

Making Your Cover Letter Sparkle

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When applying for jobs, you should always include a cover letter with your résumé. Your cover letter is your first impression, so it needs to be well-crafted. It should briefly but clearly communicate what job you are applying for, what skills qualify you for the position, and why you want to work for the company. The trick is making it interesting to read.

If you're applying for an existing vacancy, briefly describe the position, where you saw it advertised, what qualifies for the job, and why you want to work for that specific company. If you are approaching an agency to register your résumé, describe the type of job you're looking for, the skills that qualify you for that job, your current salary, and whatever location preferences you may have.

There are certain steps you need to follow to write a short, to-the-point email that stands out. People who sound both interesting and interested get noticed. And getting noticed is the first step toward getting interviewed and employed!

What You Need to Know

Do people still use cover letters these days? Job hunting has changed so much over the last few years.

Indeed, the methods used in the hunt for jobs has changed a great deal in years. Without question, the Internet has been the biggest thing to change, and has impacted both employers and job seekers. Jobs are advertised online, applied for online, and even some pre-interview culling is done online. However, nothing has changed the basic premise of the job hunt. Your objective is to make yourself stand out from a competitive throng, and online advertising, e-mail, and Internet search engines are merely new tools for an old process. And whether you send your cover letters by e-mail or the old-fashioned way, they are still your first chance to impress your reader.

A cover letter is your chance to put a personal touch on your application, which may not come across in a résumé or application form. It is here that you can show how you write, how you view yourself, and what you understand about the position and company you are applying to. As you write, think about the tone you are setting, the words you are using to describe yourself and your qualifications. Remember to include the results of any research you have done into the company or field of work you're interested in.

What is the right length for a cover letter?

The best cover letters make a powerful impact while at the same time being short and to the point, two or three paragraphs at most. In fact, an overly long letter will likely bore or frustrate your reader.

What to Do

Be Clear About Your Objectives

Your cover letter is your first chance to stand out from the crowd. It must grab the reader's attention, making the recruiter or manager want to read your résumé and meet you. Start by addressing your letter to the right person. Using salutations such as "Dear Sir/Madam" or "To Whom It May Concern" is a red flag to recruiters, showing them that you have not done your homework. Such letters are often simply discarded. Finding out the name of the individual you need to address your letter to can be as simple as calling the company. Failing that, look it up on the Internet or at a reference library. Another good place to look is the company's catalog or annual report.

Although perhaps the most typical reason for writing a cover letter and sending a résumé is to respond to an advertisement, there are a number of other, slightly different, purposes for a cover letter.

- If you want to inquire with a company about job openings you can send a cover letter to ask who to send your résumé to.
- After visiting an organization in person to fill out a job application, you can use a cover letter to follow up.
- When applying for a position online via an agency, you may be asked to provide only your résumé and your contact details, but some agencies ask for a brief supporting statement to accompany your résumé.

When responding to an advertised job vacancy, a cover letter is the place to provide details requested in the advertisement, but which do not fit into a résumé format, such as:

- current salary;
- desired future salary;
- notice period;
- preferences for geographical location;
- dates you may be available for interview (you may want to include these if you are about to go on vacation).

Starting the Letter

Start by explaining the reason you are writing. If you are applying for an existing vacancy, begin your letter by describing the position in question, and that you are interested in it. For example:

- I am writing to express interest in the Senior Designer position advertised in the June 3 *Times* supplement.

If you have received a recommendation from someone within, or known to, the company, begin your letter with a sentence like this:

- I have been given your name by Ms Annette Rastelli regarding the vacancy in your Credit Control Department.

Express Your Interest in the Job

The value of expressing your interest in the job cannot be underestimated. Before you begin writing, you need to do whatever research necessary to be sure you understand what the company does and what its goals are. Search on the Web, including the company's own Web site if it has one, for any recent news articles. Read the company's press releases, read business newspapers, read trade magazines. You should know what trends and issues the company faces. Utilize the resources of your local library. Take notes and make photocopies of what you read if you cannot keep the article itself, and file them with anything relevant to your application with this company. Once you have completed your research, make sure it shows in your cover letter. Use descriptive terms to demonstrate your enthusiasm.

Show that you thoroughly understand the job advertisement by matching the language used there. For example, if the job description mentions "superior communication skills," work that phrase into your writing.

It is important to include all the information requested in the advertisement. If the recruiters want to know your current salary and notice period, make sure you've mentioned them.

Describe Why *You* are the Best Candidate

Early in the letter lay out your qualifications for the job, using strong descriptive language to grab the interest of the recruiter or personnel officer. Explaining how you can help the organization achieve its goals shows that you have done your homework, that you know what your role with the company can be, and that you are genuinely interested in the position and the company. For example:

- I understand that your company is planning on creating a Web presence to support your sales. In my current position as Senior Web Designer for Athena's Sportswear, an online women's

sportswear retailer, I have worked with our team to increase our market share by 13% in the past year.

The best cover letters describe how you and you alone can help the company successfully manage the challenges it faces.

Request the Interview

Although you might feel uncomfortable asking for an interview, preferring to let the company contact you, taking a more proactive approach makes a stronger impact. Asking for an interview can be as simple as writing something like “I look forward to the opportunity to discuss how my background and experience can contribute to the success of your organization.” You could also write that you will be in their area on a particular date and would be available for an interview.

Remember the Basics

Now that you have completed your planning and research, put the pieces together into a powerful whole.

- Be yourself. Your résumé is a somewhat bare bones list of your experiences and skills, but your cover letter is a chance to express your personality, perhaps even a little flair so that you stand out from the crowd of other applicants. Maintain a professional tone, but share your enthusiasm and your interest in the position.
- A cover letter that does not look professional will not get past the first review. Formatting and typeface should follow standard guidelines, and there is no excuse for errors in grammar or spelling. Read it carefully before you send it off and have a friend do the same. Do not rely on just your computer spellchecker!
- Most cover letters and résumés are submitted by e-mail these days, but if you are submitting by mail, use high quality résumé paper.
- Use a large envelope to mail the cover letter and résumé, to avoid folding them. Consider sending two copies in case the recruiter needs to show your letter and résumé to different people.
- When e-mailing, do not hit the send button until you check that your files are attached! In the body of your message, specify what type of file you have attached. Be prepared to send it in another format if they are unable to open it.

What to Avoid

You Use a Cover Letter Template

Reviewing the sample cover letters in business reference works can guide you on formatting, typeface, tone, and what to include for different kinds of letters. Do not make the mistake of copying these samples word for word. Remember that recruiters, managers, and interviewers read many, many cover letters. They will have heard the clichés and hackneyed phrases. Personalize each of your cover letters and target them to a specific position. Do your best to convey your own uniqueness. Some may try to use a template, “customizing” it with a few phrases and the correct recipient’s name. This method is not likely to fool anyone.

You Recycle the Same Cover Letter

Taking the time to write a personal cover letter targeted to a particular company will show that you really want to work for that company. Also, when you recycle the same cover letter over and over again, you run the risk of making mistakes, such as inadvertently mentioning the wrong company in the body of your letter. Tailoring your letter to the company you’re applying to may be more time-consuming, but your cover letter is your one chance to impress your reader that you are the best person for the job.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Bolles, Richard. *What Color is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers*. Revised ed. Ten Speed Press, 2007.

Web Site:

Monster.com: www.monster.com