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How to write a cover letter people will actually read

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This article is part of a series aimed at helping you navigate life's opportunities and challenges. What else should we write about? Contact us: smarterliving@nytimes.com.

You're probably not the only one applying for that job.

That might seem obvious, but too many cover letters are written in a robotic style that leave little impression on hiring managers who are sifting through vast piles of applications, according to career counselors. The cover letter is your chance — most likely your only one — to stand out from many other candidates who have similar résumés.

Don't botch it. Despite the high stakes, a lot of job-seekers treat the cover letter like a formality, putting little thought and few personal flourishes into it.

"A cover letter can make the difference between two equally qualified candidates," said John O'Neill, the assistant dean of career education for Stanford University.

While every industry and hiring manager is different, here are some tricks to increase your chances of scoring an interview.

Don't stick to a template

You could easily Google "cover letter template" to get some ideas on how to write it. Don't.

"You need to think about your audience," said Kristen Fitzpatrick, the managing director of career and professional development at Harvard Business School. "Who's reading it? How do you capture their attention enough so they move you from one pile to another?"

This is your time to show your communication skills and your personality. You must make the case that the other 99 percent of applicants don't have what you have. Following a template, or otherwise putting little effort into making your letter stand out, suggests you're just another applicant.

Don't rehash your résumé

Focus on the organization you're writing to and the job description of the open position. If you nail your cover letter, the hiring manager will end up reading your résumé anyway, so don't waste precious space duplicating it by going down the list of where you've worked.

"It's to complement your résumé, not repeat it," Mr. O'Neill said. "Cover letters where you're just rewriting the content of your résumé aren't effective."

Instead, you could list some specific examples of projects you've worked on, and explain what you learned from them and how that knowledge would apply to the open position. Or you could offer some new ideas, showing

from the start that you understand the company's goals and would bring creativity.

(Related: Getting past the first cut with a résumé that grabs digital eyes)

Don't state the obvious

Read your letter again, and zap any clichés or platitudes that don't say something meaningful about you, the position or the company.

As an example: Don't say you're a "hard worker." Everyone says that, and it would be easy to lie about if you weren't, making it a meaningless sentiment to include. It merely takes up space that could be better spent on something that actually sets you apart from the other candidates.

"It's not even worth saying," Ms. Fitzpatrick said. "You'll show you're a hard worker by going above and beyond in writing a letter."

Do your research

This requires going past the first page of Google results.

You could go to a library to sift through professional databases that might have more information, or get coffee with someone who works at the company you're applying to. Show a familiarity with recent projects, acquisitions and public statements. It doesn't have to be a lot, but a few sentences to show you've put time into it could go a long way.

If you're not preparing for something as crucial as a cover letter, why would they trust you would prepare for an important meeting?

Focus on what you can offer them

A lot of applicants spend too much time talking about why they love the company, Ms. Fitzpatrick said.

"How many letters does Apple read that say, 'I couldn't live without my iPhone'? Probably a lot," she said. "So you want to show you are unique and you've done your research."

You do want to make it clear that you respect the company and explain why you're interested, but the focus should be on what you can do for them.

"You want to avoid too many 'I' statements — 'I know this,' 'I did this,' 'I can do X, Y or Z' — because that's too much about what you're going to get out of this opportunity," Mr. O'Neill said.

The company isn't posting a job for charity, or to improve your life; they're trying to fill a position they consider essential. Convince them that you're the one who would most help them, not that you'd benefit most from it.

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