

General Writing Guidelines

Writing an excellent application message may be the most difficult message you ever attempt to write. The key to success is to avoid standard verbiage and make sure that your self-marketing connects *your* experiences to your future with a specific company and reflects *your* personality and values. The following writing techniques will help you craft an original and impressive message that distinguishes your application message from the competition:

- **Substitute fresh, original expressions that reflect contemporary language.** Overly casual expressions and overused statements will give your message a dull, unimaginative tone that may be perceived as disrespectful. Obvious ideas such as “This is an application,” “I read your ad,” and “I am writing to apply for,” are sufficiently understood without making direct statements. With the application message and résumé in hand, a reader learns nothing from “I am enclosing my résumé for your review.” Observe caution in choosing overused words such as *applicant*, *application*, *opening*, *position*, *vacancy*, and *interview*.
- **Avoid overuse of “I” and writer-focused statements.** Because the message is designed to sell your services, some use of “I” is natural and expected; but restrict the number of times “I” is used, especially as the first word in a paragraph. Focus on providing specific evidence that you can meet the company’s needs. The employer is not interested in reading about your need to earn more income, to be closer to your work, to have more pleasant surroundings, or to gain greater advancement opportunities.
- **Avoid unconvincing generalizations that may sound boastful.** Self-confidence is commendable, but overconfidence (or worse still, just plain bragging) is objectionable. Overly strong adjectives, self-judgmental terms, and unsupported generalizations damage your credibility. Instead of labeling your performance as “superior” or “excellent,” or describing yourself as “an efficient, technically skilled team player” give supporting facts that show the interviewer you can deliver on what you’re selling.
- **Tailor the message to the employer’s need.** To impress the interviewer that your message is not a generic one sent to everyone, provide requested information and communicate an understanding of the particular company, job requirements, and field.
- **Provide requested information.** Job listings often request certain information: “Must provide own transportation and be willing to travel. Give educational background, work experience, and salary expected.” Discuss these points in your application message. Preferably, the question of salary is left until the

interview, allowing you to focus your message on your contributions to the company—not what you want from the company (money). Discussion of salary isn’t meaningful until after a mutually successful interview; however, if an ad requests a statement about it, the message should address it. You may give a minimum figure or range, indicate willingness to accept a figure that is customary for work of that type, or indicate a preference for discussing salary at the interview.

- **Communicate knowledge of the company, job requirements, and language of the field.** Your statements about a company’s rapid expansion or competitive advantage show you really are interested in the company, read widely, do more than you are required to do, gather information before making decisions, and so on. However, phrase these statements carefully to avoid the perception of insincere flattery. For example, referring to the employer as “*the* leader in the field,” “*the* best in the business,” or “a great company” may appear as an attempt to get a favorable decision as a reward for making a complimentary statement. To reflect your understanding of the job requirements, use indirect statements that are informative and tactful. Direct statements such as “The requirements of this job are . . .” presents information the employer presumes you already know; “An auditor should be able to . . .” and “Sales personnel should avoid . . .” sound like a lecture and may be perceived as condescending. Discussing experiences related to a specific job requirement or your preference for work that requires this skill reveals your understanding without a direct statement. Including terminology commonly used by the profession allows you to communicate clearly in terms the reader understands; it also saves space and implies your background in the field.
- **Focus on strengths and portray a positive attitude.** Concentrate on the positive aspects of your education or experience that have prepared you for the particular job. Apologizing for a shortcoming or admitting failure only weakens your case and raises questions about your self-esteem. Do not discuss your current employer’s shortcomings. Regardless of how negatively you perceive your present employer, that perception has little to do with your prospective employer’s needs. Also, if you speak negatively of your present employer, you could be perceived as someone who would do the same to the next employer.

Finishing Touches

The importance of professional formatting and careful proofreading of a print document is generally understood. However, proofing and formatting a “real” résumé and

letter appears more important to some applicants than producing quality email submissions. Employers frequently voice concern with the sloppiness and unprofessional appearance and content of electronic submissions. To survive the skeptical eye of an interviewer scanning for ways to reject an applicant, allow yourself time to produce a professional-looking document regardless of the presentation or delivery option you've chosen. Include these steps in your finishing phase:

- Regardless of your delivery option, address your application letter or email message to the specific individual who is responsible for hiring for the position you are seeking rather than sending the document to the "Human Resources Department" or "To Whom It May Concern." If necessary, consult the company's annual report or website, or call the company to locate this information.
- Verify the correct spelling, job title, and address, and send a personalized message to the appropriate individual.
- Keep the message short and easy to read. A one-page letter is sufficient for most applications but especially for students and graduates entering the job market.

- Apply visual enhancements learned previously to enhance the appeal and readability of the message and to draw attention to your strengths.
- Definitely keep the paragraphs short and consider listing your top four or five achievements or other important ideas in a bulleted list.
- Use paper that matches the résumé (color, weight, texture, and size). The watermark should be readable across the sheet in the same direction as the printing. Since you're using plain paper, include your street address and city, state, and ZIP Code above the date or formatted as a letterhead at the top of the page.
- Include "Enclosure" below the signature block to alert the employer that a résumé is enclosed. The proper letter format is shown in the example in Figure 14-7.
- Get opinions from others and make revisions where necessary.

When preparing an application message for email submission, career experts recommend formatting it as a business letter with the complete address of the company exactly as presented in a letter sent by mail. To compete with the high volumes of junk mail, daily mes-

Keep all your job application materials polished and professional, and remember that presentation (like with a gift) matters.



© Porchai Mittonglare/Botanical/Jupiterimages



Example of an Application Letter

Example 13.8

Jeanne Fulton | 89 Lincoln Street | San Antonio, TX 78285-9063

October 15, 2008

Mr. Paul Horne, Partner
Brown & Donavon, CPAs
1000 Plaza Court
Austin, TX 78710-1000
Dear Mr. Horne:

Dr. Lindsay, an accounting professor at Sam Houston State University, told me that Brown & Donavon has an auditing position available. A systems emphasis in my masters degree and related work experience qualify me for this auditing position.

Because of my interest in fraud, I enhanced my credentials with an emphasis in forensic accounting. Courses in fraud examination and criminology have given me the skills to extract data from ERP systems and detect evidence of fraud using ACL, Excel, and Access. Unstructured, often ambiguous problems that require creative solutions are among my favorite assignments.

My internship at Smith & Lewis has prepared me for audit assignments in your firm:

- Firsthand interaction with practicing auditors, often working long, irregular hours and assisting them at client locations.
- A proven ability to work effectively as a member of an audit team, building trust and credibility with clients and a diverse staff.
- Performance ratings were excellent with commendations for superior technical proficiency and strong written and spoken communication skills.

Please review the enclosed résumé for additional information about my accounting education and related work experience. Work samples and further detail are available in my electronic portfolio at jfulton@netdoor.com. Please call or write so we can discuss my joining the audit staff at Brown & Donavon.

Sincerely,

Jeanne Fulton

Jeanne Fulton

Enclosure

- Addresses letter to specific person using correct name and job title.
- Reveals how applicant learned of position, identifies specific job sought, and introduces background.
- Discusses how education relates to job requirements.
- Uses bulleted list to highlight qualifications that correspond to job requirements.
- Introduces résumé and website for additional information.
- Encourages employer to take action without sounding pushy or apologetic.

Format Pointers

Formats as formal business letter since message is accompanying print résumé. Abbreviated email message followed by inline résumé in ASCII or RTF format would be appropriate for electronic submission.

Uses same high-quality paper as for résumé (neutral color, standard size); includes writer's address and contact information.