

WINNING COVER LETTERS

TOP TEN REASONS WHY YOU NEED A COVER LETTER

By Peter Newfield

Your cover letter presents your intentions, qualifications, and availability to a prospective employer in a succinct, appealing format. It's your first chance to make a great impression, a personalized letter indicates you are serious about your job search. Your resume can give the nitty-gritty of dates, places of employment, and education but your cover letter must entice the reader to take the extra few minutes to consider you when faced with hundreds and thousands of candidates for any one job opening.

1. **Do you really need a cover letter?**

You bet! Just as you would never just show up unannounced at a prospective employer's door, your resume should never just appear solo on a decision-maker's desk. Your cover letter is your first opportunity to introduce yourself, present your qualifications, and show the search committee you are a potential candidate for the advertised position.

2. **Personalize it to the company.**

Anyone can reproduce a "canned" cover letter and hope for the best. Instead, take a few minutes to personalize your letter by showing that you are really serious about working for the companies you are contacting. State the reason that you are interested in working for that particular company. Mention a department, a new project the company is involved in, an acquisition the company has made. Show that you have done your homework. Address the cover letter to a specific individual whenever possible.

3. **Why are you sending your resume and cover letter?**

Cover letters should be clear and to the point. Include the specific job title, two to three reasons why your experience makes a good fit, and a brief outline of career highlights.

4. **Highlight your strengths!**

You may be a great person and never call in sick, but prospective employers really want to know why they should consider you for this position. Brag a little! Give a few facts, list relevant skills, and state accomplishments on your present or most recent jobs that will be impressive.

Examples: Increased overseas sales by 93%? Negotiated new financial leases/loans? Implemented new training programs which reduced staff turnover by 15%?

5. **State your intentions and qualifications right up front.**

If you expect a senior personnel manager or recruiter to wade through a mish-mash of information on your cover letter before understanding why you are sending your resume, chances are, it will never happen.

6. **What makes you different?**

Emphasize your skills, talents, and experiences to show how you would be a valuable addition to the team. If you have relevant volunteer or professional experience include it briefly in your cover letter. Example: an accountant who serves as volunteer treasurer for a nonprofit community health organization; an international sales rep who has lived in Europe and Asia and speaks several languages.

7. **No negative information!**

Never include personality conflicts with previous employers, pending litigation suits, or sarcastic remarks in your cover letter. If you are bad-mouthing your present place of employment, interviewers may fear a repeat performance if they hire you.

8. **When should you include salary/relocation information?**

The rule of thumb is to always include salary requirements and/or salary history in the cover letter if a prospective employer requests it. For example: My salary requirements are \$60,000-\$75,000 (negotiable). Or: My current salary is \$53,000 at XYZ corporation. To eliminate this information from your cover letter may justify your resume getting tossed out. Never include salary and relocation information on your resume, only address this information in your cover letter.

9. **Action Steps to Take**

Take a proactive approach in your cover letter. State the fact that you are available for a personal interview; give your home, work, e-mail, and/or cell phone numbers where you can be reached; note that you will follow up by phone (where possible) to provide any additional information required.

10. **Be direct!**

A professionally written cover letter and resume can open the doors to your next position on the corporate ladder, as well as a new career in a different field. A clean, error-free presentation combined with strong phrasing and solid facts will encourage the reader to review the attached resume and call you in for an interview.