

Network to Work Meeting

March 2020

RESOURCE DOCUMENT #1 – *COVER LETTERS*

Introduction

What is a Cover Letter and Why is it Important?

A professional cover letter is a short, single page letter you should include with every application and/or resume you send out – unless the job listing specifically says not to include one. It's a quick way for you to introduce yourself to an employer and gives them a taste of you...not just your skills (which they will get by looking at your resume.)

While a resume is a document that summarizes your skills, abilities and accomplishments, it does little to explain who you are. That's where a cover letter comes in. A good cover letter gives potential employers information about you that they wouldn't get just from looking at your resume alone.

A well-written cover letter is a little bit like a friend meeting with your blind date and telling them all the best things about you before you even get there. It's an opportunity for you to present yourself as an individual, not just as an applicant. So, not only should it highlight your qualifications, it should be written in a way that demonstrates how you stand out from the other qualified job seekers competing for the job. It showcases why you are the right candidate for the job.

Not only does a good cover introduce you and all your best qualities, it's also an opportunity to help explain away any concerns a prospective employer might have about your ability to do the job they're hiring for. It can address gaps in your resume or, if you are switching careers, how your past experience and skills make you a good candidate for this job.

A job seeker who sends in a resume without a cover letter is basically telling an employer that they're happy to do just the bare minimum. By writing a solid cover letter, even when not asked for one, you're taking that extra step and reinforcing that you're not only enthusiastic about the opportunity but that you're also motivated to do what it takes to get in the door for that face to face meeting.

Elements of a Good Cover Letter

Let these pointers guide you in writing an effective cover letter:

Keep it Short And Sweet: Keep your cover letter clean, concise and limited to a single page. Make sure your sentences are focused and avoid using flowery words.

Know What You Want And Go For It: Make sure you let your potential employer know exactly what you are bringing to the job. They have a need and you are there to fill it. Tell them how you are going to accomplish that.

Tailor! Tailor! Tailor!: Don't be generic. Make sure your letter is tailored and targeted to the job you are going for as well as the company you want to be hired by. Research the job and company to help you identify content. Each of your cover letters should be unique.

Know Your Audience: Make sure you address your letter directly to the proper individual. Research and find out who will be reading it . . . and absolutely make sure you have the proper spelling of their name. If you can't get a name, make sure to address it "Dear Hiring Manager," or "Dear Recruiter."

Don't use "To Whom it May Concern" or "Dear Sir/Madam"; those are considered outdated.

Proofread!: The fastest way to end up in the circular file is by submitting a sloppy letter. Double check to make sure your spelling and grammar are correct.

Use Keywords: Pay careful attention to what is said in the job postings. Look for key words and phrases in the description, and make sure to echo those in your letter. Take care, however, not to overstuff your letter.

Be Professional: Keep the focus of your letter on the job. Introduce yourself but don't go into too much personal detail or bring up anything unrelated to the job. Do not speak badly of past employers or trash talk prior jobs.

Distinguish Yourself; Show Some Personality!: Engage the reader from the start by distinguishing yourself and your qualifications from other applicants. Anecdotes and splashes of personality presented in a dynamic, memorable – and professional – fashion will set you apart.

Things that Immediately Turn Off Hiring Managers

Individuals with extensive experience in screening and selecting cover letters report that these things may get your letter tossed right off the bat.

1. Poor Execution of the Basics

Hiring managers pressed for time will start out by skimming the letter for anything that could be disqualifying. That includes typos, an outdated salutation such as “Dear Sir or Madam” or “To Whom It May Concern”, or the impression that the letter is so generic that the sender simply changed it using “find – replace”. These things tell a hiring manager that the sender didn’t take their time with the letter and really doesn’t care that much about working there.

2. An Off-putting Tone

Take care not to thank the hiring manager so incredibly much for reading your application—that’s his or her job. If your tone suggests you feel consideration of your application is the biggest favor ever, you’ll make the other person think it’s because you’re desperate. So, skip effusive thanks and demonstrate genuine interest by writing a cover letter that connects the dots between your experience and the requirements of the position. This is a much better use of space than gushing.

3. A Boring Opening Sentence

If your first line reads: “I am writing to apply for [job] at [company],” the hiring manager won’t think, “How thoughtful of the applicant to remind me what I’m reading!” Instead, her reaction will be much closer to, “boring,” “meh,” or even “next!”

These are much better openers:

- “I’ve wanted to work in education ever since my third grade teacher, Mrs. Dorchester, helped me discover a love of reading.”
- “My approach to management is simple: I strive to be the kind of leader I’d want to work for.”
- “In my three years at [prior company], I increased our average quarterly sales by [percentage].”

These examples make you want to keep reading, and that’s half the battle. Additionally, they make you memorable, which will help when you’re competing against a sea of applicants.

Here’s how to approach writing a memorable opener:

- Pick a jumping off point. It could be something about you or an aspect of the job description that you're really drawn to.
- Then, spend 10 minutes writing out whatever comes to your mind – a brain dump. Don't worry that some of what you write might seem lame or embarrassing – no one need see them!
- Look for the sentence that's most engaging and see how it reads as the opening line for your cover letter.

4. Examples of Skills that Lack Personality

As you promote your skills and experience, you want to make the case that you are more qualified than the other applicants. You show this by making clear what distinguishes you, so the hiring manager can see why you're worth following up with to learn more. Furthermore, you want to do this in a memorable way. Writing a laundry list of skills will do nothing to distinguish you from any other application formatted this same way. So, just like you went with a unique opener, do the same with your examples. If you want to include a list of skills, be sure to break those up with anecdotes or splashes of personality.

Here's a great and memorable example of how to promote one's skills, written by a hiring manager herself:

"If I'm in a conference room and the video isn't working, I'm not the sort to simply call IT and wait. I'll also (gracefully) crawl under the table, and check that everything is properly plugged in."

Here's what makes this example memorable:

- It not only lightens up the letter, but it also highlights her soft skills.
- She got the point across that she's a take-charge problem solver, without saying, "I'm a take-charge problem solver."
- And by using "(gracefully)" she shows that she doesn't take herself too seriously—even in a job application. If your submission follows the same list-type format all the way through, see if you can't pepper in an example or anecdote that'll add some personality.

Tips for Starting a Cover Letter and Editing it to One Page

In order to maximize the likelihood that your cover letter is read, you want to write a concise yet compelling letter. You need to make every single word count.

A good way to get started is to do a “brain dump.” Get all your ideas onto the page, then think how you can cut it in half. The first to go may be generic phrases. Since you only have a limited amount of space to get your point across, focus on the information that isn’t stated elsewhere in your resume.

This may seem like a lot of effort, especially if you are writing several cover letters, but remember that quality comes first. Target the jobs you are most interested in and qualified for, and give them all your energy. You may not be able to apply to as many jobs, but you are guaranteed to have better results in terms of response rate.

If you are unsure what to cut, here are some pointers for where to begin:

Compare your Letter to Your Resume and the Job Description

Your cover letter is an addition to your resume, not a summary of it. The two documents together should match up with the job description. So, if you find that a lot of what you discuss in your letter is covered in your resume, cut it. Then use that space to fill in any gaps that your resume doesn’t touch upon.

This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t highlight your leadership skills if your resume makes it clear you’ve been in leadership roles for years. But rather than wasting space talking about titles and times spent in them, share an anecdote instead about a time when you showed those skills.

Keep Your Opening Short

It’s usually smart to start your cover letter with an interesting line or a personal anecdote to get the reader engaged from the get-go. That being said, be mindful of how long this drags on for. You don’t want to lose the reader’s attention or run out of space for promoting yourself for the job. Try to stick to one or two sentences about who you are, then move on to the more important stuff.

Find the Fluff

Pay attention to whether a good amount of your letter is fluff that tries to sound impressive but lacks specifics. If you’re using typical lines like “I would be honored to work for [company] because...” or “I believe I am qualified for this role because...,” cut them out and jump immediately to the “why.”

Consider Your Adjectives and Adverbs

Print out your cover letter. Circle all the adjectives and adverbs. Then, look at any sentence with more than one and cut it down to just one. For example: do you have to be a “very passionate and focused learner,” or can you just be a “passionate learner?” Did you “institute an immense amount of truly important changes” or did you just “institute important changes?” While long, elaborate sentences might make you seem smarter, more often than not, they muddle your message.

Choose Two Examples to Make Your Point—and No More

There’s nothing more exciting than reading a job description and realizing, I have all of these qualities! Score! Nonetheless, promote yourself by limiting your focus to your two best examples, the ones of which you’re proudest. Explain them well enough to provide context for what you’ve written on your resume, but not so much that you’re going off track from what they’re looking for.

Important Pointers for the Mature Job Seeker

Mature job seekers have a unique challenge: how to portray a long work history attractively and efficiently, and in a way that relates the variety of their experiences effectively in a competitive job market. Here are some important pointers for ways to maximize the impact of your cover letter:

1. Tactfully De-Emphasize Age

Refrain from mentioning things that will automatically age you such as exact number of years in the workforce or your high school or college graduation date.

2. Avoid Rehashing Your Resume

No cover letter should be a repetition of all the information in your resume, but this is especially important for mature job seekers who may have a lot they could share. Focus on one or two specific qualifications you possess.

3. Use Descriptions Rather Than Quantitative Information

Avoid using specifics that will draw attention to your age. For example, instead of saying you have “over 25 years of experience” use a descriptive phrase such as, “extensive experience.”

4. Highlight Marketable Skills

Most employers want to hear about the specific skills that you’ll bring to the table. Use practical examples of your professional success to showcase the skills listed in the job requirements.

Marketable skills include leadership ability, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills.

5. Demonstrate Your Proficiency With Current Technology

It is important to show that you have technological proficiency comparable to younger candidates. Therefore, list specifics about the programs and equipment you can use, especially if you are applying for a technical position.

6. Use Personal Connections

Professional networks are an essential part of the job market. If you know someone who works at the company, mention the name in your cover letter.

7. Focus on your Flexibility and Learning Ability

The perfect cover letter shows a potential employer that you are enthusiastic about the job and capable of learning new things swiftly. Indicate your passion for the industry and include some examples of self-motivated learning such as attending professional development courses.

8. Show Your History of Success

Without explicitly saying it, you want to compare your level of experience favorably against that of an untested younger employee. Include specific information about your career successes and achievements without drawing attention to your age.

9. Cut Dated Phrases and Language

Make sure you don't include any outdated buzzwords or phrases. Avoid using "To Whom It May Concern:" or "Dear Sir:" as salutations, and replace phrases such as "team player" that have fallen out of favor. A quick Google search of "cover letter descriptors that are outdated" can be helpful.

10. Describe How You Can Help the Company

The overall focus of your letter should be how your unique qualifications can help the company reach its goals. Speak directly to the requirements listed in the job description and discuss specific ways your skills will meet those requirements.

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