

Cover letters that demand attention

Set yourself apart from the competition.
By Jane Hodges

While some say cover letters are useless in an era of forms-based job applications and who-you-know networking, most hiring managers still expect them. A recent CareerBuilder survey revealed that one-third of hiring managers are unlikely to consider applicants who don't write one.

So, necessary evil or not, cover letters should at a minimum summarize and shape the contents of your accompanying resume. The best cover letters do more, though. They also convey your personality, skill base, fit for the job, how you embody the hiring company's culture and how you think or problem-solve both independently and in groups. It may take a few drafts to craft a letter that covers the basics and also sings the extras. If you want to write an effective cover letter, consider drafting until your letter delivers on these goals.

Deliver the basics

"You'll have competition and the reader is going to scan the cover letter," says John Carvana, a Stockton, California-based career coach who counsels job seekers. "You can do that in three paragraphs."

In the first paragraph, state why you are writing or to which job you are applying. In the second, provide context for your skills and how they fulfill those sought in the job description. In the third, allude to next steps, such as your availability to talk or willingness to provide further materials such as references.

Show you've done your homework

If you know someone in the company or have been researching the industry, layer that into your letter. But be careful: Make sure your contact knows you'll invoke their name and are in good standing, Carvana counsels. It's also helpful to mention what you like about the company based on homework from trade or industry associations, which reveals you're educating yourself on your own time about your potential new employer or field.

Specify your accomplishments

"I sometimes ask people to be more specific in a cover letter," says Amy Fried, a recruiter in Boulder, Colorado, who has worked with digital media companies and now places hires at renewable energy companies. "Sometimes I ask them to jot down four bullet points highlighting specific achievements relevant to the position they're pursuing."

For instance, she says, rather than talk generally about projects you led, think like an employer and get specific about your achievements and their scope. Instead of saying you managed research teams and programs at an educational company, Fried suggests you say something concrete like this: "At XYZ, an educational research firm, I designed, executed and managed questionnaire design, data collection, analysis and reporting for four college-level programs covering 100 institutions and 20 rural K-12 districts. I managed teams of up to 10 and budgets in the \$200,000 to \$500,000 range."

Kick it up a notch

Paul Stolz, author of *Put Your Mindset to Work*, says cover letters not only provide a place to outline skills but, more importantly, demonstrate your “mindset” at work. Like Fried, he advocates getting specific about accomplishments. But in doing so, he says, show that you have the ‘right mindset’ with one of what he calls the three G’s—goodness (team playing), grit (tenacity) and global sensibility (the ability to think beyond your immediate department).

“Hiring managers would rather choose someone who lacks specific skills and has the right mindset, than someone who has the skills sought and the wrong mindset” Stolz says, nothing that in his research of 30,000 resumes and cover letters, mindset typically trumped skill set.

For instance, rather than simply mentioning you were on a corporation’s wellness team, mention you fought seven years to get your company to institute a wellness initiative that would up saving millions by slashing health care costs or halving sick days. Such an example explains the facts, but also demonstrates grit (seven years of persistence), a global mindset (making a company-wide effort) and a good outcome (your people skills paid off with decision-makers). Mindset is important if you were entry level and still building skills or mid-career and want to move from one industry or type of job to another, he says.

Get down to brass tacks

In your letter’s closing, include additional basics such as your availability for interviews or to start work, your willingness to relocate and so forth. Remember that, in addition to getting to know you, hiring managers have some basic nuts and bolts on their minds—a budget, a hiring timeline, urgency around projects awaiting staffing, etc. Knowing how soon you can join the company and under what circumstances matters.

Borrow a pair of eyes

There’s more than one way to write a good cover letter. Often, getting an extra pair of eyes from friends or industry peers can help you skirt sloppy grammar or spelling mistakes and more effectively convey or highlight your skills. Approaching one of your references or someone who knows your past work can also be effective for this task, as you’ll get them up to speed on a job for which they’ll provide a kind word. Following these simple tips can help you get your foot in the door and set you apart from the competition.

