

## Writing a winning cover letter

6 AUG 2014 · BY [JOHN K. BORCHARDT](#)



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Your CV cover letter is both an introduction and a sales pitch. "It should show what sets this individual apart from all others," advises [Jeffrey Stansbury](#), vice chair of the Department of Craniofacial Biology at the University of Colorado School of Dental Medicine in Aurora. Like any good sales pitch, your cover letter should motivate the customer to learn more about the product—in this case, you.

A good cover letter, like a good sales pitch, has several characteristics. First, like a good doctor, it does no harm: It avoids making a negative impression. Second, it demonstrates that the product suits the consumer's—your future employer's—specific needs. Third, it assures the customer that the quality of the product (you) is superb. Accomplishing all this is easier said than done. So how do you write a cover letter that will do you justice and earn an interview? First you need a plan.

If the cover letter is to be effective, it must definitely be tailored to the particular institution.

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—Kenton Whitmire

## The objective

"A successful candidate impresses the committee right off with the cover letter and makes the committee members actually want to dig through the CV and recommendation letters to pull out the details that start to validate the positive claims," Stansbury says. "It also provides a glimpse into the applicant's personality and gives some guidance as to whether or not they can communicate in an organized, effective way."

One of the most important jobs of any good sales pitch is to avoid doing harm. Some cover letters inadvertently convey negative impressions of a candidate, especially if they "look sloppy or indicate an inability to communicate in English," says [H. Robert Horvitz](#), who shared the 2002 Nobel Prize for physiology and medicine and has chaired search committees at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. "These things can kill someone's chances," adds [Kenton Whitmire](#), chemistry professor and former chair of the chemistry department at Rice University in Houston, Texas.

Horvitz adds that cover letters "should be neat and professional," and should fit on one page. Whitmire would allow applicants a bit more room: The letter, he says, should be "no longer than one to two pages." To keep it short, "the cover letter should not reproduce the information in the CV, publications list, or other documents provided," Whitmire says, "but it should be used as a vehicle to highlight those things that the candidate believes will make him or her a good match for the position at hand."

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["The Cover Letter: Door Opener Par Excellence"](#)

## The match

An effective cover letter doesn't just emphasize your best qualities; it also shows how well those qualities are likely to mesh with the open position. "Applicants should begin by reading advertisements for faculty positions carefully and be sure that their background and goals are appropriate for the position in question. You lose credibility if you can't make a case that you fit the ad," Whitmire says. "If the cover letter is to be effective, it must definitely be tailored to the particular institution."

"There's no excuse for not writing a cover letter that shows how your education, experience, and interests fit with what the institution is seeking," warns Julia Miller Vick, coauthor of the [Academic Job Search Handbook](#), which is now in its fourth edition. "Not doing this would reflect laziness," Horvitz observes. At best, Vick adds, "a form letter or one that is generic doesn't accomplish much and leaves how the application is reviewed completely up to the reviewing committee." At worst, a generic cover letter can make you seem undesirable.

"While many people applying for academic positions tend to think that the review process is an evaluation of their previous work—how good is it?—the issue that is as important is the match," Whitmire says. "How will this person fit in here? The former is necessary, but the decision to interview will often be made upon research area or some other measure of fit to the department's needs at that moment in time."

## Planning

Begin by learning about the department in general and the open position in particular. Department websites are a good starting point, but don't stop there. Go beyond the public information, and seek a sense of perspective. "It is best if candidates speak with their advisers and mentors to get some feel for the institution where they wish to apply," Whitmire suggests. Close senior colleagues can serve the same purpose. Read beyond the job ad, and figure out what they're really looking for.

Once you've got a fix on the institution, the department, and the open position, ask yourself what abilities or special qualities a candidate needs to excel in that position. Then determine which of your qualifications and accomplishments will particularly interest this department. Think about your research plans, past research accomplishments, special projects, and previous employment.

What evidence can you put forward that your background and plans prepare you well for this opening? How well do your research interests match those described in the advertisement? How well will they complement the work of the current faculty? How will your presence there make the department better? All this information will determine what to emphasize in

your cover letter.

## Writing the body of the letter

Your research accomplishments and plans should constitute the body of your cover letter for a research university position. At institutions where teaching is the primary emphasis, your primary focus should be your teaching experience, philosophy, and goals—and the suitability of your research program to a teaching-focused environment.

"An outline of plans for teaching and research needs to be specific to be meaningful," Stansbury says. Focus on your most important two or three examples of proposed research projects and innovative teaching plans, such as developing novel courses. These examples should change from one cover letter to another, as you customize your letters for different jobs.

## The opening

After the body of your cover letter has been drafted, you come to the most critical step: writing an attention-getting introduction. Salespeople call this "having a handle." Your handle is what you offer that makes you especially well qualified for a particular faculty opening. For example, summarizing how well your research interests match the ones the department advertised provides an effective letter opening.

The opening paragraph should be short but more than one sentence. After you've captured the reader's attention with the handle, clearly but briefly summarize your most important—and relevant—qualifications. Anything less than a sharp focus and your readers will quickly lose interest and move on to the next application.

## Closing the letter

End your letter decisively. Don't let it meander to an indefinite or weak close. A decisive close projects an image of you as assertive, confident, and decisive. It never hurts to close by requesting an interview.

## Editing

Make your cover letter an example of your best writing by editing it carefully. It must be easy to read. Focus and clarity of expression in your letter imply focus and clarity of thought—very desirable qualities in a faculty member.

Then return to the critical issue: whether your research interests, other qualifications, and personality meet the search committee's requirements. Anything that doesn't accentuate the match should be deleted ruthlessly.

Now, set your letter aside for a day or two before editing it again. The detachment you gain from this short break will help you see what you've written more clearly. Detachment makes it easier to determine whether your paragraphs flow smoothly from one to the next. The logic that seemed so obvious when you were writing may seem much less so a day or two later. Carefully review both your cover letter and your CV to be sure the information in them is perfectly consistent. Often, a committee won't bother to try to resolve any discrepancies they find; they'll just move on to the next application.

Finally, Whitmire advises, "be sure to have your cover letter reviewed by someone [who] can be trusted and who has experience. Often, getting a second opinion about how something sounds to the reader—i.e., what they got from reading the letter, not what you intended in writing it—can be very valuable."

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**John K. Borchardt** 

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## The Commandments of Cover Letter Creation

20 DEC 1996 · BY [PETER FISKE](#)

SHARE:



I've always hated the term "cover letter." It implies that the letter you send out to accompany your résumé, the opening shot in your job-hunt campaign, is merely "decoration" for your résumé. A good cover letter does far more than just cover: It engages the reader and makes her want to explore your job qualifications more fully. A good cover letter also highlights your qualifications, guides the reader through the most important parts of your work history, and demonstrates your flawless command of the English language. That's a lot to cover in only three paragraphs!

Don't be daunted. Writing a good cover letter boils down to making a decent presentation of your experience with the employer's needs foremost in mind. This point is extremely important. If you do not have a good understanding of the requirements of the position and the nature of the work involved, how will you be able to answer the needs of the employer? Writing a good cover letter, just like preparing a winning résumé, requires research into the organization you are approaching.

I have distilled eons of wisdom about cover letters into a list of 10 commandments (well, commandments is a little strong; how about recommendations?) that you should bear in mind while preparing your letters. Even if you have already written your cover letter, you may want to use this list as a check on your product.

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- [Tell them why you're writing!](#)
- [Tell them how you fit.](#)
- [Demonstrate your suitability by citing examples.](#)
- [Use their words.](#)
- [Write to a person, NOT a Human Resources Department.](#)
- [Answer the obvious questions.](#)
- [Keep it brief.](#)
- [Stress the positive.](#)
- [Avoid cover letter clichés.](#)
- [Know when NOT to send a cover letter!](#)

### Recommendation #1: Tell them why you're writing!

This may seem obvious, but you must be specific from the outset about why you are sending someone your résumé. Are you applying for an advertised position or just a potential opening? If it is a specific opening, where did you learn about it? You would be surprised how many people fail to mention the specific job to which they are applying. For big companies that are advertising many positions, your lack of specificity may land your résumé in the recycle bin. Even for small operations, it is important to explain how you heard about the job.

### Recommendation #2: Tell them how you fit.

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Most mediocre cover letters are not specific. They cite items in the résumé but they fail to make the connection to the job that is being advertised. Sure, it's a great thing that you have worked for a summer doing data reduction, but what if they are most concerned about project management experience? You're hosed! You have to show them how your background and experience fit the job they are advertising. At the bare minimum, you should have the job advertisement in front of you as you are writing. But you will be further ahead if you've actually done some research on the company, or better yet, have talked to the people who are advertising the opening.

### Recommendation #3: Demonstrate your suitability by citing examples.

The best way to prove that you fit is to cite examples in your past work history where you tackled similar job duties or occupied a similar position. Do **not** assume that they will pick these details out of your résumé, especially as the average employer spends only 20 seconds scanning through a résumé. For example, if you are applying to work in an aeronautical engineering company doing product development, you want to note any specific experience involving the development of a device or experiment rather than just citing your years of experimental work for your Ph.D. Citing specific examples and quantifying them where possible is the best way of convincing a stranger that you've got what it takes to get the job done.

### Recommendation #4: Use their words.

Read the job description and other materials carefully. One way to make your background and experience a better fit is to use the same phrases and descriptors that they use in the job advertisement. This is an important aspect of "speaking the same language" as the employer. If you use the same terms, you will make a more effective connection between your experience and

their needs.

**Recommendation #5: Write to a person, *not* a Human Resources Department.**

Directing cover letters to nameless human resources personnel is like asking the crocodiles in the moat to lower the drawbridge! HR people are best at scanning résumés and matching job descriptors with items on people's résumés. They are not very good at figuring out how someone with an unusual background (like having a Ph.D.) will fit into a particular position. That decision is left with the hiring manager. In some cases, especially with large companies, it is impossible to do a complete end run around the HR department. In those cases, the best you can do is send a duplicate cover letter and résumé to the person who is actually making the hiring decision. Don't know who that is? Call and find out!

**Recommendation #6: Answer the obvious questions.**

It doesn't take clairvoyance to guess what questions might be uppermost in the mind of someone who reads your cover letter. If you are applying for a job for which a Ph.D. is not required, one obvious question is: "Why is a Ph.D. applying for this job?" Another question might be: "Is this person overqualified?" It is important to anticipate these questions and allay any concerns in your cover letter. It is important to show how your experience as a scientist would be an asset in a wide variety of positions.

**Recommendation #7: Keep it brief.**

One-page cover letters are a rule unless you have some specific reasons to make them longer (for example, if the job description or advertisement asks for answers to questions or for more information). In fact, three paragraphs should be sufficient. If your letter is any longer, you'd better have a good reason. Here is a suggested general structure:

*Paragraph 1:*

- Introduce yourself to the reader.
- Explain why you are writing (either for a specific opening or for a potential opening).
- Explain how you learned about the position.
- Explain why you'd be perfect for the job.

*Paragraph 2:*

- Show how your qualifications fit the job.
- Demonstrate your suitability by citing examples.
- Expand on one or more items from your résumé that highlight your key qualifications.

*Paragraph 3:*

- State what the next step is (e.g., you will call in a week to check up).
- Thank them.

**Recommendation #8: Stress the positive.**

A sad story about how you have been searching for a job for the last 4 years may be sincere and truthful, but it rarely makes a good impression. A good cover letter should project an image of confidence and professionalism. Save the confessions until after you get the job.

**Recommendation #9: Avoid cover letter clichés.**

Your cover letter should be an example of your best written communication. Therefore, it should be self-evident that the writing should be clear, distinctive, and devoid of clichés. But many people can't help but insert some stock cover letter phrases such as: "Enclosed please find ..." or "Thank you for your consideration." These phrases are so routine in cover letters! Say those things differently! Be unique! Show some flair!

**Recommendation #10: Know when NOT to send a cover letter!**

Some companies are using electronic résumé tracking for all their applicants. Many times they don't bother scanning in the cover letter at all and simply throw it away. Spending a great deal of time on a cover letter in these cases is a waste. It would be far wiser to find out the name of the person who is the hiring manager and contact them separately in a letter, either with or

without a copy of your résumé. The personal contact and attention to detail that a separate letter represents is important.

There is a final transcendent rule for sending out your job materials: **following up!** You would be surprised how many people simply mail off their materials and never bother to check back with the employer to see if they have actually arrived. Following up with a phone call a week or so after mailing your job materials does two things. First, it ensures that your letter arrived. More importantly, it demonstrates that you are able to follow through and shows that you are genuinely interested in the job. I have heard from several hiring managers who have been impressed by such a simple act.

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Peter Fiske is a Ph.D. scientist and co-founder of RAPT Industries, a technology company in Fremont, California. He is the author of *Put Your Science to Work* and co-author, with Dr. Geoff Davis, of a blog (at phds.org) on science policy, economics, and educational initiatives that affect science employment. Fiske lives with his wife and two daughters in Oakland, California, and is a frequent lecturer on the subject of career development for scientists.

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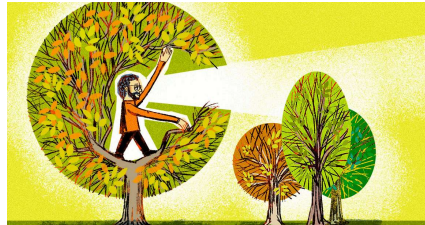
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