

Cover letters that work by Steve Bremner

The power of a covering letter is often overlooked. Candidates spend hours working on their CVs and undo all of their good work by dashing off a covering letter in twenty minutes. The covering letter gives you the first and strongest opportunity to sell yourself. It provides your potential employer with an immediate insight into your personality and suitability for the role.

If you remember that the most important three elements of a covering letter are: to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the organisation and the role it is advertising; to highlight your most relevant experience and show how this can be of specific value to the employer; and finally, to underline your unique selling points, pulling in information that wouldn't naturally sit in a CV, then you can't go far wrong.

Structuring your covering letter

Having said all of that, your covering letter should never be more than a side long. You should be concise and clear, but not comprehensive - this is an advert for your CV and shouldn't try to summarise everything in there.

Try to aim for a maximum of four paragraphs and structure your letter in three parts: the first should set the scene and give your motivations for writing; the second should highlight your suitability for the role, demonstrate your knowledge of the organisation and really get across your motivation and enthusiasm for the job; the third part is your opportunity to detail your availability for interview and should be as proactive as possible to underline your energy and desire for the job. (The second part of the letter is also a good place to explain any anomalies or time gaps in your CV).

How to write a successful covering letter

- Show your understanding of the role and organisation.
- Detail the specific benefits you can bring to the employer.
- Highlight your strengths and relevant experience, making sure these are tailored to the requirements in the advert.
- Be concise and clear - don't try to summarise your entire career history.
- Get facts, names and spelling correct.
- Use a logical, three-part structure.
- Ensure the tone and style fit the industry you are looking to work in.
- Sell, sell, sell - this is your strongest opportunity to create a good impression.

Covering letter mistakes to avoid

- Plagiarising - don't be tempted to copy a letter from the internet, it will be immediately apparent.
- Being too relaxed - your letter should promote you as a professional. Keep reinforcing what you can do for the organisation and how you can help it achieve its goals.
- Talking too much about yourself - this may sound strange given that the purpose of the letter is to sell yourself, but remember to keep the focus of that selling firmly on the specific benefits to the employer - resist the temptation to ramble and go off at tangents - keep it relevant.

The Top Agency

Candidate advice sheets

- Making it too long - the reader will give your letter an average of 20-30 seconds before deciding whether or not to look at your CV - if you don't make an impression in the first few lines, they won't read on.
- Using the same letter for every application - generic letters are very easy to detect and will indicate a lack of enthusiasm and no real desire for the role.
- Getting factual information about the employer wrong - this is the quickest way of getting your CV into the bin.
- Forgetting to ask for an interview - remember the purpose of the letter and demonstrate your ability to be proactive.