Creating Effective Cover Letters

Cover Letters are an essential part of your marketing package. A good cover letter will get your resume read and generate interviews. It adds a personal touch to your application. When accompanied by your resume, cover letters demonstrate that you are a serious, professional candidate who is sincerely interested in the position available.

Employers use cover letters to evaluate and compare candidates. An effective cover letter will serve as an introduction, but a poorly written letter can eliminate you from consideration. 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.

Direct your letter to a specific individual. If necessary, call the company to find out who will be receiving the letter. If there is no way to find a person’s name, ‘Dear Hiring Manager’, ‘Dear Selection Committee’ or ‘To Whom It May Concern’ are appropriate as a last resort.

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 arrogant. 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? 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. Cover letters should be limited to one page, preferably 3-5 paragraphs with 1" margins all around.