

# Cover Letters



**30 seconds.** That is how long you have to make an impression with your cover letter and your resume. 20 years of your work history condensed into a 2-page resume and the reader will grant you a mere 30 seconds of their undivided attention. They will spend more time brewing a cup of tea than they will to review your resume and cover letter. You, or better yet a professional, spent countless hours writing, revising and updating your resume until it was perfect. But you spent a tenth of that time and wrote a boiler-plate cover letter. To me that is the equivalent of covering your Armani suit with a cheap Snuggie. So – what can you do? You can take what I have learned in nearly two decades in the Human Resources/Recruiting industry and apply it to your cover letter. This e-book will give you the tools to write the best cover letter you can and land the interview.

## PHILOSOPHY (& THE #1 REASON YOU AREN'T GETTING AN INTERVIEW)

I am not one to waste time so let's get this out of the way now. Assuming your resume was professionally prepared (it had better be) and assuming you are right for the position then why aren't you getting an interview? It's your cover letter! The #1 reason you aren't getting an interview is because you wrote a cover letter for ANY job, not THE job. Do you understand the difference? Boiler-plate cover letters that say nothing and are written for everyone will cost you the interview 90% of the time. The key to getting your resume read and getting the interview is a **personalized cover letter**.

The #1 reason you aren't getting an interview is because you wrote a cover letter for ANY job, not THE job.

Understand that mentioning the employers name in the first and last sentence is NOT personalizing the cover letter. Looking for work is hard and it is human nature to take shortcuts. The internet makes taking shortcuts easy. It's easy to apply for 10 jobs with the click of the mouse (what I call "*click and apply candidates*") but how many callbacks did you get - 1 out of 10 if you were lucky. Here are the steps to writing a personalized cover letter and getting callbacks 9 out of 10 times!

**Research the company.** Find out everything you can about the company and the hiring authority. Personalize the letter to him or her if possible. Many times all it takes is a call to the company to find out who is hiring for that position. If you call you might even get lucky enough to be put on the phone with the hiring authority. Congratulations – you just hit the lottery. Having a phone call with the hiring authority trumps a cold resume submission any day of the week. Here is how to handle the situation should that occur. First and foremost be brief on the phone and don't take up too much of their time. Make sure you get their personal email and alert them you will send your resume and will follow-up with another call. Now, before you get hung up on, ask this individual the million dollar question: **Who do you consider your biggest competitor/threat?** This is

valuable information you'll make use of later. Make sure you disengage from the call before they do; it's a power move and shows your time is as valuable as theirs.

**Assess their competition.** Perhaps you learned this information in your phone call, but perhaps this required a web search or other methods. You must determine the company's competition, assess them, and tell the hiring company what you can do to better the competition.

Do a store shop and show how their competitor is getting more shelf space at Target and what you would do to impact their presence at Target.

Do a quick and dirty competitive analysis of their premier product and how it measures up against the competition then tell them what you have done with similar products at a comparable company.

Tell them how their packaging could be hurting sales and detail – (or show) what you would do to change it. See Sidebar - *Real Life Example.*

Explain what is wrong with their company but not in a way that is insulting or demeaning. Rather, clarify why Target won't look at their products because they're not properly positioning their brand and offer a solution.

Reference a quote from their Mission Statement. You can learn a great deal about the company from their website. If they don't have a website you should either design one for them and showcase it or think better about applying for a job at such an old-fashioned company.

The purpose of the cover letter is to engage the reader, identify their threats and weaknesses and provide a solution. You can provide a solution like our designer did above or you can offer a *tease* detailing what you have done in the past and what you can do in the future for the company.

Now that you know the philosophy behind an interview getting cover letter, let's discuss the format.

## FORMAT

### PARAGRAPH I

The first paragraph is designed to **PIQUE THE INTEREST** of the reader. This is done (using the information gleaned above) by commenting on a timely issue relating to the hiring company, by mentioning a problem of theirs or by offering a fact/information about their business that an industry expert (that's you) should know. You are trying to grab their attention. If there is an actual job listed that you are applying for you can mention it here. If this is a prospecting letter

#### *Real Life Example*

A Designer who wanted to work for a company took the time to deconstruct the client's packaging and improve upon its look. He spent a few hours fixing the old and even designing a new package from the ground up for a product that could fit into the client's line. He placed his work on a webpage and included the hyperlink and explanation in his cover letter.

The hiring authority read the cover letter, reviewed the work, interviewed the designer and hired him on the spot. The extra effort paid off. Remember, finding a job is hard work but it pays off!

don't box yourself in with a job title! Rather let the reader know you want to work for their company - after the second paragraph they will know why.

## PARAGRAPH II

It's time to close the deal. Too soon you say? Just remember that your **30 seconds** are almost up! Trust me, it is plenty soon enough. This "mid-section" can be one or two short paragraphs that give specific details about your background and the solutions you can bring to this client. Remember, you are solving a problem for the client and/or giving them insight they might not otherwise have. There is an old adage that says "*to get something you have to give something*", well now is the time to give. Give them a product or competitor review. Give them the art direction they are missing and/or tell them how you will be an asset to their company. You can mention how you were an asset to your prior employer and you can bring that magic to them.

I worked with a salesperson who had an uninterrupted history of success with a certain retailer that the hiring company couldn't break into. I told her to hit them over the head with that fact and share some sales numbers and let this company know that they too could have this. She did that in her cover letter and guess what...she got the interview and she got the job. What did the client get? They got in the door and sold the retailer.

**Make the cover letter  
about the client – not  
about you!**

It is important to remember that you have to make this a win-win for both sides. Step outside of yourself and think about your hiring from the employer's point of view. You want to present your actions as a positive impact to their bottom line.

Let the reader know why you are particularly interested in their organization. Write with the reader in mind. What is the company really looking for? What do they need? Why do I want to work for them and what separates me from other applicants? More than anything – make the cover letter about the client – not about you!

### **Real Life Example**

I recently received a cover letter for a job posting I was having difficulty filling. The cover letter began:

"Dear Sir/Madam:

I am writing about the \_\_\_\_\_ job that was advertised in the \_\_\_\_\_ as I feel I am uniquely qualified for that position."

Clearly this candidate was using a form cover letter which is lazy. However to not proof their cover letter – or to not care - shows what kind of lazy, "*click and apply*" candidate I was dealing with. Even though I was having difficulty sourcing candidates for this position (due to its location) I refused to read any further in the cover letter and I didn't read their resume. I knew all I needed to know about that candidate from their first sentence.

Here are two examples; note the difference in who each piece is written for:

*"I am an accomplished Salesman with over 25 years of experience calling on the big box retailers. I have excellent relationships with buyers across several departments and I am able to open closed doors. I am able to adapt to the buyers wants and needs. I am able to flourish in a fast-paced environment and can easily handle change. I have what it takes to be successful at **ABC Company**."*

*"**Wal-Mart** is reducing floor space for toys and is beginning a 30% reduction in sku's. This means that suppliers with less than 3 items and items that are similar but higher priced than the competitions, like **ABC Company**, are in grave jeopardy of losing **Wal-Mart's** business. I worked closely with several Buyers and I have brokered solutions that allowed my former company to not only maintain their sku count but to increase it by placing items out of toy and into seasonal and craft."*

The difference is obvious as the first piece is written for the applicant and not the employer. The second is written for the employer; their potential problems and your solution. This paragraph is for you to promote your value and note your specific accomplishments.

### **PARAGRAPH III**

This is your *call to action!* Melissa Gropper, a professional resume writer, states this is "...where you let the employer know that as a testament to your skills and experience that it would be your pleasure to come in and demonstrate/explain/illustrate the value you will add to the given company/position". You must state your desire for an interview and must state that you will follow up with a phone call about the possibility of a meeting. You should be courteous but firm with your words and include your contact (cell) phone number and/or email address. Close by saying "Thank you".

### **SAMPLE COVER LETTER**

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, "*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.*" This means we can't give you a "sample cover letter" because then you won't learn how to write an interview getting cover letter. A great cover letter is like a snowflake – although similar no two are alike. The format is the same, but it is your words that will separate it from the others. Here is the format:

Paragraph I – Pique the interest of the reader; and introduce yourself.

Paragraph II – Close the deal. Remember, the employer has a problem and you have the solution.

Paragraph III – Call to action. Let them know you want the interview and that you will be following up as well.

You must take this format and modify it to fit the employer's needs and your wants. Let's discuss some "do's" and "don'ts" for your cover letter.

#### **COVER LETTER DON'TS**

**Don't rehash the resume.** Probably the biggest mistake of all; don't use exact lines from your resume but rather focus on issues relating to the specific company or position.

**Don't Use Humor.** A business setting is certainly not the place to attempt humor or wit. This is also unacceptable in an email cover letter which should be just as formal.

**Don't Use Contractions.** I can use them but you can't – ha! Be as formal as possible.

**Don't focus solely on you.** Rather make it about the employer; and don't use "I" too much.

**Don't use more than one font.** Don't use **bold**, *italic*, underline or **a combination of all 3.**

**Don't use clip-art.** This isn't grade school.

**Don't include your picture.** This only scares an employer away as they are worried about lawsuits.

**Don't go over one page in length.** Remember, you only have 30 seconds.

#### **COVER LETTER DO'S**

**Do use paper that matches your resume** and it should be either white or cream, 16-25 pound weight.

**Do sign your name in black ink.** And don't have your computer sign it with a signature font as it makes you look like a "*click and apply*" candidate.

**Do mail the cover letter (and resume) flat, not folded, in a 9x12 envelope.** It will cost more but it is a small detail and worth it.

**Do follow up as promised in the cover letter.** If you say you will call in one week after receiving the cover letter – make the call.

**Do make sure you proofread your cover letter** and have a trusted friend proof it as well.

#### **JOB SEARCHING PHILOSOPHY PART II**

Nothing surprises and disappoints me more than the job-seeker who doesn't want to work to get a job. When I post a job I get hundreds of responses, at least 50% of the respondents are clearly off-target, these are the *click and apply candidates* who are either too lazy to read the job spec or just taking a shortcut and applying for anything. Of the "appropriate" 50% I often send a questionnaire developed by myself and the client as the first step in the evaluation process. This action weeds out 80% of the remaining candidates. 80% of job-seekers are too lazy to answer questions about their background. In my opinion it takes very little to set yourself apart from the other applicants you are competing against.

First and foremost is to make sure you have a professionally prepared resume. The best resumes in our industry are from [Melissa Gropper](#) who had worked for **Macmillan Publishing Company** editing books; **Dow Jones, Inc.**'s online service; and who now spends her time designing and writing interview-getting resumes. If you don't have a professionally prepared resume, then you are at a severe disadvantage in the process.

Next, you must determine if you really are appropriate for the job and then you must put the work into learning about the company and then, via the cover letter, you must position yourself as a problem-solver to the employer. Yes, this is hard work but it will pay off for you.

Last, but most important is the follow up. Consider this, 80% of applicants you will compete against have professionally prepared resumes. 80% of those applicants will have attention getting cover letters. But only 5% (or less) of all the applicants will follow up with a phone call or email. Clearly, if you put in the effort the odds are in your favor of getting an interview and that is what the process is all about.

**COVERS LETTERS** by [David E. Fitzgibbons](#), CPC President of [The Executive Search Group](#)