

15 Tips for an Effective Cover Letter

Most people don't read cover letters ... because most cover letters stink! They are boring. They are poorly-written. They often talk about things that are irrelevant to the job opening.

What would you do if you received this cover letter?

Hi Mike! Can you imagine all the hope and excitement of landing a phone interview ... 29 times ... only to be told "No" every single time? It was beyond discouraging for Vince. In fact, he was so discouraged he was starting to apply for jobs stocking shelves at midnight. The truth is, all he needed to do was improve his interviewing skills! Vince followed my advice ... step by step ... and everything changed immediately. He aced his very next phone screen and ended up with **2 job offers in just 6 weeks**. Three years later, he is managing 44 employees and still having a blast.

Interviewing doesn't have to hurt! With over a dozen years of hiring and management experience, I bring a unique perspective to the career counseling role. I've interviewed thousands of people and hired hundreds. I know what's really going on behind company doors, and it is an absolute joy to help job seekers break through the biggest barriers to job search success.

I came across your opening for an employment counselor position, and I was thrilled. I've been following your company for some time now, and would be very excited to speak with you about this position. My resume is attached. I'd love to talk to you at any time.

Sincerely,

Cat Breet

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P.S. Something else unusual about me: I love tracking things. So, when it comes to case management and tracking my clients' activity and my conversations with them, you can count on me to make sure every record is up to date and accurate. I will never be a management headache for you.

Would you read the entire cover letter, or throw it away?

Almost every recruiter or hiring manager would read it from beginning to end ... and then call me in for an interview. Here's why:

1. It's different.
2. It's catchy. Opening with a relevant story is a great way to interest someone.
3. It's relevant. Everything I spoke about was focused on what's important to them.
4. My P.S. statement eliminated one of the biggest fears: hiring someone who is hard to manage.

That sample cover letter is hitting right at the heart of what managers want to hear: you care about doing good work, you're good at what you do and you understand what success looks like. The P.S. statement I wrote is probably the most important part of my letter: a friend of mine is a manager of career counselors, and he said if he has to scold one more counselor for not putting their notes into their system, he is going to scream! The more you do to talk about how you can eliminate a headache or solve a major problem for a manager, the better.



CHECKLIST – 15 Cover Letter Tips

- I understand the goal: TO STAND OUT FROM THE HERD & GET AN INTERVIEW.** A cover letter is designed to get you an interview, NOT to get you the job. There will be plenty of time to show them how amazing you are at all things rocket science. For now, all you need to do is pique their interest enough to bring you in for an interview. Don't give it all away. Leave them hanging a little bit. Just give them a taste of what you can do for them.
- It's original** (in my voice & style). You can look at someone else's cover letter for ideas, but do not copy someone else's format. It's got to be in your voice.
- It's different than my resume.** If you are simply going to copy and paste your resume summary, don't bother sending a cover letter.
- It states 3 THINGS I CAN DO FOR THEM. It's clear what business problems I can solve for them.** What sets you apart, and makes you really well-qualified to solve *their* biggest problems? What can you do to increase their revenue, eliminate their biggest headache or accomplish their toughest goals?
- What I WANT is not in my cover letter.** It's focused on what I can do for them. Imagine that you're out on a dating website and you see two guys who look interesting. You click on their profiles, and this is what they say:

Guy #1 – Do you like breakfast in bed? Surprise adventures? Baseball games on a long summer night? Long conversations about things that really matter in life (like whether or not the chicken really crossed the road)? Then we should talk. I think relationships should be fun, honest and open. It might take us a little while to get to the open part, but I'd love to give it a try.

Guy #2 – I'm looking for a really athletic (not overweight), independent woman who can entertain herself, will let me go hunting with my buddies and throw my socks on the floor."

Who would you call first? I wish I was exaggerating, but my friends have sent me crazy dating messages like this ... and I've seen picky, self-oriented cover letters, too!

It's really the same thing with cover letters. Imagine a nanny saying "Seeking a nanny position that will give me flexibility to go to school at night, and involves working with well-behaved kids." While both of those are perfectly reasonable things to be on your list of must-haves, they do not belong in a cover letter. The cover letter is not about what you want; it's about what you can do to make their business better, and make their job easier as a manager. There will be plenty of time for you to explore what you want from them ... once you get an interview. Until then, it's all about getting them excited to meet you.

- I have edited my cover letter carefully.** Typos and grammatical errors will make a terrible first impression. If you don't care enough to proofread and spellcheck your cover letter, the recruiter or manager won't care enough to call you.
- I have avoided stating the obvious (like job duties).** Everyone knows a waiter takes orders and carries food to the table. What employers want to know is what made you a stand-out as a waiter. Save your precious space for things that really matter.
- I have "prove it!" statements.** Instead of saying "I'm a hard worker," I gave one or two examples of key relevant accomplishments. "STAR Stories" are very helpful for this. One woman sent me a resume that said "I just got divorced and now I need a job to cover my bills." I'm sure she was trying to say "I am a motivated candidate, and I will work hard," but it was not something she should have told me. Ever. Too personal, and none of my business.
- All of my information is relevant to their job.** You might jump out of planes on the weekends, but unless you're a stunt man, A. They don't care B. That might worry about healthcare costs.
- I did NOT give them a reason not to hire me ... or call out any of my missing skills or experiences ... unless I know it's a show-stopper.** Chances are good that you are missing a couple of things they're asking for. So what? Do not draw attention to that in your cover letter! I received one cover letter that began like this:

“I don’t have experience in the financial services industry, and I have never led a team as large as the one you need me to manage, but I am a really hard worker and a fast learner. You can ask anyone.”

Bless her heart! I love honest people. I bet she *is* a hard worker, and there are probably plenty of people who can vouch for how talented she is, but I was so skittish at that point I didn’t want to read any more. I promise you: if you have any gaps, they will notice, and they will ask about the ones that really matter to them. They don’t need you to call attention to them. Furthermore, you might call attention to something that doesn’t really matter to them. If you don’t already know it, most job postings stink! They are really poorly-written, and loaded with requirements that are nice to have, but not gotta-have. From the outside looking in, you can’t know which ones are show-stoppers for them. Focus on what you think they really need to get the job done, and highlight your key skills.

I did not criticize the person or the company. I have received cover letters that begin like this:

“Your job posting is asking for ten years of experience, and I really think you misunderstand what it takes to be a great business analyst. It’s all about communication skills. The rest I can learn. I am an excellent communicator.”

I kept it short (half page if at all possible). Remember: your goal is to pique their interest enough to call you and set up an interview. Your cover letter should be just a taste of what you have to offer.

I kept it down to earth and conversational. You might be tempted to say “I’m the best at this” or go on and on about how amazing you are. You need to come across as confident and competent ... without moving into the arrogant arena. Let your metrics and success stories tell the story about how good you are.

I kept my Negative Nellie to myself. Your last boss might have been a royal jerk. Your last company might have been cowardly, and treated you the same way Jonathan was last time he got laid off, by putting a note on the door that said “We are no longer in business. If you have personal things inside, please call this number.” Bad things happen to good people, but I’m afraid your cover letter is not the time or the place to complain about anyone.

You can do this! You have so much to offer your next employer. All you need is a little time to figure out which of your amazing skills & experience are most important to share with your next boss.