

How to Write a Good Cover Letter

In the age of the digital recruiting, is it still important to know how to write a cover letter? The short answer: Yes! In fact, more than half of employers (58%) said they prefer to receive cover letters and find them very valuable, according to a recent Robert Half survey of more than 2,800 senior managers.

Yet, far too often, job seekers treat the cover letter as an afterthought to writing a resume or they don't bother to write one at all.

Your cover letter is your introduction to a company and an opportunity to make a good first impression on your prospective employer. So don't squander it.

Today, a cover letter, like your resume, is not typically hard copy mailed to an employer. In fact, it may not be a letter at all. The savviest job seekers still manage to include its modern equivalent somewhere in the body of an email message or an online job application. Someone who takes the time and effort to do this will have a leg up.

Here are some tips for writing a cover letter that will convince hiring managers and HR professionals to bring you in for an interview.

1. Don't just rehash your resume

What's the first thing to know about how to write a cover letter? Your words should do more than restate salient details from your resume. Check out this brief checklist of important functions of a cover letter:

- Draw attention to specific skills and experience that make you an ideal candidate.
- Mention relevant skills and personal qualities the resume may not illustrate.
- Explain why you would love to have the job in question — and how it advances your personal career goals.
- Show you've done research on the company, its mission and key leadership.

2. Tailor your cover letter to a specific job

Don't use a one-size-fits-all cover letter template for all the positions you apply for. If you do, you're missing the point: Only a letter that's targeted to the job at hand will make a positive impression. Write a cover letter that employers can't ignore by tying it to the elements of the job that match your specific skills and experience. What are they asking for that you're especially good at? Those are the points to stress in the cover letter.

Just as important, gather facts and figures that support your claims. For example, if you're applying for a managerial role, mention the size of teams and budgets you've managed. If it's a sales role, describe specific sales goals you've achieved.

In addition to highlighting your talents, you can further personalize your cover letter by demonstrating your familiarity with the specific industry, employer and type of position.

3. Be proud of your past accomplishments

Remember that companies don't just want warm bodies. They want confident employees who love their work. They know these are the people who tend to perform better, serve as stronger team members and have greater potential to grow along with the business. Don't hesitate to brag a little.

4. Keep it brief

The barrage of information coming at all of us today has created attention spans that are shorter than ever before. Cover letters are no exception. Managers are often inundated with applications, so economy of words matters. Keep your cover letter to no more than one page if printed. Short is sweet.

5. Address the hiring manager personally

Just as you personalize your resume to the role, you should also address the cover letter to the person actually hiring for the position. If it's not spelled out in the job posting, call the employer's main phone number and ask for the name and title of the hiring manager. If you're still in school or just out, your career services office may be able to help you identify the right contact at a company.

6. Use keywords from the job description

Many employers use resume-filtering software that scans for keywords and evaluates how closely resumes and cover letters match the preferred skills and experience.

That means your cover letter should incorporate key phrases you've identified in the job description — if they honestly match with your background and strengths. During the writing process, review qualifications such as the type of degree required, the number of years' experience needed, specified software skills, organization and communication abilities, and project management background.

7. Address any concerns

The cover letter also is a place to preemptively explain anything that might give a hiring manager pause, such as a gap in employment. If you were out of work, briefly explain what you've done in the meantime to keep your skills up to date.

8. Proofread!

Last, but decidedly not least, once you're convinced you've made a strong argument for your candidacy, it's time to proofread your work. Typos in resumes signal carelessness or a cavalier attitude to an employer. Even a single typographical error can damage your chances of landing an interview. After you've given your letter a final polish, ask a friend with strong grammar, punctuation and spelling skills to review it. Consider providing a copy of the job posting so your friend can make sure you've hit all the right points.