

Yes, Cover Letters Still Matter -- And Yes, There's A Way To Make Yours Stand Out

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Every now and again, I go to the mats with someone who insists that cover letters are pointless, that no one ever reads the things—that the entire concept is “dead.”

Baloney.

The cover letter is not dead. I’m not saying that because I earn a reasonable portion of my living writing resumes and cover letters. I’m saying it because I’ve witnessed, time and again, the sheer power of a well-written one. I’ve made decisions to contact people based solely on those paragraphs. And I’ve seen clients get favorable responses from hiring managers less than a day after submitting stellar copy.

One guy? He got a reply within two hours. The subject line of the email went like this:

“Your cover letter... is amazing!”

The email went on to ask how soon my client could come in for an interview. (Even better, he was later invited to craft his own job description for that company.) So, before you go assuming that this is throwaway real estate, let’s chat.

What’s The Big Deal About Cover Letters?

Done poorly, there’s no big deal at all. Done well, a cover letter gives you the chance to speak directly to how your skills and experience line up with the specific job you’re pursuing. It also affords you an opportunity to hint to the reviewer that you’re likable, original and likely to fit in around the place should you land the job.

Most people completely lay an egg with this step. (And by “most people,” I do mean the vast majority.) Instead of using them to their strategic advantage, they blabber on and on about what they want, toss over bland, [cliché-filled clunkers](#) that are redundant to the resume or go off on some strange tangent in an effort to be unique.

Given this reality, imagine the leg up you’ll have if you learn how to do cover letters right.

How Do I Make This Thing Incredible From The Start?

You nail the lead.

Surely, you want to make sure what you’ve written is memorable, friendly, conversational and hyper-relevant to the job you’re pursuing. But it’s the lead that matters the most. It sets the stage for the whole document.

Make it your mission to [construct a strong opening line](#) that draws the reader into your story and makes him or her immediately want to keep reading.

Here’s an example: I recently had a client working to land a leadership role within a nonprofit specializing in fire prevention. She had a genuine passion for this cause, which she spelled out right in her cover letter lead:

“I have a personal interest in fire prevention that dates back to my youth. As the daughter of a nurse who worked in a hospital burns unit for many years, I grew up with significant exposure to those impacted by fire. I’d spend hours thinking about my mom’s patients, wishing there were some way to better protect people from fire.”

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What Specific Things Should I Showcase?

Once you’ve got the lead under wraps, you should develop three to five key points (you can put them in bullets or bold them to make them stand right out) that show you understand what the organization is looking for, and spell out how your background lines up with the position. [Study the job description for](#)

[hints](#). What's required? What skills are mentioned high up, or more than once? These will likely be the most important deliverables. Outline your experience with your strengths in these specific things.

I typically begin this section with this line:

“What, specifically, would I bring to [company name] in this role?”

And then plug in your key points.

Building off our example above, let's say that one of the key things the job description calls for is current experience leading a nonprofit. One of your bullet points might then be:

- **Current Experience as a Nonprofit Leader.** And then from here, share a brief statement about your work in this position.

Simply put, you want to spell out as directly as you can what makes you a great fit, and what you can sashay through their doors and deliver once you're hired.