

COVER LETTER STRATEGIES

The Purpose and Intention of a Cover Letter

The role of the cover letter is to help the reader understand the resume (the letter “covers” the resume). Your purpose and intention when writing the cover letter is to:

- ❖ Prime the reader’s brain to understand what they are about to read in the resume
- ❖ Tell the reader something they can’t discover by just looking at your resume
- ❖ Tease the resume. It should make them want to read through the resume

Let’s address the question: **Do recruiters read cover letters?**

They do if it appears “welcoming”. Recruiters generally scan the resume headlines first before reading the cover letter - this why the cover letter needs to be visually inviting (see rule 3 below). If it looks dense and packed, they may not read it at all.

If companies don’t ask for a cover letter and don’t create a space for an upload then they don’t read them. This is true of places such like Google. If a cover letter is optional, you are making a pivot, and it doesn’t take two hours to write, then write one.

There are three basic rules to remember before starting to write your letter.

Rule #1 *The cover letter is never by itself; that is, it’s always paired with your resume. The letter “covers” your resume*

The implication of this rule is that if you repeat your bullets on your resume then you’re wasting valuable real estate that could be used to “cover” elements about your past, present and future that cannot be communicated with the resume. The cover letter is an opportunity (additional real estate) to communicate additional relevant information about your candidacy.

Rule #2 *Be Intentional*

If you know what you want to specifically communicate and why, writing a cover letter becomes easier. They should take 30 minutes or less, although the first few will likely take longer as you practice. Most start writing a cover letter with only a vague idea of what they want to communicate (I want to highlight my skills) or too broad of a goal (I want to work here). These vague ideas typically show up in a letter that is unfocused or is essentially a long list of things (generally repeating the resume) - thereby trying to “win” through volume (the ‘more is better’ strategy)

Rule #3 *Make it Readable and Inviting*

Hold your cover letter at arms length. Visually, does it feel like something you would want to? If the letter is dense and long, would you read it?

Does the letter have lots of sentences with long lists? Does it have too many technical terms that you stumble over and have to stop and reread or just ignore?

Is every sentence overloaded with too many adjectives and adverbs? If there are adverbs and adjectives on every noun or verb, the sentences become difficult to read and it’s harder for the reader to understand what the take away is.

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WHICH
COVER
LETTER IS
MORE
INVITING TO
READ?

Rule #3 Make it Inviting and Readable

Remember the cover letter is a demonstration of your ability to write in a business context.

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THE FORMAT

There are two basic formats to use for a cover letter - narrative and bullet. In either case, your cover letter should be no longer than three to four paragraphs (more is not better).

Your cover letter demonstrates your ability to write and communicate in a business manner - be direct and succinct.

- ➔ Good writing practices apply. It is not a scientific paper - that is, tell me what you are about to tell me and then illustrate it. Scientific papers lay out the evidence piece by piece and then draw a conclusion at the end. This approach increases the odds that the reader gives up because they don't know where you are going with it.
- ➔ Readability is key. Too much technical language or lingo/jargon distracts the reader from what you are trying to say. It also demonstrates an inability to communicate clearly and confidently. A recent study found that the *overuse* of lingo/jargon led the audience to believe the speaker to be less confident.

Two Basic Formats

Both formats - narrative and bullet - really impact the middle paragraph(s). The first and last paragraphs are generally the same for either format.

Narrative

The narrative format is useful to communicate your key message in a story format, especially if the message occurs in a singular experience or sequentially over time.

for example, if you are applying to consulting and one of your experiences is analogous to the consulting experience, then a single narrative around that experience makes sense. It's the 'Analogous' story or 'I've done this before!' story.

or for example, if you are trying to communicate why your motivation or connection to purpose or mission is meaningful, and it stemmed from a memorable personal experience, then a narrative format makes sense. I call this the 'Realization' or 'A-Ha' story.

or for example, your key message occurred sequentially over time in a logical fashion then the narrative format makes sense. Such as gluing together disparate moments over time, 'the Bread Crumb' or 'Upon reflection ...' story that concludes with the message you want to communicate.

Bullet Point

The bullet point format is useful to communicate your key message that occurs across multiple experiences - such as growth or reputation. The bullets tend to be more focused on technical skills, however, adaptive (leadership) skills can also be communicated. The bullet point format almost always takes the reader out of a narrative.

for example, If you've had impact using some key skills but they occurred over different experiences/roles, then using a narrative format will feel disjointed, so bullets make it easier for the reader to comprehend

or for example, you want to communicate a skill that you've continued to develop over time, showing the increasing impact you've had with this skill (the "road to mastery" story).

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NARRATIVE FORMAT

BULLET POINT FORMAT

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THE STRATEGY

Your strategy generally anchors on *how do you want to make use of your middle paragraph(s)*? This is how to think about it: What does your resume already cover? What is hard to see from your resume? What knowledge about you do you want to convey that is hard to see from the resume?

For example, if you are making a pivot from financial analyst to consulting, they are going to know that you have numerical and analytical skills. If you've constructed your resume bullets properly they are going to understand you've used those skills to have impact. So what do you want to communicate? Perhaps what's missing and hard to convey is your ability to manage an ambiguous project or a project that involved working with a difficult clients.

Thinking this through is part of *Rule #2 - Be Intentional*. Remember *Rule #1 - Your Cover Letter is paired with your Resume*, so when you think about your cover letter, think if you want your middle paragraph to be complementary (reinforce/highlight) or supplementary (add) to your resume content. Here are some ways to think about it:

Pivoting to Different/Non-Adjacent Roles (complementary strategy)

Your strategy might be to emphasize your transferable skills and not that you just have them, but that you've used them in a context that is similar to the role/organization that you are applying for. For example, your resume indicates you have teaming skills and your CL second paragraph highlights them being used in a turnaround situation; the same situation your target organization might be going through.

Same/Similar Role, Different Industries (supplementary strategy)

If you are pivoting industries and your prior role is the same or closely adjacent to the role you are going after, then instead of focusing on telling them you have these skills (as it'll be apparent from the resume), you might want to focus on another element to demonstrate - "Fit". Such as:

- Culture (your "how") - Illustrate your "how" in action to show culture fit and impact, such as leadership style
- Superior motivation - At this moment, why is this your purpose? Illustrating where your motivation comes from and how creates outsized impacts - qualities such as persistence, resiliency, dedication or patience can help you go that extra kilometer.
- "Cross-industry" innovation or unique transferable experience - what ideas and experiences from your prior roles can you bring to them?
- An idea or vision for the future that might interest them.

Remember, your resume will communicate your accomplishments in the role, so what else can you offer them?

A Non-Traditional Role or Unique Situation in a Role

Use the second paragraph to bring clarity to a role or situation the reader may not be aware of. For example, in start-ups or small organizations, your actual responsibilities/role may not be well represented by your title. Your second paragraph can highlight these "hidden" or unique situations. This may take a narrative form if there is a canonical project you worked on. Or this may be in bullet form if the uniqueness of the situation took place over several projects.

THE STRUCTURE

Here is an overall structure for the letter itself.

Paragraph ONE: communicate the basics

- ✓ Who are you?
- ✓ What do you want?
- ✓ Why them, specifically and with evidence
- ✓ Why you, specifically? (this last line is a tease to paragraph two)

TIP: Don't spend a lot of valuable space describing the company to themselves. For example, You don't need to say, "Amazon is the largest retailer in the world and you have changed the way consumers buy products and continue to innovate; And that is the impact I want to be a part of ..." The majority of that sentence is about them and less about you.

Paragraph TWO: your main theme (Narrative or Bullet Format)

- ✓ The main message you want to communicate to the reader. Be specific. What is your Strategy? Your strategy will determine what you intend to communicate.

TIP: This is the paragraph, where when we forget our intention, things can get long as we try to cram everything into it. Usually it shows up in the form of creating long lists of tasks, departments we've worked with, etc., ...(keep lists to max three items or use ranges, for example, "from engineering to the c-suite"). Also using a lot of lingo and technical jargon can increase the length of your paragraphs. Keep adjective and adverb use to a minimum.

Paragraph THREE (if you need it)

Usually this is a short paragraph to highlight an additional element of interest to the organization and it can also be used to tease the resume. Don't use it for the sake of having more - it's not a "win" by volume game. Most people use the third paragraph to summarize and tease the resume. "As you'll see on my resume ..."

LAST Paragraph - bookend tease (additional reasons)

- ✓ Another reason why them - again specifically. You get to mention an additional reason why them.
- ✓ Another reason why you - use this line to tease the resume and highlight a theme in your resume. Such as a history of working entrepreneurial in resource starved organizations, or the ability to lead innovation in large bureaucracies, or immediate impacts in pivots, or the fierce dedication to customers, etc., ... Prime the reader's brain to read that resume.
- ✓ Next steps and the "The Closing" graces. Thanks and the "looking forward to next steps" lines.