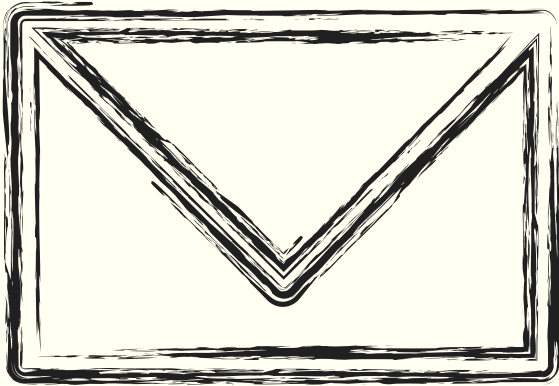


Cover letters



When writing cover letters, far too many job applicants approach the document as a narrative résumé. They fill the letter with information that is already available to potential employers and miss the opportunity to tell a memorable story about themselves. Rather than approaching your cover letter in this way, try thinking of the document as a mini-essay, one that adopts the following thesis:

Thesis: "X job calls for Y skills, and I have those skills because of my experiences with A and B."*

*You would not state the argument quite this directly in your cover letter, though.

Thinking of a cover letter in this way can help you break through writer's block. Many of us freeze when asked to talk about ourselves. But it gets much easier when you understand that a cover letter is not actually about *you*. It's about the employer and what they want. Why should this person or organization hire you?



1

Begin by scanning each job description for keywords. What skills or characteristics do the employers say they want? Make a short list.

2

Secondly, think of experiences you've had that demonstrate those skills. You may be able to make a direct link between the position and the coursework you've completed or the jobs you've held. But if you think creatively, you might be able to draw connections between the job and your hobbies, volunteer work, or even family experiences.



3

After you have chosen the specific experiences you want to highlight, ask yourself what you achieved through those experiences. Tangible and quantifiable results are best, but even indirect achievements should be mentioned.

"As part of my comedy troupe, I organized a charity showcase that raised over \$4,000 for a local school..."



"I helped my mom organize a local volunteer organization, where she began improving her English and building confidence..."



4

When choosing specific experiences, be focused. The letter should be three to four paragraphs (including the introduction and conclusion), meaning you do not have space to mention every accomplishment, award, class, and so forth.

5

When drafting your letter, be sure to echo the words or phrases from the job description. This can help your material get through an automated screening process; it can also demonstrate that you have looked closely at the job listing, rather than submitting a generic cover letter.

Applicants will have excellent verbal and written communication skills....

"As a staff writer for the Daily Trojan with more than twenty bylines to my name, I developed both verbal and written communication skills..."

See the reverse side for some questions to help you start brainstorming and drafting your cover letter



A strong cover letter will....

- Not simply be about you, but about how you fit into the job or organization.
- Use body paragraphs to highlight key experiences that demonstrate your skills and accomplishments.
- Mention quantifiable outcomes whenever possible.
- Use key words or phrases from the job description.
- Avoid rehashing your résumé.
- Avoid listing every skill, award, experience, etc.

- What are the specific skills or character traits mentioned in the job listing?
- Do a little research on the employer. What is their mission statement? Any recent news coverage or milestones announced on the website? Overall, what values seem important to this organization?
- Look through your answers to questions #1 and #2. What are some experiences you've had that demonstrate these particular skills and values?
- If you could get the hiring manager to remember one story about you, what would it be? Note the word "story," not "characteristic." Maybe you want your potential employer to know that you are great with people. Okay - but how would SHOW your people skills via a brief story? Concrete details and stories are much easier to remember than a list of abstract qualities..