

How to write an effective cover letter

I read a lot of cover letters and most of them are pretty bad. This is unfortunate because, in most instances, cover letters are pretty important and a bad cover letter equals a missed opportunity to market yourself to an employer. So, why do so many people write so many bad cover letters?

Consider the following . . .

Four things good cover letters can do:

- Get the employer to read your resume
- Demonstrate your ability to write persuasively
- Illustrate how your qualifications align with those in the position description
- Establish you as a viable candidate for the job for which you are applying

Four things to keep in mind when writing cover letters:

- Each cover letter should be unique (though some content may be similar)
- You cannot write an effective cover letter without reading the position description first
- The content of your cover letter should be consistent with the content of your resume; not identical to it
- The writing style of your cover letter should be your own

The Harsh Reality: Most cover letters are generic “junk mail” that read like form letters.

What do you do with junk mail? You throw it away.

If the following sounds like the cover letters you write, you shouldn't be surprised employers aren't calling you to schedule an interview:

Opening Salutation

Part One: First Paragraph – The introduction: I am applying for this job because I am the perfect candidate.

Part Two: Body Paragraph(s) – The main emphasis: Let me tell you 10,000 wonderful (but random) things about me that have nothing directly to do with the job for which I am applying. Honestly, I haven't even read the job description, and I've already sent this exact same cover letter to 200 other employers.

Part Three: Last Paragraph – The close: That's why I am the perfect candidate for the job. Here's my resume. I expect you to call because you should be able to see how good a candidate I am.

Closing Salutation

The Opportunity: Good cover letters are focused marketing letters that present what is relevant.

Use the following as a guide for writing cover letters that market what you offer in terms relevant to the hiring employer:

Opening Salutation

Part One: First Paragraph - State your Case! (tell them why you are writing): State the purpose and nature of your inquiry.

Part Two: Body Paragraph(s) - Defend your Case! (tell them why they should care you are applying):
–Tell them how what you offer/seek matches with what they offer/seek

Part Three: Last Paragraph - °Close your Case! (Set context for next steps and close): □Wrap it up/Summarize. □Suggest/hint toward next steps in the process

Closing Salutation

The Caveat: This advice does not apply to everyone equally.

I admit – not all jobs require candidates with strong written communication skills; in some instances, what really matters is your ability to write code, process data, engineer technology, etc. If you are pursuing a career in a field where your communication skills are not really all that important, your ability to communicate effectively won't be all that important either, so your ability to write persuasive cover letters won't be all that important.

For most of us, however, the ability to write and speak persuasively is critically important to our career success. So – if you think you are a good writer . . . prove it by writing good cover letters.

Want a few more tips? Check out the Cover Letter Guide in your JOB BOARD account.