

# GET•THE Interview EVERY TIME

Fortune 500 Hiring Professionals' Tips  
for Writing Winning Résumés and Cover Letters

Brenda Greene

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## COVER LETTERS

*“The purpose of a cover letter is to summarize the person’s relevant experience, to express interest in the position, and to demonstrate writing ability.”*

**LISA WHITTINGTON**

Director of Human Resources, Host Marriott Corporation

In the electronic job market, cover letters are nearly passé. Of the 50 Fortune 500 participants, only 11 said cover letters are attached to every résumé. It’s too bad because applicants miss an opportunity to display their strengths—the accomplishments and abilities that never make it onto the résumé because of space limitations.

If it weren’t for a cover letter, Martin Ward of Glen Rock, New Jersey, an IT manager at a major brokerage firm, might still be looking for a job. After his company downsized, laying off several hundred employees in the first quarter of 2001, Ward found himself without a job and stuck in the middle of “the longest job hiring slump since the Depression” (*New York Times*, June 15, 2003). He networked with friends, business associates, family, and headhunters. He e-mailed his résumé to a hundred openings and even sought the help of an Internet job search firm, which reminded him—for a \$100 fee—that everyone was in pretty much the same leaky boat.

After following one false employment lead after another, Ward suddenly remembered a comment made in passing by a senior manager at his former brokerage firm: “If you ever need anything, give me a call,” the IT manager said to Ward just before he left for his new job.

Ward, who is part of the growing phenomenon known as “boomerang employees” (those who return to work for a former employer), didn’t pick up the telephone, but he did sit down and write a cover letter (with a résumé attached). He reminded the senior manager (who had now moved up in the firm) that they had worked on a project together—a project that had added value to the firm

and whose success was still being felt today. The senior manager, who now had more than 40,000 people reporting to him, sent it down the hiring channel that had been previously closed to Ward. Ward's résumé got into the right hiring authority's hands, and he returned to the major brokerage firm several weeks later despite a "formal HR hiring freeze."

Without a cover letter, there's a chance that Ward's résumé would have spun around aimlessly in cyberspace's black hole. Granted, he did network, but it could have taken him twice as long to find his current position. In a way that a casual telephone call or an impromptu breakfast meeting couldn't, Ward's cover letter showed that he was indeed interested in returning to his former company. By committing to paper the value he added to the company while he was there, Ward convinced his old employer that he still had a lot to contribute.

## THE FORMAT TO FOLLOW

Even though many Fortune 500 companies don't require it, cover letters *are* read. Jackie Coburn, a staffing manager at Federal-Mogul, said, "Only if I have an interest in the candidate do I read the cover letter," but 40 percent of the Fortune 500 participants said they "always" read the cover letter first. So what goes into a cover letter? Carol Eubank, a human resources manager at Aquila, Inc., said a cover letter should be a "quick summary of why you want the job and how your qualifications match the requirements."

Don't think that Eubank means you can dash off an e-mail in a heartbeat and be done with it. You have to put some effort and professionalism into a cover letter. In fact, 84 percent of the Fortune 500 participants said they expect applicants to adhere to the same standards they would if they were writing a formal letter (only two participants said e-mailed cover letters are more informal). One of those participants, Stacy Harshman of Albertson's, who maintains that e-mailed cover letters are more informal, said her expectation of an electronic cover letter is to "introduce the person and give an idea where the applicant received information about the company."

But what are the expectations of the other 84 percent of the Fortune 500 hiring professionals? Let's start with the format first. You can simplify your life by using block style for all your correspondence. (There's no indentation with block.) Here's the rudimentary arrangement: your address, the date, the employer's address, salutation, body, closing—all flush left.

A reminder about stationery: When searching for a job, you should invest in high-quality stationery. (Even if the application process takes place entirely online, you still need a résumé in hard copy for interviews—and also a few extra

copies to carry around in your briefcase in case you run into an old colleague.) Make sure you have enough crisp, neutral paper for both the résumés and cover letters, and to further polish your professional image, it's a good idea to purchase matching envelopes. (If you have your contact information professionally printed on the stationery, don't put this information elsewhere in your cover letter.)

Examine the format and notice the placement of information: your address, date, the employer's address, the salutation, the body, the closing. Avoid short-cutting this style. Prospective employers want to see, at the very least, that you are familiar with the basics of business correspondence, so include all of this information, and—here's the difficult part—make sure it fits on one page. Time is in short supply these days, so no matter what, strive to be concise (try not to exceed 250 to 350 words). According to the participants, “neatness” also counts.

Let's look at some of the style features, beginning with the design. Remember there is nothing casual about the process of searching for a job. To be a consummate professional, all your communication must be formal, unless, of course, you are asking your best friend for a job.

The cover letter is in a block format, which means all information aligns along the left margin (no worry about indentation or tabs). It's centered on the page, with an equal amount of spacing on the top as well as the bottom. A line of spacing is used to separate paragraphs, except after your closing, which should get four lines to accommodate your signature (in black or blue pen).

Let's review some technicalities first. In the name and address section, include your courtesy title, which will either be Mr. or Ms. Instead of spelling out the state's name, use the postal service's two-letter (no periods) abbreviation; in the body of the text, spell out the state's name (Baltimore is one of the cities that can stand alone without a state name—check a style reference for stand-alone cities). In the employer's address, also include a courtesy title or professional title (Mr., Ms., Dr.). Using a department name will ensure that your letter gets to the appropriate hiring authority. Department names are capitalized in an address. Then use the full, legal name of the company. After the salutation, use a colon, not a comma. After your complimentary closing, use a comma.

Now let's look at the body of the letter. At its most basic, it should tell the employer where you heard about the position; it should tell the employer what position you are interested in; it should reinforce the idea that you are qualified for the job; and it should tell the employer how to contact you. Make sure your cover letter is written to a specific individual (never send a cover letter “To Whom It May Concern”).

But there are a few more things a cover letter can accomplish, provided it's done well. Think of a cover letter as a means of furthering your cause beyond the résumé. So how does Carol Nadata's cover letter in Figure 5.1 do just that?

FIGURE 5.1 Carol Nadata's Cover Letter

Ms. Carol Nadata 100 Grindall Street Baltimore, MD 21100	<b>YOUR ADDRESS</b>
May 1, 2004	<b>DATE</b>
Mr. Robert Leonard Sales Department Consolidated Finishing Corporation 100 Pennsylvania Avenue Washington, DC 21100	<b>EMPLOYER'S ADDRESS</b>
Dear Mr. Leonard:	<b>SALUTATION</b>
<b>BODY</b> <p>I recently read the <i>Baltimore Sun</i> profile of your company (April 28, 2004) and noticed that you are expanding your business into the Baltimore area. I am sure you will need accomplished account executives to increase your presence in this area, and I believe I am perfectly suited to help you as I am already familiar with your company's innovative and environmentally sound products.</p> <p>The enclosed résumé outlines my skills and experience. I am adept at cultivating key relationships with decision makers, so I believe I can grow your business significantly in this area. As you can see from my résumé, I have innumerable contacts in the furniture business—and I invest a good deal of my time through my community service and avid golfing in strengthening my already healthy and profitable business relationships. I believe this will carry over into your business at Consolidated Finishing, as well.</p> <p>I am primarily interested in building your business in the Baltimore area, but I am willing to relocate if necessary.</p> <p>I will contact you next week to request an interview for current or future positions. If you would like to contact me, I can be reached at my home telephone number at 410-539-1000 in the evenings or on my cell phone, anytime, at 410-556-1010.</p> <p>Thank you for your time and consideration.</p>	
Cordially,	<b>CLOSING</b>
Carol Nadata	
Enc.: Résumé	

- It shows that she takes the initiative. Not only does she read up on industry news, but she acts on it too. She spotted a job opening before it even appeared.
- She tells the employer where she heard about the company.
- She anticipates the employer's need by informing the employer that "you will need accomplished account executives to increase your presence . . ."
- She adds information specific to this position, using language her employer understands—"cultivating key relationships with decision makers"—and thus reinforces the idea that she is qualified for the position.
- She includes information about her extracurricular activities, which is not listed on her résumé (notice that these activities are relevant to her sales career).
- She tells the employer that she is willing to relocate.
- She tells the employer she will contact him but provides enough information so that she can be contacted immediately.
- She thanks the employer.

Writing a good cover letter ensures that you will "stand out." Try to relish this opportunity to distinguish yourself but also know that employers are getting an added look at your communication skills, so the cover letter must be letter perfect, clear, and concise. Because businesspeople are inundated with information in the digital age, they want employees who know how to cut through the chaff and get down to the essentials. Your communication with your prospective employer must show you can do this. In addition, Amy Moers, a senior staffing manager at SYSCO Corporation, said the cover letter should "outline the interests and mobility of a candidate if they aren't in the city where the job is located."

## ELECTRONIC COVER LETTERS

When Ken Dean, an assistant vice president of Bank of New York, reads a cover letter, he wants "to find out what position the candidate seeks" and expects that candidate to "add flavor to anything unusual on the résumé." That holds true for the electronic, or e-mail, cover letter as well, so don't bypass this chance to shine. One of the real advantages of an online application is that you have the time and resources to make the best of this opportunity. Yes, writing a cover letter is an opportunity.

Don't forget that before you even begin any online application process, you'll have your job search data file in front of you. You can pull the appropriate information out of your data file and—once you've tweaked it to the specific job

opening—you can put the information into the e-mail message. In the predigital age, you probably would have completed the job application process by sitting in an office lobby struggling to think of something clever to say on your paper application (without the benefit of a dictionary or stylebook) and fighting a bad case of the jitters. You're in the driver's seat now, so prepare for this trip as you would for any other.

Stacey Webb, a human resources representative at Gannett, stated that the purpose of a cover letter is “to gain a general understanding of what an applicant seeks in a new position and to give information on background and qualifications.” Leslie Humphries, a human resources specialist at State Farm, contended that candidates should “sell their interest” in the company. Look at the electronic cover letter in Figure 5.2 (placed in the body of an e-mail and not sent as an attachment) to see if it meets these requirements (notice that the text is plain, so features, such as em dashes or accents, are not present).

Even though e-mail was used initially as an informal tool of communication, it is quickly becoming the preferred form for business correspondence. According to Helen Cunningham, coauthor of *The Business Style Handbook*: “If you are using e-mail for formal correspondence, both within and outside your organization, apply the same standards you would to a letter.”

As for the layout of an electronic cover letter, plan to follow the same block style, but this time there isn't any need to include your address, date, or employer's address as that information is being transmitted electronically. Instead, for an e-mail you need a *correct* e-mail address, the *correct* name of the hiring authority (if it's not a general “contact us” submittal), and a topic for the subject line (usually a job number or position title). Even though the job applicant could include an electronic signature, he doesn't, so there's no need to add spacing after his complimentary closing.

Beyond the design, let's take a look at some of the things the job applicant's electronic cover letter accomplishes.

- He uses a contact name in the first paragraph, a name he picked up when he submitted his résumé online.
- He tells the employer where he found the job opening (on the company Web site [notice he uses the company's preference for lowercasing the word *website*]).
- Even though he has had other jobs in his 20 years of experience (which are listed on his résumé), he highlights only two positions that demonstrate his leadership abilities.
- Each position he highlights is given a concise paragraph (no technical jargon here, but he does use language that is current and suggests he is an

FIGURE 5.2 *Michael Jones's Cover Letter*

To: bdephilips@siac.com	<b>RECIPIENT'S E-MAIL ADDRESS</b>
Subject: Systems Director Position	<b>POSITION YOU WANT</b>
Dear Mr. DePhilips:	<b>SALUTATION</b>
<b>BODY</b>	
<p>After reviewing the SIAC website, I noticed several opportunities in the development area (development director, technical director, and development project manager) and contacted Bill Smith, a colleague of yours in human resources, about these opportunities. He suggested I send my resume to you for your review.</p> <p>As you can see by my resume, my experience includes more than 20 years of progressive leadership responsibilities in large technology environments.</p> <p>At Chase Manhattan Bank I was actively involved in developing highly integrated, worldwide applications that supported all aspects of the business -- from sales and marketing through operations and finance. My role progressed from a programmer/analyst to project leader, then project manager and finally to director.</p> <p>At Winthrop Stimson I continued to focus on development but took on additional organizational responsibilities. Beyond leading teams developing mainframe, client/server, and Internet-based applications, I was responsible to a group of project managers for department planning and finances (workload of \$40 million) and for department staffing and staff development (350 programmers). In this capacity, I was promoted to vice president.</p> <p>Beyond these roles and responsibilities, my abilities to work with teams and get things done led to being selected for senior teams that drove reengineering and best practices. I have had successes with many different types of business units, and I believe I can bring experience and expertise to your highly regarded organization (I noticed on your website that SIAC was named "one of the 100 Best Places to Work in IT" by Computerworld magazine). I would like to help you strengthen your leadership team at an organization, group, or project level.</p> <p>Thank you for reviewing my attached resume. I will contact you next week regarding this opportunity. If, in the meantime, you would like to contact me, please call my cell phone anytime at (973) 296-1000.</p>	
Sincerely, Michael Jones	<b>CLOSING</b>



insider). He then limits the letter to 340 words (because he has written a rough draft of this cover letter in Word, he knows his word count is about one page before the electronic submittal).

- He uses numbers to substantiate his claims.
- He tells the employer that he is interested in working at this “highly regarded” organization and then backs up this statement with something he picked up when he was browsing through the company Web site.
- He tells the company how he can help it, emphasizing his progressive leadership abilities.
- He provides instant access (his cell phone number).
- He thanks the employer.

Notice, too, the style differences in the electronic cover letter. Because this is not a hard-copy Word document, Jones is limited to the characters on the keyboard, so he doesn't have access to such symbols as the em dash or the accent marks on résumé or the use of bullets. To be on the safe side, he doesn't italicize the name of the magazine, either, just in case the recipient's system can't translate this command. All text in an e-mail should be plain text so that it doesn't get garbled on the recipient's end.

More about this later, but it's always a good idea to e-mail the employer after you send a cover letter and résumé electronically whether it was received in readable form. Look at this as another opportunity to bring attention to your submission, so make sure you handle this professionally.

Even if you have to resend your documents five times because of a glitch on the other end, make sure you do so with grace. Paula Axelrod, a manager of staffing at BJ's Wholesale Club, said job candidates need to “be courteous to all [they] come in contact with.”

Make the e-mail inquiry as brief as possible.

To: Mr. DePhilips

Re: Job inquiry/Recent submission

Dear Mr. DePhilips:

I just sent a cover letter and resume and am verifying whether you received them in readable form. If your system did not receive a readable copy, please let me know at your earliest convenience and I will resend the document according to your requirements. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Michael Jones

## WHAT IF YOU HAVE NO QUALIFICATIONS?

The Fortune 500 participants stressed again and again that they want to know in your cover letter why you think you are qualified for the position. For newcomers to the job market or recent graduates, this topic may be a difficult one.

The question is how do you turn your experience at school or in your community into a marketable commodity? Let's look at the cover letter in Figure 5.3 from a job candidate seeking a summer internship at an advertising agency.

Internships are an excellent means for obtaining gainful employment once you graduate. You may even get college credit, provided you arrange for the internship with your school. Many company Web sites provide explicit directions to students about how to obtain a summer internship. Follow these directions precisely.

Chris Collier of Georgia-Pacific said he wants a cover letter to give an "overview of experience and value-added potential to his company. It should also express a high level of enthusiasm." With this advice in mind, look at the job candidate's cover letter in Figure 5.3 that was sent, as specified on the Web site, as hard copy.

Let's look at how this job candidate tailors her cover letter so that her lack of relevant experience doesn't work against her. She focuses on her education as well as how her past experience can be of value to the employer.

- She immediately tells the employer what she wants (a summer internship).
- She exhibits professional polish, even though she is still a student.
- She demonstrates in her writing that she is positive, upbeat, and enthusiastic.
- She tells where she read about the opportunity.
- She talks about her relevant coursework (accomplishing a 3.5 GPA).
- She zeros in on the position she had at the Career Center, where she demonstrated leadership abilities as well as sensitivity (steering students in the creation of résumés is not an easy task).
- She refers to some of her soft skills (patience and highly responsible character), which is acceptable as she has so little experience.
- She thanks the recipient and asserts that she will contact the employer. The applicant includes her cell phone number and e-mail address.

## A FEW MORE TIPS FOR NEWCOMERS

David Murphy of McGraw-Hill said a cover letter should "grab my attention by the statement of one or two really salient facts that encourage me to read the full résumé." It's not always easy to anticipate what's going to grab someone's

FIGURE 5.3 *Marie Capelli's Cover Letter*

<p>Ms. Marie Ann Capelli 10 Commonwealth Avenue, Apt. 100 Brighton, MA 02100</p>	<p><b>HER NAME AND ADDRESS</b></p>
<p>February 14, 2005</p>	<p><b>DATE (winter application for summer)</b></p>
<p>Ms. Suzann Roberts-Smith Rogers &amp; Cowan 100 Fifth Avenue New York, NY 10010</p>	<p><b>EMPLOYER'S NAME /ADDRESS</b></p>
<p>Dear Ms. Roberts-Smith:</p>	<p><b>SALUTATION</b></p>
<p><b>BODY</b> I want to express my interest in a summer internship with Rogers &amp; Cowan. I became aware of this opportunity with your company while investigating the InternshipExchange Website through my work at Boston College Career Center. I was attracted to your company because of its commitment to delivering outstanding service to its impressive collection of clients.</p>	
<p>The highly regarded communication curriculum at Boston College provides a solid foundation in both public speaking as well as written communication. Besides intensive writing courses, I have completed an advertising and public relations course (with a GPA of 3.5).</p>	
<p>As you can see in my résumé, my employment and activity record demonstrate my leadership abilities as well as my organizational skills. Working at Boston College Career Center as a peer adviser has given me the opportunity to lead and assist students in perfecting their résumés as well as their interview skills. In addition, working with children has taught me patience as well as the ability to use my organizational skill and creative flair in coordinating activities.</p>	
<p>I am confident that my versatility and highly responsible character will be an asset to your summer program. I would like to be granted an interview so that we can discuss my qualifications further. I will contact you within the next week regarding this internship opportunity. If you would like to contact me, I can be reached immediately on my cell phone (201-236-1000) or through my e-mail address, which is marann@bc.edu.com.</p>	
<p>Thank you for your time and consideration.</p>	
<p>Yours truly,</p>	<p><b>CLOSING</b></p>
<p>Marie Capelli Enc.: Résumé</p>	<p><b>ENCLOSURE</b></p>

attention, but telling a person something that he or she has never heard before usually is a good start. It falls within the suggestions of many Fortune 500 participants to “differentiate yourself.” Hiring professionals at large companies see hundreds of résumés and cover letters, so telling them something new helps you stand out.

If a former part-time employer wrote an excellent reference for you, feel free to include it in your cover letter. Just make sure you use a substantial quotation: “Great kid” doesn’t say much, but “I didn’t get one complaint from customers about a missing section of the Sunday *New York Times* while Marie put together the paper at the store” does.

And always use language that is simple and direct. It may be tempting to finally throw around a few words that were hammered into you when you took your SAT prep class, but try to resist. Your writing should be a natural expression of who you are. Because the cover letter and résumé are your formal introduction to the company, don’t use slang, colloquialisms, or clichés, but also don’t be afraid to be yourself.

Even with minimal experience, it’s important to demonstrate your professionalism—through your cover letter and résumé—and emphasizing that hiring you will be a good investment. A willingness to learn as well as a positive and enthusiastic attitude have a value not easily calculated but much in demand by employers.