

Typical Content of Cover Letters for Mail, Internet, or In-person Surveys

Source: Dona A. Dillman. 2007. *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, 2nd ed. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. In general, the following are considered good practice for cover letter development:

1. Limit the length to **one page**.
2. Include a **date** at the top for mail surveys. Make sure the date is when they are being mailed.
3. If you have the list of people to whom the survey is being sent, it is considered best practice to mention their name in the **salutation** (e.g., Dear Jane, Dear Dr. Peterson). If you cannot determine sex of individual by name, then be more general in your salutation (e.g., Dear fellow student)
4. Paragraph 1 should discuss **what the survey is about**. Dillman (2007:162) has a fine example, "I am writing to ask your help in a study of new residents being conducted for the state of Washington. This study is part of an effort to learn what draws people to the state, and whether they are happy or unhappy with what they find here." Things to avoid: I am finishing my thesis and I need you to help me to do so. Starting this way is a real turn-off to most people and it suggests the survey is all about you and your needs instead of the subject matter of the survey and needing information from them to help address the research question(s).
5. Paragraph 2 should discuss **why people were selected or how they were chosen**. This doesn't have to be that elaborate, but it gives people an idea of "why me?" If you used a probability method of selection and their name was selected tell them. If you are using a convenience sample, say that.
6. Paragraph 3 discusses **why the request is useful and important**. This is a challenging section to write. Things to avoid: explanations that are biased—those that indicate you as are looking for potential respondents to agree with your point of view. (E.g., "It is important to keep big business from harming the environment, so we are doing this survey to get your honest opinions on the extent to which you feel the environment should be protected" (Dillman 2007, p. 161)). An example from Dillman's work (2007:161) shows how you might show yourself to be objective: "It is unclear whether people want either more or less to be done by state government to protect the environment than is now being done. Only by asking people throughout the state to give their honest opinions can we learn what people do and don't want our government to do. The results of this survey will be summarized and provided to all legislators from both political parties for their possible use in the upcoming legislative sessions."
7. Paragraph 4 typically discusses **confidentiality or anonymity**. There is a difference and you need to select which one pertains to your study. If you are promising confidentiality, you as the researcher can connect responses to respondents, but you promise to report responses in a manner that protects the identity of the participants (such as reporting results in aggregate). If you are promising anonymity, you as the researcher have no way of connecting responses to particular individuals. This may be the case if you are handing out surveys in a large lecture class and students are not putting their names on the surveys. Dillman (2007:162) provides a wonderful example of explaining confidentiality: "Your answers are completely confidential and will be released only as summaries in which no individual's name can be identified. When you return your completed questionnaire, your name will be deleted from the mailing list and never connected to your answers in any way."

The fourth paragraph also typically assures the potential respondent that their **participation is voluntary**. Again from Dillman (2007:162) "This survey is voluntary. However, you can help us very much by taking a few minutes to share your experiences and opinions about Washington state. If for some reason you prefer not to respond, please let us know by returning the blank questionnaire in the enclosed stamped envelope."
8. **Willingness to answer questions** is in the next paragraph. Provide contact information (an email address is fine) for people who have concerns about your study or if they want to ask for a copy of your results. End with a **thank you**. They have given you their time, and a thank you is the least you can offer. If you are providing a **token incentive mention** that as well. A real incentive might be providing them with a copy of the results once they are available.
9. **Sign the letter**. Provide the contact information if you have said people could contact you. **I would avoid providing more than your email address**.
10. Other things that might be helpful:
 - **If your study is sponsored by an organization or a department**, ask if you can use their letterhead for your cover letter. It helps provide some legitimacy to your study.
 - **If you are conducting a mail survey, then provide a stamped and addressed return envelope**. The more you can do to offset the cost and hassle of returning your survey, the more likely people will be to return it.