

First line of defence – The perfect cover letter

The best cover letter I ever received and I read a lot of cover letters, was from a PA who wrote a brief article on herself in the format of a newspaper article. You just had to read it and had to meet this person. I'm not a big fan of the cover letter but a good cover letter such as this one, can be a real eye catcher. Cover letters are always going to be problematic, too many people try using the cover letter to say what they should actually say in the interview. And it seldom works.

Let's first look at the purpose of the cover letter. This brief and I emphasis brief form of introduction should cover who you are and why you are seeking employment. The entire role of the cover letter is to invite the reader to explore your CV further. Almost like a good marketing bi-line attached to a brand that gently encourages the tired eyes of the HR manager to want to explore further. The challenge that you have when designing your cover letter is most certainly the huge amount of CV's that the reader will need to go through to get to the final shortlist of possible candidates he or she wants to meet. If your cover letter is too long the reader will just give up before getting to your CV. In reality the CV is the actual marketing tool that you will need to sell not the cover letter.

You get two types of cover letters; the "I'm applying for that job" type or "traditional cover letter" and the seldom used "I am looking for opportunities in the following areas" type or "sales type" of cover letter.

The initial being when you actually see a job that you wish to apply for and the latter being for the purpose of applying for roles that a recruiter or company may have and has not advertised for as yet. The "sales type" obviously being slightly harder as it will need to provide instant direction to the reader on what roles you could possibly fill and what skills you bring to the table where as the "traditional cover letter" will just speak to the reader about the role that he or she has advertised.

The structure and length (about three paragraphs and 250 words), of the cover letter is vital. For the "traditional letter" the initial paragraph should tell the reader which role exactly you are applying for and why. And keep your reasons professional and preferably positive such as you are keen to explore new opportunities in a new environment. Often companies will use reference numbers to describe vacancies especially if they are advertising more than one role and I suggest referring to this in the opening paragraph.

For the “sales type” cover letter you can use a more dynamic approach such as a brief introduction to why you have decided to forward your details to the reader. This could be a combination of a move motivating reason but I prefer a complimentary type approach such as mentioning a clear reason for your interest in the company, such as a recent success the company had and then linking your area of talent and what the company could gain from these skills. Some brief achievements are also good if thrown in subtly to set the scene.

The next paragraph for the “traditional cover letter” should cover in brief why it is that you should be chosen for an interview. Now very important. Most vacancies have a few specific technical areas that you will need to be fulfilled such as the number of years of experience or industry background they require. Do not be scared to use point forms here and tell the reader in brief three or four of your skills that are relevant to the job requirements. This will help the reader match your skills to the job.

For the “sales cover letter” the second paragraph is slightly more complicated. Most companies will have differing job titles for different roles, so your job is to simply make the reader understand as quickly as possible what jobs you can fulfil with your transferable talent. The simplest example is the role of secretary could also be called PA or Operations Manager could be called Technical Supervisor. I suggest listing three of these generic role titles that you could be suited to in that company.

What-ever type of letter you are using try to personalise your cover letter to each role. I also suggest that you include only relevant skills specific to the advertised role or company profile. So it's no use mentioning your brilliant typing skills if you are selling yourself to a company that you want to join as sales person. Again use point forms and make it easy for the reader to interpret your top skills.

The final paragraph and very importantly should cover your availability. Especially if you are employed and have certain constraints regards your time. Remember the one of the purposes of the cover letter is to get you to the interview so if your contact details are incorrect how can people contact you. Provide an email address (careful of the work email address) and at least two contact numbers with at least one of these telephones having a voice mail facility.

Finally when delivering your CV by normal mail you should make sure that your cover letter and CV for that matter of fact are printed on a good quality paper. You can also use an old sales trick that companies use to promote their services and you handwrite the address on the envelope. The reader will always be intrigued to open it.

Cover letters are not rocket science the trick is to think of the content from the reader's perspective. The cover letter sets the scene for a much greater event – your CV.