Writing Cover Letters

When reading cover letters, the key benchmark I use is simple: Do I get to know both the person and the professional? As we read a cover letter, we should have a sense that no other candidate could have written this particular document in this particular way. Hence, we respect and honor the individual.

In conversation, the term “cover letter” is used loosely to mean any professional letter that you write in an attempt to get a job, with the term “cover” denoting that the letter is usually a “cover piece” designed to introduce and accompany your resume. Thus, too many writers think of the cover letter as mere mechanical introductory fluff—disposable goods—when in fact it can be more important than your resume.

The best tip that I have heard on cover letter writing is that the letter is for the audience, not for you. Certainly you are selling yourself, but you do that best by molding your skills to what an employer needs and by knowing all that you can about your audience. This tells you that you should visit a company’s website, read the company literature, and have a specific person’s name and title to write to (you can always request this by phone or e-mail before you write). In sum, know what your audience is interested in and how you might fit into a company’s plans, not the other way around. Unless an employer instructs you otherwise, always include a cover letter with your resume as you apply for a job.

Tone: Making it Sound Good

- The proper tone for the cover letter is one of an informed, straightforward, courteous, relaxed, literate writer.
- Use “I” comfortably as a sentence subject, but avoid being too informal—overusing contractions or jargon could make you appear unprofessional.
- Avoid being too cocky, aggressive, idealistic, or unrealistic; come off as mature, self-aware, and confident.

Appearance and Mechanics: Making it Look Good

- Limit cover letters to one page, and type them using single-spaced or 1.5-spaced typing, with about one-inch margins or more on all sides of the page.
- Skip lines between paragraphs.
- Favor short paragraphs over long ones.
- Use highly readable, tight, fonts, such as Helvetica or Times, and point sizes no larger than 12 and no smaller than 10.
- Spell check, then proofread the hard copy carefully. Present the final version of the letter on durable white or off-white paper.
- Mail your letter and resume flat in a large envelope rather than folded in a small one. That way they will be easier to read and Xerox.

The Heading and Greeting: Following the Formats

- At the top right or left corner of the page, type your address, your phone number, your e-mail address, and the date. Below that, at the left margin, put the name, title, and address of the person
receiving the letter.

- Skip a line or two, then type “Dear,” the person’s title (Dr., Ms., Mr.), name, and a colon.
- If possible, find out the proper title, spelling, and gender of the receiver of the letter (all it usually takes is a phone call or a little web surfing). If you cannot be certain of the recipient’s gender, it is acceptable to use both the first and last name (i.e., “Dear Jan Morris”). If no name is available, use a logical title such as “Dear Human Resources Representative.” Greetings such as “Dear Sir or Madam” and “To Whom it May Concern” are old-fashioned—some even find them offensive—and should be avoided.

The Opening Paragraph: Showcasing Your Homework

- Ideally, open with a reference to how you derived knowledge of the company or position.
- If possible, provide context by some artful name dropping (“Ms. Judith Sowers, a Quality Control Specialist in your Meredith plant, informs me that you are seeking . . .”). Otherwise, simply be forthright about why you are writing the letter (“I am writing to you because . . .”).
- Include particulars about the company’s activities and vision—prove that you have done your homework and know something about the company’s products and mission. Even quote a mission statement if you can.
- Establish your own professional context by naming your major and school.

The Body Paragraphs: Selling your Skills

- One paragraph may suffice here, but use more if necessary, especially if you have several different skills or experiences to sell. Stick to one topic per paragraph.
- Through concrete examples, provide evidence of your work ethic and success—cite courses, co-ops, papers, projects, theses, or internships you have completed. Make your examples both quantitative and qualitative. Some writers use a bulleted list to introduce narrative examples of their skills. Some even provide URLs for their home pages or other web pages they helped to create.
- Introduce your resume (“As the enclosed resume shows . . .”) and interpret it for your audience rather than simply repeat its details. Apply your education, work experience, and activities directly to the job, proving that you are a highly capable candidate.

The Closing Paragraph and Signoff: Exiting Gracefully

- Keep your closing short and simple. Do not waste time. Be gracious and sincere, not falsely flattering nor pushy. Respectfully indicate your desire for further action, reminding the company of your availability.
- Remembering that a company could try to call you over a break or during the summer, indicate relevant phone numbers right in the text. Provide your e-mail address as well.
- Under the final paragraph, skip a line or two, then, directly under your heading address, type “Sincerely,” then handwrite and type your name beneath.
- Indicate that a resume is included along with the letter by typing the word “Enclosure” at the left margin near the bottom of the page.

Self-Study