COVER LETTERS

A well-written cover letter, that provides a glimpse of your personality and communicates your value to an employer, has a much better chance of enticing an employer to interview you than a resume alone. To be most effective, each letter should be tailored specifically to the reader or opportunity and should express specific ways you can contribute to the company. Companies know you will gain valuable experience from working with them, so avoid telling them what you hope to gain. Instead emphasize what you can do for them. Always include a cover letter when sending your resume.

There are many styles of cover letters, ranging from the standard conservative business letter to a riskier grab-the-attention creative approach. The best advice in deciding which style is best is to know your audience and adjust your style to match theirs. In many causes you may not know their style, so it is better to err on the side of conservative than to create doubts about your sincerity. Most cover letters generally follow a similar format. This basic outline provides the essential elements of a cover letter.

Salutation—Know your reader.

- Address your letter to a specific person by name and job title.
- Do not use "To Whom It May Concern" or "Dear Sir or Madam." If there is not way for you to determine the recipient, omit the salutation line completely (see the cover letter samples provided in this chapter).
- Never guess at gender. If you aren't sure use the person's entire name (e.g., "Dear Pat Jones" instead of "Mr. Jones" or "Mrs. Jones")

Introduction—Why you are writing.

- Capture the reader's attention. Starting the letter with a question is a good way to open creatively.
- Indicate how you learned of the position, or who has referred you to the recipient.
- Give brief background of who you are and why you are writing.
- Identify the specific job title, department, and location to which you are applying.

Main Body—Why should the company be interested?

- Focus on accomplishments rather than previous job duties.
- Choose 2 or 3 relevant accomplishments highlighting your fit for the position.
- Indicate the skills you've utilized to achieve your accomplishments.
- Describe the value-added results.
- Relate these details and skills back to the target company's needs. Be sure to use your successful track record to probe the value you will add to their team.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the company, industry, and functional area.

Conclusion—Action!

- Refer the reader to your enclosed resume.
- Express your appreciation for their consideration and request an opportunity to meet with them face-to-face to elaborate on your qualifications.
- Indicate how you plan to follow up. Use specific actions, not general or vague statements.