



Association for Creative Business Writing

Cover Letters that Get Interviews

To get that job interview, forget old-fashioned cover letters and tell a good tale instead.

Applying for a job you really want? Don't nix your chances by writing a boring cover letter. For starters:

1. Lose the "To Whom It May Concern." That went the way of the 20th century. Try to get the person's name. If not, simply say "Greetings" or "Hello."
2. Forget the "This letter is in regards to your ad..." People reading these letters are already bored with the reams of pabulum they have to read. Do you really want to make them comatose?

I don't know why people present themselves this way. It's like wearing a dreary brown suit to an interview (if you ever get that far). Yet, every day I see how people resist being creative when introducing themselves to a new company.

Why?

I think fear is the biggest culprit. It keeps people from writing well. They remember the harsh words of a grumpy grammar teacher in the 9th grade, or they hear irrational bosses and even parents droning in their heads. Tell them to get lost! You're good, and you're not going to take it anymore.

Cover Letter 101

So how do you write a good cover letter?

- 1. 4. Use keywords:** This is just as important in the cover letter as in your résumé. Pay attention to the words the potential employers use in their ads, announcements, and Web sites and incorporate them into your cover letter.
- 2. Show, don't tell:** Share a good story about what you've accomplished. Stories show why you're the best candidate. They also show you've got a head on your shoulders.
- 3. Use good grammar:** In our electronic world we rarely meet face-to-face, so the way we write creates an image of us—just like when we hear someone on the radio or telephone. Don't let your cover letter conjure the image of someone with greasy hair and spinach between your teeth. Give your readers the impression of someone who's on the ball.
- 4. Be uncommon:** Not weird—interesting. Not reckless—creative. A good cover letter does much more than tell about you. It shows that you can think. Writing is the portal to your deeper thoughts. Text messaging? That's just top-of-the-mind stuff.

Sometimes I see fear in clients' eyes when they hear this. They're pleading with me, begging for mercy.

"You expect me to write something different?" they ask, gulping.

"Well, are you different from the other candidates? Are you the best choice?" I ask.

"Yes," they answer with great confidence.

"OK, then *show* it."

Sadly, most don't. That's a real shame, because résumé reviewers enjoy reading something different. Jennifer Dupper, a recruiter for Amazon in Seattle, Washington, says she takes special notice of candidates with good writing skills.

"A well-written cover letter makes such a positive difference!" she says. "When I'm screening an inbox full of applications and come across an interesting cover letter, I'm not only excited to view the résumé, but more likely to contact the candidate—even when their experience may be lacking some of the necessary requirements of the position they are seeking."

Cover yourself

Check out the [Before] and [After] examples below. They're just to help get you started. Think of a personal story that *shows* why you're the best, then tell about it in relation to the job specifications.

[BEFORE]

Please accept this letter and accompanying résumé in application for the Communications Director position advertised in the Washington Post. As the current Chief Publicity Office at the Craft Center in Bethesda, Maryland, I have the skills required, and I'd like to remain in this region.

In my current role, I have utilized the essential functions found in the job descriptions. This includes [z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z]

[AFTER]

I believe the best way to share my qualifications for the Communications Director position is through an example of how I increased profits in my first year as Chief Publicity Officer at the Craft Center in Bethesda, Maryland.. When I started in 2002, I found an organization with a rich history and promising future—but no plan for sharing its message. I immediately developed a photography library of artists and studios.

Once this program garnered increased media attention, I convinced the board that new products in our in-house publishing division would deliver increased revenues and attendance at regional fairs and festivals. And it did. In just 12 months, profits rose 20 percent.

My enclosed résumé includes other success stories that... (continues with details.)

Cover letters are a great way to differentiate yourself. Use the [After] letter above to inspire you to write your own cover letters that open doors for your career.

For more tips, tools, and tricks of the trade, check out the Association for Creative Business Writing at www.afcbw.com.