



Grossmont College
Career Center / Student Employment Services



Writing Cover Letters

Cover Letters

Create a Picture of You!



Believe it or not, cover letters can be great fun to write. Unlike resumes, in which specific information must be included (e.g., experience, education), cover letters are an empty canvas upon which you can create an image of you – an image that depicts how you want to be perceived by a prospective employer.

Consider these *three* different “perceptions” of the same job seeker, a 32-year-old sales representative name Alex, and how each cover letter differs.

Perception #1:

If Alex wants to continue working as a sales representative, his cover letter will focus on his sales success-revenue performance, market growth, key account relationships and more.

Perception #2:

If Alex now wants to move into a sales management position, his cover letter will focus on his experience in training and mentoring newly hired sales representatives, his public speaking skills (they’ve surely been important in his client presentations), his skills in budgeting and sales forecasting, and more.

Perception #3:

If Alex now wants to change career paths and pursue an opportunity in special event management, his cover letter will focus on his organizational skills, ability to coordinate numerous ongoing projects (his customer relationships), his negotiating skills and more.

When you write a cover letter, you can “push” your reader to “see” your skills in a particular way by using the most effective writing strategies for that particular situation. Most significant, you must always remember that cover letter writing, just like resume writing, is sales and marketing. You must write your cover letters as you would any other marketing communications – with power and confidence that you are the “right” candidate for the position.

Six Elements to Include in Your Cover Letter:

1. The Benefits **You** bring to the organization
2. The Value **You** bring to the organization
3. You’re most distinguishing **Achievements** relevant to the organization
4. Relevant **Professional Skills** and **Qualifications**
5. Educational and professional **Credentials** relevant to the organization
6. Most important, in each cover letter, you must **Ask** for the **Interview**



Employer's Perspective

The cover letter is probably the most important document the job seeker will ever write. While a typical job search campaign may be conducted with possibly two or three resumes, a specific and skillfully crafted cover letter is necessary for each targeted employer.



First: Learn the specific needs and expectations of the hiring company.

Second: Write a cover letter that showcases your qualifications, accomplishments, educational credentials and more that are relevant to the position. If the cover letter can spark an interest, the employer will be motivated to extend an invitation for an interview.

It goes without saying that each and every cover letter must be *100 percent accurate*. Incorrect spellings, improper grammar, poor organization and inappropriate language are never acceptable or even tolerated. Letters, just like resumes, are a direct reflection of the quality of work that a person will produce. Less than perfect will not communicate the right image.

Types of Cover Letters

Following is a list of the different types of cover letters that are used in different situations. Each has its own idiosyncrasies, yet all share the same bottom-line objective – to help secure an interview. The most commonly used types of cover letters are:

- **Ad Response Letters** (written in response to a specific print or online advertisement).
- **Cold-Call Letters** (written to express interest in employment opportunities with a targeted company).
- **Recruiter & Employment Agency Letters** (written to investigate opportunities that recruiters and agencies may have that would be appropriate for a specific job seeker).
- **Resume Letter** (a unique resume/cover letter combination often used when a job seekers want to share only select experiences from their past).
- **Broadcast Letter** (letter-only communication with no accompanying resume, often used by job seekers to “sell” themselves to a new career).
- **Networking Letter** (more “casual” letter written to individuals within a particular job seeker’s network).

Writing the Cover Letter



Plan & Prepare. It is important to be prepared prior to writing the cover letter. When searching for a job, you must research the company you are seeking employment with. This will assist in ascertaining contact names, what the company needs and how your skills and experience are a good “fit” for the company. Many human resource departments have job announcements and/or full job descriptions available, and applicants can request them. This makes it easier to match requirements to the candidate’s qualifications.



Opening Paragraph. This is where you can pique the employer’s interest. This is the “sales pitch” and should be hard-hitting. The employer is informed in this paragraph, who you are, why selecting you would benefit the company above all other applicants and what position you are applying for. This information should be concisely stated in this paragraph. If you are responding to an advertisement, be sure to note the exact position title and name of the publication.



The Body of the Letter. This is the most important section of any cover letter, for it is where you communicate what you can contribute to the organization by writing about your skills, qualifications, achievements, accomplishments, contributions and successes. These are essential to an effective cover letter and can be conveyed in a ***Paragraph Style***, ***Comparison-List Style*** or ***Bullet Style***.

Appendices to this are:

Letter 1: Paragraph Style

Letter 2: Comparison-List Style

Letter 3: Bullet Style.

If you use the ***Paragraph Style***, paragraphs should be short. This is often the best style if the writer wants to “tell a story” by providing a summary of professional skills that accentuate the candidate’s career accomplishments and demonstrate a potential to repeat the same standards of performance. This strategy is extremely effective and enables the employer to actually visualize the applicant at work.

The unique format of the ***Comparison-List Style*** demonstrates your ability to meet the job requirements. This format is easy to read, visually appealing and must be very organized to achieve the necessary impact. All skills, accomplishments and qualifications relate specifically to requirements outlined in the job announcement.

The ***Bullet Style*** focuses on the needs of the employer by outlining and listing all the relevant skills, accomplishments, specialized training and qualifications of the job seeker. This format has proven to be particularly effective for both graduating students and experienced professionals.

The “Body” of the Cover Letter. In the “body” of the cover letter, the opportunity exists to communicate any knowledge of the company, familiarity with the industry, and how company goals and objectives dovetail with your professional plans. This is also a perfect time for you to convey enthusiasm for the position by continuing to relate details of why you should be considered for the position.

The overall tone of the cover letter should be confident, polite and professional. However, the tone can vary as it is influenced by the career stage a candidate is in. Recent college graduates are eager to begin their careers. A seasoned professional may communicate a more reserved confidence in his or her accomplishments and background.



The Closing Paragraph. The assertive approach – asking for the interview – works best in the closing paragraph. Write positive, proactive statements that entice the employer to want to meet you. You can include personal and professional references, emphasize your flexibility for travel and/or relocation, or include a very brief recap of why you are an excellent match. Express confidence and enthusiasm. Then be sure to include a brief note that you will be following up within a specific period of time.



Salary Requirements. It is never to the advantage of the applicant to discuss salary in a cover letter, even when it’s asked for. Study after study has shown that if an employer is interested in a candidate, they will contact that candidate, regardless of whether or not they have responded to a salary request. Employers use salary to screen applicants out before they even have the opportunity to discuss their qualifications. Salary will need to be discussed at some point in the hiring process, just not this early on. As such, be well prepared for the salary conversation when it arises. Job seekers are strongly encouraged to research positions and their salary ranges prior to applying for a position.

Tips for Professional Cover Letter Development

Experts agree upon the following guidelines for preparing top-flight cover letters:

Length of Cover Letter

The cover letter should be neat, concise, well-organized and almost always fit on one page (except in unusual circumstances). This will enhance communication and the probability that the letter will be read.

Professional Appearance

A good layout and design provide an attractive appearance and create a favorable impression for the reader. Cover letters should be neat and clean. Avoid unusual typefaces or anything too fancy. If the letter will be mailed, good-quality stationery that matches the resume is recommended for the highest impact.

Acceptable Letter Formats

Acceptable cover letter formats include the most widely used full block, block and modified block. If you're not familiar with these, pick up a copy of an English textbook or a typing book for illustrations.

Salutation

The cover letter should be addressed to the person most likely to make the hiring decision. (Employer contacts can be researched through college campus career centers, libraries, yellow pages, friends, the internet, professional organizations and more). Use the name and title whenever possible. If you cannot locate it, you can use Dear Sir/Madam as a last resort. Avoid addressing the letter with "To Whom It May Concern".

Convey Personal Warmth & Enthusiasm

"Reach out and touch someone." Individualized cover letters should be very specific and communicate not only the applicant's skills and qualifications but also the attitude employers are looking for. A letter seasoned with assertiveness and just a dash of personal pride in one's accomplishments is a nice touch.

Proofread & Then Proofread Again

Looking over your cover letters several times for errors in spelling or grammar cannot be stressed enough. Avoid trite language and have someone else read the cover letter to react to its tone, content and mechanics. Two or even three proofreaders are recommended.

Conclusion

Many exciting opportunities have been lost because a cover letter has contained the usual ho-hum content. Skillfully written cover letters can successfully illustrate key qualities employers are seeking if they are brief, simple and customized for each position. The cover letter that captures the most attention will motivate the employer to move on to the resume. Applicants must design their cover letters with strategy and panache for today's competitive and rapidly changing world of work.

Appendix: Letter 1: Paragraph Style

ROBERT J. SHERMAN, JR.
28 Sea Shell Blvd., St. Louis, MO 66352
Email Address: rjs4444@aol.com Home Phone: 218.777.3283

September 2, 2003

Donald Grimsley
Director – Human Resource Department
Prego Community College
7389 Eisenhower Boulevard
St. Louis, MO 63728

Dear Mr. Grimsley:

In response to your current advertisement in the *Journal for Higher Education* for a **Health Education/Exercise Science Instructor**, I have enclosed my resume for your consideration.

My background encompasses 20 years of professional experience as an educator of health science, athletic programs, exercise science and inpatient/outpatient cardiac rehabilitation. I have been employed 18 years as a Clinical Exercise Physiologist, and currently work as the Senior Clinical Exercise Physiologist in the Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation Department of St. John's Memorial in St. Louis. In addition, I serve as an Adjunct Instructor in the Exercise Science Departments at both Lorillard and Gilbert Community Colleges.

As an instructor at the community college level, I emphasize the fundamental principles of physical fitness and its impact on life-long health and wellness. Lectures, written materials and my evaluations of the students' performance are based on attitudes and potential habits regarding cardiovascular efficiency, body composition, muscular strength, endurance and flexibility. Instruction on nutritional guidelines is provided, and I offer opportunities for students to analyze their eating habits. I structure my classes to accommodate the needs of participants of all ages and ability levels including athletes, seniors, fitness enthusiasts, disabled, injured and rehabilitated individuals.

My solid accomplishments in instruction and clinical proficiency have prepared me as the unique and ideal candidate for this position. I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to further discuss my qualifications and enthusiasm for joining your department. Thank you. I'll follow up next week.

Sincerely,

Robert J. Sherman, Jr.

Enclosure: Resume

Appendix: Letter 2: Comparison-List Style

DONOVAN REECE-SMITHSON
dsmithson@msnvoyager.com
3829 Collington Drive, La Mesa, CA 92133
(619) 288-8883

September 2, 2003

Mr. Lester R. Wiley
Manager – Engineering & Product Design
The City of San Diego
P.O. Box 12
San Diego, CA 92112

Dear Mr. Wiley:

In response to a recent advertisement for a Senior Project Engineer in the September 1st publication of the San Diego Union-Tribune, I have enclosed my resume for consideration. This sounds like an exciting opportunity and the position requirements align very well with my qualifications and experience:

Your Requirements:

BS – Mechanical Engineering

Project Management

Program Development

Quality Control & Safety Standards

My Qualifications & Experience:

BS – Mechanical Engineering – Michigan Tech University

Professional experience encompasses 7 years of project management with demonstrated ability to independently handle major projects while providing technical direction to junior engineers.

Implementation of a re-design for SAIC of the TLXK-22 control system which has proven to be an asset when working on our recent \$6 million contract for power systems.

Recognized for philosophy and methodology of TQM for product and design. Practical application of statistical techniques for design, control charting and variance analysis, instrumental in creating quality program which incorporate safety standards.

I am confident that I can provide the kind of leadership you are seeking. Additional qualifications include excellent written and interpersonal communication ability. It would be a pleasure to meet with you at your earlier convenience to further discuss your needs and my background. I will phone you at the end of the week to arrange a meeting. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Donovan Reece-Smithson

Enclosure

Appendix: Letter 3: Bullet Style

Mary Ann Rodgers

590 Miller Drive, Virginia Beach, VA 28736 * (540) 232-9803

September 2, 2003

Arnold Pines, Chief Civil Engineer
City of Virginia Beach
903-C Second Avenue
Virginia Beach, VA 27890

Dear Mr. Pines:

It is with great enthusiasm that I submit my resume for the position of **Senior Drafter** with the City of Virginia Beach, Capital Projects/Design Department.

As a hard-working and dedicated professional, I bring the following contributions to your organization:

- A professional background consistently demonstrating all phases of drafting/design that connect ideas to reality.
- Cutting-edge expertise in the operation of current AutoCAD software packages including Bentley Microstation. I understand you must contract projects out-of-house requiring Microstation design and completion. My proficiency with this particular program would save your department time and money.
- Proven ability and perseverance to solve the toughest technical issues and work all projects through to completion in a timely and budget-conscious fashion.
- Friendly, flexible and enjoy participating as part of the team, but take the initiative with new design concepts.

I am proud of my background and ability, Mr. Pines. It has been my ambition to work with the City of Virginia Beach and I have streamlined my career path to master my field and the qualifications you require for this position.

After consideration of my enclosed resume, please phone me so we can further discuss contributions I might make to your department. Thank you and I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Rodgers

Enclosure

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G R O S S M O N T
C O L L E G E



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