



CareerLine Q & A

by [Jack Wilson](#)

ACM's career consultant, Jack Wilson, answers questions from students about their forthcoming careers in computing and information technology.

Q: I'm having trouble writing letters to potential employers. Even though I'm enclosing a resume, I'm not sure what I should be saying in the cover letter. Is there some model or methodology I can follow?

A: Yes. In general, keep the readers in mind at all times, appealing to their concerns rather than your own. Also, think of your letter in four parts. First, open in such a way as to capture the reader's ATTENTION. This is often called "the hook" or "the grabber." Make a solid connection between yourself or your ability and the employer's business. Then, assuming you have their attention, state some additional facts or information about yourself to create INTEREST. Try to DISTINGUISH yourself and make the reader want to talk with you. Finally, close with a call to ACTION. Don't hesitate to say what you want to happen. To satisfy our penchant for acronyms, these four words (ATTENTION, INTEREST, DISTINGUISH, ACTION) form the name of the opera AIDA.

Here are some other tips:

- Keep your cover letter brief. Don't simply repeat the content of your resume, but you can emphasize one or two important points from it.
- Always address the letter to a person by name, never "To Whom It May Concern." All that says is that you didn't make the effort to identify an appropriate recipient. And the recipient of your letter should not be someone in Human Resources unless you want a job in Human Resources!
- Use good quality, business-size stationery with matching business envelopes. Neatness counts!
- Proofread your letter thoroughly (not just spell-check). Even better, have

someone else read it and check for both spelling and grammar.

Q: Two months ago I responded to an ad for a web design job, and I've now been called to set up an interview. They told me the first interview would be by phone. Can you give me an idea on what to expect?

A: This is probably a screening interview, whose purpose is to pare down the total number of candidates. Many companies have found it more efficient to conduct these initial interviews by telephone, as they can screen a greater number of candidates to decide which ones to invite in for a more in-depth, face-to-face meeting. They will probably go over your resume and credentials and ask you some basic questions about relevant experience. They may also ask if you have any particular questions for them, so have one or two that you can readily use. Remember that the screener may not have a technical background.

Here are some typical questions you might expect, but don't be surprised if none of these are asked. All interviewers are different:

- Tell me about yourself (Have a very concise, modestly promotional description of your background, academic achievements, and work experience).
- What are your strengths? Any weaknesses?
- Why are you interested in this company?
- What is most appealing about this job?
- What have you done that relates to this kind of job?
- What do you do best?
- What kind of work environment do you like best?
- Where do you want to be in five years? ten years?
- Tell me about one of your most satisfying successes.
- Tell me about one of your failures.
- Do you have any problems with taking tests?
- Is there anything else we should know about you?

Caution: Don't over prepare with carefully memorized answers. Go with what's in your heart.