

What should my cover letter say? by Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

N.B. I think cover letters are important. Some recruiting folks tell me they never look at them. Others say they'll soon be a thing of the past. Know your industry and what it expects; behave accordingly.

Think of your cover letter as your main selling document. Your resume summarizes your educational and work life. Your cover letter focuses on the job in question and matches your skills and background against what the company said it needed.

Do not prepare a generic cover letter to send with the resume. It looks sloppy, careless, and lazy; it gets you the same casual attention you gave the letter. The body of your cover letter can have several paragraphs that are more or less the same, but you *must* make each one specific for the job you're seeking. (This is another commercial for *not* sending out hundreds of "over-the-transom" resumes.)

Here's the basic format:

1. Dear [use a real name]
2. Here's why I'm writing
3. These are my experiences that match the ones you're seeking
4. These are my skills that prove I can do the job
5. Here's how I'll follow up
6. I look forward to meeting you

1. Dear [person's name]. Always have a name. It keeps you from sending a "Dear-fill-in-the-blank" letter that will get no attention.

2. Paragraph 1. Say why you're writing the letter, such as "I'm writing. . .

"in response to your ad for a _____,"

or

"at the suggestion of Bob Owens in your traffic department,"

or

"to request an informational interview"

3. Paragraph 2. State what their need (or probable need) is, and how you match it:

"Your ad indicated you're seeking three to five years' experience in a manufacturing environment. In my first position after college, I was a process engineer with. . . ."

or

"Here are the qualifications you specified, and how my background meets them:

- Recruiting. After graduating from college, I became a national recruiter for my sorority.
- Labor Relations. Our plant has two unions, and I have assisted the Director by preparing data for contract negotiations. . . .etc."

You get the picture. Whatever the job requirement, you *state* it and you *match* your experience to it. If you don't have it, don't say it. Employers can tell when you're stretching the truth, i.e., you collated training manuals rather than creating them.

4. Paragraph 3. The skills paragraph. This is where you discuss your skills and capabilities. Say *what* the skill is and *back it up* with a proof of it from your experience:

"People skills. At the plant I have responsibility for employee relations with our hourly employees. I also work with our top plant management as well as visitors from our headquarters."

Talk about the skills you think they'll need: Technical, communications, management, fund-raising, etc. In other words, round out the picture of you as the perfect combination of background and skills.

5. Paragraph 4. Talk about the next step. If you don't and simply drop the letter in the mailbox, prepare to be disappointed. You may get no response at all! Yes, it's rude, but that's what happens. Keep responsibility for your progress toward an interview. Don't say, "I look forward to hearing from you." You might not!

Try this instead: "I will call you next week about scheduling an interview." And then do it.

6. Paragraph 5. Kiss. Kiss. The last paragraph, something nice, like "I look forward to meeting you."

A few final pointers:

- Put your cover letter on stationery, the same paper as your resume.
- Give yourself a letterhead: Name, address, phone number (home and mobile), e-mail. Word processing software makes that easy, or ask a copy center to do it for you.
- Create a "tickler" file for follow-up. An accordion file folder with a space for each day of the month, 1-31. If you write your letter on the 12th, then follow up about five days later. Put a copy of the letter in the folder marked 17, so you can follow up on the 17th.