

## Chapter 1

# News Flash: Cover Letters Are Grown Up and Have Kids

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Busting unemployment with revolutionary letter power
- ▶ Surveying the robust family of career management documents
- ▶ Using cover letters to accomplish specific purposes
- ▶ Customizing compelling messages for each job you want
- ▶ Staying clear of spam filters

Once upon a job-hunting time long ago, the term *cover letters* brought to mind drab documents like this one:

*Dear Sir/Madam,*

*Please accept this letter and resume for the Payroll Manager position as referenced in the Louisiana Times, Nov. 5. My work history and educational background make me an outstanding candidate. I am available for an interview at your earliest convenience. Thank you.*

That style of transmittal letter has become a museum piece.

In this century's brave new world of hypercompetitive job searches, cover letters have not only been reinvented, they've spawned a family of *career management documents* like these:



- ✓ Intrigue-inducing e-mail cover notes
- ✓ Deal-closing thank-you letters
- ✓ Interest-reviving follow-up messages
- ✓ Star-power bios and branding statements
- ✓ Image-brightening reference blurbs
- ✓ Qualifications-matching candidate checklists

- ✓ Humanizing audio and video bites in profiles
- ✓ Eye-popping accomplishment sheets

And there's much more in the new cover letter family. All together, today's family of career management documents — which I also call *job letters* — delivers a spectacular array of self-marketing tools for people who want to be seen, noticed, and hired for the best jobs. That's you, isn't it?

## *A New Age of Self-Promotion Is Here!*

Looking for and landing the job you want is always a challenge, especially in uncertain times. But — lucky you — in one important way, your timing hits the jackpot!



You're in the right century at the right time with the right tools to better manage your career than any generation before.

By seizing the opportunity to capitalize on 21st-century opportunities, you can

- ✓ Change to creative and high-impact letters that bring interviews
- ✓ Switch to gutsy but polite letters that generate hires
- ✓ Shift to persuasive and content-rich letters that position you to win career rewards that matter to you

You live in nothing less than a *revolutionary age for career self-promotion*. How did you get so lucky? This empowering new age is upon us for two main reasons:

- ✓ **Society's changing expectations in message style.** In this era of mass-marketing and media overload, people are so accustomed to vivid, sparkling advertising and creative, clever marketing in every corner of their lives that they no longer pay much attention to feeble, uninteresting messages from job seekers who merely go through the motions. The family of new-style letters is hard to ignore in an atmosphere where HDTV gets attention, but black-and-white TV is ho-hum.

The new-style letters vary in approach from elegant to elementary, but their missions are the same — picking up the cue from contemporary advertising and marketing, all the best ones are *sales letters*.

- ✓ **Emergence of a technology-rich environment.** In previous centuries, cover letters were joined at the hip with the post office. In this century, the Internet's vast and powerful e-mail and social networking services supply unprecedentedly wide vistas to carry new-style messages.

For clarity, I pause to emphasize that despite the loosening of collars in the new wave of job letters, conservatively styled cover letters aren't dead. They continue to be preferred in certain buttoned-down industries, such as banking, medicine, and government service. Why? Because they're persuasively and expertly written to satisfy the tastes of executives in those industries. (See for yourself the conservatively styled cover letters that appear in Parts 3 and 4.)

As creativity and technology turn new pages in recruiting circles, the cover letter has morphed into an extended family of hard-hitting messages that influence how the working world sees you and treats you.

## *Cover Letters Are Alive and Sell*

Considering our digital world in which millions of people send their resumes off to online boarding schools without cover letter guardians, you may ask whether the cover letter model (new- or old-style) continues to lead the parade of written job docs. More bluntly, are cover letters still valuable?

The answer is a resounding *yes*! These resume sidekicks pack far too much firepower to be left on the sideline, according to two 2008 surveys:

- ✔ You leave interviews on the table when you skip cover letters: so concluded a survey I developed with talent selection expert Alise Cortez, PhD. Three-fifths (60 percent) of a cross-section of 83 American employers, human resource specialists, and recruiters sampled say they read cover letters always, often, or sometimes. Two-fifths (40 percent) read resumes rarely or never. Dr. Cortez is a founding partner of ImprovedExperience.com, a third-party research firm headquartered in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, that specializes in surveys for the human resource industry.
- ✔ Big company managers overwhelmingly prefer their resumes with cover letters. A poll of 150 executives in major U.S. companies reveals that a whopping 86 percent rate cover letters as valuable, with only 14 percent calling cover letters not valuable. Moreover, 80 percent of polled executives say cover letters accompany resumes they receive electronically. The poll was developed by OfficeTeam, a leading staffing company headquartered in Menlo Park, California.

In summing up widely held opinion among people in the employment business, OfficeTeam executive director Dave Willmer explains why your resume should never leave home without a cover letter at its side:

*Submitting a resume without a cover letter is like not shaking hands when meeting someone for the first time. Those who aren't including cover letters with their resumes are missing an opportunity to make a good first impression and set themselves apart from other job applicants.*

## Will your cover letter save the day?

When a rookie recruiter, who hasn't yet been taught the finer points of analyzing data-packed resumes, doesn't know what to make of yours but doesn't want the boss to know that he or she doesn't know, your resume's new address can be the reject pile.

A cover letter treatment is the recommended therapy to save your resume from certain candidate death merely because a rookie can't measure its value. Why? Letters are easier to analyze than resumes. The rookie reads the

letter and immediately knows what you bring to the table. Wanting to look like a savvy judge of talent, the rookie recruiter is now likely to pass your package of letter and resume up the line to a senior recruiter who does know how to evaluate resumes and who can extend interview invitations.

The takeaway: Attaching a cover letter that zings with your qualifications for the job can keep your resume (and job hopes) alive.



A Stand Out cover letter does much more than keep your resume warm during its long trip to a hiring manager. Cover letters done right can step up and accomplish a number of important getting-you-noticed purposes, which the following sections outline.

## *Looking good at first light*

Use a cover letter to immediately position yourself as a most valuable person. First impressions are very hard to change. And your cover letter often is an employer's first inkling that you're on the planet and for hire. You can use your cover letter to show yourself to be alert and attentive by editing out all the typo goofs for which your high school English teacher would have given you a big fat F.

## *Targeting the employer's needs*



The resume focuses on you and the past. The cover letter focuses on the employer and the future. Tell the hiring professional what you can do to benefit the organization in the future.

Failure to understand this simple principle is a critical mistake, advises career grand master John Lucht, CEO of RiteSite.com, a respected Web site for professionals seeking jobs at six figures and up. Lucht explains:

*Lots of people figure that the cover letter is about them and what they want. Wrong! It should be about what the employer wants that they provide. Dump the 'I'm looking for' — both the attitude and the words. Instead say, 'Do you need?' And make the 'need' one that you — as your attached resume clearly spells out — are the ideal person to fill.*

## ***Showcasing your attractive personality***

Your cover letter is a chance to bring more personality to your application than a resume can carry. It suggests, even subliminally, whether you're open to new ideas, results driven, energetic, a people person, cheerful, agreeable, and cooperative, to name but a few premium employer-pleasing qualities.

Most chief executives say that employee turnover is one of their biggest headaches. Personality is a key ingredient (along with knowledge and skill) in being a good fit for a job, which is why some employers give personality tests to candidates. Your cover letter offers early clues to your personality fit for the job.

## ***Closing gaps in your work record***

Your cover letter is the ideal vehicle to explain — on your terms — any disruption in your work history. The basic strategy explains the gap as a positive achievement: You studied further, gained business-related transferrable skills while raising children, served in the military, undertook volunteer activities, moved to a new location for a good reason, or resolved a non-recurring health problem.



When your resume has time holes in it and you don't explain how you productively filled the time and kept your skills current, yoking your past and your future is very difficult. In that case, entry-level offers are the most likely outcome. (Followed closely by no offers.)

## ***Highlighting your skills and accomplishments***

Your cover letter is the perfect place to emphasize the high-interest factors that whet a hiring authority's interest in knowing more.

This is your chance to connect the dots for hiring authorities and recruiters, counsels Lynne Sarikas, director of the MBA career center at Northeastern University's College of Business Administration:

*Most likely you have not done this exact job in this exact industry before and don't assume they will figure out how your experience is transferable. Show them how you meet their specific needs and the unique value you bring to the table.*

By the way, don't sabotage this purpose by merely repeating your resume using different words and mixing them up a bit. That's a time waster, and you don't want to be thought of as one of those.

## ***Demonstrating your communication skills***

Every survey of employers' most-wanted skills seems to include the ability to communicate well. By a strange coincidence, almost every professional-level job seeker claims the ability to communicate well — without offering proof.

An impeccable and robust cover letter provides that proof. It's your chance to show that you have the chops to communicate clearly, that you're downright articulate.

## ***Taking the wheel***



An action close on a Stand Out cover letter tells the recipient that you'll proactively call to set up an interview. It establishes that you have initiative and aren't one to sit around and wait for interview manna to fall in your lap.

Of course, an action close isn't always possible in a digital exchange when you don't know to whom you're applying. Or when you don't know who's in charge of a task force selection committee. In situations where you can't take the interview initiative, maintain your image of a "person of action" by encouraging the hiring authority to quickly contact you.

## ***Meet the Letters Family***

Like all the best families, the job letter clan has its share of first and second cousins and an occasional odd uncle. The following sections show you how the relatives line up.

## *Job ad reply letter*

The head of the letters family is the category of cover letters written in reaction to a published job opening in print or online. Responding to published job openings is the most common job search letter activity. Pay the job ad reply letter the courtesy of customizing it to point out how you match the requirements of the position it addresses.

You find everything you want to know about writing job ad reply letters in Chapter 8.

## *Prospecting letter*

Sent selectively to a relatively small number of potential employers with whom you have some sort of connection (same industry, personal meeting, affinity group), these self-marketing, direct-mail messages are similar to broadcast letters and may overlap with networking letters. Call them prospecting, broadcast, or networking letters: Whatever you call them, you need them. I dissect and illustrate prospecting letters in Chapter 9.

## *Broadcast letter*

A type of self-marketing direct mail, the biggest differences between broadcast and prospecting letters are scale and relationships. You send broadcast letters to big numbers of potential employers with whom the sender has virtually no connection. In fact, job seekers often use commercial mailing lists to develop their broadcast letter address book. True believers in the pay-off for broadcast letters insist that their secret to success is the distribution by postal mail or online of large numbers of enticing letters (“a numbers game”), with persistent follow-up by phone or e-mail. Find out more in Chapter 9.

## *Networking letter*

Most networking letters ask for job leads, not for job interviews. They’re addressed to human networks, requesting that members respond by phone, e-mail or Twitter. (Twitter is a Web site and service that lets users send short text messages from their cell phones to a group of individuals.) Networking letters typically reach out to those with whom you have some kind of affinity — fellow alumni, members of your church, civic organization, or buddy group, and so on. Additionally, you may send a networking letter for other reasons — to a hiring authority with whom you’ve recently met, for example; in such situations, you *do* ask for a job interview. Find networking letters in Chapter 10.

## *Resume letter*

An odd uncle in the letters family, this direct postal or online mail document doesn't contain a separate resume per se. (However, you may attach a separate accomplishment sheet.) A storytelling approach weaves the facts of your work history into a narrative describing your objective. A resume letter is a good choice when your fundamental qualifications are sound but you need to gloss over gaps or other problems. When interestingly written, the letter pulls in readers because everyone likes a good story well told. A resume letter can be categorized as a subset of a broadcast or prospecting letter. Find samples in Chapter 11.

## *Job fair cover letter*

Deciding in advance which companies you want to target at a job fair enables you to write attention-getting cover letters to leave with your resume at the land booth or send online to a virtual job fair. View a job fair sample letter in Chapter 9.

Try a twist by pairing a cover letter with an accomplishment sheet instead of a resume; see Chapter 11.



The vast majority of fair visitors don't make the extra research effort and instead just hand over generic documents, which gives you a huge opportunity to Stand Out from the crowd.

## *Thank-you letter*

Think of a letter written ostensibly to thank a hiring authority for an interview as what it really should be: another turn at bat to drive home your winning run, not merely an extension of your mother's etiquette lessons to show your good manners. Focus on facts and comments that advance your candidacy for selection. Chapter 12 contains chapter and verse on thank-you letters and includes great samples, as well.

## *Follow-up letter*

Also an after-interview communication, a follow-up letter is designed to spur decision action or even serve as a comeback effort to revive your candidacy after a period of thundering silence from the employer. Chapter 12 hosts super follow-up letters.



## *Professional branding statement*

How will prospective employers, clients, and customers perceive you professionally — as Sam Slacker or Sam Superstar? As Betty Boob or Betty Best? That's what personal branding is all about — your image and your reputation. What you deliver for the money, you expect to be paid. Chapter 13 is home base for crafting professional branding statements based on accomplishments and specializations that make you memorable in the job chase or on the consulting scene.

You can use a professional branding statement in letters, online profiles, accomplishment sheets, resumes, interviews, blog biographies, and elevator speeches. Even if you never get around to weaving a branding statement into a document, the mere act of writing one is a great way to concentrate your mind on what you're selling.

## *Online profile*

Growing more popular by the minute, this second cousin in the job letters family ranges from short and sweet (executive bio, described in Chapter 13) to a Yao-Ming-tall Web portfolio stuffed with links — photos, blogs, vlogs (video blogs), lists of publications, certifications, licenses, audio or video sound bites, and more. You name it, online profiles have it! Chapter 13 is your destination for online profiles.

How important are the quality of your online profile and other mentions of concern about you on social networking sites? *Very!* To cite a single but typical late 2008 survey of 3,169 hiring managers by online job site CareerBuilder.com, 22 percent screened potential staff members by using social networking profiles. This figure was up from 11 percent just two years earlier. An additional 9 percent said they plan to start using online profiles. In sum, almost a third of recruiting and staffing professionals are using or plan to use social networking sites to check up on potential hires.



About a third of hiring managers said that they had dismissed a candidate after what they discovered on social networking sites. Biggest offenses: information posted about drinking or using drugs, provocative subjects, or inappropriate photographs. More turnoffs: poor communication skills, lying about qualifications, candidates using discriminatory remarks related to race, gender or religion, and an unprofessional screen name.

The good news is that the survey found that 24 percent of hiring managers said that they found content on social network pages helped seal their decisions to hire candidates.

## *E-mail cover note*

Cover notes, which you find aplenty in Chapter 14, are kid brothers and sisters to cover letters. They're short and to the point. Typically, you send them in text in the body of an e-mail to introduce your attached resume, which usually is presented as an MS Word or PDF document.

## *Pulling Out the Stops with Special Marketing Messages*

One of America's iconic comedians, the late George Burns, told audiences how he defined happiness. "Happiness," Burns said, "is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city."

That quip works as a metaphor for an elite branch of career management documents. The documents in this group, described in Chapter 3, may as well be in another city because they come out only for special occasions, which are:

- ✓ When the job you want is master of the universe and you're thinking "fat chance that will happen"
- ✓ When the job is exactly what you hope to find, and you can't bear the thought of it slipping through your hands
- ✓ When the job is madly desired by so many competitors that you need to do something really special that makes you Stand Out

Special marketing messages generally are extra, load-bearing documents you take along to interviews, leaving them behind to remind decision-makers of your worthiness. Turn to Chapter 3 to find out what I'm talking about.

## *Sing, Cover Letter, Sing*

Call upon your inner muse before desperately resorting to sending out a skimpy, generic cover letter that brings you neither glory nor notice. Pledge to write cover letters that employers actually read; inspire intrigue by creatively using the right words and sending the right facts. Although Part II contains this book's mother lode of writing advice, here's a digest of tips to paste on your copyholder.

## *Customize and use names*

Is your job search stalling after you submit a cover letter and resume package but before you're offered an interview? If that's your experience, why keep repeating failure?

Realize that, like the dearly departed all-purpose resume, the era of the generic cover letter is gone. Switch to a best practice of customizing each cover letter you send — not only in content, but addressed to the specific hiring manager instead of the threadbare approach of “Dear Employer ” or “Dear Sir/Madam.”

When you can't discover the hiring manager's name (by calling the company or through research), you're stuck with using a generalized introduction that's better than nothing but not as effective as “Dear Ms. Carmel,” or “Dear Mr. Alvarez.”

## *Speak the right language*

Consider the recipient of your information. If the organization is conservative and traditional, keep the presentation of your information conservative and traditional. By contrast, when the targeted organization is creative and entrepreneurial, the addition of a splash of gifted words or a flourish in design tempts the doorkeeper to let you in.



I explain in Chapter 6 that the opening of your letter has to hook the reader, selling him or her on your abilities. One of many devices employed to hook readers is the use of a quotation. But here's the danger: Don't risk being perceived as a poet without a point by leading off with a nice but unrelated quotation that goes nowhere. Connect inspirational quotations with your strengths, or skip the quotation.

You can take more chances in approach and language when you really know your audience. To illustrate that principal, career coach Don Orlando in Montgomery, Alabama, passed along a high-risk real letter he wrote some years ago for a client who wanted to become chief of staff to a U.S. senator. She used her network to gain understanding of the senator's personality and preferred standard operating procedures. Discovering that he was known for giving curt answers, had a short fuse, and preferred take-charge staffers, here's the letter Orlando wrote for her:

*Your job search for a chief of staff is over. Please tell your secretary to expect my call at 10:30 EDT, Monday, 28 July, to arrange an interview. I will need twelve minutes of your time on the day that is best for you.*

*During that short meeting, if I cannot convince you that I can arm you with bulletproof information that moves your agendas forward among all your constituencies, I will leave your office at once.*

*But if I can, I will start work the following Monday.*

She was hired.

## ***State the reason you're writing***

Always tell the reader why you're writing, but be tactical about it. To reply to an advertised job, name the position title and where you saw the ad, but don't squander valuable real estate doing so in the opening paragraph. Instead, accomplish the same thing by positioning that information in the upper right-hand corner in the subject line "regarding" space. Other ways to handle the reason you're writing are presented in samples throughout this work.

## ***Explain why you're a top candidate***

Your basic message should be: "Here are examples of work I've done and accomplishments I've achieved that match what you're looking for." Because you research the company online, you're able to show why your skills and competencies are right for the job and can benefit the company. You explain any gaps in a positive way.



Accomplishments are job-offer magnets. Employers hire for results, not responsibilities. And they like numbers — percentages, dollar amounts, or other key measures wherever possible to quantify achievements and accomplishments.

## ***Tell them why you admire them***

You needn't gush with insincere praise when explaining why you'd like to work for a company, but intelligent compliments are a staple of effective cover letters. You won't be believable unless you get a line on the company before writing your letter. Why bother? Because your appreciation of the workplace where he or she toils makes the hiring manager feel important.

## *Declare what's next*

In closing your letter, reprise your enthusiasm, confirm your desire for an interview, and state what the next step will be. Preferably, you use an action close, telling the recipient that you will follow up and when that will happen. In some instances, you will have to wait for them to contact you. Find out all about the action close in Chapter 6.

## *Read and reread*

Go beyond using your computer's spell checker tool to review your job letters for typos and grammatical errors. Ask a friend or mentor to look over your letters as a backstop. Your words are going out into the hiring world as your only representative. If they don't go out in first-rate order, you never get to show off your stuff in person. Chapters 4 and 5 give you writing tips that enable you to write with the skills of a grammar snoot without actually having to be one.

## *Be a savvy submitter*

When you plan to send your application package of cover letter and resume online, bear in mind the advice I received from Susan P. Joyce, editor and Webmaster of Job-Hunt.Org.

Spam filters have been called into service seemingly everywhere because spam messages now comprise an estimated 78 percent of all e-mail received. That means that up to 10 percent of your messages won't make it through to the intended recipient. Susan Joyce explains how to up your odds:

- ✓ **Be very careful with the message subject.** Be precise and concise, while avoiding the “unsafe” words below. When you're responding to a specific posting, the job title is the safest, clearest, and most helpful subject for the recipient.

Stay away from words like *free*, *testing*, *money*, *urgent*, *payment*, and *investing*. Look at the spam messages you get and avoid their terminology and methods. Find synonyms or use a completely different approach to the subject.

Avoid using all caps and punctuation, particularly exclamation points and dollar signs.

- ✓ **Watch the words you use in the body of your message.** Spam filters check the bodies of messages as well the subjects, so similar problems apply.

- ✓ **Know that you are usually safest using unformatted text, rather than rich text or HTML.** If you do use formatted text, be wary of using colored text and backgrounds, and avoid including fancy technology (Flash or other animation) unless the technology is related to a job requirement.
- ✓ **For a really important message, you can add a line that requests confirmation of receipt.** When confirmation doesn't come through, you can follow up. This can be a good excuse to call.

## *A Different Kind of Cover Letter Book*

As this first chapter explains, career management docs are becoming important success drivers in a digital era. Cover letters now head up an entire family of new-style job letters, online profiles, and amazing self-marketing creations you can't afford to ignore. Visit the family reunion in the following pages, illustrated by 126 great new samples from professional cover letter writers.



### **Keeping everything straight**

When you send resumes and cover letters in an MS Word document, send them to yourself first to be sure that they survive their electronic journey formatted the way they left home. You may find that some portions of the text slip and slide around, winding up in the strangest

places. Here's an easy solution: Send each Word doc as a PDF (portable document format) attachment. PDFs arrive looking identical to the way you send them. You can quickly convert any document into a PDF for free at [www.pdf95.com](http://www.pdf95.com).