

A COVER LETTER IN FOUR EASY STEPS

By Kevin Donlin

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Writing a cover letter is a difficult task for many job seekers.

Are you struggling to put one together? Keep this in mind -- your cover letter is one long answer to this question: Why should I read your resume and call you for an interview?

Here are four ways to answer that question and get called for an interview.

1) Build rapport.

Cover letters are read by people, so address yours to a person. NEVER start your cover letter with such clichés as Dear Sir or Madam or To whom it may concern.

Take that extra two minutes to call the employer and get the recipient's name. Ask the receptionist, I'm writing a letter to the person who manages (your target department). May I have the correct spelling please? This will set you apart from most applicants. If that fails, begin your letter with, Dear Employer. It sounds confident and will stand out.

2) Avoid stating the obvious.

We know you're a quick learner, honest and hard-working. So are the other 500 applicants who want this job. Don't waste precious space in your cover letter saying so. Instead, use the cover letter to display your knowledge of the company, the industry and even to share specific recommendations you have for problems or opportunities you've researched.

Example: With 10 years of retail management experience and a record of rapid advancement, I have found at least three ways to increase sales at your Edina, MN location by \$250,000 -- or more -- this year. May I discuss them with you?

3) Stick to one page in length.

Doing this proves you can prioritize your thoughts and present them concisely -- both admirable qualities. Also, it shows respect for your busy reader, who may have hundreds more cover letters and resumes to wade through.

The cover letters I write for clients have an opening paragraph, three or four fact-filled bullet points to build the reader's interest, and a closing paragraph. This usually comes out to five or six paragraphs that never exceed one page.

4) Get input from friends ... and strangers.

When you finish your one-page masterpiece, give it to three friends and ask for their first impressions and overall opinion. Their advice is important.

Then, ask your friends to show it to three people you don't know. The feedback you get from these strangers will be as important or more so, since they won't be concerned about hurting your feelings.

Kevin Donlin owns Minnesota based Guaranteed Resumes and writes a by-weekly column providing job searching and resume writing advice.

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