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Effective Cover Letters

Writing a cover letter often seems like a particularly daunting task. However, if you take it one step at a time, you'll soon be an expert at writing letters to send with your resume.

A cover letter typically accompanies each resume you send out. Your cover letter may make the difference between obtaining a job interview and having your resume ignored, so, it makes good sense to devote the necessary time and effort to writing effective cover letters.

A cover letter should complement, not duplicate your resume. Its purpose is to interpret the data-oriented, factual resume and add a personal touch. A cover letter is often your earliest written contact with a potential employer, creating a critical first impression.

Do not design a form letter and send it to every potential employer (you know what you do with junk mail!).

Why You Are Writing

Effective cover letters explain the reasons for your interest in the specific organization and identify your most relevant skills or experiences (remember, relevance is determined by the employer's self-interest). They should express a high level of interest and knowledge about the position.

To be effective, your cover letter should follow the basic format of a typical business letter and should address three general issues:

1. First Paragraph - Why you are writing
2. Middle Paragraphs - What you have to offer
3. Concluding Paragraph - How you will follow-up

In some cases, you may have been referred to a potential employer by a friend or acquaintance. Be sure to mention this mutual contact, by name, up front since it is likely to encourage your reader to keep reading!

When writing in response to a job posting, indicate where you learned of the position and the title of the position. More importantly, express your enthusiasm and the likely match between your credentials and the position's qualifications.

What You Have To Offer

In responding to an advertisement, refer specifically to the qualifications listed and illustrate how your particular abilities and experiences relate to the position for which you are applying. In a prospecting letter express your potential to fulfill the employer's needs rather than focus on what the employer can offer you. You can do this by giving evidence that you have researched the organization thoroughly and that you possess skills used within that organization.

Emphasize your achievements and problem-solving skills. Show how your education and work skills are transferable, and thus relevant, to the position for which you are applying.