

The Ins and Outs of Cover Letters

You might wonder if a cover letter is necessary when you submit a résumé. Unless otherwise instructed, a cover letter should accompany every résumé. A cover letter compels your reader to review your résumé.

Your résumé presents factual information about your qualifications, experience, and educational credentials. You use the résumé to present yourself as a good match for a position based on the content in a job posting. It is common for job seekers to use one résumé for several employment contacts. While this is a customary practice, a cover letter lets you personalize your résumé package for a specific job opportunity.

You no doubt have value-added skills that are above and beyond those listed as the fundamental job requirements. These skills can distinguish you from other candidates. A cover letter lets you present this information and add value to your marketability.

In creating your résumé package, your cover letter is an informative and even fun way to demonstrate that you can communicate in a clear and concise fashion. You do this with the words you use, the tone of the letter, and the visual presentation of the letter.

Although there are no set rules to creating cover letters, the following are some guidelines for introducing yourself in a letter:

Be brief – Cover letters are not essays. Use just one page to communicate who you are, what you can do for your potential employer, and why you are the best candidate for the position.

Be professional, yet personal – Avoid using the same tone and language you use in your résumé. Address your reader as if you were speaking to him or her in person. Your cover letter should compliment your résumé, not repeat it.

Tell who you are – Open the letter with a clear statement of who you are and what you do. Don't make your reader search for that information in the body of the letter or worse have to figure it out from the content of the letter.

Maintain consistency – Use the same heading format on all documents within your résumé package (résumé, cover letter, references, follow-up letters, thank-you letters).

Highlight your value added skills – Spotlight your skills that do not appear in your résumé such as your work ethics, teamwork ability, and skills that are not listed as requirements for the job but are useful to the organization.

Explain why you want to work for the company – Do you like their product or service, their financial standing, their position in the industry, or their direction for the future? Companies like to know what captures your attention.

Proof, Proof, Proof – Make sure that your letter is clear, concise, and error free. Make a checklist that addresses grammar, punctuation, and words that are spelled correctly but out of context (form instead of from, you instead of your, etc.). Use this checklist for your own proof reading and have someone else read it if possible.

A cover letter can make the difference between getting an interview and getting passed over. Use a cover letter to help boost your chances of getting the job offer.

About the Author

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