

# Tips on Writing (Good) Cover Letters

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## Why you need a cover letter

The other day I received an e-mail from an acquaintance that had a Best Buy ad attached to it, with no explanation. I was baffled by this . . . why on earth did they send it to me? Some questions that immediately came to mind were:

- Was this sent to me in error?
- Does this person think I need something in the ad? What?
- Is this some kind of joke?
- Is this a SPAM that could infect my machine?

Receiving a resume without a cover letter places the recipient in a similar frame of mind:

- Why have I received this? Is this in response to one of our ads? Which one?
- What type of job does this person want? Past employment does not suggest any positions that we have open.
- Do they meet the requirements of the job opening(s) we have?
- Why is this person looking for work? Have they been fired from their last job?
- Is this person looking for full or part-time work?
- Why was this person's last job 2 years ago? What have they been doing since?
- They appear to live 40 miles from our office – will they be willing to commute? For how long?
- And so on.

A typical resume does not provide answers to these and other questions that a prospective employer may have. So without a cover letter you have created a dilemma for them: Read and try to figure some of these questions out, or simply take the easy way out and round file this resume and look at the next one in the pile. Unfortunately, most employers will choose the latter course – at your expense.

## The purpose of a Cover Letter

In three words, the purpose of a cover letter is to GET THE INTERVIEW. That is what it's all about. From the introduction above you can see that a resume by itself does not tell the whole story, so without a cover letter the employer is evaluating you without all the facts – a distinct disadvantage for you and for them. So the entire cover letter should be focused on that single objective: GET THE INTERVIEW.

In order to achieve that purpose, the cover letter needs to be a *selling document*. It must convince the reader that:

- You are qualified for the position
- You can benefit the company
- You are available (to interview by phone or in person; to start a new job within a reasonable time frame)
- They should pay particular attention to *your* resume, because you have a track record of accomplishment. Your resume also should tell that story, but your cover letter should convince them to *really read your resume* to find out just how qualified you are, as opposed to skimming it and then throwing it on the “No” or the “Maybe” pile. Your goal is to place yourself on the “Must call” or the “Bring in for an interview” list.

The cover letter provides a place to establish the context for a job application. You may be working in a good job now, but have decided to change professions. Or perhaps “it’s just not working” – you don’t enjoy the work, or the boss is too overbearing, or you can’t work weekends anymore. There are any number of reasons why you are looking for work while currently employed. Likewise, you may be re-entering the job market after a “leave of absence” to care for a sick parent, or your children have left the nest and you are now available. You may have relocated to the area because of your spouse’s job, or to be near a relative and so you need work in the new location. This type of information should be brief and positive. Don’t say “ I can’t stand my boss”, or “It’s a terrible environment”. Instead, try to convey the situation as neutrally as possible. Something like “seeking an environment with more opportunity for advancement and contribution”.

## The essential ingredients for a good cover letter

**Identify the job your are applying for.** If in response to a job posting on the Internet or a classified ad in a newspaper, you should use the exact terminology that was used in the posting. For example, if you were responding to this (actual) job posting:

Senior Personal Banker Universal  
 Location: Philadelphia, PA  
 Job ID/Req. Number: 404984

After a simple salutation (Dear Human Resources . . .) you should state something like the following:

“I am applying for the position of Senior Personal Banker Universal, Job ID 404984 in Philadelphia, PA. “

In a large organization this information is critical to getting the proper attention by the appropriate hiring personnel. If you had written “I am applying for a banker position” but did not include the rest of the information, in a large banking institution (think Bank of America) they have hundreds of locations, and perhaps dozens of “banker” positions open at one time. Do not make them guess which one you are applying for – if they guess wrong, you lose, not them.

**Why you are looking for a job.** You may be looking for more growth opportunity, you may be in a job that offers no advancement or pay increases, your company may be downsizing, or maybe you are just re-entering the job market after an extended absence due to health, caring for a loved one, or having

taken courses to effect a career transition to another field. You should make this explanation sound as positive as possible, while explaining why you have been unemployed for some time.

**Summary of your job experience and skills that are relevant to the position sought.** This is where you want to do the “selling” of your ability to make a positive contribution to this employer. Be brief and concise, emphasizing the “biggies” that will attract attention and demonstrate capability.

The following example captures a 30+ year career in just a few inches of space, and utilizes shading to delineate experience and create visual interest.

<b>SAIC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process Improvement</li> <li>• Client-Server</li> <li>• Project assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consulting</li> <li>• Program Management</li> <li>• Division Management</li> </ul>
<b>SEI</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SA-CMM Instructor</li> <li>• Assessments</li> <li>• Process Improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Planning</li> <li>• Product Line Development</li> <li>• Technology Transfer</li> </ul>
<b>Software Productivity Consortium</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CASE Tools</li> <li>• OO Design Methodology</li> <li>• SEI CMM Compliance</li> <li>• Process Improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Planning</li> <li>• SW Development</li> <li>• Product Line Management</li> <li>• Processes &amp; Methods</li> </ul>
<b>E-Systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet, DDN Protocols</li> <li>• Packet-switched comm's</li> <li>• Embedded real-time</li> <li>• C3I • ATE • Ada • Networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systems/SW Dept. Head</li> <li>• 120+ personnel</li> <li>• Computer Network Mgmt</li> <li>• IR&amp;D, Advanced Technology</li> </ul>

If at all possible, customize each cover letter to the job at hand so that your cover letter doesn't come across as a form letter.

**Make the point that you are good fit for the job, based on the stated job requirements.** A very effective way to demonstrate that you are a perfect fit for the job is a requirements match-up table. Below is an excerpt taken directly from a job posting at WorkForce Central Florida.

*Job Order Number:* **FLORIDA-3619580**

*Job Title:* **PRODUCTION SCHEDULING CLERK**

*Projected Occupation:* **None Specified**

*Job Duration:* **Full Time**

*Primary Functions:* Responsible for secretarial duties including composing and typing correspondence, photocopying, faxing, distributing reports and department mail, filing, etc. Perform data entry into Excel spreadsheets and the AS400 under Manager,s guidance. Perform cycle counts of inventory. Generate periodic reports....

*Skills / Requirements Skills:* Position requires the ability to work well with others in a fast-paced environment; strong typing and computer skills, including Microsoft Windows, Word, Excel, and AS400; strong basic math and written/oral communications skills; visual and auditory acuity, hand and eye

*coordination, finger dexterity, and the ability to access work area as well as other areas of the compound as needed. Strong organizational skills required. Ability to perform the job functions in a timely fashion consistent with industry norms and the Company,s experience with the time required to perform the functions. Education and Experience Preferred: Minimum of high school diploma or equivalent required. AS400, Excel, and scheduling experience preferred.*

First extract the requirements, which could be described as job duties, job functions, responsibilities, and/or job skills required.

Next, list on the right those items of your skills or your experience which show that you meet that requirement. This has been done for the example job posting above, based on hypothetical skills of an applicant. Note that in the 3<sup>rd</sup> requirement – Perform cycle counts of inventory – the applicant has not done that work, but states the closest experience s/he has and the willingness to learn. This can be used where there are unfilled requirements or the job is a “stretch” from your current position.

<b>Position Requirements</b>	<b>My experience and skills</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secretarial duties – composing, typing, filing, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 years group secretary</li> <li>• 2 years Manager’s admin. assistant</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perform data entry – Excel/AS400</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proficient in Microsoft Office 2010: Word, Excel, PowerPoint</li> <li>• Have extensive experience with IBM client/server, PC-standalone, and web-based applications</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perform cycle counts of inventory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On a smaller scale, was responsible for all department supplies, purchasing, and budgeting. Fast learner, willing to spend my own time learning new systems.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teamwork</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have demonstrated team-player and individual contributor skills as the situation required. Enjoy working with people and team activities.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written/Oral communications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generated finished letters and reports from rough notes and raw data</li> <li>• Interfaced to other department heads and admin’s to coordinate events, calendars, activities.  </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong organizational skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revised and simplified the company’s filing system.</li> <li>• Created the dept. supply system from scratch and computerized using Excel spreadsheets.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• H.S. Diploma</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graduate Leesburg H.S.</li> <li>• AA degree Lake Sumter CC</li> </ul>

This example is probably too lengthy for a cover letter in most cases. However, if you have a really great case to make and are a “glove fit” for the position, you will probably hold the reader’s attention with this approach.

**Ask for the interview.** The interview, after all, is the whole reason for the cover letter and its accompanying resume, so don’t be ashamed to suggest it. A pleasant way to bring the cover letter to conclusion might be: “I look forward to discussing my qualifications with you and how I can benefit Company, Inc. I may be reached during the day on my cell phone at 352-678-9101, and evenings at my home at 352-456-7891.” This approach is a gentle request for an interview and has the additional effect

of letting them know that though you may be employed currently it is OK to reach you during the day on your cell phone, and you won't mind an evening call at home either.

**Keep it to one page if at all possible.** Although you have a lot of things that need to go into a cover letter, it is a preamble to your resume. You want to be as brief as possible and still make your points. Avoid a lot of duplication with your resume. It makes for a better read and it helps keep the cover letter pointed and concise.

## **Optional things you may want to include in your cover letter**

Sometimes there are some "bonding points" between yourself and the intended read or the company that help convey a sense of familiarity which can break the ice a bit and create a bond that may be remembered as they are reviewing a stack of resumes, trying to decide who to call in for the interview. Your son is on the little league team that the manager coaches, or you go to the same church and see him there sometimes. Perhaps you are neighbors, have a mutual friend, or you worked for that company years ago, or you work for a rival company now. Rival companies are typically "revolving doors" and recruit from each other frequently.

If you have such a bonding point, slip it into the cover letter, but don't make an issue of it.

If you have a "life philosophy" about your career, you may want to put in a sentence or two about it. This would be something that you are passionate about that shapes the way you work, manage, prioritize, and make decisions. Your life philosophy might be "We will not ship the product until it has been thoroughly tested and is free of defects." On a more modest scale, perhaps: "Every customer will be greeted with a smile and treated with courtesy and my full attention." In my own cover letters I always made the point that I had "a reputation for on-time, on-budget software that meets the requirements". That statement landed me more than one job, since at the time most software projects ended up over budget, late, or complete failures that didn't work.

## ***Avoiding common Cover Letter mistakes***

**Take care in writing your cover letter – it is the "first impression" that the reader will have of you.** I know a lot of people hate writing resumes, so when the added burden of a cover letter surfaces they tend to do a half-hearted job. I've seen e-mails with attached resumes that simply say "My resume is attached". This Lazy Lucy approach will telegraph that this cover letter, this company, and probably this job are not very important to you. Result: REJECT.

**Use a professional looking format.** The cover letter is not a text, and it's not an e-mail (even though it may be delivered via e-mail). It should be a business letter with a business letter format. You may be writing it as an e-mail to accompany an electronic delivery of your resume, but even so you should follow the form of a business letter, not the casual style used most often in e-mails.

ADDRESSEE - Mrs. Ima Hirin  
ACME Widgets, Inc.

1234 Gamble Street  
Midland, MI 48460

SALUTATION - Dear Mrs. Hirin,

BODY- I am writing in response to your add in the Midland Courier for a widget designer . . .

CLOSING - Sincerely,  
(Signature)  
John Doe

It is best to use a letterhead format that has your personal contact information either in the header or the footer: Name, address, phone numbers(s), e-mail address. Many letterhead templates are available in popular word processing programs.

**Proofread carefully.** Nothing says “careless” like misspellings, poor grammar, or bad sentence structure in a cover letter.

**Don’t’ turn your cover letter into a form letter by using the same one for every job application.** Your resume can remain fairly constant so long as you are doing a focused search in the area of your expertise, but the cover letter should say to the reader “this is for you . . . it didn’t come out of the copier machine”. Finding a job is serious business, and yes, it is work. Don’t sell yourself short by generating robo-letters . . . you will likely get a “Dear John” form letter back.

### ***Conclusion***

The cover letter provides the context for your resume. It should serve to introduce you, your skills, and your career objectives to the reader. It should not duplicate your resume – it should complement it. Space in a cover letter is precious (1 page limit, please) so don’t squander it by duplication of information the reader will get in the resume. Instead, use it to portray who you are, what type of job you are seeking, and your current situation. You want to leave the reader with the impression “Wow – I can’t wait to see the details in the resume.”