

13 Writing Job Application Letters

Chapter Outline

How Content Differs in Job Letters and Résumés

How to Find Out about Employers and Jobs

Tapping into the Hidden Job Market

- Information Interviews
- Referral Interviews

Content and Organization for Job Application Letters

- How to Organize Solicited Letters
- How to Organize Prospecting Letters
- First Paragraphs of Solicited Letters
- First Paragraphs of Prospecting Letters
- Showing a Knowledge of the Position and the Company
- Showing What Separates You from Other Applicants
- Writing the Last Paragraph

E-mail Application Letters

Creating a Professional Image

- Writing Style
- Positive Emphasis
- You-Attitude
- Paragraph Length and Unity
- Letter Length
- Editing and Proofreading
- Follow-Up

Application Essays

Social Networking and Personal Websites

Summary by Learning Objectives

NEWSWORTHY COMMUNICATION

Viral Cover Letters



College students who are seeking employment on Wall Street face a difficult path. With little or no experience, they have to rely on cover letters to set them apart. In letters that were widely forwarded among Wall Street executives, two college students tried different approaches.

Consider this excerpt from an "ambitious undergraduate at NYU": "I am unequivocally the most unflaggingly hard worker I know, and I love self-improvement. I have always felt that my time should be spent wisely,

so I continuously challenge myself; I left [my job] because the work was too easy. Once I realized I could achieve a perfect GPA while holding a part-time job at NYU, I decided to redouble my effort by placing out of two classes, taking two honors classes, and holding two part-time jobs. That semester I achieved a 3.93, and in the same time I managed to bench double my bodyweight and do 35 pull-ups."

Compare this excerpt from another student: "I am aware it is highly unusual for undergraduates

from average universities like [mine] to intern at [your company], but nevertheless I was hoping you might make an exception. I am extremely interested in investment banking and would love nothing more than to learn under your tutelage. I have no qualms about fetching coffee, shining shoes, or picking up laundry, and will work for next to nothing. In all honesty, I just want to be around professionals in the industry and gain as much knowledge as I can."

Which of these applicants would you hire?

Sources: Eric Platt, "Here's the Full Summer Analyst Application Cover Letter That Went Viral on Wall Street," *Business Insider*, February 8, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/heres-the-full-summer-analyst-application-cover-letter-that-went-viral-on-wall-street-2012-2>; and Maseena Ziegler, "Wall Street Bosses Are Calling This 'The Best Cover Letter Ever'—But Not Everyone Agrees," *Forbes*, January 16, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/maseenaborders/2013/01/16/wall-street-bosses-are-calling-this-the-best-cover-letter-ever-but-not-everyone-agrees/>.

Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will know how to

- LO 13-1** Find the information you need to write a good job letter to a specific employer.
- LO 13-2** Write a job letter that makes you look attractive to employers.
- LO 13-3** Use social networking and a personal website to create a virtual cover letter.

The purpose of a job application letter is to get an interview. If you get interviews arranged by your campus placement office or through contacts, you may not need to write a letter. Similarly, if you apply electronically through a company's website, a letter may not be part of the materials you submit. However, if you want to work for an organization that isn't interviewing on campus, or later when you change jobs, you may need a letter. A survey conducted by Robert Half International, the world's largest specialized staffing firm, found 86% of executives said cover letters were still valuable components of job applications in the electronic age.¹

The co-founder of one software firm says,

We ignore résumés. . . . Résumés reduce people to bullet points, and most people look pretty good as bullet points.

What we do look at are cover letters. Cover letters say it all. They immediately tell you if someone wants this job or just any job. And cover letters make something else very clear: They tell you who can and who can't write. . . . When in doubt, always hire the better writer.²

Job letters can play an important role in your personal branding (see pages 381–83). They can show your personality and, through careful reference to well-chosen details about the organization, interest in a particular job.

Job letters are frequently seen as evidence of your written communication skills, so you want to do your best work in them. Flaws in your letter may well be seen as predicting shoddy job performance in the future.

How Content Differs in Job Letters and Résumés

The job application letter accompanies your résumé and serves as its cover letter. Make the most of your letter; it is your chance to showcase the features that set you apart from the crowd. Here you bring to life the facts presented in your résumé; here you can show some personality (but don't overdo it). The cover letter is your opportunity to "sell" yourself into an interview.

Although résumés and job letters overlap somewhat, they differ in three important ways:

- The résumé summarizes *all* your qualifications. The letter expands your *best* qualifications to show how you can help the organization meet its needs, how you differ from other applicants, and how much knowledge of the organization you possess.

- The résumé avoids controversial material. The job letter can explain in a positive way situations such as career changes or gaps in employment history. If you have one of the difficulties described in Chapter 12, a cover letter may help you overcome it.
- The résumé uses short, parallel phrases and sentence fragments. The letter uses complete sentences in well-written paragraphs.

How to Find Out about Employers and Jobs LO 13-1

To adapt your letter to a specific organization, you need information both about the employer and about the job itself. You'll need to know

- **The name and address of the person who should receive the letter.** To get this information, check the ad, call the organization, check its website, or check with your job search contacts. An advantage of calling is that you can find out what courtesy title (Chapter 3) the individual prefers and get current information.
- **What the organization does, and some facts about it.** Knowing the organization's larger goals enables you to show how your specific work will help the company meet its goals. Useful facts can include market share, new products or promotions, the kind of computer or manufacturing equipment it uses, plans for growth or downsizing, competitive position, challenges the organization faces, and the corporate culture (Chapter 4).
- **What the job itself involves.** Campus placement offices and web listings often have fuller job descriptions than appear in ads. Talk to friends who have graduated recently to learn what their jobs involve. Conduct information interviews to learn more about opportunities that interest you.

The websites listed in Figure 13.1 provide a wide range of information. For instance, the *Forbes* and *Money* sites have good financial news stories; the Public Register (prars.com) is a good source for annual reports. As a consumer, you may have used the Better Business Bureau (bbb.org) site.

More specific information about companies can be found on their websites. To get specific financial data (and to see how the organization presents itself to the public), get the company's annual report from your library or the web. (Note: Only companies whose stock is publicly traded are required to

Multiple Career Changes



You will probably need a cover letter as you change careers during your lifetime. A study from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that young people hold an average of 11 jobs between the ages of 18 and 44. But what are these jobs? Are people changing careers?

The answer can be complex. If a worker takes a company promotion to move from being an active engineer to becoming a manager, is that a career change? Just a promotion? The work being done will certainly change. If someone laid off from her financial career takes a landscaping job for six months to pay bills before her next financial job comes along, is that a career change? Will it count as a double career change when she returns to finance?

One thing is certain: in a job market that is constantly shifting, having an up-to-date cover letter and résumé will prepare you for any sort of job change or promotion.

Adapted from U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Frequently Asked Questions: Does BLS Have Information on the Number of Times People Change Careers in their Lives?" National Longitudinal Surveys, last modified June 12, 2013, <http://www.bls.gov/nls/nlsfaqs.htm>; and U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Number of Jobs Held, Labor Market Activity, and Earnings Growth among the Youngest Baby Boomers: Results from a Longitudinal Survey," news release, July 25, 2012, USDL-12-1489, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/nlsy.pdf>.

Figure 13.1 Web Sources for Facts about Companies

Company Facts

<http://www.jobbankinfo.org>
<http://www.wetfeet.com>
<http://www.forbes.com>
<http://www.irin.com>
<http://www.corporateinformation.com>
<http://www.vault.com>
<http://www.stockmarketyellowpages.com>
<http://www.prars.com>
<http://money.cnn.com>
<http://www.inc.com/inc5000>

<http://www.bbb.org>
<http://legacy.www.nypl.org/research/sibl/company/c2index.htm>
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/BUSI>
<http://online.wsj.com/public/page/news-career-jobs.html>

Salary Calculators

<http://salaryexpert.com>
<http://www.indeed.com/salary>
<http://www.payscale.com>

Phantom Job Ads



Although most large companies have specific human resources policies that require formal job advertisements, many positions are filled before the ads are posted.

So who are the successful candidates? Nearly 80% of people who are hired are already inside the company or from the manager's professional network. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a job ad for a new head football coach was posted *after* the athletic director had contacted his top five candidates.

This practice irritates some HR departments, but for others, it is a relief. With hundreds of openings to fill, each phantom job ad means less work and lower costs for busy HR directors.

Adapted from Lauren Weber and Leslie Kwoh, "Beware the Phantom Job Listing," *Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2013, B1, B6.

issue annual reports. In this day of mergers and buyouts, many companies are owned by other companies. The parent company may be the only one to issue an annual report.) Recruiting notebooks at your campus placement office may provide information about training programs and career paths for new hires. Many companies also have this information on their websites. To learn about new products, plans for growth, or solutions to industry challenges, read business newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal*, business magazines such as *Fortune* or *Bloomberg Businessweek*, and trade journals.

Tapping into the Hidden Job Market

Many jobs are never advertised—and the number rises the higher on the job ladder you go. In fact, some authorities put the percentage of jobs that are not advertised as high as 80%.³ Many new jobs come not from responding to an ad but from networking with personal contacts. Some of these jobs are created especially for a specific person. These unadvertised jobs are called the **hidden job market**. Information and referral interviews are two organized methods of networking.

Information Interviews

In an **information interview** you talk to someone who works in the area you hope to enter to find out what the day-to-day work involves and how you can best prepare to enter that field. An information interview can let you know whether or not you'd like the job, give you specific information that you can use to present yourself effectively in your résumé and application letter, and create a good image of you in the mind of the interviewer. If you present yourself positively, the interviewer may remember you when openings arise.

In an information interview, you might ask the following questions:

- How did you get started in this field?
- What have you been working on today?
- How do you spend your typical day?
- Have your duties changed a lot since you first started working here?
- What do you like best about your job? What do you like least?
- What do you think the future holds for this kind of work?
- What courses, activities, or jobs would you recommend as preparation for this kind of work?

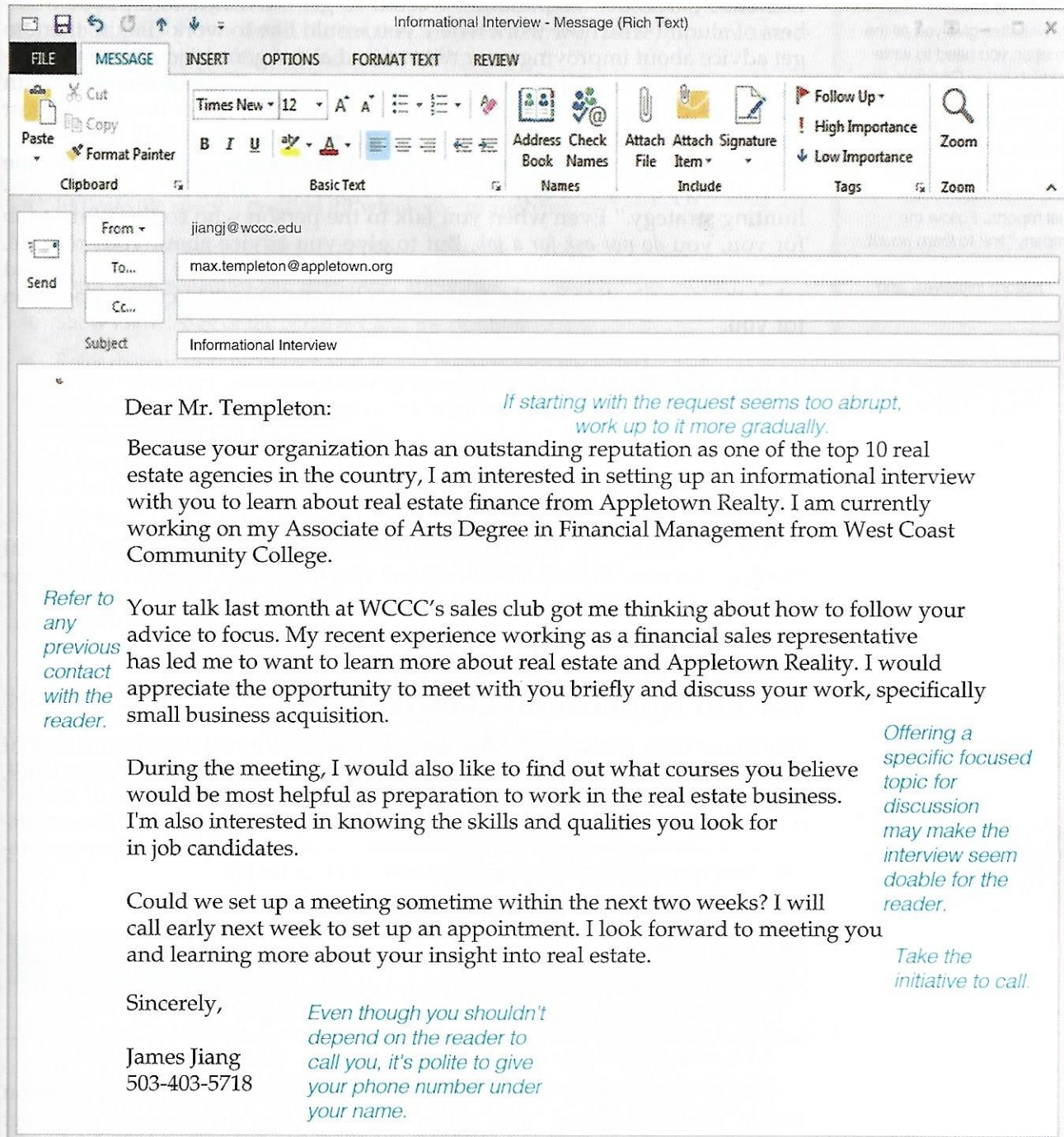
To set up an information interview, you can phone or write an e-mail like the one in Figure 13.2. If you do e-mail, phone the following week to set up a specific time.

Referral Interviews

Referral interviews are interviews you schedule to learn about current job opportunities in your field. Sometimes an interview that starts out as an information interview turns into a referral interview.

Figure 13.2

E-mail Requesting an Information Interview



A referral interview should give you information about the opportunities currently available in the area you're interested in, refer you to other people who can tell you about job opportunities, and enable the interviewer to see that you could make a contribution to his or her organization. Therefore, the goal of a referral interview is to put you face-to-face with someone who has the power to hire you: the president of a small company, the division vice president or branch manager of a big company, the director of the local office of a state or federal agency.

<http://www.google.com/about/>



Many websites give you all the information you need to write a good job letter. Google's About page, for example, has links to jobs, news, company information, and investor relations, where you will find financial information and annual reports. Follow the "Company" link to learn about topics such as Google's history, initiatives, and philosophy.

Start by scheduling interviews with people you know who may know something about that field—professors, co-workers, neighbors, friends, former classmates. Use your alumni website to get the names and phone numbers of alumni who now work where you would like to work. Talk to them to get advice about improving your résumé and about general job-hunting strategy, but also to get referrals to other people. In fact, go into the interview with the names of people you'd like to talk to. If the interviewer doesn't suggest anyone, say, "Do you think it would be a good idea for me to talk to —?"

Armed with a referral from someone you both know, you can call people with hiring power, and say, "So-and-so suggested I talk with you about job-hunting strategy." Even when you talk to the person who could create a job for you, you *do not ask for a job*. But to give you advice about your résumé, the person has to look at it. If there's a match between what you can do and what the organization needs, that person has the power to create a position for you.



WARNING: Many businesspeople are cynical about information and referral interviewing; they know the real purpose of such interviews, and they resent the time needed. Therefore you need to prepare carefully for these interviews.

Prepare a list of good questions; know something about the general field or industry; research the specific company.

Always follow up information and referral interviews with personal thank-you letters. Use specifics to show that you paid attention during the interview, and enclose a copy of your revised résumé.

Content and Organization for Job Application Letters LO 13-2

Job letters help show employers why they should interview you instead of other—sometimes hundreds of others—qualified applicants. In your letter, focus on

- Your qualifications to meet major requirements of the job.
- Points that separate you from other applicants.
- Points that show your knowledge of the organization.
- Qualities that every employer is likely to value: the ability to write and speak effectively, to solve problems, to work well with people.

Two different hiring situations call for two different kinds of application letters. Write a **solicited letter** when you know that the company is hiring: you've seen an ad, you've been advised to apply by a professor or friend, you've read in a trade publication that the company is expanding. This situation is similar to a direct request in persuasion (see Chapter 11): you can indicate immediately that you are applying for the position. Sometimes, however, the advertised positions may not be what you want, or you may want to work for an organization that has not announced openings in your area. Then you write a **prospecting letter**. (The metaphor is drawn from prospecting for gold.) The prospecting letter is like a problem-solving persuasive message (see Chapter 11).

Prospecting letters help you tap into the hidden job market. In some cases, your prospecting letter may arrive at a company that has decided to hire but has not yet announced the job. In other cases, companies create positions to get a good person who is on the market. Even in a hiring freeze, jobs are sometimes created for specific individuals.

In both solicited and prospecting letters you should

- Address the letter to a specific person (a must for a prospecting letter).
- Indicate the specific position for which you're applying.
- Be specific about your qualifications.
- Show what separates you from other applicants.
- Show knowledge of the company and the position.
- Refer to your résumé (which you would enclose with the letter).
- Ask for an interview.

The following discussion follows the job letter from beginning to end. The two kinds of letters are discussed separately where they differ and together where they are the same. Letters for internships follow the same patterns: use a solicited letter to apply for an internship that has been advertised and a prospecting letter to create an internship with a company that has not announced one.

How to Organize Solicited Letters

When you know the company is hiring, use the pattern of organization in Figure 13.3. A sample solicited letter for a graduating senior is shown in Figure 13.4. A solicited letter following up from a career fair and requesting an internship is shown in Figure 13.7. The job ad for the letter in Figure 13.4 is printed in Exercise 13.20.

Figure 13.3

How to Organize a Solicited Job Application Letter

1. State that you're applying for the job (phrase the job title as your source phrased it). Tell where you learned about the job (ad, referral, etc.). Include any reference number mentioned in the ad. Briefly show that you have the major qualifications required by the ad: a college degree, professional certification, job experience, etc. Summarize your other qualifications briefly in the same order in which you plan to discuss them in the letter.
2. Develop your major qualifications in detail. Be specific about what you've done; relate your achievements to the work you'd be doing in this new job.
3. Develop your other qualifications, even if the ad doesn't ask for them. Show what separates you from the other applicants who will also answer the ad. Demonstrate your knowledge of the organization.
4. Ask for an interview; tell when you'll be available to be interviewed and to begin work. Thank recipient for considering your application. End on a positive, forward-looking note.

Figure 13.4

A Solicited Letter from a Graduating Senior

Jeff Moeller

831.503.4692
 51 Willow Street
 San José, CA 95112
 jmoeller@csm.edu

April 4, 2014

Mr. Richard Grove
 Telltale Games
 P.O. Box 9737
 San Rafael, CA 94912

Dear Mr. Grove:

Tell where you learned about the job.

If the job has a reference number, provide it.

In paragraph 1, show you have the qualifications the ad lists.

I am applying for your Game Designer position posted on your website. As an avid player of Telltale games, I believe that I have all the qualifications to do a great job. With my degree in Computer Science and Information Technology and my experience creating game content, I will be able to apply many skills to the Game Designer position. My passion for becoming part of the gaming industry, combined with my oral and written communication skills, makes me a great fit for the Telltale team.

This summary sentence forecasts the structure of the rest of the letter.

Shows enthusiasm for the profession and picks up on the programming experience emphasis in the job ad.

Since I was five, I have had a strong interest in computers and video games, and my interest and knowledge have only increased in recent years. Not only do I play video games, I discuss them with others, read news articles about them online, and consider ways to improve or change a specific game. I have also used game editors to create my own content in games. When it comes to computers, I have a keen interest in staying current with the latest technology, and I apply my knowledge hands-on by building systems. These experiences give me an understanding of how modern computers and video game systems function. I also have experience with several programming languages, from both taking courses and learning them on my own. This has increased my eye for detail, a necessary ability for any game designer.

Provides evidence for his achievements in the profession.

My passion for creating video games was recognized this year in President Obama's National STEM video game challenge. With a team of students in Professor Kent Olberath's game development class at California State University, I produced "Parrot Villa," the first level of an immersive game where players solve mysteries on a unique jungle world. The programming quality and detailed story line helped my team earn second place in the nationwide competition. You can see a demo of "Parrot Villa" at www.STEMChallenge.gov/2013_Winners.

Relates what he has done to what he could do for the company.

Evidence of communication skills is a plus for almost any job.

Along with my enthusiasm for games, I have strong oral and written communication skills. I am a confident public speaker, and I have an ability to relay information in a clear and concise manner. More importantly, though, I have developed the ability in my creative writing courses to create engaging and coherent narratives, which will be a large component of developing new games. In addition to my coursework and experience, I have honed my skills online by writing articles about games. In covering the video game industry for Point Network, I have reviewed Telltale's own *Tales of Monkey Island*.

Shows familiarity with company's products.

Working in the video game industry is my goal, and I would be a great asset to Telltale Games. I would love to come in for an interview to discuss the position and the contributions I can make. I have always enjoyed playing Telltale's games, and I look forward to the possibility of working on them one day soon.

Sincerely,

Jeff Moeller
 Jeff Moeller

Figure 13.5 How to Organize a Prospecting Letter

1. Catch the reader's interest.
2. Create a bridge between the attention-getter and your qualifications. Focus on what you know and can do. Since the employer is not planning to hire, he or she won't be impressed with the fact that you're graduating. Summarize your qualifications briefly in the same order in which you plan to discuss them in the letter. This summary sentence or paragraph then covers everything you will talk about and serves as an organizing device for your letter.
3. Develop your strong points in detail. Be specific. Relate what you've done in the past to what you could do for this company. Show that you know something about the company. Identify the specific niche you want to fill.
4. Ask for an interview and tell when you'll be available for interviews. (Don't tell when you can begin work.) Thank the recipient for considering your application. End on a positive, forward-looking note.

How to Organize Prospecting Letters

When you don't have any evidence that the company is hiring, you cannot use the pattern for solicited letters. Instead, use the pattern of organization in Figure 13.5. A sample prospecting letter for an applicant desiring to change fields is shown in Figure 13.6.

First Paragraphs of Solicited Letters

When you know that the firm is hiring, announcing that you are applying for a specific position enables the firm to route your letter to the appropriate person, thus speeding consideration of your application. Identify where you learned about the job: "the position of junior accountant announced in Sunday's *Dispatch*," "William Paquette, our placement director, told me that you are looking for. . ."

Note how the following paragraph picks up several of the characteristics of the ad:

Ad: Business Education Instructor at Shelby Adult Education. Candidate must possess a Bachelor's degree in Business Education. Will be responsible for providing in-house training to business and government leaders. . . . Candidate should have at least one year teaching experience.

Letter: I am applying for your position in Business Education that is posted on your school website. In December, I will receive a Bachelor of Science degree from North Carolina A & T University in Business Education. My work has given me two years' experience teaching word processing and computer accounting courses to adults plus leadership skills developed in the North Carolina National Guard.

Your **summary sentence** or **paragraph** covers everything you will talk about and serves as an organizing device for your letter.

Through my education, I have a good background in standard accounting principles and procedures and a working knowledge of some of the special accounting practices of the oil industry. This working knowledge is enhanced by practical experience in the oil fields: I have pumped, tailed rods, and worked as a roustabout.

My business experience, familiarity with DeVilbiss equipment, and communication skills qualify me to be an effective part of the sales staff at DeVilbiss.

Unconventional Tactics



In a competitive job market, you may be tempted to try an unconventional approach to getting attention from employers.

Nathan Schwagler tried to get past the traditional hiring process at Ingram Micro. He dressed up as a deliveryman, complete with a clipboard, a bouquet of flowers, and a Candygram. He got through security and to the office of Jessica, the company's recruiter. When he finally met her, Schwagler stripped off his coveralls to reveal his business suit underneath and presented Jessica with his résumé, in addition to the flowers and candy.

Did it work? When Schwagler followed up a week later, he found he had been barred from entering the office or calling again.

According to surveys, only 9% of hiring managers have hired someone who used unconventional tactics to get noticed. The other 91% hired candidates who had a strong cover letter and a well-designed résumé.

Adapted from Rachel Zupek, "Unusual Job Search Tactics," CareerBuilder, accessed June 20, 2013, <http://www.careerbuilder.com/article/cb-1076-job-search-unusual-job-search-tactics/>.

Figure 13.6

A Prospecting Letter from a Career Changer

Mandy Shelly

www.wisc.edu/~Shelly88/home.htm

March 29, 2014

Mr. Franklin Kohl
 PDF Productions
 3232 White Castle Road
 Minneapolis, MN 55434

Dear Mr. Kohl:

*Mandy uses a
 "letterhead"
 that harmonizes
 with her résumé.
 (see Figure 12.7)*

266 Van Buren Drive
 Madison, WI 53706
 shellym@wisc.edu
 608-897-1534 (home)
 608-842-4242 (cell)

*In a prospecting letter, open with a sentence which
 (1) will seem interesting and true to the reader and
 (2) provides a natural bridge to talking about yourself.*

The Wall Street Journal says that PDF Productions is expanding operations into Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Nebraska. My experience in technical writing, design, and computers would be an asset to your expanding organization. *Shows knowledge of the organization.*

*Briefly shows
 a variety of
 technical
 writing and
 computer
 skills.*

While working at a local animal shelter, I used my technical writing skills to create a website that allows users to easily access information. To improve the website, I conducted usability tests which provided useful feedback that I incorporated to modify the overall design. In addition, I was also responsible for writing and editing the shelter's monthly newsletter, which was distributed to roughly 1,200 "Friends of the Shelter." I have extensive computer and design skills, which I am anxious to put to use for PDF Productions.

*Relates
 what
 she's done
 to what she
 could do
 for this
 company.*

Coursework has also prepared me well for technical writing. I have written technical material on a variety of levels ranging from publicity flyers for the animal shelter to scientific reports for upper-level science courses. My course work in statistics has shown me how to work with data and present it accurately for various audiences. Because of my scientific background, I also have a strong vocabulary in both life sciences and chemistry. This background will help me get up to speed quickly with clients such as ChemPro and Biostage. My background in science has also taught me just how important specific details can be.

*Shows how
 her course-
 work is an
 asset.*

*Names specific
 clients, showing
 more knowledge
 of company.*

In May, I will complete my degree from the University of Wisconsin and will be most interested in making a significant contribution to PDF Productions. I am available every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for an interview (608-897-1534). I look forward to talking with you about technical writing I can do for PDF Productions.

Sincerely,

Mandy Shelly

Mandy Shelly

Figure 13.7

Letter Following Up from a Career Fair and Requesting an Internship

James Jiang
jiangj@wccc.edu

Campus Address
1524 E. Main St
Portland, OR 97231
503-403-5718

*Letterhead
matches his
résumé.*

Permanent Address
2526 Prairie Lane
Portland, OR 97233
503-404-7793

January 23, 2014

Ms. Deborah Pascal, HR Department
Prime Financial
401 Prime Park Place
Beaverton, OR 97007

Dear Ms. Pascal:

*Uses his
contact
immediately.*

Mary Randi at the West Coast Community College Career Fair suggested I send you my résumé for the Sales Advisor internship. My education, combined with my past work experiences, makes me a strong candidate for Prime Financial.

*Shows he has
been getting
full value from
his schooling.*

While working toward my Associate of Arts degree in Financial Management from West Coastal Community College, I have learned the value of fiscal responsibility. For example, in my social financial planning course, I developed a strategic plan to eliminate credit card debt for a one-income household with two children. Moreover, in my business communication course, I improved my oral communication ability so that I could effectively communicate my plans to potential clients. This ability will be an asset to Prime Financial as the organization works to maintain the strong relationship with the community and small business owners that Ms. Randi informed me about.

*Refers to
knowledge
gained at
career fair.*

*Paragraphs 2
and 3 show
he has skills
he can use
immediately
as an intern.*

My financial education, combined with my previous work experiences in sales, will allow me to thoroughly analyze investment opportunities and establish a strong client base for Prime Financial. For example, I started the A-Plus T-Shirt Company that sold graphic T-shirts to high school students; it had a routine client base of over 150 customers. From managing this business, I know what it takes to be reliable and responsive to customer needs. I am looking forward to learning new approaches from Prime Financial's internship, particularly new ways to work with small businesses.

*Provides
details
about his
sales
experience
to interest
his reader.*

With my education and experience, I can provide the innovative and competitive edge necessary to be part of your team. I would welcome an interview to discuss your internship and the contributions I could make at Prime Financial.

Sincerely,

James Jiang

James Jiang

Worst Cover Letter Content



Although there are many things you can write in a cover letter to make yourself attractive to an employer, here are 10 things you should not put in your letter:

1. Next to nothing
2. Criticism of the employer
3. Personal stories
4. Awkward language
5. Someone else's words
6. Irrelevant experience
7. Arrogance
8. Wrong company name
9. Cultural preferences
10. Jokes

Adapted from Sindhu Sundar, "The Top Ten Worst Things to Put in Your Cover Letter," *FINS Finance*, August 8, 2011, <http://www.fins.com/Finance/Articles/SB131281414544931041/The-Ten-Worst-Things-to-Put-in-Your-Cover-Letter>.

First Paragraphs of Prospecting Letters

In a prospecting letter, asking for a job in the first paragraph is dangerous: unless the company plans to hire but has not yet announced openings, the reader is likely to throw the letter away. Instead, catch the reader's interest. Then in the second paragraph you can shift the focus to your skills and experience, showing how they can be useful to the employer and specifying the job you are seeking.

Here are some effective first and second paragraphs that provide a transition to the writer's discussion of his or her qualifications.

First two paragraphs of a letter to the director of publications at an oil company:

If scarcity of resources makes us use them more carefully, perhaps it would be a good idea to ration words. If people used them more carefully, internal communications specialists like you would have fewer headaches because communications jobs would be done right the first time.

For the last six years I have worked on improving my communications skills, learning to use words more carefully and effectively. I have taught business communication at a major university, worked for two newspapers, completed a Master's degree in English, and would like to contribute my skills to your internal communications staff.

First two paragraphs of a letter applying to be a computer programmer for an insurance company:

As you know, merging a poorly written letter with a database of customers just sends out bad letters more quickly. But you also know how hard it is to find people who can both program computers and write well.

My education and training have given me this useful combination. I'd like to put my associate's degree in computer technology and my business experience writing to customers to work in State Farm's service approach to insurance.

Notice how the second paragraph provides a transition to a discussion of qualifications.

Questions work well only if the answers aren't obvious. The computer programmer above should *not* ask this question:

Do you think that training competent and motivated personnel is a serious concern in the insurance industry?

If the reader says *yes*, the question will seem dumb. If the reader says *no*, the student has destroyed his or her common ground. The computer programmer, however, could pose this question:

How often do you see a programmer with both strong programming skills and good communication skills?

This question would give him or her an easy transition into paragraphs about his/her programming and communication skills.

Showing a Knowledge of the Position and the Company

If you could substitute another inside address and salutation and send out the letter without any further changes, it isn't specific enough. A job application letter is basically a claim that you could do a specific job for a particular company. Use your knowledge of the position and the company to choose relevant evidence from what you've done to support your claims that you could help the company. (See Figures 13.4 and 13.6.)

The following paragraphs show the writer's knowledge of the company.

A letter to PricewaterhouseCoopers's Minneapolis office uses information the student learned in a referral interview with a partner in an accounting firm. Because the reader will know that Herr Wollner is a partner in the Berlin office, the student does not need to identify him.

While I was studying in Berlin last spring, I had the opportunity to discuss accounting methods for multinational clients of PricewaterhouseCoopers with Herr Fritz Wollner. We also talked about communication among PricewaterhouseCoopers's international offices.

Herr Wollner mentioned that the increasing flow of accounting information between the European offices—especially those located in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria—and the U.S. offices of PricewaterhouseCoopers makes accurate translations essential. My fluency in German enables me to translate accurately; and my study of communication problems in Speech Communication, Business and Professional Speaking, and Business and Technical Writing will help me see where messages might be misunderstood and choose words which are more likely to communicate clearly.

A letter to KMPG uses information the student learned in a summer job.

As an assistant accountant for Pacific Bell during this past summer, I worked with its computerized billing and record-keeping system, BARK. I had the opportunity to help the controller revise portions of the system, particularly the procedures for handling delinquent accounts. When the KMPG audit team reviewed Pacific Bell's transactions completed for July, I had the opportunity to observe your System 2170. Several courses in computer science allow me to appreciate the simplicity of your system and its objective of reducing audit work, time, and costs.

One or two specific details about the company usually are enough to demonstrate your knowledge. Be sure to use the knowledge, not just repeat it. Never present the information as though it will be news to the reader. After all, the reader works for the company and presumably knows much more about it than you do.

Showing What Separates You from Other Applicants

Your knowledge of the company can separate you from other applicants. You can also use coursework, an understanding of the field, and experience in jobs and extracurricular events to show that you're unique. Stress your accomplishments, not your job responsibilities. Be specific but concise; usually three to five sentences will enable you to give enough specific supporting details.

This student uses both coursework and summer jobs to set herself apart from other applicants. Her research told her Monsanto had recently adopted new accounting methods for fluctuations in foreign currencies. Therefore, she mentions relevant simulations from her coursework.

Unfortunate Cover Letter Statements



- "Please find my résumé." Did you look under the couch?
- "I have integrity so I will not steal office supplies and take them home." Good to know.
- "Please, please, please hire me for this job. I will be waiting by the phone." Don't wait too long.
- "What interested me about this job is that it's with a prestigious company." Glad to hear it.
- "After perusing my résumé, I am looking forward to hearing from you soon." If you don't mind, we'd appreciate the opportunity to peruse it ourselves before we get back to you.
- "I'm submitting the attached copy of my résumé for your consumption." Yum.
- "I perform my job with effortless efficiency, effectiveness, efficacy, and expertise." And an awful lot of alliteration, apparently.
- "The interview you schedule will undoubtedly reveal my unmatched talent and suitability for the position." Uh, don't count your chickens. . . .
- "But wait . . . there's more. You get all this business knowledge plus a grasp of finance that is second nature." If I act now, will you throw in a set of kitchen knives?

Quoted from "Resumania Archive," Resumania, 2013, <http://www.resumania.com/ResumaniaArchive>.

Study Abroad and Overseas Work Programs



Have you considered a studies abroad program or international job?

If so, a variety of resources are available. These websites offer assistance for students interested in study abroad programs:

<http://www.ciee.org>

<http://studyabroad.com>

<http://iepassport.org>

For information regarding full-time overseas opportunities, visit the following websites:

<http://www.monster.com/geo/siteselection>

<http://www.jobsabroad.com/search.cfm>

<http://transitionsabroad.com>

My college courses have taught me the essential accounting skills required to contribute to the growth of Monsanto. In two courses in international accounting, I compiled simulated accounting statements of hypothetical multinational firms in countries experiencing different rates of currency devaluation. Through these classes, I acquired the skills needed to work with the daily fluctuations of exchange rates and at the same time formulate an accurate and favorable representation of Monsanto.

Both my summer jobs and my coursework prepare me to do extensive record keeping as well as numerous internal and external communications. As Office Manager for the steamboat *Julia Belle Swain*, I was in charge of most of the bookkeeping and letter writing for the company. I kept accurate records for each workday, and I often entered over 100 transactions in a single day. In business communication I learned how to write persuasive messages and how to present extensive data in reports in a simplified style that is clear and easy to understand.

In your résumé, you may list activities, offices, and courses. In your letter, give more detail about what you did and show how those experiences will help you contribute to the employer's organization more quickly.

When you discuss your strengths, don't exaggerate. No employer will believe that a new graduate has a "comprehensive" knowledge of a field. Indeed, most employers believe that six months to a year of on-the-job training is necessary before most new hires are really earning their pay. Specifics about what you've done will make your claims about what you can do more believable and ground them in reality.

Writing the Last Paragraph

In the last paragraph, indicate when you'd be available for an interview. If you're free anytime, you can say so. But it's likely that you have responsibilities in class and work. If you'd have to go out of town, there may be only certain days of the week or certain weeks that you could leave town for several days. Use a sentence that fits your situation.

November 5–10 I'll be attending the Oregon Forestry Association's annual meeting and will be available for interviews then.

Any Monday or Friday I could come to Memphis for an interview.

Should you wait for the employer to call you, or should you call the employer to request an interview? In a solicited letter, it's safe to wait to be contacted: you know the employer wants to hire someone, and if your letter and résumé show that you're one of the top applicants, you'll get an interview. In a prospecting letter, call the employer. Because the employer is not planning to hire, you'll get a higher percentage of interviews if you're assertive.

If you're writing a prospecting letter to a firm that's more than a few hours away by car, say that you'll be in the area the week of such-and-such and could stop by for an interview. Companies pay for follow-up visits, but not for first interviews. A company may be reluctant to ask you to make an expensive trip when it isn't yet sure it wants to hire you.

End the letter on a positive note that suggests you look forward to the interview and that you see yourself as a person who has something to contribute, not as someone who just needs a job.

I look forward to discussing with you ways in which I could contribute to The Limited's continued growth.

Do not end your letter with a variation of the negative cliché "Please do not hesitate to contact me." Why do you think the reader would hesitate? Also avoid this other tired cliché: "Thank you for your time." Using an overworked ending dumps you right back in the pool with all the other applicants.

Oh yes, one more thing. Don't forget to sign your letter—with blue or black ink—legibly.

E-mail Application Letters

You will probably e-mail most of your applications. If your application is solicited, you can paste your traditional letter into your e-mail. If your application is prospecting, you need a shorter letter that will catch the reader's attention within the first screen (see Figure 13.8). In both solicited and prospecting applications, your first paragraph is crucial; use it to hook the reader.

As with any letter, what you write depends on your audience. For solicited applications, your e-mail will most likely be read initially by someone in Human Resources rather than the hiring manager. The HR staff member is reading your letter to see what job you are applying for and whether you meet the basic qualifications. In some cases, you will send a transmission e-mail to Human Resources with only basic information (the job number and your contact information) and an attached cover letter for the hiring manager. Pay close attention to the instructions in the job ad on how to submit your application.

For prospecting applications, your e-mail will more likely go directly to a hiring manager, who is not expecting it. You therefore need to do more to convince him or her to read your letter and look at your résumé. Do not make the mistake of treating a prospecting e-mail like a transmission e-mail. The recipient is unlikely to look at an unsolicited cover letter or résumé without a persuasive e-mail message.

If you don't know who will receive your e-mail, use a traditional cover letter format for your e-mail. Some experts are starting to recommend a shorter letter for both situations, but many caution that you need to include enough information to make you, not one of the numerous other applicants, the person for the job. Frequently that is hard to do in one screen.

When you submit an e-mail letter with your résumé,

- Include your name as part of the subject line. Many companies will also request the job number or title in the subject line.
- Repeat the job number or title for which you're applying in the first paragraph.
- Prepare your letter in a word-processing program. Use the spell checker to edit and proof the document.
- Use standard business letter features: salutation, standard closing, single-spacing with double-spacing between paragraphs.
- Use standard business language, without abbreviations or acronyms. Use standard, correct punctuation.
- Don't put anything in all capital letters.
- Don't use smiley faces or other emoticons.

Be Specific



Employers often read hundreds of cover letters each year. They know all the tricks and have seen all of the buzzwords. The best way for you to stand out is to be specific. Here are some tips for improving your cover letter:

1. If you are reusing text from cover letters to different companies, watch for errors like including the wrong company name, using "his" when you mean "hers," or extra or missing words.
2. Using vague language tells an employer you are either unsure about your own experience or you are inflating some facts.
3. Buzzwords can hurt more than they help, unless you link the buzzwords to specific experiences and examples.
4. Don't make jokes, include personal asides, or talk about your family or personal connections to the company.

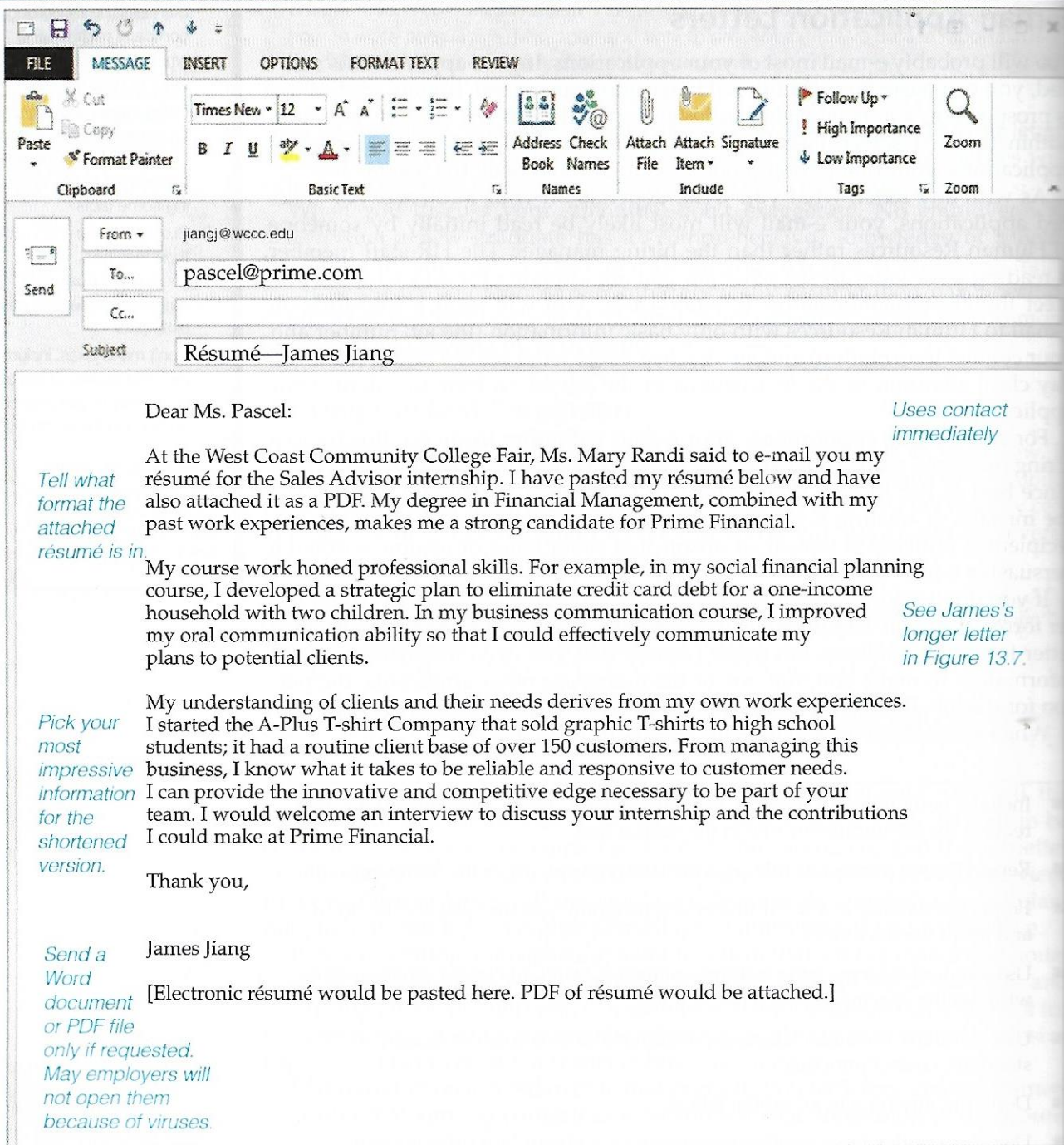
Adapted from John Lopez, "The Recommendation Letter Employers Don't Want," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, June 11–17, 2012, 86.

- Put your name at the end of the message.
- Include contact information (at least your e-mail address and phone number) below your name.

Follow all guidelines posted by the company. Do not add attachments unless you know doing so is OK. Test your e-mail by sending it to a friend; have your friend check it for appearance and correctness.

Figure 13.8

An E-mail with Application Letter and Résumé



Creating a Professional Image

Every employer wants businesslike employees who understand professionalism. To make your application letter professional,

- Create your letter in a word-processing program so you can use features such as a spell-checker. Use a standard font such as Times New Roman, Arial, or Helvetica in 12-point type.
- Address your letter to a specific person. If the reader is a woman, call the office to find out what courtesy title she prefers.
- Don't mention relatives' names. It's OK to use names of other people if the reader knows those people and thinks well of them, if they think well of you and will say good things about you, and if you have permission to use their names.
- Omit personal information not related to the job.
- Unless you're applying for a creative job in advertising, use a conservative style: few contractions; no sentence fragments, clichés, or slang.
- Edit the letter carefully and proof it several times to make sure it's perfect. Errors suggest that you're careless or inept. Double-check the spelling of the receiver's name.
- Print on the same paper (both shade and weight) you used for your résumé. Envelopes should match, too.
- Use a computer to print the envelope address.

Writing Style

Use a smooth, concise writing style (Chapter 5). Use the technical jargon of the field to show your training, but avoid businessese and stuffy words like *utilize*, *commence*, and *transpire* (for *happen*). Use a lively, energetic style that makes you sound like a real person.

Avoid words that can be interpreted sexually. A model letter distributed by the placement office at a Midwestern university included the following sentence:

I have been active in campus activities and have enjoyed good relations with my classmates and professors.

Sentences like this get shared for laughs; that's not the kind of attention you want to get!

Be sure your letter uses the exact language of the job ad and addresses all items included in the ad. If the ad mentions teamwork, your letter should give examples of teamwork; don't shift the vocabulary to collaboration. Many readers expect their job ad language in applicants' letters. If the language is not there, they may judge the applicant as not fitting the position. And so may their computer, since the vocabulary of the job ad probably contains crucial key words for the computer to find.

Positive Emphasis

Be positive. Don't plead ("Please give me a chance") or apologize ("I cannot promise that I am substantially different from the lot"). Most negatives should be omitted from the letter.

You(r) Attitude Matters



If you find getting a job difficult, your attitude may be the reason. Here are four common career-blocking attitudes and responses to them:

Attitude: I deserve a good job because I went to school for four years.

Response: Employers are looking for who is best for a job, not who "deserves" a job.

Attitude: I am open to any job. I have no idea what I want to do.

Response: Employers want workers who are focused.

Attitude: I don't have experience because no one will give me a chance.

Response: Employers do not employ people to give them a "chance." Employers are concerned with what an applicant can do for them.

Attitude: I am so down on myself that it's hard to keep looking for a job.

Response: Get professional help, because this attitude is poisonous to your life as well as your career.

Adapted from Peter Vogt, "Self-Defeating Attitudes Will Stop Your Job Search Cold," Monster.com, accessed June 21, 2013, <http://career-advice.monster.com/job-search/getting-started/self-defeating-attitudes-job-search/article.aspx>.

Avoid word choices with negative connotations (see Chapter 3). Note how the following revisions make the writer sound more confident.

Negative: I have learned an excessive amount about writing through courses in journalism and advertising.

Positive: Courses in journalism and advertising have taught me to recognize and to write good copy. My profile of a professor was published in the campus newspaper; I earned an "A+" on my direct mail campaign for the American Dental Association to persuade young adults to see their dentist more often.

Excessive suggests that you think the courses covered too much—hardly an opinion likely to endear you to an employer.

Negative: You can check with my references to verify what I've said.

Positive: Professor Hill can give you more information about my work on his national survey.

Verify suggests that you expect the employer to distrust what you've said.

You-Attitude

Unsupported claims may sound overconfident, selfish, or arrogant. Create you-attitude (Chapter 3) by describing accomplishments and by showing how they relate to what you could do for this employer.

Lacks you-attitude: An inventive and improvising individual like me is a necessity in your business.

You-attitude: Building a summer house-painting business gave me the opportunity to find creative solutions to challenges. At the end of the first summer, for example, I had nearly 10 gallons of exterior latex left, but no more jobs. I contacted the home economics teacher at my high school. She agreed to give course credit to students who were willing to give up two Saturdays to paint a house being renovated by Habitat for Humanity. I donated the paint and supervised the students. I got a charitable deduction for the paint and hired the three best students to work for me the following summer. I could put these skills in problem solving and supervising to work as a personnel manager for Burroughs.

Show what you can do for them, not what they can do for you.

Lacks you-attitude: A company of your standing could offer the challenging and demanding kind of position in which my abilities could flourish.

You-attitude: Omit sentence.

Remember that the word *you* refers to your reader. Using *you* when you really mean yourself or "all people" can insult your reader by implying that he or she still has a lot to learn about business:

Lacks you-attitude: Running my own business taught me that you need to learn to manage your time.

You-attitude: Running my own business taught me to manage my time.

Beware of telling readers information they already know as though they do not know it. This practice can also be considered insulting.

Lacks you-attitude: Your company has just purchased two large manufacturing plants in France.

You-attitude: My three college French courses would help me communicate in your newly acquired French manufacturing facilities.

Since you're talking about yourself, you'll use *I* in your letter. Reduce the number of *I*'s by revising some sentences to use *me* or *my*.

Under my presidency, the Agronomy Club. . . .

Courses in media and advertising management gave me a chance to. . . .

My responsibilities as a summer intern included. . . .

In particular, avoid beginning every paragraph with *I*. Begin sentences with prepositional phrases or introductory clauses:

As my résumé shows, I. . . .

In my coursework in media and advertising management, I. . . .

As a summer intern, I. . . .

While I was in Italy. . . .

Paragraph Length and Unity

Keep your first and last paragraphs fairly short—preferably no more than four or five typed lines. Vary paragraph length within the letter; it's OK to have one long paragraph, but don't use a series of eight-line paragraphs.

When you have a long paragraph, check to be sure that it covers only one subject. If it covers two or more subjects, divide it into two or more paragraphs.

Use topic sentences at the beginning of your paragraphs to make your letter more readable.

Letter Length

Have at least three paragraphs. A short letter throws away an opportunity to be persuasive; it may also suggest that you have little to say for yourself or that you aren't very interested in the job.

Without eliminating content, tighten each sentence (Chapter 5) to be sure that you're using words as efficiently as possible. If your letter is a bit over a page, use slightly smaller margins or a type size that's one point smaller to get more on the page.

If you have excellent material that will not fit on one page, use it—as long as you have at least 6 to 12 lines of body text on the second page. The extra space gives you room to be more specific about what you've done and to add details about your experience that will separate you from other applicants. Employers don't *want* longer letters, but they will read them *if* the letter is well written and *if* the applicant establishes early in the letter that he or she has the credentials the company needs. Remember, however, that the trend is toward shorter letters.

Editing and Proofreading

Be sure you edit and proofread your cover letter. Failure to do so can undo all the work you put into it. The web abounds with humorous examples of spelling errors making unintended statements (I'm excellent at spelling and grammar). In fact, some companies post the best bloopers on their websites. For example, Robert Half International maintains Resumania (resumania.com); Killian Branding, an advertising agency, has "Cover Letters from Hell" on its website (www.killianbranding.com/cover-letters-from-hell/): the "poetic" Night-before-Christmas cover letter is amazing.

Check your content one last time to ensure that everything presents you as a hardworking professional. Make sure you are not revealing any frustration with the job search process in your content or diction. Check your tone to see that it is positive about your previous experiences and yourself. Don't beg or show too much gratitude for commonplaces such as reading your letter.

Fatal Spelling Errors



These spelling errors occurred in actual cover letters:

- "I feel my rigorous education and subsequent internship have prepared me for any obstical I might encounter." Except the challenge of finding misspelled words.
- "I prefer a fast-paste work environment." For life's stickiest situations.
- "I am very interested in the newspaper add for the accounting position." And we're divided on your qualifications.
- "I am extremely detailoriented." I'm afraid we're not convinced.
- Name on letterhead: "Sam Mevlin"; Signature: "Sam Melvin" Would the real Sam please come forward?

Adapted from Robert Half International, "Cover Letter Statements," 2013, <http://www.resumania.com/ResumaniaArchive>.

Follow-Up

Follow up with the employer once if you hear nothing after two or three weeks. It is also OK to ask once after one week if e-mail materials were received. If your job letter was prospecting, it is fine to follow up two or three times. Do not make a pest of yourself, however, by calling or e-mailing too often; doing so could eliminate you from further consideration.

Application Essays

Some jobs and internships, and many scholarship and graduate school applications, ask for an application essay. In a sense, this essay is an extended cover letter, but one written in an essay format rather than letter format. It will detail your strengths for the job/internship/scholarship/graduate school slot and show why you should be chosen instead of other applicants.

The essay offers you a chance to expand on your best points in more detail than does a cover letter. In so doing, you need to capture your readers' attention and show that you are exceptional. Frequently this means you need to put some of your personality into your essay. Here you can spell out with more interesting details skills you have already acquired from previous experiences and will bring to the new job or internship. Here you can elaborate on your academic achievements so you seem worthy of a scholarship or able to thrive in the rigors of graduate school. You can also expand more on general skills such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork. Show that you are capable, hardworking, and interesting.

The essay also gives you room to include content that you would not put in a cover letter. For instance, you might want to include an anecdote that shows something about you as a developing professional (hint: make it interesting but not melodramatic). Or you might talk some about future goals. How did you arrive at these goals? How would this internship advance your career goals? Why do you want to go to graduate school? What do you want to do after the internship, scholarship, or graduate career is over?



WARNING: Be careful when giving goals for job application essays. You do not want your goals to make the job seem like a quick stepping-stone to better opportunities.

Remember to use the good writing techniques you have learned in this course and your other communication classes.

- Follow the directions, especially word and page limits, precisely. If the essay is to respond to a question, make sure it answers the question.
- Have a focal point for your essay, a unifying theme. This will help prevent you from merely listing accomplishments (your résumé did that).
- Start your essay with an interesting paragraph to catch attention. Do not summarize your essay, or your reader may go no further.
- Remember your audience. Show what you can do for this company, or why you want to go to this particular graduate school. But most of all, show what's in it for the readers if they accept you.
- Use vivid details in the body of the essay. They don't have to be wildly creative for a job essay; showing how you cut production time for the department newsletter by 15% will be interesting to your reader if the job is a good fit for you.

- Use some unique details. If your sentence could be used in many other applications, it is not showing why *you* should get the internship/job/scholarship/graduate school slot.
 - Avoid unsupported generalities and clichés.
 - Use topic sentences at the beginnings of your paragraphs. Remember these essays are frequently read quickly.
 - Let your word choice reveal your personal voice. Since the essay is about you, it's fine to use some first person. Avoid thesaurus diction.
 - End with a strong concluding paragraph. Remember, this is the reader's last impression of you. Do not waste it on a boring summary of a one-page essay.
-

Social Networking and Personal Websites

Many employers are no longer finding their employees through job ads and applications. Rather, they are searching LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ for qualified, interesting people to recruit. In these cases, you will not get a chance to submit a cover letter until after the employer has seen what you have posted online. In addition to the tips on personal branding from Chapter 12, you can also use your online presence to create a virtual cover letter—an introduction to employers who may be searching for you.

Here are some ideas for creating a virtual cover letter:

-
- **Manage your social networking profiles.** Employers will likely find you by your profile. Keep your education and employment up-to-date on all of your profiles. Include professional interests with your personal interests to give employers a well-rounded picture of who you are and how you could fit into their company.
 - **Use key words.** In a competitive marketplace, where employers could see millions of profiles, using key words will at least get you on the radar. If you use key words and tie them into your experiences, you are more likely to stand out.
 - **Keep your profile pictures professional.** When an employer searches for you, your profile picture will be one of the first things he or she sees. If it shows you making a funny face or partying with friends, it may be a red flag to an employer. The best bet is to keep your profile pictures simple and professional.
 - **Manage your posts to social networks.** While a potential employer may not read through all your posts, you do need to show that you are professional and interesting. If you use key words in your posts, you are more likely to be found by an employer.
 - **Create an effective personal website.** Your personal website can be your cover letter, résumé, and portfolio of work samples all in one place. Use the space effectively. Write a short introduction on the main page that talks about your goals and professional interests. On a different page or pages, include the stories and experiences that you would include in your cover letter. Show that your experience is real and interesting. Provide context and explanation for your portfolio items.
-

Using electronic resources well can help you stand out to potential employers.