

You Can Write Great Cover Letters

Is it hard to write a good cover letter? You bet! Good writing is always hard work, but it's worth the trouble. A good cover letter will help put you at the top of the list of candidates.

A well-prepared letter has always been a valuable asset in your job search toolkit, but never more than today, when your words often stand alone as text in an e-mail message or in a recruitment database — without benefit of beautiful stationery, creative formatting, or special fonts to help communicate your image and message.

Here is a four-step process — laced with ten valuable secrets — that will make you a cover letter genius.

Step 1. Prepare.

Have you done your homework? Learn what you can about the company, the job, the person you are contacting. Do you know how to spell his/her name? If you have their correct job title include it; if you are unsure, leave it out.

When should you use a cover letter? [**Secret #1: Best when you can write to a specific person.**] Blanketing the countryside with your cover letter might make you feel productive, but it won't do you any good.

When will the cover letter be read? [**Secret #2: The hiring manager generally reads the letter after becoming interested in your resume.**]

So, it's a good opportunity to answer questions the reader may have — explain gaps in employment, why you left a position, why you are seeking a new position, why you think their position would be a good fit for you, or address an issue that might be perceived as a problem.

Step 2. Draft your letter.

What are your objectives? Introduce yourself. If you were referred by a personal contact, mention it. Set yourself apart by explaining how you will make a contribution to the company. In

other words, show them that they will be the winner if they hire you. [**Secret #3: This is all really about them, not about you.**]

What is your point of view? [**Secret #4: It's personal.**] Write to a person, not a company. The letter is from you. It should sound like you. Do not use form letter language. Pretend that you are writing to someone you know — not a family member or pal, but a person you can relate to. This will help you write in your natural voice and use warmer language.

What is the appropriate style? This is a business letter. Be brief, specific, simple, and honest. It's not a novel. Get to the bottom line. Your letter must:

- Be neat, accurate, and grammatically correct.
- State your follow-up plan. Do not say you'll 'call next week' if you know you won't make the call.
- Be no longer than one page.
- Be positive. [**Secret #5: Find the good nugget in all your experiences, even the bad ones.**]
- Be enthusiastic.

How should you format your cover letter?

Three-four short paragraphs:

1. Introduce yourself.
 - a. Why you are applying for the job. Be sure to specify exactly what job.
 - b. Your top skills and [**Secret #6: your transferable skills**]. They won't try to figure out what your transferable skills are — help them out!
2. Benefits to the company if they hire you
3. Action / close

What should you say?

1. Outline your key points before you begin. [**Secret #7: The key points should respond to the needs of the company and the job.**]

2. Include a specific example of how you achieved a result. [**Secret #8: You cannot overestimate the power of a personal story.**] It is memorable, it makes you memorable, and it goes behind the ‘headlines’ every applicant spouts – “I’m a team player;” “I can handle stress,” and others. You may repeat or restate things that are in your resume for emphasis.
3. If the position that has been advertised, the employer has given you some clues as to what they want. Respond to these clues.
4. If you have no clues, then imagine them. Think like the hiring manager, what are the most important traits they are likely to be looking for? Respond to those.
5. STOP! [**Secret #9: Do not volunteer more information, even though you have lots of other skills.**] The employer gets confused! They start to think, what does this candidate REALLY want? Will they stay in this job? Is there a hidden agenda? Are they still deciding what they want to be when they grow up? More is **not** better.

Cover Letter Content Guide

Dear Mr. or Ms. [name]:

I am applying for the position of [title].

I have [skill one] [skill two] [skill three] skills that match your requirements.

[Here is a specific example of how I delivered results using my skills that relate to your needs:] At [my present company], I [worked all night to finish a presentation for an important meeting... and we got the account I can really handle pressure and meet deadlines.]

I am interested in this position because [describe]. I know your company would benefit from my skills because [describe, showing you know something about the company, if you do].

Handle special issues (Relocation? Employment gap? Career change? Etc.) [My company is relocating to China but I have decided to remain here.]

What happens next? [Please consider me, I would like to meet, I will call you, etc.]

Sincerely yours,
[your name]

Step 3. Clean it up.

Are you ready to send your letter? NO!

[**Secret #10: Editing will make a good letter great.**]

Here are a few tips for troubleshooting your letter (or anything you’re writing):

1. Read it for spelling and grammar. Spell-check will miss words that are spelled correctly but used incorrectly (‘too’ instead of ‘two’, ‘there’ instead of ‘their’). Grammar-check is not fool-proof, either.
2. Read it (again) for wordiness. Have you said something in four or five words that can be said with one? Have you used a big word (‘utilize’) when a little word (‘use’) will do? Change it.
3. Compare the contents to your resume. Facts, dates, should be consistent.
4. Read it (again) for content. Have you made your key points?
5. Get an outsider’s view. Ask a friend or colleague to give you their reactions and suggestions.
6. Confirm the accuracy of the contact information and spelling of the name.
7. NOW you’re ready to send your letter!

Step 4. Ship it out.

E-mail etiquette. Should you send the letter as an attachment? It is a good idea to do both. Send the letter’s text within the body of your e-mail message, plus the attachment. If there is any problem with the attachment, it will not slow the process at the hiring end.

Your outstanding personal presentation will help make you a ‘must-see’ candidate! Good luck in your search!