

What You Don't Know About Cover Letters

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Perhaps you think you don't need to go over this old ground again. We all know that you should send a cover letter along with your résumé when applying for a job, except when you are spared the burden of writing one by the constraints of a Web application. But trust me, you don't want to be spared.

A good cover letter can do as much to help you get a job as a good résumé -- maybe more. It's your chance to tell your story. The résumé tells the facts; the letter brings them to life and creates interest. A good letter gets you the interview that gets you the job. And it is especially important for Ph.D.'s who are making a big move away from the subject area of their graduate field.

Length and Elements

For anyone starting a new career, a one-page cover letter of four paragraphs is plenty.

First Paragraph: Briefly introduce yourself -- who you are and what job you are applying for. By "who you are" I mean your status as a graduate student or a Ph.D., or your identity as an experienced writer or researcher with a Ph.D. from X University, or as someone knowledgeable about issues of international trade and fluent in Chinese, Russian, and English who will receive a Ph.D. in economics from University Y in June. You're putting out there a sentence or two that identifies you immediately as someone worth reading more about. If you have a personal connection to the employer -- someone recommended that you write or you have several friends from college who work in the research division -- put that information right up front as well. Understand that you must catch readers' attention and engage their interest in your first few sentences.

Second and Third Paragraphs: At this point, you want to tell a compelling personal story that points to the specific skills, expertise, and experience that you would bring to the employer and why you want the job. These paragraphs are the heart of your letter. You must focus on what you can do for them -- that's what they care about. The key may be the subject area of your graduate concentration or your language skills or the program-management skills you developed in the course of getting your doctorate.

If your Ph.D. field doesn't seem obviously related to your career choice, then you should make clear the reading, thinking, and talking you have done to move in this direction. For example, if you are a graduate student in French and you are applying for a position with Goldman Sachs, convince them that there's a good reason for the move. A possible scenario: In your Ph.D. studies you followed your love of French culture and literature. Increasingly in recent years you found yourself engaged also by business issues and problems (note the specific reading you have done or courses you have taken). It is this direction that you choose now for your professional career, bringing with you the analytic, communications, and research skills developed through your doctoral program along with the statistical skills you developed as an undergraduate sociology major.

Fourth Paragraph: Make arrangements for following up. In most situations, you can establish an active role for yourself instead of passively waiting by the phone or computer. Say that you will follow up with an e-mail message or telephone call in the next week to arrange a time when you might get together. What happens when you call is a matter for another column, but here I'll just say don't be surprised if no one knows anything about your letter.

The Point: As you are writing and revising your letter, always keep in mind its purpose -- to land you an interview. Ideally your letter will convince the reader that you can do something that the employer needs done, and that you can do it better than someone else.

Types of Cover Letters

The challenge of writing a cover letter varies, depending on whether you're applying for an actual job opening, or just making inquiries. Here's how I define the different types of cover letters:

Type A: Applying for a job that exists in a field where you have experience.

Type B: Applying for a job that exists in a field where you do not have experience.

Type C: Inquiring about possibilities in a field where you have experience.

Type D: Inquiring about possibilities in a field where you do not have experience.

Clearly, a "type A" letter is the easiest to write, because you have everything in your favor. If you think the employer would find it hard not to consider you for the job, you can be pretty sure you have written an effective letter. In a "type C" letter you would present yourself in a similar way; the difference is that you don't know whether there is a current opening. A good example would be a letter of inquiry about a research job for a pharmaceutical company written by a Ph.D. in chemistry who has industry experience, direct research experience in an area of interest for the company, and other relevant skills. In these two types of letters, you present yourself as the best person with the education, experience, and skills that the employer wants. You are as close to a risk-free hire as there can be, and employers generally like to avoid risk.

"Type B and D" letters are a different story. In these you want to present yourself as an interesting person, someone they should take a look at even though you are not an easy, risk-free candidate. These letters are especially challenging for Ph.D.'s who not only may lack the relevant experience for the career, but also the usual degree held by people in the position. This is where you sell your transferable skills, exceptional achievements as a student, and your ability to learn and communicate masses of new information with ease. While it is always a good idea to send your letter to the head of a particular division or department rather than to the head of human resources, it is crucial to do so when writing one of these letters. Put simply, human-resource divisions are not noted for their enlightened vision or "out of the box" thinking. You need to get your letter to someone pretty high up in the organization who may be able to appreciate what you offer.

One more thing about "type C" and "type D" letters: In the current economy, all of you should expand your job searches by writing letters of inquiry to organizations or companies that interest you - - describing your education, skills, and experience with sufficient clarity and directness so that employers will be able to tell how they can use such a talented person. If you can help them see where you fit in the organization, all the better.

What Not to Do

Here's my list of the most common mistakes made by graduate students in the cover letters I've reviewed.

Emphasizing What the Company Will Do for You: The company's primary mission is not to educate you. Don't waste your words telling them how happy you are about their programs for employee



development or what a good opportunity this will be for you to learn about the business. Tell them what they do care about --namely, what you can do for them.

Using Brochure Language: You have all read and perhaps used such language -- "industry leaders," "in the forefront of technology," "opportunities for growth and advancement." These phrases always sound good, but do they carry any real meaning? You have a lot of ground to cover in a letter. Choose words that state what you want clearly and describe your achievements specifically.

Using Too Much Self-Evaluation: "I am confident that I will contribute to your company." "I am uniquely qualified for this position." Why should they believe you? Better to lay out your specific skills and achievements and let them conclude that you're the top.

Presenting Your Strengths Too Weakly: The whole point of the letter is to present you as a person they should interview and hire. It's not enough to mention four or five skills shared by many Ph.D.'s -- skills they are probably quite familiar with by now. Think of your task this way: to make clear why they should hire you and not an M.B.A. from a good school; why you with a Ph.D. in history instead of a Ph.D. in science; why you instead of your physics Ph.D. lab partner; why you instead of a bright, young, and malleable B.A.

Final Words of Advice

Find your own voice. Choose the right words, not fancy words. Don't be cute. No matter what you may have read, it's not a good idea to open with, "Good morning, Mary, I'm the person you want to hire."

Check that the tone is mature. Describe your relevant achievements and goals in a direct and confident manner.

Always be specific. Every time you make a generalization about yourself, back it up with a specific example that illustrates it. Use generalizations as organizing devices for describing the specifics. Specifics are inherently more interesting than generalizations, and they are what you need to interest the reader in you -- and not your competition.

