



# Apply Yourself

## Cover Letters That Show You Off

You should include, along with your résumé, a brief cover letter (often called an application letter) to introduce you to the prospective employer. The strategy behind this letter is to demonstrate how your qualifications fit the requirements of the position. Study the position description carefully and decide on one or more themes—education, experience, interests, responsibility, etc.—that show how well you fit the position. Link major job dimensions with your related past performance, experience, and/or education. One caution: Don't just repeat the contents of the résumé; highlight the relevant information in it.

### A cover letter...

- should always be sent with a résumé;
- should entice the reader to read the résumé;
- should act as an introduction to and summary of the résumé;
- expresses some ideas and summarizes better than a résumé alone can;
- should *always* be tailored to the specific organization you're applying to; never send a blanket cover letter;
- should put your qualifications in terms of the benefits they will provide for each employer;
- should be courteous and show the person behind the résumé—both as a person and as a professional.

### The format for a cover letter...

- should include the name and address of the person in the organization who will be hiring for the position you are interested in. Be sure to confirm the accuracy of position titles in advance. Responses to position advertisements that do not include a name or title of a recipient should be addressed exactly as specified in the ad;
- should consist of three or four single-spaced paragraphs, with double spaces between paragraphs—and no more than one page long. Short paragraphs (five to six lines) are most readable. Typically, the paragraphs are organized along these lines:

—The opening paragraph introduces you and tells why you are writing to the organization. This is where you explain that you are answering an ad or have spoken to someone about the position. You should also indicate your themes, i.e., briefly introduce your specific qualification, whether it is education experience, or interest.

—The middle paragraphs lead the reader to the enclosed résumé by highlighting and summarizing its contents. You should also address how your experience or education meets the requirements for the position.

—The closing paragraph thanks the reader for considering the résumé. State your proposed follow-up actions and suggest further communication to arrange an interview at their convenience. Be sure to include any information not on the résumé that will make it easier for the organization to contact you. For example, if you will be out of town between certain dates or can be reached during business hours at a phone number not on the résumé, let them know.

**The appearance of the cover letter is very important so....**

- Use the same paper used for the résumé;
- Avoid fancy or colored paper for both the résumé and the cover letter;
- Use a word processor or computer and a laser or good ink jet printer;
- Use the spell checking function of your word processing package, but don't rely on it alone; proofread your letter very carefully, or better yet, have someone you trust do it for you;
- Sign each letter personally.

**Two points to remember:**

1. A cover letter gets an average of about eight seconds of attention, so it has to be both brief and informative.
2. According to a survey by Office Team, 76% of executives polled said they would not hire job applicants who have just one or two typographical errors in their cover letter or résumé (cited by the Student Center L.L.C. 1996 [<http://www.studentcenter.com>]).

Just as you don't want to do anything on your résumé that will make you look foolish, you need to be just as careful with your cover letter. Don't make mistakes like these...

**Actual Mistakes in Cover Letters**

- "I am a rabid typist."
- "Here are my qualifications for you to overlook."
- "After receiving advice from several different angels, I have decided to pursue a new line of work."
- "As indicted, I have over five years of experience analyzing investments."
- "It's best for employers that I not work with people."
- "P.S. If you hire me away from this nightmare, you'll also save me thousands in therapy."
- I am a perfectionist and rarely if ever forget details."
- Please disregard the enclosed résumé—it is terribly out of date."

—*Resumania, Robert Half International, Inc.*

For further assistance and advice with cover letters or career counseling, contact

**Tammy Craig**

Career Services  
Center

SAB 50  
217.206.6508