
Cover Letters

This cast will provide you with the formula for a winning cover letter and hopefully persuade you to write one.

There is some general belief that nobody reads cover letters anymore—and some recruiters will actually ask not to submit a cover letter with your application.

I believe this is because applicants are spending less time on their cover letters and so it is really difficult to receive a well-written cover letter. Recruiters don't see the value anymore in spending a minute or two reading the cover letter and frankly it is a missed opportunity for the applicant.

Hopefully by the end of this cast we can compel you to write a cover letter with your application and if you do, we'll give you the formula so that it is a winning cover letter. In this cast we'll cover four topics:

1. Write one
2. The formula
3. Shortcut for bankers and consultants
4. Common pitfalls

1. Write one

The objective of the cover letter is to get your résumé read. So what it should be doing is setting the tone for your résumé. It is a positioning exercise so that the reader can quickly understand the fit you have with the role, *before* she reads your résumé.

Another way to think about this is that writing the cover letter is really a positioning exercise—**how will you position yourself, your skills, and your experience for this job?**

Hopefully you have thought about this before you apply to a job, so writing your cover letter shouldn't take much time. If you haven't, writing your cover letter is actually a good exercise, regardless whether the recruiter is going to read it or not.

Not writing one is a missed opportunity.

2. The formula

Your cover letter is not your résumé in paragraph form. You don't need to submit a second document that has the same content as your résumé—that would be a waste of time and effort. Instead, the cover letter is about the future: how will you contribute to this role?

Your cover letter articulates how well your skillset is matched to the position and company—it should answer the 'what is in it for me?' question—and demonstrates your commitment and interest in the job.

To do this, divide the cover letter into three parts:

1. Intro
2. Value proposition
3. Close

The intro is one sentence long, indicating who you are, what job you are applying to, and where you read about the opportunity.

The value proposition is the most important part of the cover letter and usually one or two paragraphs long. In this section you articulate your specific skillset as it relates to this position and how you will contribute to the role.

Don't just list what skills you have, but how you will use them—**features tell, benefits sell**. Don't tell the recruiter that you have a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt, but how the Black Belt will help you improve operational processes as they merge product lines. Explain how your understanding of the Chinese market will help you design a great market entry strategy to capture the right market opportunities as a marketing manager.

The final part is the close, where you bring it back to your specific interest in the role and the company. Now that you have indicated that you have the right experience, stress that you would love to work for

the company. Mention any current employees you interacted with and how joining the company will contribute to your career.

Of course, follow any guidelines of a formal business letter. Use the same header and font you use on your résumé, add recipient's information, salutation, and date. Don't justify your letter—keep all text left aligned and make sure you follow punctuation guidelines. I recommend reading 'Punctuation Fundamentals for Cover Letters' by Joyce Lain Kennedy

The shorter a cover letter is, the better, so a good practice is to write your cover letter and then go through it again, removing anything less relevant and distracting from your main selling proposition—remember less is more.

3. Shortcut for bankers and consultants

If this all sounds like a terrible investment of your time because you are recruiting for banking and consulting and you feel that after all the networking, recruiters already know you well enough to jump right into your résumé without reading your cover letter, you might be right.

Our recommendation for banking and consulting cover letters is to write a letter that meets at least three criteria. It:

1. Highlights your skills
2. Is an ideal writing sample
3. Shows your past points of contact

Make sure your cover letter is 130% accurate! By ideal writing sample we mean that you have unlimited time to write your cover letter; If it is not 130% accurate, what guarantee does a hiring manager have that you will be able to deliver a complex model under tight deadlines?

4. Common pitfalls

This is not an exhaustive list, but we have seen many cover letters throughout the years, and we have seen the following themes we'd recommend you stay away from:

- Address the letter to 'whom it may concern'
- Talk too much about what you have done
- Too much about what you like about company, too early
- Tone is too casual
- Poor attention to detail: Grammar mistakes, typos, addressed to wrong company
- Not tailored to the role and company

An absolute must is to **address the letter to a person**. You could look up the job posting on different job boards—you will be surprised how some postings will offer more information than others. You could call the company and ask who the hiring manager is, you can ask your connections at that company to find out, or you could look for a recruiter on LinkedIn and address the letter to that person. Whatever way you choose, make sure you have an addressee.

And once you address the letter to someone, make sure you keep it formal. Even if the recipient is your best friend, a cover letter must be addressed to Mr. or Ms. so-and-so. Not to Peter. Cover letters are forwarded so make sure you keep the standard.

Wrap up

Writing a tailored cover letter is a great exercise to start thinking about your value proposition, which will help you better prepare for your interview.

Now that you have learned the three parts of a winning cover letter, check out our cover letter examples in our Career Resources.

And remember, when Elmore Leonard was asked about the popularity of his novels, he replied "I leave out the parts that people skip".