

ASK A BOSS | UPDATED JULY 28, 2020

How to Write a Cover Letter That Will Get You a Job

By Alison Green



Photo: The Cut

I've read a lot of cover letters in my career — thousands of them, maybe even tens of thousands. (If you're thinking that sounds like really boring reading, you're right.) What I can tell you from doing that is that most people make the same mistakes over and over, and they waste the opportunity cover letters give them to make a case for why they'd be great at the job.



chances of getting an interview. It's worth putting in the effort to do them well, so let's learn how!

1. First, understand the point of a cover letter.

For employers, picking the best candidate for the job isn't just about skills and experience. If it were, we wouldn't ask for cover letters at all — hell, we might not even need interviews. We could just hire based on résumés alone. But of course, other things matter, too — things like personal traits, work habits, communication skills, people skills, intelligence, drive, and enthusiasm for the job. Your cover letter is supposed to give a window into those things.

Because of that ...

2. Whatever you do, don't just summarize your résumé.

The most common mistake people make with cover letters is that they simply use them to summarize their resume. This makes no sense — hiring managers don't need a summary of your resume, because your resume is on the very next page! They're about to see it as soon as they scroll down. And if you think about it, your entire application is only a few pages (in most cases, a one- or two-page résumé and a one-page cover letter) — why would you squander one of those pages by just repeating the content of the others?

Instead, your cover letter should go beyond your work history to talk about things that make you especially well-suited for the job. For example, if you're applying for an assistant job that requires being highly organized and you neurotically track your household finances in a detailed, color-coded spreadsheet, most hiring managers would love to know that because it says something about the kind of attention to detail you'd bring to the job. And that's not something you could put on your résumé, but it can go in your cover letter.

Or maybe your last boss told you that you were the most accurate data processor she'd ever seen, or came to rely on you as her go-to person whenever a lightning-fast rewrite was needed. Maybe your co-workers called you “the client whisperer” because of your skill in calming upset clients. Maybe you're regularly sought out by more senior people to help problem-solve, or you find immense satisfaction in bringing order to chaos. Those sorts of details illustrate what you bring to the job in a different way than your résumé does, and they belong in your cover letter.



probably talk about what you're good at and how you'd approach the work. That's what you want here.

3. You don't need a creative opening line.

If you think you need to open the letter with something creative or catchy, I am here to tell you that you don't. Just be simple and straightforward:

- "I'm writing to apply for your X position."
- "I'd love to be considered for your X position."
- "I'm interested in your X position because..."
- "I'm excited to apply for your X position."

That's it! You don't need to open like an infomercial pitchman. Straightforward is fine.

Write a Cover Letter That Will Get You a Job

Don't just assert that you'd be great at the job, or proclaim that you're a great communicator or a skilled manager or so forth. Instead, demonstrate that you are those things by talking about accomplishments and experiences that show it.

Here's a concrete example taken from one extraordinarily effective cover-letter makeover that I saw. The candidate had originally written, "I offer exceptional attention to detail, highly developed communication skills, and a talent for managing complex projects with a demonstrated ability to prioritize and multitask." That's pretty boring and not especially convincing, right? (This is also exactly how most people's cover letters read.)

In her revised version, she wrote this instead:

"In addition to being flexible and responsive, I'm also a fanatic for details — particularly when it comes to presentation. One of my recent projects involved coordinating a 200-page grant proposal: I proofed and edited the narratives provided by the division head, formatted spreadsheets, and generally made sure that every line was letter-perfect and that the entire

~~finished product conformed to the specific guidelines of the RFP. (The result? A five-year, \$1.5~~



visible as prepping the materials for a top-level meeting and as mundane as making sure the copier never runs out of paper.”

That second version is so much more compelling and interesting — and makes me believe that she really is great with details.



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5. If there's anything unusual or confusing about your candidacy, address it in the letter.



position but are excited about it anyway, or if you're a bit underqualified but still think you could excel at the job, address that up-front. Or if all of your experience is in a different field but you're actively working to move into this one, explain that and talk about why — and explain how your experience will translate.

If you don't provide that kind of context, it's too easy for a hiring manager to just think wrong fit or applying to everything she sees or doesn't understand the job description and put you in the “no” pile. A cover letter gives you a shot at saying, “No, wait — here's why this could be a strong match.”

6. Keep the tone warm and conversational.

While there are some industries that still prize stiff, formal-sounding cover letters — like law — in most fields, your cover letter will be stronger if you write in a warm, conversational tone. Strive for the tone you'd use if you were writing to a colleague who you liked a lot but didn't know especially well. That means that it's okay to show some personality or even use humor.

7. Stay away from form letters.

If you're sending out the same cover letter for every job you apply to, you're probably doing it wrong. A good cover letter should be personalized to the job.

That doesn't mean that you can't reuse pieces of the letter over and over — if you're applying for a bunch of very similar jobs, you absolutely can — but it does mean that it should feel like you wrote it with the nuances of this particular job in mind. A good litmus test: Could you imagine other applicants for this job sending in the same letter? If so, that's a sign that you haven't made it specific enough to you and are probably leaning too heavily on just reciting your work history.

8. No, you don't need to hunt down the hiring manager's name.

If you read much job-search advice, at some point you'll come across the idea that you need to do Woodward and Bernstein-level research to hunt down the hiring manager's name in order to open your letter with “Dear Matilda Jones.” You don't need to do this; no reasonable hiring manager will care. If the name is easily available, by all means, feel free to use it, but otherwise

~~“Dear Hiring Manager” is absolutely fine. Take the time to research it if you want, but don't stress about it.~~



9. Aim for about one page.

If your cover letters are longer than a page, you're writing too much, and you risk annoying hiring managers who don't have time to read lengthy tomes. On the other hand, if it's only one or two paragraphs, it's unlikely that you're making a compelling case for yourself as a candidate — not impossible, but unlikely. For most people, a page or something close to a page is about right.

10. Don't agonize too much over the small details.

What matters most about your cover letter is its content. You should of course ensure that it's well-written and thoroughly proofread, but many job seekers agonize over elements of the letter that really don't matter. I get tons of [questions from job seekers](#) about whether they should attach their cover letter or put it in the body of the email (answer: no one cares, but attaching it makes it easier to share and will preserve your formatting), or what to name the file (answer: again, no one really cares as long as it's reasonably professional, but when people are dealing with hundreds of files named "resume," it's courteous to name it with your full name).

Approaching your cover letter like this can make a huge difference in your job search. It can be the thing that moves your application from the "maybe" pile (or even the "no" pile) to the "yes" pile. Of course, writing cover letters like this will take more time than sending out the same form letter summarizing your résumé — but 10 personalized, compelling cover letters are likely to get you far more [interview invitations](#) than 50 generic ones will.

Order Alison Green's book, *Ask a Manager: Clueless Colleagues, Lunch-Stealing Bosses, and the Rest of Your Life at Work*, [here](#). Got a question for her? Email askaboss@nymag.com. Her advice column appears here every Tuesday.

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