

# Writing the Perfect Cover Letter

By Kerry Hannon

## Customize for the job and proofread till it hurts

Writing a killer cover letter is a key step in the job search dance. While not every employer accepts one in this era of automated résumé processing, for many it's what first piques interest in a candidate. So unless the job posting states otherwise or you're submitting your résumé on a site that includes no option for a cover letter, always include one.

View it as your opening number. Make it concise and confident. You have just a few sentences to demonstrate how well you understand the needs of the organization and, importantly, how well you communicate that knowledge in writing. Hard to believe, but according to CareerBuilder.com, 45 percent of job seekers don't include a cover letter. So don't be one of them. Take your time and create a letter in which each word works magic for you.

### **Here are my do's and don'ts.**

Do your homework. Start by reading the job description with a discerning eye. Learn as much as you can about the industry and your prospective employer. Visit the company's website and the sites of the company's top competitors. Visit the job-hunt site Glassdoor.com and do a Google search to dig up additional information. Find out who your supervisor is likely to be and look up the person on LinkedIn.

All this will help you craft a customized letter for this particular job that's addressed to the person who'll interview you or make the decision.

Do some soul-searching. If you've found something about the company that truly speaks to a cause and interest that you care about, this is your moment to put that front and center.

Keep it brief. Your letter should be no longer than one page. Think of it as a written version of your elevator speech: a short, snappy summary of who you are and what kind of job you'd like to find. It's a sales pitch you will tap again and again as you network and interview your way to your next position.

Organize. A good cover letter typically has three sections. The first is the introduction. In the opening paragraph, tell the employer what job you're applying for and mention the exact title and position as it appears in the job post, if there is one.

Explain why you're applying for it, and (if applicable) who referred you or how you heard about it. Employers like to hire people they know or people they know of.

For example: "My friend and former colleague Joanne Smith told me you're looking for a detail-oriented person with years of experience in strategic communication. That is precisely what I can offer, and the opening is timed perfectly for my decision to pursue my goal of working for [organization name]."

Second, briefly describe your skills in a way that matches them to the needs of the organization. Remember, job hunting is never about you. It's about what you can do for the employer. Highlight training, education and skills that are particularly relevant to the position and the organization's needs. Be specific without going into too much detail. Think of your letter as a carefully planned appetizer that whets the reader's appetite for the main course — your résumé.

In the last section, refer to the résumé and express eagerness to meet with the person. For example: "For additional details, please see my résumé (attached). I look forward to the opportunity to meet with you in person to discuss the position and my qualifications in greater depth."

Wrap it up with a line that indicates you will follow up with them in the next few days. Invite the person to contact you and include the best phone number and your email.

Always end with: "Thank you for your time and consideration."

Those are the "do's."

**Now here are some "don'ts,"** which I've learned from reviewing hundreds of job applications over the years and speaking with dozens of people in human resources.

Don't be generic. Instead, tailor each letter (and résumé) to the specific position.

Don't waste space. Phrases such as "Let me introduce myself" add little to your message. Get to the point.

Don't be bland. For example: "As was mentioned in the job description for this position, your company is in need of a team-oriented individual with a background of 10 years or more in the fields of marketing and communications, and proficiency with standard office computer applications. As you can see from the details in my résumé, my qualifications make me perfectly suited to that position." Would you want to read that? Better to say something like this: "Your company needs a team player with experience in marketing and communications. I am that person."

Don't merely repeat the contents of your résumé. Instead, highlight your particular skills and achievements.

Don't call attention to your age. Citing your 30 or 40 years of experience creates a certain impression. Instead, use words such as "extensive" or "significant" to describe your experience.

Don't include your salary requirements. Unless the organization specifically requests this information, save the salary discussion for when you're close to being offered the job.

Finally, fine-tune. Once you've got a "final" draft of your letter, print it, read it closely ... but don't send it. Revise it to optimize its impact. Here are a few suggestions:

Include key words and phrases in your letter that match those used in your résumé, just in case the organization uses an automated system for screening cover letters and résumés

Use bulleted lists to present details. Leaving plenty of white space makes your cover letter more inviting and easier to read

Be clear, direct and terse. Use short sentences and active verbs

Share your letter with trusted friends who can give you frank reactions. Does your letter feel intriguing? Does it make the reader want to know more about you? If not, revise it

Purge your prose of spelling and grammar errors. Proofread your letter several times and have someone else proofread it as well

Now you're ready to send it. If you've done it right, the recipient is going to smile and think, This person sounds interesting. Let's set up an interview.

Kerry Hannon is a career transition expert and an award-winning author. Her latest book is *Getting the Job You Want After 50 for Dummies*. She has also written *Love Your Job: The New Rules for Career Happiness* and *Great Jobs for Everyone 50+: Finding Work That Keeps You Happy and Healthy...and Pays the Bills*. Find more from Kerry at [Kerryhannon.com](http://Kerryhannon.com).