

Preparing Your Cover Letter



PREPARING YOUR COVER LETTER

When you look at the results from the survey questions covering the resume and cover letter, one thing is abundantly clear: Recruiters do not want to spend a lot of time looking at either. You probably felt cheated when you learned recruiters looked at your resume for less than four minutes, especially considering the amount of time it took you to write it. Compared to the cover letter, that will seem like an eternity. On average, recruiters spend 2 minutes (2.07) reading your cover letter and only 10% indicated it was the most important applicant material. If you combine the time recruiters spend scanning your resume and reading your cover letter, you get a whopping six minutes. That is probably pretty discouraging considering all of the effort you put into them.

Just because recruiters said they only spent two minutes reading your cover letter, do not take that as a recommendation to skip writing one. It is still a good idea to send a cover letter along with most of the resumes you send out. There are times when you do not need a cover letter (i.e. job fair, posting a resume on a web site, etc.), but if you are unsure whether you need one or not, send one. You are better off sending one and not having the recruiter read it than not sending one and leaving the recruiter wondering where it is. The cover letter does provide you with the opportunity to explain what you are interested in doing for the company and to sell yourself to the job. The more it looks like your qualifications match those of the ideal applicant for the position, the more likely you will be to get an interview.

The most important factors (Figure 6.1) to keep in mind when writing your cover letter include: (1) Concise and to the point, (2) One page, (3) Sell yourself to the job description, (4) No spelling or grammatical errors, and (5) Do not repeat information

included in your resume. These factors are discussed in the tips for writing a good resume. They include:

1. Do not make your cover letter more than one page. If you are concise and to the point, this should not pose a problem. Longer is not better when it comes to cover letters. Remember, you are not the only person sending a cover letter for the recruiter to read. You may have taken essay tests in college where you figured the more you wrote, the more likely you were going to actually say something of value. That strategy does not work with recruiters when it comes to cover letters.
2. Sell yourself to the job description. The job description will normally include a list of the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA's) the person applying for the position must possess. Provide examples and illustrations (unique from anything on your resume) from your past when you have demonstrated those KSA's. Use action verbs like you did in your resume.
3. Proofread very carefully for typographical, grammatical and spelling errors. One little error could go a long way in showing the recruiter your attention to detail is lacking. Have someone else proofread it too, since it is often difficult for you to find your own errors.
4. Do not just regurgitate information that is on your resume. This is your chance to expand on what you feel (and hopefully what the recruiter will feel) is most important. You can expand on areas listed on your resume, but do not simply repeat. For example, if you listed relevant coursework on your resume, discuss in your cover letter projects or presentations that were a part of the class that would demonstrate relevant KSA's.
5. Try and address each cover letter to the specific person who will be reading it. If you do not know the specific person's name, give the company a call and try to find out. This phone call also gives you the chance to get your name into the minds of members of the organization. Make sure you are professional, polite and considerate no matter with whom you talk. Even if the person you speak with has little direct decision-making power in you landing a job, he or she may have a lot of influence with the people who do. Do not use "To Whom it May Concern" at the beginning of a cover letter because chances are good it will end up not concerning anyone if you do write that.
6. Focus on what you can do for the company, not what the company can do for you. You can mention the benefits you will gain from them, especially if you are interested in an internship, however, the focus on the letter should be what you can do for them. It is a good idea to discuss facts about the company you learned through your research that were impressive (a smart way of patting the company on the back).

7. Send an original and creative cover letter with each resume. Do not try to create a universal cover letter.
8. Be enthusiastic about yourself, the position and organization to which you are applying.
9. Be confident. You can demonstrate confidence in your writing style. Do not write statements like "I feel I would be an excellent addition to XYZ company." It sounds like you are trying to defend yourself. Instead write, "I would be an excellent addition to XYZ company."
10. Type on bond paper (the same kind and color as your resume).
11. If you mention in the closing paragraph that you will contact the recruiter, do not forget to do that. I doubt you will. If you wait five to seven days, that should be plenty of time for the recruiter to have received and reviewed your application materials. It does not hurt to take the initiative and be aggressive.

In the appendix section of this chapter, you will find the most important factors according to recruiters when writing a cover letter (Figure 6.1). There are also example paragraphs you can use in the opening of a cover letter (Figure 6.2) along with a framework for cover letters (Figure 6.3) in general. Finally, there are three sample cover letters to use (Figures 6.4 - 6.6) as guides when creating your own.

Figure 6.1- Important Factors when Writing Cover Letters

1. Concise and to the point
2. One page
3. Sell yourself to the job description
4. No spelling or grammar errors
5. Include information unique from the resume
6. Include the position for which the student is applying
7. Sound enthusiastic
8. Personalize to a specific person in the company
9. Provide examples of relevant skills
10. Well organized
11. Interesting
12. Honest (no fluff)
13. Creative
14. Includes signature
15. Mentions connection, if relevant
16. Positive
17. State what you can do for the organization
18. Not too cute (they are referring to the wording, not you)
19. Include phone number

Figure 6.2 - Example Opening Paragraphs for Cover Letters

- 1. Response to an Advertisement** - You are sending a cover letter to a company in response to an advertisement listing an available position. With an advertised position, your chances improve considerably.

EXAMPLE: I am writing to you about the Park Ranger position advertised in the Sunday, March 21" edition of the Hickory Gazette. I am very interested in the position and my knowledge, skills and experience would be invaluable to XYZ company and the management of your forest.

- 2. Using a Contact** - You are sending a cover letter to a company hoping to be considered for an interview (for an advertised or unadvertised position). You are using the name of a connection that the company would recognize and make a positive association with.

EXAMPLE: Betty Robell, a close family friend, referred your name to me. I am graduating in December with a Master's Degree in Accounting. I am interested in pursuing a career in corporate accounting and would appreciate the opportunity to interview with ABC Accounting Firm for a full time position. (If the position was advertised, refer to the specific position and source).

- 3. Prospecting** - You are sending a cover letter to a company hoping it has an opening, but nothing is advertised. This is a very difficult way to get an interview.

EXAMPLE: I am a senior in Human Resource Management graduating in May. I am interested in XYZ Company because of its emphasis on teamwork and commitment to excellence. My knowledge, experience and drive to succeed would make me an excellent addition to your company. I am looking to start in an entry-level position.

Figure 6.3 - Standard Format for a Cover Letter

Your Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Date

Name of the person to whom you are writing
Title of the person
Name of the organization for which he/she works
Address of the company

Dear Dr./Mr./Mrs./Ms./Miss _____:

First Paragraph: State the specific purpose for writing. There are several possible reasons for writing (Figure 6.2) and the appropriate one should be brought to the recruiter's attention immediately. Also, mention the specific position for which you are applying, and how you found out about the opening (friend, placement center, newspaper, etc.). This is the place to mention a connection. A connection can make a huge difference in whether or not you get an interview or a job offer.

Second Paragraph: Discuss how your background (i.e. school, work, activities, etc.) qualifies you for the position you are applying for without restating what you wrote on your resume. This is your chance to go into more depth and provide the recruiter with examples and details of your experiences. You may want to discuss what knowledge and skills your classes, projects or extracurricular activities taught you. You can also list accomplishments you have achieved at school or work. Then, move into a discussion of how your past work experience qualifies you for the position. Mention how certain tasks from past jobs would be directly applicable to tasks in the job you are seeking. Point out again that you worked WHILE attending college and what this taught you (i. e. time management, responsibility, etc.). If you have extensive work experience, divide the second paragraph into two separate, smaller paragraphs. Focus one paragraph on your academic experience and focus the other paragraph on your work experience.

Final Paragraph: Indicate your desire for an interview and let the individual know you are willing to meet on his or her terms (as far as the time and place). Close by restating your phone number and mention you will contact the recruiter. Do not rely on the recruiter to contact you. Show some initiative. The recruiter is far too busy to call back every applicant. You might be sitting by the phone for a long time if you wait for the recruiter to call.

Sincerely,

(Signature)

Name (Typed)

Enclosure: Resume and References (If you send references)

Figure 6.4 - Sample Cover Letter (Advertised Position)

5684 West 32nd St. #243
Chapel Hill, NC 87512
June 25th, 2002

Mr. James Riley
Personnel Manager
Top Automobile Manufacturer
3040 Round Road
Detroit, Michigan 48095

Dear Mr. Riley:

I am writing in response to your recent advertisement for a customer sales representative that was listed in the Sunday, June 24th edition of the Detroit Press. With my strong people skills and determined work ethic, I would make an excellent addition to Top Automobile Manufacturer.

I admire your company's vision to be the worldwide leader in the automotive industry and to be committed to providing "total customer enthusiasm" through your employees. I have the ability to generate customer enthusiasm. I recently completed an extensive 40 hour mediation course. This training provided me with the skills necessary to analytically separate fact from emotion in order to manage disputes and resolve conflicts in the most effective, practical, and positive manner possible. These techniques are essential in satisfying the interests of the customer while still protecting the interests of Top Automobile Manufacturer.

In accordance with the mediation certificate, my academic studies at The University of North Carolina in Communication and Organizational Management have given me a diverse curriculum that relates directly to your organizational culture. I am referring to your dedicated approach to strengthening employee commitment by actively facilitating, teamwork, leadership, and motivation. I am certain that, by incorporating my own knowledge and experience from these same areas, I can guide employees toward achieving common objectives. I can also assist in the improvement of customer relations in order to meet and exceed customer expectations.

The enclosed resume is a summary of my qualifications, training and experience. I will be in the Detroit Metroplex area the second week of July. I would be honored to interview with you while in Detroit. I will call you the first of next week to try to schedule an interview date. Please feel free to contact me at (815) 468-2534 if you have any questions or need any additional information. I look forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely,
(Signature)

Jillana E. George
Enclosure: Resume

Figure 6.5 - Sample Cover Letter (Unadvertised Position – Prospecting)

1800 Primrose
La Jolla, CA 92156
April 15, 2002

Mr. Roger Hanson
Director of Sales Staff
MJB Electronics
5326 Patton Drive
Memphis, TN 64534

Dear Mr. Hanson:

I am a senior Business Administration major graduating in August. My varied work experience in business, coupled with my education, has prepared me for a career in management. I am interested in working for MJB Electronics because of its commitment to its employees and the community. I would like to start in a management trainee position.

While at San Diego State University, I had numerous opportunities to demonstrate my management and leadership skills. I served as the inaugural leadership chairperson for my sorority. As leadership chairperson, I implemented a leadership and mentoring program that pinpointed members' strengths and directed them in paths that best fit their interests. I have also been given several leadership and management tasks within my sorority including a special project head in a theatrical program. In this role I organized a task team, delegated responsibilities, and promoted enthusiasm among the members.

Along with my college experience, I have had the opportunity to work as a salesperson with several companies. This exposure has been instrumental in strengthening my interpersonal communication skills and flexibility in approaching and dealing with diversity in people and the workplace.

I would welcome the chance to speak with you about my qualifications and starting a career with MJB Electronics. I will contact you the week of April 22nd to follow up on this letter. If it is more convenient for you, I can be reached at (619) 222-4653. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

(Signature)

Wendy E. Hall

Enclosure: Resume and References

Figure 6.6 -Sample Cover Letter (Advertised Position with a Contact)

7253 Hatfield Avenue Apt. #3
Natchfield, IL 54635
October 14, 2002

Mr. Peter Filler
Director of Personnel
Top Marketing Firm
Washington Hall
934 North Washington
Seattle, WA 64537

Dear Mr. Filler:

I am writing you regarding my interest in the marketing representative position advertised in the Sunday, October 7th edition of *The Examiner*. Eric Fife, the northwest district manager suggested I write to you personally. My knowledge and experience in the marketing field would make me an excellent addition to Top Marketing Firm.

I have had the opportunity to work in a marketing department in two different jobs at both the collegiate and professional level. Interacting with players, coaches and the media on a daily basis has served to strengthen my communication skills and teach me different perspectives involved in the sports' industry. Through my experience with the Cleveland Blizzard and the West Central State University football program, I have been able to gain insight into the efficient operations of two different organizations.

Along with my experience, I have found the time and dedication to actively belong to numerous campus organizations, holding offices in several of them. Besides working and being involved on campus, I have maintained a GPA of 3.7/4.0, which shows organizational and time management skills. My excellent oral and written communication skills, dedication, work ethic, and enthusiasm would make me an asset to the Fort Sound Rocketeers' organization.

I would welcome the opportunity to speak with you about the marketing assistant position. I will contact you the week of October 21st to follow up. If it is more convenient for you, I can be reached at (928) 263-3746. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

(Signature)

Spencer R. Koltun

Enclosure: Resume