

Ten Things to Avoid In Your Cover Letter

Your cover letter is the first thing employers see when they open your materials. Avoid these 10 mistakes, and make your first impression an impressive and lasting one.

Don't Overuse "I."

Your cover letter is not your autobiography. The focus should be on how you meet an employer's needs, not on your life story. Avoid the perception of being self-centered by minimizing your use of the word "I," especially at the beginning of your sentences.

Don't Use a Weak Opening.

Job seekers frequently struggle with the question of how to begin a cover letter. What results is often a feeble introduction lacking punch and failing to grab the reader's interest.

Consider this example:

* Weak: Please consider me for your sales representative opening.

* Better: Your need for a top-performing sales representative is an excellent match to my three-year history as a #1-ranked, multimillion-dollar producer.

Don't Omit Your Top Selling Points.

A cover letter is a sales letter that sells you as a candidate. Just like the resume, it should be compelling and give the main reasons why you should be called for an interview. Winning cover letter strategies include emphasizing your top accomplishments or creating subheadings culled from the position ad.

For example: Your ad specifies... and I offer communication skills, five years of public speaking experience and an extensive background in executive-level report writing, strong computer background, proficiency in all MS Office applications, with additional expertise in Web site development/design.

Don't Make It Too Long or Too Short.

If your cover letter is only one or two short paragraphs, it probably doesn't contain enough key information to sell you effectively. If it exceeds one page, you may be putting readers to sleep. Keep it concise but compelling, and be respectful of readers' time.

Don't Repeat Your Resume Word-for-Word.

Your cover letter shouldn't just regurgitate what's on your resume. Reword your cover letter statements to avoid dulling your resume's impact. Consider using the letter to tell a brief story, such as "My Toughest Sale" or "My Biggest Technical Challenge."

Don't Be Vague.

If you're replying to an advertised opening, reference the specific job title in your cover letter. The person reading your letter may be reviewing hundreds of letters for dozens of different jobs. Make sure all the content in your letter supports how you will meet the specific needs of the employer.

Don't Forget to Customize.

If you're applying to a number of similar positions, chances are you're tweaking one letter and using it for multiple openings. That's fine, as long as you are customizing each one. Don't forget to update the company/job/contact information -- if Mr. Jones is addressed as Mrs. Smith, he won't be impressed.

Don't End on a Passive Note.

Put your future in your own hands with a promise to follow up. Instead of asking readers to call you, try a statement like this: I will follow up with you in a few days to answer any preliminary questions you may have. In the meantime, you may reach me at (555) 555-5555.

Don't Be Rude.

Your cover letter should thank the reader for his time and consideration.

Don't Forget to Sign the Letter.

It is proper business etiquette (and shows attention to detail) to sign your letter. However, if you are sending your cover letter and resume via email or the Web, a signature isn't necessary.

Letters to Get You Hired -- by *Kay Peterson, Ph.D.*

You might think that if you have a good resume, you don't need a cover letter. Nothing could be further from the truth. The cover letter *supplements* the resume. It focuses attention on your achievements and gets a prospective employer interested in *you*. Cover letters are especially important to new graduates. Through the cover letter, you can persuade an employer to look past a possibly thin work history to see the value of your education and non-professional experience.

Always supply a cover letter with your resume - even if one isn't specifically requested.

The Cover Letter Made Simple

A good cover letter contains the following elements:

- **Introductory paragraph:** Keep this section short! Identify yourself and your objective (to get a job or internship, etc.). You may also include how you came to hear about this opportunity.
 - **Brief summary of your qualifications:** Don't reiterate your resume. Make a stronger impression by limiting your focus to one or two experiences. The more specific you can be, the better; try to include hard data as well as description (i.e. number of employees you supervised, increase in productivity, etc.).
 - **Conclusion:** In the final paragraph, restate your interest in the company and provide information about the best time/means to contact you.
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