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Writing A Cover Letter

The cover letter is as important as your resume — maybe more so. While the resume is like a shotgun fired at everybody, the cover letter is like a rifle shot directed at a single target. A cover letter written to “To Whom It May Concern” is headed straight for the trash bin.

The difference between a résumé and a cover letter is that the cover letter is customized for each individual who receives it. The cover letter allows you to address a specific job.

What’s in a Letter?

The cover letter allows you to describe exactly why your prior work history and experience make you a perfect fit for a particular position. In other cases the cover letter can be used to explain that you are ready to make a career change. You may choose to laud certain personality traits or behaviors, such as your work ethic, how well you work without supervision or under pressure, that you are a team player, and so on.

Addressing the Job

The job requirements in a want ad or job listing on the Internet are usually written with the employer’s needs listed in descending order: listed first are the most important qualities, listed last are qualities more like “preferred but not required.” Be sure your letter addresses each need. Be sure to use the same wording that appears in the ad.

Making Yourself Stand Out

Cover letters can be written in a business-like style; however, one way you can make your cover letter stand out is to relax your writing style just a bit and include a personal touch. Including your beliefs, principles or general philosophy enhances the cover letter and makes you a unique candidate. For example, a mechanic might include a note about the importance of having quality tools; a nurse could describe her feelings about helping people; a customer support agent could write about dedication to quality service. These kinds of statements included in your cover letter will help you stand out.

A word of caution: There is a fine line between including a brief personal statement and becoming overly casual or candid in your letter. Use care to include just enough to make you unique, but not so much as to turn off a prospective employer. (In plain English: you don’t want to give the impression you’re a weirdo.)