

# Cover Letters That Sell

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John and Linda applied for the same job. They were equally qualified and each submitted an excellent resume that emphasized their accomplishments, education and training, and positive work ethic.

John included a general cover letter that outlined his career history and aspirations. He used the same letter to apply for every job opening he looked at. Linda put more effort into her letter. She found out the recruitment manager's name and addressed him directly and she researched the company to learn about its mission, past performance, goals and corporate culture. She studied the job description and spelled out how she was an excellent match for the advertised position. She backed up her claims with examples of her past successful experience. Linda's extra effort landed her a job interview. John did not receive a phone call.

The cover letter is the first document a recruitment manager will look at. He or she will then read your resume. Make the most of this opportunity to present yourself on paper.

- **Do Your Research**

The more you know about the employer's needs, the more compelling your letter can be. Review company websites, brochures, sales flyers and other promotional materials to obtain pertinent information. If possible, speak with current employees to get the inside scoop. Search newspaper archives, public libraries and career-centre resources. Do a keyword search using the company name and see what you can find. This information will also be useful in a subsequent interview for the position.

- **Determine Your Unique Selling Points**

With the knowledge that you have about the employer, how would you help achieve the company's organizational goals? Set yourself apart. If there are 100 other applicants vying for the same position, why should the recruitment manager select you? Write a list of the top five reasons why you're an excellent candidate.

- **Construct Your Letter**

Heading/Date/Inside Address:

If you are writing a traditional letter to be sent by post, select a standard business-letter format such as block style. Your letter's design should match your resume. Use the same font and font size in both documents.

- **Salutation**

It's best to address your letter to a specific person (e.g., "Dear Ms Jones,"), but use "Dear Recruitment Manager," if there's no way to find out the person's name. Avoid outdated salutations such as "Dear Sir/Madam," and "To Whom it May Concern,".

- **Opening Paragraph**

Recruitment managers are busy and do not wish to wade through a mass of text. Your opening paragraph should clearly state the position for which you're applying. Include the reference number of the position and the referral source (eg. The Australian, The Canberra Times, the University of Canberra's Careers website).

Your opening can include a synopsis of why you are a top candidate for the position, eg:

"Your position advertised on Monster is an excellent fit with my qualifications, as the enclosed resume shows. My background includes two years' work managing international sales programs, particularly with the Asia Pacific region. I offer excellent experience in the IT sector, with in-depth knowledge of networking technology..."

- **Body of Letter**

The body of your letter contains your 'sales pitch'. This is your chance to outline the reasons why you're worthy of an interview. Keep in mind that recruitment managers are self-centred -- they want to know what you can do for them and the company, not learn about your life story. Show how your credentials, motivation and work record would benefit their operation. Review your top five selling factors (the ones you jotted down when doing your company research) and weave them into the body of the text.

Back up your achievements with specific examples of how your performance benefited current and former employers. Precede your bulleted list with a statement such as "Highlights of my credentials include:" or "Key strengths I offer include:."

The tone of your letter should be pleasant, professional and realistic. Beware of making claims for yourself that you will not be able to substantiate in your resume or at an interview. Make sure your statements relate to your professional life and do not include self-praise at the personal level. Leave words like 'fantastic', 'incredible' and 'superb' out of your letter.

Keep your letter positive and confident. Put yourself in the recruitment manager's shoes -- would you call yourself in for an interview?

- **Closing Paragraph**

Your final paragraph should generate a call for action, so express your strong interest in an interview and say that you look forward to the opportunity of meeting face-to-face.

- **Complimentary Close and Your Name**

End with a professional close such as "Best regards," "Yours sincerely" or "Respectfully yours."