

Network to Work Meeting

March 2018

RESOURCE MATERIALS – *COVER LETTERS*

All About Cover Letters

AT A GLANCE

A. The Cover Letter

There are plenty of jobs for people over 50, a writing a solid cover letter can help you land one. Cover letters are an age-neutral communication that can **link your career accomplishments to your prospective employer's specific needs** and help get you that job interview.

Cover letters (or cover messages, for electronic submissions) can also be used to introduce professional connections, project youthful energy, demonstrate your writing ability, and to capably address challenges such as resume gaps and requests for salary history.

A cover letter typically accompanies each resume you send out. If an employer requires a cover letter, it will be listed in the job posting. Even if the company doesn't ask for one, you may want to include one anyway because a cover letter is often your earliest written contact with a potential employer, creating a critical first impression. Employers use cover letters as a way to screen applicants for available jobs and to determine which candidates they would like to interview. A cover letter is particularly important if you want to elaborate on your work history. For example, maybe you took some time out of the paid workforce to provide family care. Or perhaps you've chosen to apply for a position with considerably less responsibility than in your previous jobs. Therefore, it is important to devote the necessary time and effort to writing effective cover letters.

B. What is a Cover Letter?

- It is a focused, concise document sent with your resume to complement it, not duplicate it.
- Usually one page in length, it should contain just enough information – and a personal touch - to entice the hiring manager to contact you for an interview.
- It should focus on your experience relevant to the job at hand; older candidates should stay away from a sequential recounting of your employment.
- It should also be used to address questions that may be raised by your resume.
- It should be tailored to explain:
 - why you are interested in the specific organization and position;
 - how your skills and experience relate to the specifics of the job description; and

- **why you are a strong match for the job and the employer's job requirements.**
- It should mention your flexibility, adaptability, and willingness to learn – qualities often seen in the young and eager.
- It should showcase your current technology skills and knowledge.

C. What to Leave Out of Your Cover Letter

- Don't share personal information about yourself or your family; the letter is about your qualifications for the job, not about you personally.
- Don't mention if you lack certain requested credentials; instead, focus on the credentials you have that are a match.
- Don't mention salary unless the company asks for your salary requirements. If requested in the job posting and you want to deemphasize your response, it's okay to say, "Through my career, I've earned salaries in a range from..."
- Don't ask questions about the job, the salary, the schedule, or the benefits.
- **Don't include years of experience.**
 - Don't list the length of experience you have in your cover letter. Saying you have 20 or 30 years of experience will flag you as an older candidate.
 - However, if the posting asks for 5+ years' experience, you should say you have "5+ years' experience (assuming that's the truth!).
- **Don't promote your age.**
 - Avoid terms like seasoned professional, wealth of experience, worked for many years, or anything similar.
 - Instead, stick to the facts (e.g., "I led a team of 10 marketing professionals over at XYZ Company.").

Here's all the information you need to write a cover letter that will get your application noticed.

PERSONALIZATION

A. Steps for Matching your Skills & Qualifications to the Job and its Requirements

1. **Take time to review and analyze the Job Listing carefully** to become familiar with what the employer wants.
 - Job postings typically have several sections.
 - Information about the company
 - Desired **qualifications** of applicants
 - The **responsibilities** involved of the job.
2. Make a List
 - List the **criteria and preferred qualifications** the employer is looking for.
 - Write down the **keywords describing skills, qualities or experiences** which the employer has listed as required or preferred.
 - Review the job duties and make some assumptions about the qualifications needed to carry out those duties.

- If the ad is very short and doesn't reveal much about the employer's expectations, look on the company's website / HR section to see if a longer description is available.
3. Make a Match
- Review each item on the list and think of how you might prove that you possess that asset. See where your own experience best matches up.
 - Be selective about which of the requirements you choose to highlight. Aim for half of the company's requirements, but keep it under five or six total
 - **Write a sentence about each of the qualifications you possess, detailing how you used that skill or exhibited that quality in a professional or personal role.**
 - Highlight your experience that is most significant to the position AND that also provides specific examples and compelling anecdotes about your experience.
 - Write down any positive results or recognition you received while applying the skill. For example, if a job requires strong writing skills, you might say "While working as a campaign intern, two of my press releases led to two articles being published in the local media."
 - **Create a Table or Paragraphs Highlighting Your Qualifications**
 - Make a two column table with the company's requirements on the left side, and your matching attributes on the right side. (see example below)
 - **Tip:** If you need something to jog your memory for the right side of the table, look for a copy of the job description for your current or past position. It will give you a nice guideline on how to phrase your past responsibilities and your professional and personal attributes.

Their candidate requirements:	My qualifications:
Success in leading a team of at least ten employees	As Executive Vice President of Communications for Asana, a manufacturer of organic food products, I managed a team of fifteen public relations, marketing and advertising professionals.
Advanced communication skills, including public speaking and presentations	I have presented at the Natural Food North America conference for the past three years, and was also a headlining speaker at the 2014 International Conference on Organic Food.

4. Put into the Letter:
- Prioritize the sentences about your qualifications and incorporate the hardest hitting statements into your cover letter.
 - Format:
 - Address how your skills match the job in paragraph form **OR**
 - List the criteria and your qualifications in table or bulleted form.
 - **Tip:** Save your cover letter as a PDF file so that the document retains the proper formatting when it is opened and looked at.

B. How to Write a Strong Cover Letter Personalized to the Job & your Qualifications

- **Address it to a specific person**
 - If you can, address it to the individual responsible for hiring. If need be, research online or make a phone call to find out who the hiring manager is.
 - Alternatively, find someone:
 - in Human Resources - preferably a Director or Manager; or
 - a higher-up within the department you're applying to.
 - Take the time to find out as much as you can about the company and the hiring manager.
- **Reference the job you're applying for** (*include the job title in your opening paragraph*)
- **Mention Who You Know** (*also include in your opening paragraph*)
 - Name dropping works; if you know someone at the company, mention their name in your cover letter.
 - Be sure to ask your contact if they can recommend you for the job and help get your cover letter and resume a closer look from the hiring manager.
- **Mention How You Learned About the Job** (*also in the first paragraph*)
 - The company wants to know how the job was sourced, especially when they have paid to post it.
 - For example, "I learned of this position from the posting I read on Monster."
 - Take it one step further and mention something about the company, from the mission statement on the company website, for example, in your cover letter.
- **Showcase Your Qualifications, Skills and Results** (*in the next paragraph*)
 - To pass the first round of screening, you must specifically address the job ad and state why you are qualified for the position
 - Be specific about why you are qualified for the job.
 - Skill, results and recognition keywords in your cover letter clarify what you have to offer the employer, matching your skills to the job description.
- **State Why you want to work at this specific company** (*reference in your closing paragraph*)
 - Read up on the organization's mission, values and goals to mention in your letter)
- **Conclude with a Thank you for being considered for the job**
- **Finish With your Plans to Follow-Up**
 - Finish strong and close the cover letter with the promise of a "next step." When you reach out to the potential employer, they'll be reminded to go retrieve your cover letter and resume and take another look.
 - Reach out when you say you will to demonstrate your punctuality and ability to follow through with promises.

Cover Letter Structure and Formatting

Cover Letter Structure:

Here's an outline of the sections that should be included in every cover letter:

- **Header**
 - The letter should begin with both your contact information (name, address, phone number and email), then the employer's contact information, followed by the date.
 - If this is an email rather than an actual letter, include your contact information at the end of the letter, after your signature.
- **Salutation**
 - Your cover letter salutation should be "Dear" with "Dr./Mr./Ms. Last Name." If you are unsure if your contact is male or female, you can write out their full name. If you do not know the employer's name, simply write, "Dear Hiring Manager." This is better than the generic and formal, "To Whom It May Concern."
- **Introduction**
 - Begin by stating what job you are applying for.
 - Explain where you heard about the job, particularly if you heard about it from a contact associated with the company.
 - Briefly mention how your skills and experience match the company and/or position; this will give the employer a preview of the rest of your letter.
 - Reference 2 - 4 assets which make you an excellent fit for the job.
 - For example, for a bank teller job, you might say "my strong mathematics skills, customer service orientation, attentiveness to detail and ability to work with precision make this job an excellent fit for me." In subsequent paragraphs, you should provide examples of how and where you applied those skills.
 - Your goal in the introduction is to get the reader's attention.
- **Body**
 - In a paragraph or two, explain why you are interested in the job and why you make an excellent candidate for the position.
 - Make a strong connection between the specific requirements listed in the job posting and your own qualifications.
 - Mention specifically how your skills and experience match the job you are applying for. Provide specific, tangible examples from your work experience that demonstrate your abilities and traits in action.
 - Use several shorter paragraphs or a bulleted list of your qualifications rather than one large block of text. This makes it easy for the reader to quickly scan and absorb this important information.
- **Closing**
 - Restate how your skills make you a strong fit for the company and/or position.
 - If you have room (your cover letter should be no longer than one), you can also discuss why you would like to work at that specific company.

- State that you would like the opportunity to interview or discuss employment opportunities.
- Explain what you will do to follow-up, and when you will do it. Thank the employer for his/her consideration.
- **Signature**
 - E.g.: “Sincerely,”; “Best Regards,”; “Cordially,”
 - Then your handwritten signature
 - Followed by your typed name.
 - If this is an email, simply include your typed name, followed by your contact information, after the complimentary close.

Cover Letter Formatting

- **Font:**
 - The font should match the font you used on your resume.
 - It should be simple and easy to read.
 - Basic fonts like Arial, Calibri, Georgia, Verdana, and Times New Roman work well.
 - A font size of 10 or 12 points is easy to read.
- **Margins:**
 - Standard margins are 1” on the top, bottom, and left and right sides of the page.
- **Spacing:**
 - Add a space between the header, salutation, each paragraph, the closing, and your signature.
 - You can reduce the font and margin sizes to keep your document on a single page, but do be sure to leave enough white space for your letter to be easy to read.
- **Other considerations:**
 - Presentation matters. Make sure your cover letter is correctly formatted and doesn’t look old fashioned.
 - Watch for dated language. Your word choices can potentially make you seem older or younger than your actual age.
 - Favor short, snappy sentences over longer, more complex syntax.
 - Consider having a younger professional - preferably in your industry - read through your cover letter to make sure your phrasing doesn't date you.

Adapted from:

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