

COVER LETTERS 101

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The *Dynamic Cover Letters* Formula for Job-Search Success

Note: You have a maximum of 20 seconds to wow the reader of your letter, so you better maximize its impact by making it dynamic!

There is a formula that can be followed as a guide to writing your cover letters. However, it is critical that each cover letter be unique and specific to you and to the employer -- not one that any applicant could have written to any employer.

Keep your cover letter brief. Never, Never more than one page, and it's best to keep it well under a full page. Each paragraph should have no more than one to three sentences.

If you are writing cover letter that you plan to email, consider shortening the cover letter to just three short paragraphs so that it runs no longer than about one screen.

Fundamentals of a Dynamic Cover Letter

First Paragraph

Do not waste this opening paragraph of your cover letter. It is essential that your first paragraph sparks the employer's interest, provides information about the benefits the employer will receive from you, and helps you stand out from all the other job-seekers who want the job.

Focus on your Unique Selling Proposition-- the one thing that makes you different from all the other job-seekers -- and identifying two or three benefits you can offer the employer.

Weak opening paragraph: I am writing today to apply for the account manager position you have posted on your company Website.

Better opening paragraph: I have increased the size and sales levels of my client base in every position I have held, which in turn has increased the revenues and profits of my employers. I want to bring this same success to the account position you have posted on your Website.

Second Paragraph

Provide more detail about your professional and/or academic qualifications. Provide more information about how you can provide the benefits you mention in the first paragraph. Be sure to stress **accomplishments and achievements** rather than job duties and responsibilities. Expand on specific items from your resume that are relevant to the job you are seeking. Use solid action verbs to describe your accomplishments and achievements.

If you do not have a lot of solid experience in the field you are trying to enter, remember to focus on key skills that can easily transfer from your previous work experience to the job at hand.

And if responding to a job posting or ad, be sure to tailor this paragraph to the needs described in the ad.

Third Paragraph

Relate yourself to the company, giving details why you should be considered for the position. Continue expanding on your qualifications while showing knowledge of the company.

You need to do your homework -- show that you know something about the organization.

Fourth Paragraph

The final paragraph of your cover letter must be proactive -- and request action. You must ask for the job interview (or a meeting) in this paragraph. You must express your confidence that you are a perfect fit for the job. You must also put the employer on notice that you plan to follow-up within a specified time.

Weak closing paragraph: I hope you will review my resume, and if you agree with what I have stated here, consider me for the position. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Better closing paragraph: I am eager to help advance the success of your company, and I am convinced that we should arrange a time to meet. I will call your office in the next week to schedule an appointment.

Final Thoughts

One last piece of advice: Follow-up is key, so plan on making some phone calls or sending some emails.

20 Cover Letter Blunders to Avoid

There are certain errors that promise to diminish your hard work of writing a cover letter. From typographical mishaps to erroneous employer information, all mistakes have a negative impact on the application process. Serious errors will land your application in the wastebasket. Be forewarned: Carefully read your cover letter at least twice.

The following list outlines some of the most common cover letter mistakes and, more

importantly, suggests ways to correct them. These examples have been adapted from real-life cover letters gathered during the course of our research. Although some of these blunders may seem obvious, they occur far more often than you might think. Needless to say, none of the inquiries that included these mistakes met with positive results.

1. Unrelated career goals: Tailor your cover letter to the specific position applied for. A hiring manager is only interested in what you can do for the company, not what you hope to accomplish for yourself. Your letter should convey a genuine interest in the position and a long-term pledge to fulfilling its duties. Consider the difference between these two real-life examples:

Example A (wrong way): "While my true goal is to become a Professional Dancer, I am exploring the option of taking on proofreading work while continuing to train for the Boston Ballet's next audition."

Example B (right way): "I am very interested in this proofreading position, and I am confident of my ability to make a long-term contribution to your capable staff."

2. Comparisons and clichés: Avoid obvious comparisons and overused clichés; such expressions distract from your letter's purpose: to highlight your most impressive skills and accomplishments.

Here are a few real-life blunders we encountered: "My word processor runs like the wind," "I am a people person," "Teamwork is my middle name," "Your company is known as the crème de la crème of accounting firms," "I am as smart as a whip," "Among the responses you receive for this position, I hope my qualifications make me leader of the pack." So, remember to adopt a formal, professional writing style.

3. Wasted space: Since cover letters are generally four paragraphs long, every word of every sentence should be directly related to your purpose for writing. In other words, if you are applying for a position as a chemist, include only those skills and experience most applicable to that field. Any other information weakens your application. Some real-life blunders we've seen include:

Example: "As my enclosed resume reveals, I possess the technical experience and educational background to succeed as your newest Civil Engineer. In addition, I am a certified Gymnastics Instructor who has won several local competitions."

Example: "I am writing in response to your advertisement for an Accounting Clerk. Currently, I am finishing an associate degree at Fisher Junior College. My courses have included Medieval Architecture, Film Theory, American History before 1900, and nutrition."

4. **Form letters.** Mass mailing, in which you send a general form letter to a large number of employers, are not recommended. This approach does not allow you to personalize each application. Every cover letter that you write should be tailored to the position you are seeking and demonstrate both your commitment to a specific industry and familiarity with each particular employer. Mass mailings may indicate to a hiring manager that you are not truly interested in joining his or her organization.

There are certain formats and phrases that signal to an employer that you are using a form letter. In one real-life mass mailing mishap, the candidate created a form letter with blank spaces where he penned in the employer's name and position applied for. Another applicant who was indecisive about her field of interest created a list of possible positions in her letter. She then circled the most appropriate job description depending on the targeted company.

5. **Inappropriate stationery:** White and ivory are the only acceptable paper colors for a cover letter. We've seen letters in every shade from hot pink to electric blue and, to be honest, the color was the only thing we noticed. Also, we recommend standard office stationery; steer clear of transparent typing paper or personal stationery.

In any case, the stationery you choose should not distract from the contents of your cover letter. A cat enthusiast who applied to our company "enhanced" her letter with several images of her favorite felines. A musician applying for an office position sent a letter decorated with a border of musical notes and instruments. Remember, don't rely on graphics to "improve" your cover letter, let your qualifications speak for themselves.

6. **"Amusing" anecdotes:** In general, if you desire serious consideration, your cover letter should adopt a serious, professional tone. Imagine yourself in an interview setting. Since you do not know your interviewer, you would not joke with him or her until you have determined what demeanor is appropriate. Likewise, when writing to a potential employer you have not met, you should remain polite and professional. Avoid blunders like the one this job hunter made:

Example: "I feel I am especially qualified to join your staff, as my name, Chris Smith, almost rhymes with your company, Christmas."

7. **Erroneous company information.** If you were the employer, would you want to hire a candidate who confuses your company's products and services or misquotes recent goings-on? To avoid such errors, be sure to verify the accuracy of any company information that you mention in your cover letter. On the other hand, if you haven't researched the company, don't bluff. Statements like "I know something about your company" or "I am familiar with your products" signal to an employer that you haven't done your homework.

When citing information about a company, be specific. The following is an example of an effective way to use company information in your cover letter. "I have been following Any Corporation's growth for many months and I was excited to learn of your recent acquisition of C&M, Inc. Congratulations on successfully entering the international market!"

8. **Desperation:** In your cover letter, you should sound determined, not desperate. While an employer appreciates enthusiasm, he or she may be turned off by a desperate plea for employment. However, a fine line often separates the two, so the best advice would be to follow your instincts. Here are a few blunders to avoid: "I am desperately eager to start, as I have been out of work for six months," "Please call today! I'll be waiting by the phone," "I really, really need this job to pay off medical bills." In one letter we came across, the candidate even dramatically enlarged the type of this closing statement, "I AM VERY BADLY IN NEED OF MONEY!"

9. **Personal photos:** During the course of our research, we found actual photographs of candidates enclosed in job applications. We opened one letter to find an 8-by-10-inch glossy of a doctor surrounded by her patients. Another candidate used his computer to electronically scan his image onto the cover letter stationery. A third blew up a picture of his face to cover the entire page, then handwrote his letter over it!

Unless you are seeking employment in modeling, acting, or other performance industries, it is not appropriate to send a photograph. An employer will see what you look like should you reach the interview stage. Until then, even the cutest baby face won't help you get a foot in the door!

10. **Confessed shortcomings:** Some job-hunters mistakenly call attention to their weaknesses in their cover letters, hoping to ward off an employer's objections. This is a mistake because the letter emphasizes your flaws rather than your strengths. For example, avoid statements such as these: "Although I have not related experience, I remain very interested in the Management Consultant position" and "I may not be well qualified for this position but it has always been my dream to work in the publishing field." Instead, emphasize your strengths, including valuable skills, related experience, and company knowledge.

11. **Misrepresentation:** In any stage of the job-search process, never, ever, misrepresent yourself. In many companies, erroneous information contained in a cover letter or resume will be grounds for dismissal as soon as the inaccuracy is discovered. Protect yourself by sticking to the facts. You are selling your skills and accomplishments in your cover letter. If you achieve something, say so, and put it in the best possible light. Don't hold back or be modest--no one else will. At the same time, however, don't exaggerate to the point of misrepresentation.

Example: "In June, I graduated with honors from American University. In the course of my studies, I played two varsity sports while concurrently holding five jobs."

Example: "Since beginning my career four years ago, I have won hundreds of competitions and awards, and am considered by many to be the best Hair Stylist on the East Coast."

12. **Demanding statements:** Keep in mind that your cover letter should demonstrate what you could do for an employer, not what he or she can do for you. For example, instead of stating, "I am looking for a unique opportunity in which I will be adequately challenged and compensated," say "I am confident that I could make a significant contribution to your organization, specifically by expanding your customer base in the Northwest region and instituting a discount offer for new accounts."

Also, since you are requesting an employer's consideration, your letter shouldn't include personal preferences or demands. Statements such as "It would be an overwhelmingly smart idea for you to hire me" or "Let's meet next Wednesday at 4:00 p.m., when I will be available to discuss my candidacy further" often put the potential employer on the defensive. Job candidates' demands are rarely met with an enthusiastic response.

13. **Missing resume:** Have you ever forgotten to enclose all the materials you refer to in your cover letter? On numerous occasions, we've received letters with no resumes. Writing samples have been promised but not delivered. Not only is this a disappointment, but a fatal oversight. No employer is going to take the time to remind you of your mistake; he or she has already moved on to the next application.

14. **Personal information:** do not include your age, weight, height, marital status, race, religion, or any other personal information unless you feel that it directly pertains to the position that you're seeking. For instance, age might be relevant if you are seeking a job at seniors' organization and height and weight may be important if you are applying to an athletic team.

Similarly, you should list your personal interests and hobbies only if they are directly relevant to the type of job you are seeking. If you are applying to a company that greatly values teamwork, for instance, citing that you organized a community fundraiser or played on a basketball team will probably be advantageous. When in doubt, however, leave it out.

15. **Choice of pronouns:** Your cover letter necessarily requires a thorough discussion of your qualifications. Although some applicants might choose the third person ("he or she") as a creative approach to presenting their qualifications, potential employers sometimes find this voice disconcerting. In general, using the first person ("I") voice is preferable.

Example A (wrong way): "Chris Smith is a highly qualified Public Relations Executive with over seven years of relevant experience in the field. She possesses strong verbal and written communication skills and her client base is extensive."

Example B (right way): "I am a highly qualified Public Relations Executive with over seven years of relevant experience in the field. I possess strong verbal and written communication skills and my client base is extensive."

16. **Tone trouble:** Tone problems are subtle, and may be hard to detect. When you are reading your cover letter back to yourself, patrol for tone problems by asking yourself after each sentence: Does that statement enhance my candidacy? Could a hiring manager interpret that last statement in an unfavorable way? Have a second reader review your letter. If the letter's wording is questionable, by all means rewrite it. Always phrase your statements in a positive way!

17. **Gimmicks:** Gimmicks such as sending a home video or a singing telegram to replace the conventional cover letter may seem attractive. No matter how creative these ideas may sound, the majority of employers will be more impressed with a simple, well-crafted letter. In the worst-case scenario, gimmicks can even work against you, eliminating you from consideration. Examples we've seen include sending a poster-size cover letter by courier service or baseball hat with a note attached, "I'm throwing my hat into the ring!" Avoid such big risks; most hiring decisions are based on qualifications not gimmicks.

18. **Typographical errors:** It is very easy to make mistakes in your letters, particularly when you are writing many in succession. But it is also very easy for a hiring manager to reject out of hand any cover letter that contains errors, even those that seem minor at first glance. Don't make the mistake that one job-hunting editor recently made, citing his attention to detail while misspelling his own name!

Here are a few common technical mistakes to watch out for when proofreading your letter:

* **Misspelling the hiring contact's name or title** in the address, in the greeting, or on the envelope.

* **Forgetting to change the name of the organization** you're applying to each time it appears in your application, especially in the body of the letter. For example, if you are applying to Boots and Bags, in your closing don't express enthusiasm for a position at Shoe City.

* **Indicating application for one position and mentioning a different position in the**

body of the letter. For instance, one candidate applying for a telemarketing position included the following statement, "I possess fifteen years' experience related to the Marketing Analyst availability."

19. **Messy corrections:** Your cover letter should contain all pertinent information. If, for any reason, you forget to communicate something to your addressee, retype the letter. Including a supplementary note, either typed or handwritten, will be viewed as unprofessional or, worse, lazy. For example, one candidate attached a "post-it" note to his cover letter, stating his willingness to travel and/or relocate. This, and all other information, must be included in your final draft.

Also, try to avoid using correction fluid or penning in any corrections. It's always a better idea to take the time to retype the letter perfectly.

20. **Omitted signature:** However obvious this might sound, don't forget to sign your name at the close of your cover letter. Far too many letters that we've seen had a typed name, but no signature. An employer might interpret this oversight as carelessness.

Also, your signature allows you the chance to personalize your letter. Don't blow it by using a script font or a draw program on your word processor. Although there is a rainbow of colors to choose from, always sign your name neatly in blue or black ink.

References

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