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How To Write A Cover Letter

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When a friend of mine – I’ll call her Carol – asked me to help with a job cover letter last weekend, I said sure, piece of cake. I write and edit for a living. How difficult could it be to fix a page of my friend’s prose?



Always personalize your letter and try to open with the name of a mutual contact.

Painfully difficult, it turns out. I spent hours sweating over Carol’s letter, and even then I didn’t feel I had cracked it. The first line stumped me, and still does. “I am very pleased to submit my application,” she began. That seemed awfully stiff, and besides, the company she was addressing would be lucky to hire her. But my alternative was too informal, and possibly overconfident: “I would be thrilled to become . . .”

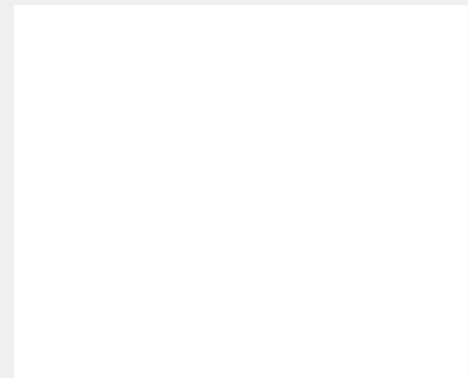
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For help, I combed through the web and turned to three of my job coach sources. I found lots of horribly written letters (“As a highly skilled sales manager with proven experience . . .”) and some difference of opinion. My conclusion: Cover letters make a difference, even short ones. Don’t ever send a boilerplate “Enclosed please find résumé” note. Do tell a story and even crack a joke if you can. Always mention mutual contacts, and make sure you proofread carefully. Even though today’s cover letter is always an e-mail with a résumé attached, as opposed to a hard copy sent by snail mail, do err on the side of a more formal prose style, avoiding common e-mail abbreviations like “u” instead of “you.”

[In Pictures: How To Write A Cover Letter](#)

That said, New York City job coach Roy Cohen, author of *The Wall Street Professional’s Survival Guide*, and Marcie Schorr Hirsch, of Hirsch/Hills Consulting, in Newton Centre, Mass., both favor short letters of less than a page. The two agree that the larger the company, the less important the letter. “A brilliant letter that’s a response to a job posting may not make a difference,” Cohen says. “In an overburdened workplace, it’s less likely that that letter will get a lot of attention.”

Hirsch and Cohen both like letters that start by spelling out what job you’re trying to get, including the name of the company, followed by a summary of your career, a list of your relevant accomplishments and then a last line that requests a meeting and says when you plan to get in touch. “Wall Street has a short attention span,” says Cohen. “Simple is the way to go.”

Still, it’s tough to write a great opening line, even in a short letter. The magic bullet: Naming someone you know in common: “Carol McGillicutty recommended I get in touch about the sales manager job at Adams & Co.”

But what do you say if you can’t say that?

In search of great prose ideas, I tried the writing guru William Zinsser, former master at Yale’s Branford College and author of the much-read book *On Writing Well*. Zinsser’s first response: “I think the business world is so uptight and so competitive, they might not want any of the kind of humanity I’m proposing.” Zinsser doesn’t like my “thrilled” opening line at all. “It’s kind of a false ingratiation,” he points out. “I think storytelling is good,” he suggests. “If you have some anecdote—’An uncle of mine once said,’” he suggests. Or, “One reason I want to work for you is I always remember something my father told me.”

My conclusion: Zinsser is right that storytelling is a great tactic in a cover letter. But it’s also a tall order for most of us.

Instead, I’d recommend either the short, succinct approach proposed by Hirsch and Cohen or the four-paragraph format suggested by Kate Wendleton, founder and president of the Five O’Clock Club, a 32-year-old national career coaching organization based in New York:

The first paragraph lays out the specific job you want and, in the best case, names a mutual acquaintance. If you’re approaching the person out of the blue, take a look at this [piece](#) I wrote on direct contacts. You might

How To Write A Cover Letter



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ABOUT ME

Since Forbes hired me in 1995 to write a legal column, I’ve taken advantage of the great freedom the magazine grants its staff, to pursue stories about everything from books to billionaires. I’ve chased South Africa’s first black billionaire through a Cape Town shopping mall while admirers flocked around him, climbed inside the hidden chamber in the home of an antiquarian arms and armor dealer atop San Francisco’s Telegraph Hill, and sipped Chateau Latour with one of Picasso’s grandsons in the Venice art museum of French tycoon François Pinault. I’ve edited the magazine’s Lifestyle section and opinion pieces by the likes of John Bogle and Gordon Bethune. As deputy leadership editor, these days I mostly write about careers and corporate social responsibility. I got my job at Forbes through a brilliant libertarian economist, Susan Lee, whom I used to put on television at MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour. Before that I covered law and lawyers for journalistic stickler, harsh taskmaster and the best teacher a young reporter could have had, Steven Brill. [See my profile »](#)

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say you've been following the person's career for a long time, or you recently read about her in *Forbes*, and then say why you want to pursue a position at the company.

In the next paragraph, write a short summary of your career, tailored to fit the company you're approaching. In the third paragraph, lay out several specific accomplishments that are relevant to the prospective job. Wendleton likes to do this in bullet form. Put your most impressive accomplishment first, she emphasizes. In the fourth paragraph, say when you'll be getting in touch.

My attempt to help Carol happened before I researched this article, and I'm happy to say we did most of what Wendleton recommends, though we didn't use bullets.

Carol herself has hired a number of people over the years, and she has some recommendations: Don't say you'd make a perfect member of the team, unless you can back that up with specific achievements. Keep the superlative adjectives to a minimum. Do tailor your letter to the position, but don't copy the exact wording. "I hate it when people say 'I'd love to' and then cut and paste a line from the job description," she says.

I'll conclude with two cover letter examples. The first one I found on a *Harvard Business Review* [blog](#) written by someone named David Silverman, who teaches business writing. It's quite short, and it doesn't spell out specific accomplishments, but I think the format is sound, the prose flows nicely, and it refers the reader to the résumé, which presumably lists relevant achievements. Though I'd delete the "I've attached my résumé for your review" phrase; the recipient will see the attachment and doesn't need to be told:

I am writing in response to the opening for xxxx, which I believe may report to you.

I can offer you seven years of experience managing communications for top-tier xxxx firms, excellent project-management skills, and a great eye for detail, all of which should make me an ideal candidate for this opening.

I have attached my résumé for your review and would welcome the chance to speak with you sometime."

Finally, here's a sample letter provided by Wendleton. I find the prose a little formulaic, but the structure seems good. Also, I'd keep it to four paragraphs, which would mean deleting everything after the last bullet, and ending with, "I'll call in a few days to see if we can find a time to meet."

Rachel Tepfer suggested I get in touch with you.

I am a seasoned financial services marketer at SanguineBank with a strong packaged goods background and extensive experience in product development and merchandising, branch management, electronic banking, and innovative distribution planning.

- I created the SanguineBank Investment Portfolio, the bank's first

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complete presentation of its retail savings and investment products, and developed successful ways to sell the SanguineDip account in the retail setting.

- As an Area Director in the New York retail bank, I doubled branch balances in mid-Manhattan in only three years.
- Most recently, I have been developing a set of PC-based fund-transfer products for SanguineBank's Financial Institutions Group.
- Prior to SanguineBank, I rebuilt the baby shampoo division for Johnson & Johnson and managed all bar-soap marketing at Lever Brothers.

A résumé is enclosed for additional background.

I am seeking to move to a new assignment that would take full advantage of my consumer financial services marketing experience, and am extending my search outside of SanguineBank as well as inside. Rachel thought it would be worthwhile for us to meet briefly. I'll call in a few days to set up a mutually convenient time for us to meet.

I'm looking forward to meeting with you.

[In Pictures: How To Write A Cover Letter](#)

Do you have a suggestion for a great opening cover letter line, or a fabulous sample letter? Please comment, or email me at sadams@forbes.com.

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