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Expert Advice: 8 Tips for Writing a Standout Cover Letter

by Gianna Sen-Gupta (<http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/nerdscholar/author/gianna/>) on 9 Apr 2014 | posted in Education (<http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/nerdscholar/category/education/>), Expert Advice (<http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/nerdscholar/category/expert-advice/>), Jobs and Careers (<http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/nerdscholar/category/jobs-and-careers/>)



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It's practically unheard of nowadays to apply for a job or an internship without submitting a cover letter. Companies are flooded with resumes, and candidates need to stand out in order to avoid unemployment. Students especially have it tough: according to a 2013 study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, roughly 13% of recent college graduates are unemployed and an additional 44% take jobs they are over-qualified for.

In today's competitive job market, it is crucial that students come prepared to the job search with dazzling resumes and eye-catching cover letters. To help students master the process, NerdScholar debunked eight resume myths (<http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/nerdscholar/2014/expert-advice-resume-myths-debunked/>) and then asked career experts for the best ways to make a cover letter stand out. Follow their tips to land the interview.

20 **POWERFUL**

WORDS TO USE IN A **COVER LETTER**

1. SOLVED
2. PROMOTED
3. OVERSAW
4. IMPROVED
5. ADAPTED
6. POSITIVITY
7. INITIATED
8. PLANNED
9. MANAGED
10. LEAD
11. INNOVATIVE
12. TRAINED
13. BUILT
14. INTRODUCED
15. STRENGTHENED
16. DIRECTED
17. PERSUADED
18. ORGANIZED
19. PROJECTED
20. ASSESSED

(<http://assets.nerdwallet.com/blog/nerdscholar/files/2014/04/cover-letter-redone.png>)

[Want more career advice? Check out our Job Search Guide for Gen Y (<http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/nerdscholar/2014/nerdscholar-job-search-guide/>).]

BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING YOUR COVER LETTER...

1. Understand your purpose.

The first step in writing a cover letter is to understand what a cover letter is used for and why you need to write one. Ed Hallenbeck, career consultant at Union Graduate College, says “the purpose [of a cover letter] is to provide an engaging personal introduction, to connect your unique qualifications to the specific qualifications for the position, and to pique the employer’s curiosity enough that they want to look at your resume.” Above all, it should answer one question: Why should this company hire you?

2. Create a Venn diagram of ideal skills and attributes.

Meghan Godorov, assistant director for career development at Mount Holyoke College, advises students to take a unique approach to writing a cover letter. “It can be tough,” she says, “to organize your thoughts about why you are applying and what makes you a good fit for each and every cover letter that you are writing.” A Venn diagram, Godorov says, will help you determine which of your skills and attributes align with a specific job or employer. The diagram is comprised of a “you” circle and “job/employer” circle. In order to understand which skills you should highlight in your cover letter, “take a look at the job or internship description and pull out key words and phrases they have listed to describe their ideal candidate for the role,” she says. After you have filled in the “you” circle with your skills and attributes, identify a few that align with the “job/employer” circle. “You can then place those items in the space where the circles overlap. Those themes will serve as the content” for your cover letter.

Hallenbeck also recommends that applicants make a list of the ideal qualifications the company is looking for in a candidate. “Make note of how you meet and/or exceed each one.” He says to identify “stories of accomplishments and achievements that provide evidence of your skills,” and then draw from these as you begin the writing process.

3. Research, research, research!

Hallenbeck notes that while “your resume is customized to a career, your cover letter is customized to a position.” Putting time into researching the company and specific position is crucial when writing a cover letter; without it, your cover letter will quickly end up in the “no” pile. Steve Hassinger, career services director at Central Penn College, says that “very few job seekers take the time to research the company prior to writing a cover letter or attending a job interview.” He says that showing you have done your homework as to the company’s needs and values will go a long way in the application process.

Rich Grant, internship coordinator at Colby College, also advises students to learn about the organization by speaking with people who work there. Informational interviews will lend a job seeker further insight into daily life at the company.

DURING THE WRITING PROCESS...

4. Be specific and show initiative.

The first rule of thumb in writing a cover letter is to address the company formally and outright, Ilesha Karasik, career services director at Pine Manor College, says. You should be sure to direct your cover letter to a specific person, too. If a hiring manager or contact liaison is not explicitly stated, “use the Internet or call the company directly to get the contact person’s name and title,” Karasik says. This will not only show the employer your initial interest in the position, but also your seriousness as a candidate.

Karasik says to be clear and concise in asking for an interview. The point of the cover letter, after all, is to persuade the employer that you are the best candidate for the job. Having a clear call to action—in this case, for an interview—followed by your detailed contact information, is key to clinching your spot as a viable candidate.

5. Use key words when referencing your qualifications and past experiences.

Once you have researched the company and scanned the job posting for key words, be sure to incorporate these phrases into your cover letter. The best way to do this is to include the key phrases and industry jargon in descriptions of your skills and experiences, Reesa Greenwald, director of the career center at Seton Hall University, says. Godorov adds that proper use of specific career and industry keywords will showcase your knowledge and passion for the field.

6. Avoid overselling yourself.

Don’t come off as cocky when listing your experience, Hassinger advises. Though your cover letter should portray you as a skilled candidate, it is more important that you show how the company will benefit from your expertise. One way to do this is to rephrase most of your sentences that begin with “I” so that they reflect the company instead. Framing your cover letter to address the needs of the company, Hassinger says, will show how you are the best candidate for the job without explicitly saying so.

7. Address the company’s values.

Employers want to hire someone who will be a good cultural fit and can help the company meet its goals. “It is not enough to look at a position and the qualifications and say you’d be a good fit,” says Godorov. Make sure you convey *why* and *how* you would add value—a key factor in the hiring process, she says. “Perhaps make a

note of their great leadership program and opportunities for growth and development within that that also attracted you to the company,” apart from the job listing.

Grant says customizing cover letters for every job application is important. “It’s okay to use a previous letter as a starting point, but every letter you send needs to be unique. Write the letter from the audience’s point of view. In doing so, Grant says, “you will be writing about how you will address *their* needs, not how you will fulfill your *own* needs.”

8. Scrap generic phrases and be original.

VA Hayman Barber, director of experiential education and career services at Johnson & Wales University, advises job applicants to choose their words carefully. Don’t just throw something generic together without getting some guidance from a career center, family, or friends. “Your writing represents you,” she says. “If you take the time to be creative about the words you use, it’s a reflection of your writing and attention to detail.”

Barber says these rules also apply to online profiles that a hiring manager might see. “Spending time updating your LinkedIn profile is just as important as the detail you put into a cover letter and resume. Use social media to your advantage, especially if you are getting some attention with things like blogs, marketing events, or leadership positions.” Barber also says that adding a link on your cover letter to your LinkedIn profile or including a short quote from a previous employer shows extra creativity—the kind that will land you the interview.

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