

Network to Work Meeting

Resource Materials – July 2016

The New Rules for Cover Letters

Cover letters have changed dramatically in the last ten years. In the age of applicant tracking software and emailed job applications, everything about effective cover letters is different—from tone and content, to purpose and relevance.

The rise of job boards and online application systems has made cover letters an unreliable marketing tool—at least when applying online. If the computer tosses out your resume, your uploaded letter gets thrown out as well. Even if your resume makes it through the screening, the person reading it may not choose to read the cover letter. Nonetheless, when read, cover letters can be very effective and tip the scales.

While uploaded cover letters are often overlooked, ones sent as email are almost always read. “(Email) body copy is the new cover letter; that’s your first impression,” according to Eli Daniel Group, a boutique recruitment firm in Allen, Texas. If you’re able to apply directly to a hiring manager via email, your cover letter (in the form of the body of the email) will be your greatest ally in landing you an interview.

Here are six rules for crafting an effective cover letter—and getting it read.

1. Forget about you; learn about them.

Your resume lists your experience, accomplishments and skills; your cover letter should show how they are relevant to a particular job, and to the company’s goals.

Before writing your cover letter, research the company so you can talk about it and its needs in your cover letter. Look at its website. Google the company and see what other websites mention it. Maybe it has been in the news. ZoomInfo and Manta can also provide company information, Glassdoor can provide insight into hiring trends, and LinkedIn can offer information on the hiring manager and other company employees.

2. Put the company’s needs first.

Speak to what you can offer the employer – how you are the solution to its needs that you identified in your research. You are promoting your ability to help them.

The first couple of lines should show what you know about the company’s business, that you understand what is needed in the job and that you can meet those needs. What you can offer the employer comes before what you are looking for.

Don’t say “I’m interested in applying for the position of...”.

Instead, say something like “You need a customer service representative that can respond to the needs of your growing customer base, and I have experience and formal training in providing effective customer service.”

3. Watch your language.

Since applicant tracking software looks for keywords in resumes and cover letters that match the job description, your cover letter should include as many of those words as possible – using the exact language found in the job description. However, when you are applying directly to hiring managers, it is best to rewrite what is wanted, using different language to make the same points while demonstrating your understanding of what the job requires.

4. Size and readability are important.

Attention spans have gotten very short and hiring managers are less interested in reading long letters. In addition, quite often applications and cover letters are being read on mobile devices. Therefore, make your cover letters brief and easy to read on a smart phone, iPad, etc.

5. Don’t worry if you’re not Hemingway.

Effective cover letters require clarity, not creativity - you can even use bullet points to communicate your message. The most important thing is to show that you’ve done your homework, understand the job, and have the particular skills the employer needs. Having a voice and showing some personality is fine, as long as it doesn’t obscure what you’re really trying to communicate, which is how you can help the company.

6. Know the nuts and bolts.

Cover letters have become less formal and more personal, perhaps because they’re delivered through email or online. Here’s what to say in a cover letter, and how to say it:

Subject field: the job title.

Salutation: “Dear Hiring Manager,” or if you have an exact name, “Dear Mr./Ms. Whatever.” (NOTE: Use “Hiring Manager” as a last resort only if you have done research but still can’t find the person’s name.)

First paragraph: match up what you know about the company’s needs with your skills, strengths and experience. State what you can do to help.

Middle paragraph(s): explain anything on your resume that may raise questions—why you left your previous job in less than a year, why you have gaps in your employment, or why you’re looking to switch careers. You can also offer more specific examples of how your experience fits perfectly with their requirements. But don’t oversell yourself with too many small details; remember that the most important thing is the employer’s needs. You can wrap it up by saying “I’d be happy to elaborate on this in an interview.”

Last paragraph: Close with a great call to action. You might say something like “Are you ready to learn more? Let’s talk. Call me at . . . (or email me at . . .)”

Sign off: “Look forward to hearing from you.”

Follow instructions exactly for an effective cover letter. If the application directions say to upload a cover letter, do it—even if you plan to send it in the body of an email as well. Ignoring the cover letter rules is the quickest way for you, and your cover letter, to get bounced.

Adapted from:

<https://lifereimagined.aarp.org/stories/13021-The-New-Rules-For-Cover-Letters>

<http://www.carerealism.com/cover-letter-trends-2016/>