

Cover Letters That Count!

GETTING STARTED

First, take time to look at some cover letter examples. Career Lab has a library of sample cover letters. Similarly, About.com has a cover letter guide that will walk you through the writing process. Each site contains good examples of basic letters, however, you'll really need to personalize yours to catch the employer's eye. Next, jot down some notes on what you want to include in your letter. Match your skills with the skills the employer is asking for in the job description. Always address your cover letter to a specific person. If there isn't a contact person listed in the ad, look online for the name and job title of the person responsible for hiring but also call the company and verify that person is still in that position.

NUTS AND BOLTS

Writing your cover letter may be easier if you divide it into three sections: The first paragraph states why you are writing. The next explains why you are ideal for the position. And the final paragraph closes by stating how you plan to follow-up.

In the first section, indicate how you learned about the opening and mention the job title.

The middle paragraph should relate your skills and abilities to the qualifications listed in the job posting. Address how you meet those qualifications with direct examples from your resume. Be open and clear about what you have to offer the prospective employer.

Throughout the entire letter, use clear and simple sentences so the reader doesn't have to decipher what you're trying to say. Keep paragraphs short so they are easy to skim. Proof read. Then proof read again. Even a small typo can look like a glaring error and may reflect on your ability to perform accurate work. Read your letter out loud. Does it make sense? Ask someone else to review it for you. Sometimes it's hard to catch our own mistakes.

Finally, let the employer know how you plan to follow-up. Be direct and indicate that you will call to set up an appointment at a mutually convenient time. If the job ad specifically says not to call, thank the employer for his or her consideration and let them know you look forward to hearing from them.

LOOKING GOOD

Once you have written the letter, then you will need to make it look good. The visual appearance of your cover letter is just as important as that of your resume. Consider using bullets or bold fonts to draw attention to the skills you wish to highlight.

Print your cover letter on standard size laser bond paper that matches your resume paper. Use conservative colors like white or beige. Brightly colored paper will not get you the type of attention you want. Use one-inch margins and balance your paragraphs on the page. Most importantly, don't forget to sign your letter. If you are sending a cover letter via email, cut and paste it into the body of an email message since many people are leery of opening attachments.

A well-written cover letter is worth the time investment. It's the first tool an employer will use to decide whether to interview you or not. So, make your cover letters count!

THE FORMULA FOR A SUCCESSFUL COVER LETTER

Heading/Date/Address/Salutation: If you are writing a traditional (not email) letter, select a standard business-letter format such as block style. Your letter's design should match your resume. Be sure to update the date the letter is written. Whenever possible address the letter to a specific person. If you don't have or can't get a name, use:
Attention: Hiring Manager or Attention: Human Resources

Opening Paragraph – Attract attention with this paragraph. State why you are writing and what position you are applying for or the type of work you are interested in. Tell the employer how you found out about the position. Hiring managers are busy and do not care to wade through fluff. Your opening paragraph should clearly state the position for which you're applying. Include a reference code if requested and the referral source (i.e. "I am writing in reply to your advertisement for an accounting clerk as advertised in the April 10th edition of the Arizona Republic", or Mr. John Davis suggested I contact you in regard to a position in your accounting department"). Your opening may also include a synopsis of why you are a top candidate for the position:

Your position advertised on Monster is an excellent fit with my qualifications, as the enclosed resume will attest. My background includes 10 years of success managing international sales programs, top-ranked regions and Fortune 500 accounts. I offer particular expertise in the high tech sector, with in-depth knowledge of networking technology.

Middle Paragraph – Sell yourself and your skills. Your letter's body contains the sales pitch. This is your chance to outline the top reasons why you're worthy of an interview. When writing the body text, keep in mind that hiring managers want to know what you can do for them, not learn about your life story. Demonstrate how your credentials, motivation and track record would benefit their operation. Review your top five selling factors (the ones you jotted down when doing your company research) and weave them into the body, perhaps as a bulleted list.

Back up achievements with specific examples of how your performance benefited current and former employers. Precede your bulleted list with a statement such as "Highlights of my credentials include:" or "Key strengths I offer include:."

Keep your letter positive and upbeat. This is not the place to write a sob story about your employment situation. Put yourself in the hiring manager's shoes -- would you call yourself in for an interview?

Final Paragraph – Close by informing the reader of your next step (i.e. usually arranging for an interview appointment). Express your strong interest in an interview and state that you will follow up soon to confirm your resume was received and discuss the possibility of meeting face-to-face.

Take the initiative! The employer will appreciate not having to take a specific action in response to your letter or interview request. Letters that require a response are an additional expenditure of time and money for the employer. **YOU MAKE IT EASY FOR THEM AND THEY OFTEN WILL GIVE YOU EXTRA CONSIDERATION!**

COVER LETTER MISTAKES

Mistake #1: Don't Overuse "I" - Your cover letter is not your autobiography. The focus should be on how you meet an employer's needs, not on your life story. Demonstrate that you are a team player by minimizing your use of the word "I," especially at the beginning of your sentences.

Mistake #2: Don't Use a Weak Opening - Job seekers frequently struggle with how to begin a cover letter. This often results in a feeble introduction lacking punch and failing to grab the reader's interest. Consider this example:

- **Weak:** Please consider me for your sales representative opening.
- **Better:** Your need for a top-performing sales representative is an excellent match to my three-year history as a #1-ranked, multimillion-dollar producer.
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Mistake #3: Don't Omit Your Top Selling Points - A cover letter is a sales tool that sells you as a candidate. Just like the resume, it should be compelling and give the main reasons why you should be called for an interview. Winning cover letter strategies include emphasizing your top accomplishments or creating subheadings pulled from the job posting. For example:

Your Ad Specifies: Communication skills

I Offer: Five years of public speaking experience and an extensive background in executive-level report.

Your Ad Specifies: The need for a strong computer background.

I Offer: Proficiency in all MS Office applications with additional expertise in Web site development and design.

Mistake #4: Don't Make It Too Long - If your cover letter exceeds one page, you may be putting readers to sleep. Keep it concise but compelling, and be respectful of readers' time.

Mistake #5: Don't Repeat Your Resume Word for Word - Your cover letter shouldn't regurgitate what's on your resume. Reword your cover letter statements to avoid dulling your resume's impact.

Mistake #6: Don't Be Vague - If you're replying to an advertised opening, reference the specific job title in your cover letter. The person reading your letter may be reviewing hundreds of letters for dozens of different jobs. Make sure all the content in your letter supports how you will meet the employer's specific needs.

Mistake #7: Don't Forget to Customize - If you're applying to a number of similar positions, chances are you're tweaking one letter and using it for multiple openings. That's fine, as long as you are customizing each one. Don't forget to update the company, job and contact information -- if Mr. Jones is addressed as Mrs. Smith, he won't be impressed.

Mistake #8: Don't End on a Passive Note - When possible, put your future in your own hands with a promise to follow up. Instead of asking readers to call you, try a statement like this: I will follow up with you in a few days to answer any preliminary questions you may have. In the meantime, you may reach me at (555) 555-5555.

Mistake #9: Don't Be Rude - Your cover letter should thank the reader for his time and consideration.

Mistake #10: Don't Forget to Sign the Letter - It is proper business etiquette (and shows attention to detail) to sign your letter. However, if you are sending your cover letter and resume via email or the Web, a signature isn't necessary.

Mistake #11: Don't Be Arrogant – Telling a prospective employer the skills and benefits we offer is not bragging, it is simply stating facts. It is when we allude to the fact that the employer can not live without us, or that we are the “best ever” that we become arrogant. A bit of humility goes a long way.