

How to Write a Great Cover Letter

Skip the “Dear Sir or Madam” and zero in on exactly how you’re going to solve whatever problems the hiring company has.

By Lisa Vaas

Do hiring professionals even read cover letters for senior candidates anymore? Some say yes; some say no, they don’t bother unless the resume in question has grabbed their attention.

The simple answer is that you should assume your resume will merit a look at your cover letter; always include one (either as a separate document or an e-mail that acts as one); and make it exceptional, so you stand out from the crowd.

Dear *who*?

The salutation is your first chance to make contact with a hiring professional, but it’s one spot where laziness often wins out over due diligence. We’re talking about the “Dear Sir or Madam” approach. What this generic salutation says isn’t positive: Namely, that the author couldn’t be bothered to find out the hiring manager’s name. Job seekers can easily locate the right person online: To find the name of the hiring manager, try searching on Google or LinkedIn. Even a good guess scores you points because it indicates that you tried harder than everyone else.

Why do you want to work here?

Make sure to mention the name of the company in the letter, followed by an explanation of why you are interested in working there. Make sure that you really mean what you say. Recruiters have a way of sensing when you are being less than truthful. Their goal is to hire people who sincerely want to work at their company — it’s the job of your cover letter to convince them.

Bombastic claims are just as bad as insincerity. Hiring managers hate to see job seekers claim in their cover letters that they’re his “best candidate.” How can you know without knowing the other candidates?

You also need to make a sales pitch as to why the employer should want to work with you! Your letter should explain what you can do for your ‘customer’. The key is to give the reader a small glimpse into your background, which encourages them to want to learn more by reading your resume.

Length and format

First paragraph

Introduce yourself and state why you re writing; you are enthusiastically presenting yourself for a job, and your background makes you the best candidate. List a referral source if possible.

Second paragraph

List your value to the company. Describe how you will contribute to the company from Day One. This should be based on research of the company and job. Share knowledge of the company’s goals, accomplishments and opportunities.

Third paragraph

Call to action. Ask for the interview and state when (exactly) you will follow up.

If you are responding a job posting, use a column approach. Below is a sample of how that might look, with bulleted lists of requirements and descriptions of how your background matches them:

Job Requirements: 1-2 years of general accounting experience.

Your experience: Tracked expenses and all financial reporting for a government subcommittee.

Job Requirements: Attention to detail.

Your experience: Edited manuscripts to ensure American English vs. British English.

Cover letters can also be used to bridge your background and the job. Here is an excerpt from the cover letter of a client with a degree in political science who wants to get a job in the video-gaming business:

“As you can see, my resume is attached. But what you won’t see on my resume is my passion for video gaming: it is how I see the world. My analytical skills and attention to detail will enable me to help solve the caller’s problems and ensure a high-quality product.”

Perfect spelling and grammar are mandatory

A cover letter is “a writing-skills evaluation in disguise”. When recruiters are faced with large stacks of resumes for new positions, you’ll never make the first cut if they notice even one spelling or grammar mistake on your resume or cover letter. Make sure that even an e-mail is scrupulously proofread.

Tactics hiring professionals love

Sometimes a gesture can impress a hiring professional. A recruiter was once beguiled by a candidate who read her LinkedIn profile and saw that she had won a ping-pong tournament. “He sent me a ping-pong paddle in the mail and wrote a cover letter with ping pong-themed language in it,” she said, including sentences like these:

- "I'd like to get in the *game*."
- "I bring energy, intelligence and motivation to the *table*."
- "I now feel compelled to *drive* home positive business results."

For some, the most effective cover letters are those that do one of the following two things in one sentence : *They make a compelling statement that begs a response, or they ask a question that must be answered.*

A good approach is to ask for clarification of a point that makes it clear they have done their homework, as in: ‘Your ad said X while your Web site said Y ... Could you help me understand Z?’ The goal of the job seeker is to start a conversation rather than just throw a resume into a pile.

Tactics that hiring professionals hate

Cover letters or cover e-mails should not only be well written with proper spelling, grammar, punctuation and capitalization, but they should also leave out abbreviations or emoticons. Phrases like “i dunno,” lolh,” “i dnt cf,” “!!!,” “dgms,” “WTF” and using all capital letters have no place in professional correspondence.

Abbreviations are also inappropriate. They’re not expressive and using them risks confusing your reader, who might not know what their spelled-out versions are.