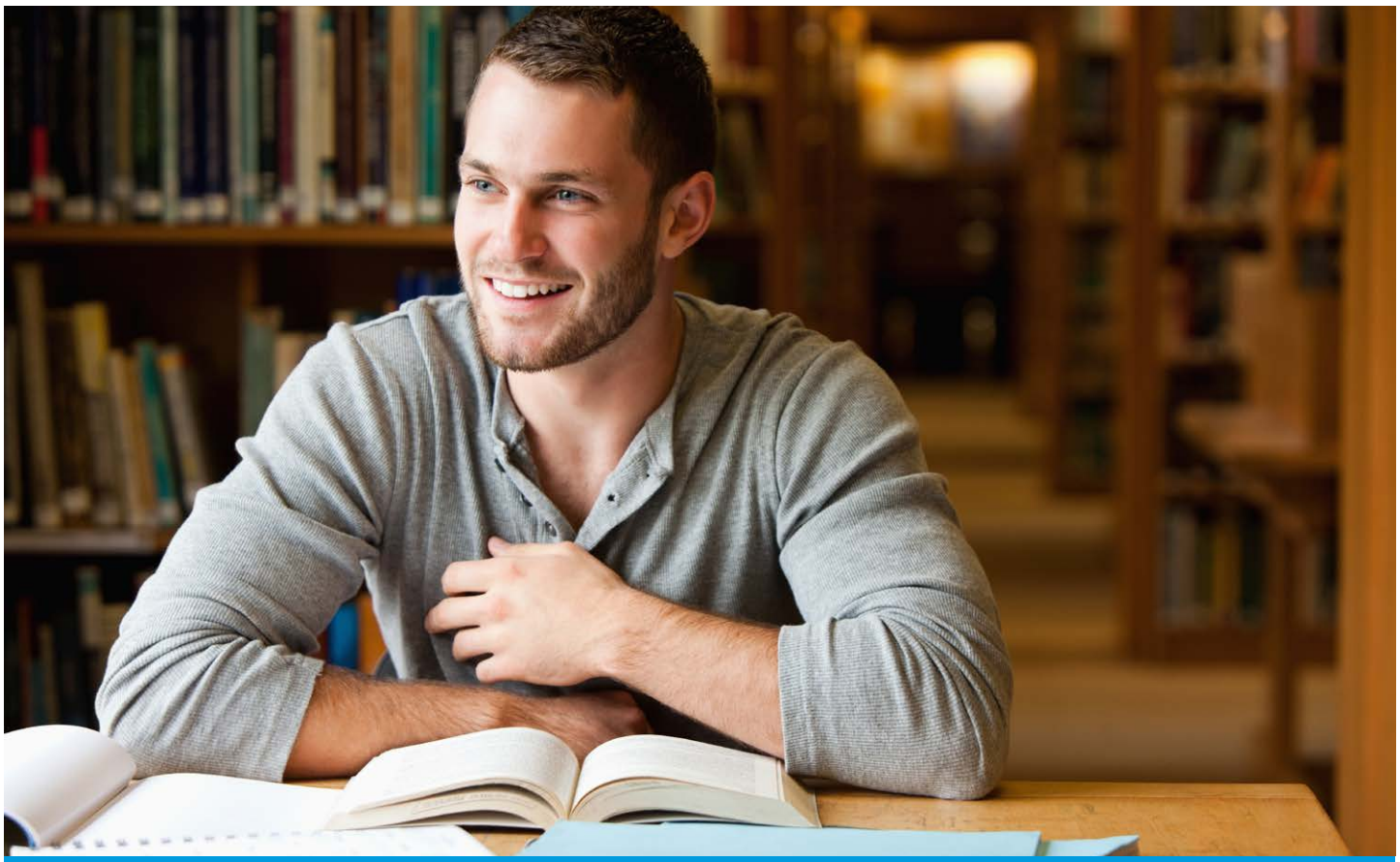
Both of these students are open and honest about their conditions and how these have affected their performance. The first student addresses the issue of lower grades at the start and asks for extenuating circumstances to be taken into consideration.

The second student goes one step further to reassure the employer that since obtaining a formal diagnosis, he/she has made small adjustments to their method of learning and seen significant improvements in their second year results.

You do not have to go into the details of your disability, you do have to:

- Focus on the facts, e.g. impact of your mental health condition, late diagnosis of dyslexia etc.
- Ask that the employer takes into consideration mitigating circumstances
- Demonstrate to the employer that you can excel in the role with a couple of minor adjustments

Employers know that having a disability or long term health condition may have prevented you from meeting certain criteria, and they are willing to take genuine mitigating circumstances into account when reviewing your application.



ACCOUNTING FOR A GAP IN YOUR EDUCATION

If you have taken time out from your education due to a disability or long-term health condition, you may want to address this gap in your cover letter and describe actions which you have taken to develop your learning outside of the classroom.

Example 1:

"During my second term at university I lost 50% of my vision in a very short period of time. Obviously this was a very stressful time for me, and I decided to take some time out whilst my condition continued to change and I adapted to my new situation before returning to my studies.

During the two years that I took out, as well as intense medical treatment, I also worked part-time in a small law firm. My confidence returned during this time and I felt ready to return to university to start a new course in 2016. Not only have I participated fully in university life, I have also achieved academically as my exam results show."

Example 2:

"Before leaving university I was offered a place at Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, to begin a short-term commission with the Yorkshire Regiment in January 2016.

However, in September 2015 I contracted a rare and aggressive form of bacterial meningitis which subsequently left me severely disabled. I was told that I would be paralysed from the neck down for the rest of my life. After a lengthy stay in hospital I was discharged in August 2016 and began an intensive period of rehabilitation.

Today, after much hard work, I have regained significant use of my upper body and continue to regain strength in my legs. It was this recovery that encouraged me to take a Masters to prepare myself for a return to work.

I wish to achieve the same goals from work as I did prior to falling ill and feel that I have much to offer (FIRM NAME) not only in an academic and intellectual capacity, but also through my interpersonal skills and strength of character."

What our recruitment experts say:

The first student demonstrates adaptability and resourcefulness by highlighting the part time role he/she took on in a law firm, while taking time off from university to receive medical treatment.

The second student demonstrates the strength and resilience he/she has developed through acquiring a disability, they go on to explain how this has motivated them to pursue higher education and fulfil their potential in the workplace.

When writing a cover letter, you should remember that academic qualifications are just one part of the selection criteria - employers are interested in your skills, attitude and character. Think about your own experience of disability and what it has enabled you to learn and do, as a result.

ACCOUNTING FOR A LACK OF WORK EXPERIENCE

Employers often look for evidence of work experience in your application because holding down a job demonstrates that you can be proactive, reliable, trustworthy and hardworking. If you have never previously worked, you can still demonstrate these qualities through your experience managing a disability.

For example:

"While my disability has, until now, made it challenging for me to obtain work experience in (FIRM'S INDUSTRY), I feel that in managing my disability I have developed and demonstrated certain competencies.

Managing my disability has specifically forced me to develop my communication and influencing skills as a result of having to work with service providers. I have also developed my ability to plan and organise as a result of coordinating my doctor's appointments around my university schedule. In addition, by working with my university's Disability Services, I have advanced my ability to work effectively in a team. These skills will transfer well to a career at (FIRM NAME), and demonstrate that I have much to offer."

What our recruitment experts say:

This student is able to draw upon different aspects of managing a disability to demonstrate a variety of employable skills.

Think broadly about the competencies you have and how you came to develop them. Your experiences can be related to work and the role you are applying for, or it could be unrelated; it could be paid or voluntary; challenging or menial.



Top Tips:

- Be positive and see your disability as something that makes you unique. Never go for the sympathy vote.
- Share what it relevant to obtain what you need. Avoid using complicated medical jargon.
- Understand your strengths. Highlight the additional strengths you have gained as a result of your disability.
- Think creatively about your skill set and why they make you an asset to an organisation.
- State genuine mitigating circumstances and ask for employers to take these into account.
- If you have gaps in your education, provide a short explanation rather than leave any period of time unaccounted for.
- Get work experience. Holding down any job demonstrates that you can be proactive, reliable, trustworthy and hardworking.

AND FINALLY....

We hope this ebook has motivated you to write a cover letter and given you an idea of the types of information you can provide to an employer when informing them of your disability or explaining a certain aspect of your application form.

For more advice and information, become a member on myplusstudentsclub.com to download ebooks on topics such as informing an employer about your disability and requesting workplace adjustments.