

## Quick advice from a career expert on how to create the best cover letter possible

*By Pat Kendall*

The cover letter plays an important role in the job search process, and if done properly, it can substantially improve your ability to compete for jobs and generate interviews. It adds a personal touch to your application and shows employers that you are a serious, professional candidate. A well-written cover letter demonstrates your communication and organizational skills by example and shows that you are the type of candidate who is willing to go the extra mile. In this highly competitive job market, the cover letter gives you a much needed edge over other job seekers, as it allows you to describe how your specific skills and accomplishments uniquely qualify you for the job.

Here are four key rules of cover letter writing:

### **RULE 1: CUSTOMIZE**

Make sure you take the time to customize your cover letter to fit the employer's requirements. Before you start the writing process, review the criteria for the position and make a list of the skills and keywords the employer wants. This list might include specific areas of expertise, years of experience, technical knowledge, transferable skills, and personality traits. Then, incorporate these items into your letter, demonstrating by example that you have the desired qualifications.

### **RULE 2: MEET THEIR NEEDS**

Write the cover letter with the employer's needs in mind - not your own. Don't describe what YOU want, but explain what you can do for the employer. Don't assume that the employer will read between the lines of your resume and dig out the relevant information. They won't. To get their attention, you have to assertively describe how you can meet their needs.

### **RULE 3: ACTIVELY SELL YOURSELF**

Tell them WHY they should hire you. Be assertive about your qualifications without being egotistical. The tone of your letter should be professional, but sound as if a real person wrote it—in other words, not too pretentious or formal. One way to judge your letter is to read it out loud. Do you trip over the words? Does it sound like an attorney wrote it? If so, work on it until it flows naturally and has a conversational tone.

### **RULE 4: KEEP IT SIMPLE**

Use a simple block format with left flush margins and ragged right margins, since that looks most like a letter typed on a typewriter. Your cover letter will generate a better response if it LOOKS like it was individually typed rather than computer-generated. Most cover letters should be limited to one page, preferably 3-5 paragraphs with 1" margins all around.

## **RULE 5: LETTER CONTENT**

Next, let's take a look at letter content. In the first paragraph, your objective is to get the reader's attention. Get right to the point—tell them why you are writing.

### **Here are some examples:**

"Your recent advertisement for a marketing manager caught my eye, as my experience in \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ is very compatible with your requirements."

### **Or...**

"My solid track record in sales should qualify me for the district manager position described in your recent Wall Street Journal advertisement. My résumé is enclosed for your consideration."

The second paragraph should outline your qualifications for the position and focus on the most relevant aspect(s) of your background (e.g., years of experience, formal education, special training, technical skills, current responsibilities, or highlights of earlier jobs). The best cover letters also include examples of accomplishments and quantifiable results. If you're a salesperson, describe how you increased sales volume. If you're a manager, explain how you cut costs and improved profits. If you're a human resources professional, describe how you reduced employee turnover or developed new training programs that increased productivity. In other words, show how you improved your previous employers' operations.

### **Here's an example:**

"My background includes 15 years in sales management with accomplishments in staff development, training and customer service. I am a skilled team builder and have consistently met or exceeded sales goals in each position held:

- Opened and developed million-dollar territory for XYZ Company.
- Set up six key accounts for ABC Company.
- Generated sales increases of at least 25% in all positions."

Last but not least is the closing paragraph. This is where you:

1. Request a meeting or personal interview
2. Mention that you will contact them to schedule a personal meeting
3. Explain how they can reach you
4. Thank them for taking the time to consider your application

**Here are some examples:**

"I believe that I can make a positive contribution to ABC Company and look forward to discussing my capabilities in more detail. I am available for a personal interview at your earliest convenience and may be reached after 5 p.m. at the telephone number above. Thank you for your consideration."

**Or...**

"I would like to meet with you to discuss your opportunity in more detail and will call next week to see when your schedule might allow time for a brief meeting. Thank you for your time."

Obviously, it takes a bit of doing to get it right, but the time you invest will be well worth it!