Writing Effective Cover Letters

A creative, well-written cover letter is often the best way to make your résumé stand out from the endless sea of applicants and find its way into the "must read" pile of the person making the hiring decisions. Here are some guidelines to help convert your one chance to make a strong first impression.

- **Target the right person.** Sending your letter to the proper person can make all the difference. Avoid generic addresses such as "To Whom It May Concern" or "Dear Sir or Madam." Instead, call the company and find out the name and title of the person who does the hiring for the job in which you're interested. Remember to ask for the correct spelling of his or her name – that's the last mistake you want to make.

- **Make yourself stand out.** Get the competitive edge by writing a cover letter that focuses on your unique and exceptional qualities. What makes you an ideal candidate? Be strategic, persuasive, and concise. Avoid a dull introduction. Grab the employer's attention from the start by pointing out how you can make a difference or something specific that you like about the company. Keep in mind that you have only about one to two seconds to get your initial point across before the reader moves on to the next letter.

- **Complement your résumé:** Write the cover letter as if it is an extension of your résumé by calling attention to select content on it, especially if it corresponds with the specific job to which you are applying. Rather than repeating what's on your résumé, use the cover letter to provide additional details that space did not permit. Illustrate as much as possible how your particular abilities and experiences relate to the position.

- **Customize it.** Target your letter to match each particular organization or position being sought. Make clear reference to the skills and/or experience that the organization is seeking. Ideally, if someone referred you to this company (e.g., alumni contacts, mentor/network), consider mentioning them at the onset of the letter.

- **Keep it simple.** Keep your cover letter brief. Keep it under a page in length; a half a page is ideal. Be sure to use clear, professional language. Steer clear of buzzwords, acronyms, jargon, or anything overly personal.

- **Make it shine.** The overall visual impression of your cover letter can be just as important as what's written on it. Always print the letters on good quality paper, preferably to match your résumé. Stick with one font and avoid solid walls of text that make the reader's eyes bounce right off the page. Break your text into digestible morsels with lots of white space.

- **Sell yourself.** Don't expect to wow a prospective employer with a lengthy checklist of past accomplishments and titles. Instead, position your accomplishments in terms of how you could bring the same benefits to their company. Your cover letter needs to answer the question: What's in it for them? Clarify how your expertise will benefit them directly.

- **Have it proofread.** Never underestimate the negative effect of bad writing, which can greatly hurt your chances of landing a new position. Have someone else check your cover letter for spelling, grammar, and overall readability.

- **Avoid exaggeration.** There's nowhere to hide when you finally land an interview, and the prospective employer wants to know what you meant by "best on the planet." Avoid saying anything that sounds like hyperbole, which can project the wrong image and damage your credibility. And remember never to speak poorly of former employers or coworkers.

- **Take control.** Don't depend on the employer to take action. Request an interview and tell the employer when you will follow up to arrange it.

- **Follow-up.** After sending in your cover letter and résumé, it's essential that you follow up. You'll greatly increase your chances of getting an interview if you call the employer directly after writing, rather than just sitting back and waiting for a call.

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