

COVER LETTERS: GUIDELINES AND CREATIVE OPTIONS

Creating good cover letters is one of the biggest writing challenges for many people.

In business, you may need cover letters not only to apply for a job but also to accompany proposals, forms, questionnaires and a host of other documents.

There are times when a cover letter must carry the whole weight of introducing you as a job candidate—a résumé may not be desired or appropriate. Always send a cover letter with a résumé or job application unless the posting specifically says not to. It may be presented as optional, but it's not.

Adopt the Right Attitude

Producing a very correct letter is important, and I'll give you the guidelines for doing so, but don't lose sight of the big picture—how you want to be perceived.

Your cover letter should feel totally positive and upbeat. This is not the place to voice reservations about your qualifications or personality. Aim to show enthusiasm, even passion, for the work you want to do, the field or profession, and the specific job opening, as appropriate.

Harder to accomplish: Don't be a bore. It's probable that every job you apply for will be highly competitive, and the organization will receive far more applications than the screeners really want to read. A creative element will gain you favor.

These days, very few employers are looking solely for technical skills, unless they intend to plant you in some hidden back office. The "soft skills"—relating to people, teaming, leading, and communicating well—are almost universally valued. Prospective employers want to know who you are, how you'll fit. The cover letter is your chance to tell them.

Remember that the people you're writing to are focused on their own problems and challenges. They work hard to explain what they want. It's your job to match yourself to those needs. If you're doing a "cold" job hunt—writing letters in the hope of unearthing an unadvertised opportunity—you need to figure out what problem the firm might have, and present yourself as a solution.

In both cases, a generalized letter that simply says,

I'm applying for the position of ABC at your firm . . . my qualifications are great . . . my résumé is attached . . .

doesn't stand much of a chance.

Plan for Success

Never dash off a cover letter at the last minute. Most of your competitors spend excruciating weeks on polishing their résumés and then write sloppy, ill-crafted, thought-free cover letters. Or—maybe worse—they don't include cover letters at all. Either way, probably no one will ever read those painstakingly produced résumés. Everything the audience needs to know is right up front, in the form of a badly written letter—or absence of any at all. Invest the necessary time to plan, brainstorm, draft and revise a strong letter.

Remember your goal. A cover letter should introduce you in a more personal, targeted way than a résumé. It need not give a comprehensive overview of your career and qualifications—that's what the résumé is for (if enclosed)—but should aim to

- present an insight about you that the résumé format doesn't accommodate;
- highlight your most relevant experience or credential and add a little detail;
- suggest some personality, or personal attributes, relevant to the job;
- set the stage for the reader to review your résumé as you would like; and
- show why you are the most qualified person for the job.

Always, the last point on the list is the most critical: *A strong application demands that you know why you are the person that the company should hire.*

How to dodge the salary question? Even when a job ad asks for your salary requirements, it's perfectly fine to say "My salary requirements remain open and flexible, as I need to learn more about the responsibilities of this position."

—Doug Silverman,
general manager of human
resources at Nikon Inc.;
former president of Society
of Human Resource
Managers/Long Island

Have a good answer to "why me," and the cover letter will reflect your conviction and include the facts to back it up. And so will the interview.

Absorb the organization's philosophy and priorities. If you're answering a posting, read it 20 times; it's full of clues about what the advertiser wants and what's important to the company. Look at the company's website and whatever other materials you can access—talk to people who know the firm if you can. Especially if you're sending a cold-call query . . . try to figure out "what keeps them up at night."

Name that connection. If you have a personal link of any kind to the recipient or organization, say so up front. Name-dropping can work wonders: Who wouldn't rather hire somebody who comes vouched for, even a little bit? So don't be shy if you can come up with anything relevant—for example, that

- someone the recipient knows suggested you write—a colleague, former employer, professor, friend;
- you share a mutual acquaintance;
- you saw the person speak at a conference;
- you went to the same school; and
- your father or cousin worked there.

The list is in descending order of usefulness.

It's not just about you: Say something nice about the person you're writing to, and/or compliment the organization. Few people do this, and it can be magical. Here are some examples:

- I know you're a leader in your field because . . .
- I read your book (or article) on X and was fascinated by . . .
- I've followed your career with interest because . . .
- I admire the strategic marketing tactics you introduced . . .
- As someone who follows the business press, I know that Y is the leading company in its market . . .
- I'm impressed by how Y Inc. has created breakthrough products in only five years . . .
- Z told me that working for you was the best experience he ever had.

But don't follow this advice without doing your homework. If you write to Apple, admiring their innovative spirit will get you sleepy sneers. If you want to compliment an organization's ethics, make sure the leaders haven't been indicted lately. Take the time to know what you're talking about, and be able to cite some detail—what makes the firm outstanding, what the CEO has a right to be proud of, and what her book is about. Find a truly good reason why you want to work there.

Use the language, style and keywords of your audience. Cover letters, like résumés, are partial exceptions to the “no buzzwords” rule. Aim to reflect the company's style, and focus and get your message across in terms these readers will relate to. This is especially important because many reviewers will scan your letter rather than read it and may do this digitally. That said, people often don't like to read the way they write themselves or don't like the biz speak that job ads provoke, so a conversational (but courteous) style is still best. And be wary of adding any jargon of your own to theirs.

Use the space to communicate more personal factors. Aim to get across why you're a good fit for the opportunity, and be original to the extent that it applies to the job. Bring in an anecdote if it relates. And this may be the best place to tell your "inside" story. For example, if you're leaving a bank job to follow a career with nonprofits, share your reasons for doing that. If your résumé isn't linear and one or more gaps are evident, explain to the degree that seems called for.

Consider using a testimonial. It can be incorporated into the body of your letter or added as a "pullout," carefully placed on the page with the name, position and affiliation of the person you're quoting. A testimonial can speak to your technical qualifications but at least equally well to your personal qualities—perseverance, for example, or hard-work habits, people skills, fast learning, taking initiative, and so on. This is particularly effective if you don't yet have a lot of work experience to your credit. A professor who likes you is a great source.

Take the initiative for follow-up. Don't tell the reader when to call you—almost always it's better to say that you will call in a few days to schedule the interview. But use common sense: If the job posting says, "Don't call us, we'll call you," or a phone number seems deliberately hard to track down, don't try to call.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: COVER LETTERS FROM HELL

Never underestimate the staying power of terrible cover letters. Bob Killian of Killian Branding reviews hundreds of applicant letters for creative jobs at his Chicago advertising agency. From these he culls "Cover Letters from Hell." Posted on the company website (killianbranding.com), these letters draw an immense and amused audience.

But it's not funny to be the person gaining such recognition. How to avoid it? Killian says, "Make it efficient, clear, don't bury the lead—most of the things are commonsensical. Many people use biz speak—the bafflegab of the clichés we make fun of—that's a smokescreen but rarely advances the cause of the writer."

Other mistakes: "Believing that my ideas and intense wonderfulness will come through no matter how I say it. Not recognizing the value of asking someone else to read it before you send it out. Not proofreading and spell checking.

"Young people tend not to hear the sound of what they're writing—always a mistake."

See the company's website for more advice along with this encouraging statement: "Good news: An error-free letter is now so freakin' rare that the minimal care required to send a letter with zero defects, combined with a few crisply written simple declarative sentences, will, alone, guarantee a respectful reading of a résumé. Maybe even secure an interview."

Nine Technical Tips

1. **Keep the letter to one-page maximum.** Less is better. If you're writing a cover letter that will be e-mailed, keep it even shorter—like three brief paragraphs. Needing to be brief is one reason not to waste space on stock phrases, stilted language and obvious statements (like “It is herewith my pleasure to provide you with . . . in response to your recent posting for . . .”).
2. **Don't send letters that look mass-produced.** If you're mailing an inquiry to 500 prospective employers, personalize and tailor each and every one and include at least something that demonstrates your interest in that specific company.
3. **Use people's names.** Addressing letters “To whom it may concern,” “Sir” or “Madam” or “Dear Marketing VP” doesn't cut it. Take the trouble to find out who holds the position—now, not five years ago.
4. **Use a formal and respectful salutation.** For men, Dear Mr. Wise is appropriate; for women, use Ms., unless you have reason to think the person prefers another form of address (as when, for example, a communication you're responding to is signed “Mrs. Ann Green”). If you're unsure of the person's gender, use the full name—“Dear W. Sutton.”
5. **Specify the job posting you're applying for.** Write the name of the position in the upper right-hand corner or before the salutation (so you don't have to waste space on that in the actual letter and can write a more engaging lead).
6. **Use all the good writing techniques you've been practicing:** short, comfortable words; short, clear sentences; short paragraphs; concise language with good transitions; and lively verbs. This is one of the most impatient audiences you'll have. A good lead for your letter is crucial for keeping your résumé out of the trash.
7. **Remember the serial audience.** Expect your cover letter to be screened by somebody in the hiring office, a department head, the CFO's assistant, or the new intern—or the CEO. Fortunately, the letters I'm preparing you to write will work at every level.
8. **Close respectfully and traditionally.** *Sincerely* is generally best.
9. **Make it look good!** If your cover letter is accompanying a print résumé, use good quality paper, generous margins and white space, and a clear typeface like Times New Roman in 11 point or bigger. Match the heading and style to that of your résumé for a uniform impression. Keep in mind that when you e-mail your application, fancy formatting and fonts may get lost in cyberspace.