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Quick! Take Cover!

A cover letter is your best ticket to a great job--if you know how to write a good one!

Imagine this scenario for a moment: Your front doorbell rings. When you open the door, and before you can say a word, an earnest looking young woman begins to tell you all about her educational experience, past job history, and salary requirements. Would you be confused about why this woman was here? What job was she talking about? Your parents did have an ad in the paper for someone to do yard work, and another for a math tutor for your younger sister, but which job is she applying for?

Sound a little confusing? For many employers, this is just what they have to go through on a daily basis when they place a job ad. Envelopes full of resumes quickly begin to fill their mailbox, and knowing which resume is geared to which job can be more than a little overwhelming. Too many times, it's easiest to ignore the pile or, even worse, toss it all in the wastebasket.

The key to appealing to a prospective employer, of course, is to make some kind of introduction first. If the young woman above had started with a simple, "Hello. My name is Amy, and I am here about the

tutoring job," you wouldn't have been so puzzled. The same is true with resumes that are mailed out. Every resume needs a cover letter with it, whether it was personally requested or is just in response to a general ad. That cover letter gives the reader--often-times the same person who is doing the hiring--an opportunity to learn about who you are, what you know, and why you're applying. Cover letters take the guesswork out of your application, and that will give you an immediate advantage over those resumes that arrive without any explanation.

Make the Right Impression

A cover letter is your first chance to make that essential good first impression on an employer. If your letter contains misspelled words, typos, and grammatical errors, it is likely to go directly into the wastebasket. Realize that employers don't have time to wade through your mistakes, and they certainly aren't eager to work with someone who is careless. Use high-quality paper, just as with your resume, and keep to a traditional type style like Times Roman or Garamond in a 12-point size.

Do Your Homework

Before you even put your fingers on your computer keyboard, however, do some research. Learn about the company. What are their products? What articles about them are in the local newspaper or on the Internet? What impact do they have on your community?

Learn who works in the personnel department. Who is doing the hiring for this job? If you can get the person's name, rather than just sending it to a generic "To Whom It May Concern" or "Dear Sir or Madam," you will make a stronger impression. Naturally, you need to spell the name correctly, too. If you don't know the person's name, call the company and ask, or look on the Internet and see if their officers are listed. If you can't determine the person's name, however, at least get the right department.

Read over the requirements of the job one more time before responding, and make sure that you meet them reasonably well. It's a waste of everyone's time to apply for a job that requires knowledge or skills that you don't have.

Learn the Formula

There is a definite format to follow with the cover letter, no matter what the job, so use it as your model. Remember to write things properly and clearly. Everything should fit on one page.

Your name

Your address

Your phone number

Today's date

Contact's name

Contact's title

Company name

Company address

Dear --:

Paragraph one is for you to introduce yourself and to say why you are writing. Name the specific job you are interested in. Tell how you learned about this opening. If someone referred you to it, mention him or her by name. Exhibit some knowledge of the business.

Paragraphs two and three are for you to "sell" yourself. Be brief. Be positive, but be honest also. Discuss your education and experience as they apply to the job. Briefly discuss your strengths and how you meet the job's requirements. Your resume can provide further details.

Paragraph four is where you wrap it all up. State that you will be calling in one or two weeks to check on the status of your application. This is stronger than saying you will wait to hear from them, but not as overbearing as saying you expect to have an answer within the week. Be sure to thank the person for his or her time and consideration, and end with the fact that you will be looking forward to a response.

Sincerely,

Your signature

Your name

Enc: This is for any enclosures you send along with your letter, such as your résumé, writing samples, letters of recommendation, and so forth.

The cover letter is a terrific tool for impressing a potential employer. Be sure you know what to include and what mistakes to avoid. Your cover letter can pave the way to getting that all-important interview. Use it to put your best foot forward.

What's Wrong with This Letter?

Read over the following cover letter and see if you can figure out what needs to be fixed or changed. What advice would you give Ulysses about reworking his letter?

Ulysses Unemployed

7052 Ashland St.

Golden, IA 50518

(291) 555-5590

Thursday

Manager

Used car place on 32nd and Vine

Hey there.

I saw that job you had listed in the newspaper this weekend and so I am sending you a resume. I am the perfect person for this job--you can just ask my mom or my friend Phil. They know that I am the best guy to fix whatever's wrong with a car engine.

I've taken some mechanics classes for a couple of years and I really know my way on engines, unless they are foreign. I worked for Carl's Cars for three months but it was getting pretty boring just doing oil changes, so I left. I am almost always on time and I only need an hour for lunch, most days. I expect to be paid weekly, though and I want more than I made at Carl's.

I figure you should know if you want me or not by the end of the week, so I will stop by and talk with you. Thanks for reading this.

Bye,
Ulysses
P.S. The resume is in here too.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Joseph P. Brown

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By Tamra B. Orr

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