

Cover Letter Clinic For AGO Houston2016

I'm the perfect fit – call me now!

That's what you should expect from your cover letter. Writing the perfect cover letter is an exercise in selling yourself. It's not your autobiography, it's not about you, it's about what you can do for the church, school, company or university. It must convince the reader that you are both competitive for the job and a good fit with the institution. While your resume is about you, your cover letter is about what you can do for them.

There is a fine line between pride in achievement and insufferable arrogance when writing about your experiences and who you are as a professional. Your cover letter builds a bridge of connectivity between you and the recipient and gets your resume read with serious attention” Martin Yate, author Cover Letters that Knock 'em Dead

Colleagues with whom I've spoken say the number one favor you can do yourself is to keep your cover letter brief, making your points succinctly. Three or four paragraphs should cover it.

If you write a really great cover letter that speaks to the job responsibilities and the job description, I engage instantly.

Justin Smith, director new student orientation at Georgetown University

First do your research and homework

The more you know about the employer's needs, the more compelling your letter can be. Review websites, brochures, sales flyers, promotional materials, speak with current employees for inside scoop. Search newspaper archives, public libraries and career center resources, do keyword search on company name and search such places as Monster's company profiles. (Monster.com)

In addition,

- Martin Yate has his clients do *Target job deconstruction* which helps the applicant focus clearly on the responsibilities of the position from the viewpoint of the selection committee – this is a must do. The process is outlined at the end of this handout, and a link is also provided.
- Use your network to glean information and find a connection
- Use Google news and other online methods to see if the institution has been in the news and learn more about the organization.
- Keep a document with labeled paragraphs for each of your skills, your work in progress.
- Be careful of your social media postings.

Recommended structure

Inside address and professional salutation. If possible, obtain the name and contact information for the hiring manager, committee chair, or other person responsible for the hire. If you cannot obtain that, *Dear Search Committee* is preferable to *Dear Sir or Madam* – they may be considered sexist greetings.

First paragraph - Reason you are writing, how you heard about the position

- Display your interest in and what you like about the school/church/company and why are you a good fit
- Relate your background to the job's needs and articulate how you'll meet them.
- Correlate your knowledge and expertise to the employer's needs both stated and implied to show how hiring you will benefit the employer. Use an attention grabbing example from your past work.
- Use endorsements if they provide a connection.

Second paragraph – targeted comparison of your skills and the job requirements as listed and assumed

- Sell your expertise and qualifications, skills, experience, and research - highlighting a few specific examples. Focus on helping them, and share with them why you think your background, experiences and style of working syncs up well with the institution's mission, vision, values, goals, culture and purpose.
- Tailor distinctly to the position
- Emphasize transferable skills and professional values.
- Reference issues behind the job's most important requirements, implied needs or issues
- Give examples of how you work productively with coworkers, reports, and management, and what you've learned about productivity and communication from these experiences.
- Show how you can add value to their organization by giving them your best example of how you have done this with your present employer.
- Relevant professional accomplishments would be aligned with at least one of employer qualifications.

Third Paragraph – illuminate your personality professional passions

- Allow the hiring manager to see a glimpse of your personality by telling a brief story of your professional experiences that can't be seen through a list of achievements on a resume.
- Show your personal style and philosophy match up with theirs
- Express your enthusiasm and convince the committee you really want the job
- Give insight into your character

Closing paragraph and signature

- Thank reader, request an opportunity to meet. Include a plan of action and next steps. Make sure you follow up.
- For example:
"It would be a pleasure to give you more information about my qualifications and experience"

"I welcome the opportunity"

"I look forward to discussing our mutual interest"

"The chance to meet with you would be a privilege and a pleasure"

- If applying for an academic position, list enclosures such as CV or Profile, list of publications, grants, etc.
- Your closing salutation should be professional – such as *Kind regards*.

Writing style

- Create punchy sentences.
Power verbs
<https://www.themuse.com/advice/185-powerful-verbs-that-will-make-your-resume-awesome>
- Good fonts for
Headlines, contact info/signature – Arial, Century Gothic, Gill Sans, Lucida Sans, Times, Verdana
Body of letter – Bondoni, Garamond, Georgia, Goudy Old Style
- Give yourself a star – put a red dot at top right hand corner of a paper resume and cover letter. Yates feels this can give you an advantage.
- Use language appropriate to telling your story to a quasi-interested stranger.
- Use language that indicates your expertise in your field.
- Coordinate style with your resume, CV, etc.
- Make each thought and sentence as succinct as possible.
- Make your content unique – don't copy text from your resume.
- Let your writing reflect your personality.
- Show how you are likeable and approachable.
- Follow the employer's directions for what they are asking.
- Use block style, match your resume.
- Emphasize your personal brand.
- Be specific and back up everything you say with great examples of your work.
- Use words from the job description to tell why you are uniquely qualified for the job.
- You could begin each paragraph with a bolded word that summarizes the reason you are uniquely qualified and back it up with fact.
- Bullet list of qualifications OK if compared with job requirements
- Using prose may help clarify your message
- Proof, proof, proof. Find a friend/spouse who will read your materials as critically as possible.

Don't

- Begin with *I'm applying for the job I saw in Sunda's newspaper*
- Tell the company they're great – they already know it
- Send salary history
- Use buzzwords
- Repeat what is in your resume
- Highlight (fill) key parts
- Write a generic cover letter
- Use gender references – in salutations and elsewhere
- Start every sentence with "I" or "My" – focus more on the employer's requirements and not your own

Electronic Submissions

- Broad keywords don't tell recruiters much – use specific terms.
- Don't list keywords. Applicant tracking systems look for context – tell the story and keywords will fit in naturally. Use a keyword as a lead-in to an achievement bullet.
- If you include keywords in your skills section, make sure that skill shows up elsewhere on your resume because more sophisticated applicant tracking systems check for context – using a keyword only once can be a red flag.
- Keep an email cover letter to one screen if possible.
- When emailing application materials to a hiring manager, paste your cover letter within the body of your message to make sure they get it.
- Send as a PDF.
- Some email headings:
Posting 2314 – Eastman DMA ready to teach
Referral from Eileen Guenther – Associate Professor of Organ
Your next Music Director – MM, Yale Institute of Sacred of Music

What do search committees want?

- Search committees are looking for reasons to eliminate you from contention.
- Few higher education professionals receive training on the search committee process, but are expected to serve on or lead committees.
- Search committees are often made up of insiders who often exhibit favoritism. Sometimes it's the culture of the institution.
- Logistics prevent committees from spending the time to do a lot of research on candidates. It's easier to skip a candidate than to delay a decision or ask someone to call a candidate, judge the merits of that response, report back to committee, meet or set a call to vote on the response and then rank the candidate against other candidates.
- Give the committee the answer to the questions they might ask before they have a chance to ask them.
- Committees are risk averse – explain any red flags.
- If you're going for a position that might not seem logical – moving up or down – tell why.
- Explain leaving tenure track to have kids – they might not think you got through your pre-tenure review.
- Sometimes they are bound to make a spousal hire.

New grads (some good advice for all here)

- Research the company, church, university.
- Learn about the culture and business needs, then speak directly to those needs.
- Show your enthusiasm, connect your knowledge, experience and career interests to the employer and job.
- Make a personal connection with someone who works there – LinkedIn.
- Include volunteer work, class projects, extracurricular, special interests, traveling, playing sports, high GPA, school leadership positions, seasonal jobs.
- Find out what skills are important to the employer and show how you have used those skills.

- Show how you're genuinely into the kind of work you're seeking.
- Give one or two pertinent examples of major life choices, lifelong interests, hobbies and passions, showing how your proclivities and ideals are aligned with the employer's projects and contributions to the world to show how you would contribute.
- Ask confidently for interview.
- Enumerate your applicable skills, tech, communication, research, report writing, time management, organizational skills, good work habits, good team member, customer service. Back them up with examples.

How to handle potential negatives

What you think of as a drawback may just to what that committee believes is valuable

- Layoff - *I'm eager to continue my career. This position is the perfect match to my qualifications and career goals.*
- Long-term unemployment - *I was a top producer, my position was eliminated during restructuring, in the interim, I've been networking, keeping my skills fresh, eager to resume.*
- Medical leave - *Don't disclose medical information that could jeopardize your chance of landing job. I went to school part-time while recuperating, was given an excellent bill of health, and am highly motivated.*
- Time off caring for family member - *I was the primary caregiver, kept work skills updated by independently and participated in professional activities. I'm confident that I would be an asset.*
- Time off raising children - *I kept my skills and connections current, actively volunteering, and taking leadership roles in school and charitable organizations.*
- Relocation - *I wanted to be closer to family, excellent opportunities, etc.*
- Career change - *Although successful in my career as..., the aspects of my work that I found most rewarding were ... I'm confident in my ability to excel in this new field incorporating those skills.*
- Entrepreneur to corporate - *I built a successful small business, grew revenues, but closed operation to pursue my passion for ... building on skills I've been successfully using.*
- Job hopping - *I'm searching for a position where I can make a long-term commitment. My credentials are an excellent fit to your needs.*
- Temp experience - *I've had a number of interesting assignments, but the short-term nature does not let me provide the enduring value-added contributions I find to be most fulfilling.*
- Demoted - *Budget cuts required me to take a...postion in order to remain employed.*
- Reframe focal point of what you bring - *I want to expand my experience with leadership opportunities in a different type of institution or metropolitan area.*

Always stay upbeat and positive.

Talking about periods of unemployment

- Lots of people have short gaps, but account for longer gaps. Don't make excuses - show how it makes you a more attractive candidate.

- Show how you've remained active - *Since leaving my last employer, I have been completing intensive training in. I've been contributing my time and talents to the successful advancement of XYZ charitable organization, while actively seeking full-time position.*
- How could unemployment make you a better employee? Inspire a move to new career? Freelance work which taught you value of retaining clients?
- Illness? Write about how your cancer, or chemo changed your character, giving you a can-do attitude, perseverance.
- Only provide information that enhances your value and makes a compelling case for an interview.

What the experts say about cover letters

According to a survey from OfficeTeam, 86 percent of executives polled said cover letters are valuable when evaluating job candidates. 80 percent of managers said it is common to receive electronic resumes accompanied by cover letters.

- *Use cover letter strategically* Anu Datta, executive recruiter, Korn/Ferry, San Francisco
- *The most important factor in getting me to read your cover letter is to keep it brief.* Steve Young, Professor of Music, Bridgewater State University, (MA)
- *I rarely look at a cover letter. Say what you must in the body of the email with a resume attached, or customize your resume toward each and every position you seek. Channel the effort elsewhere* Lindsay Olson, partner, Paradigm Staffing
- *Say Something New. If I like someone's resume for a specific position, then I read the cover letter. Take up the challenge of making yours stand out. Tell me something about your professional history that I would never know from your resume - how you lead a team to success on a project, for example.* Ross Pasquale, owner, Monday Ventures
- *It's all about the resume.* Cheryl Blackman, recruiter for Wells Fargo, Texas Human Resources

Comments from those who read cover letters

- *Clearly tell me how you can do the job.* - CEO
- *Show me how you used your skills.* - department manager
- *What contributions did you make?* - VP
- *Tell me what you can offer my company that makes you special.* - President
- *Tell me why should I select you for an interview?* - HR manager

Sample resources and links

The internet is full of sample cover letters and advice. This is just to get you started. *Caution: Don't spend all your time searching for the perfect cover letter online. It can only come from doing the work outlined in this handout.*

Career advice on Monster.com
Indeed.com
HigherEdJobs.com

Sample job listings used in workshop

<http://agohq-jobs.careerwebsite.com/jobseeker/job/28889049/>

<https://www.higheredjobs.com/faculty/details.cfm?JobCode=176271069&Title=Assistant Professor of Worship Music>

From Martin Yate

<http://www.bbj.org/Docs/Cover Letters That Knock Them Dead.pdf>

http://be.wvu.edu/careers/students/Knock_em_Dead.pdf

Target job deconstruction

<https://thingscareerrelated.com/2014/06/29/when-you-cant-tailor-your-resume-to-a-particular-employer-try-the-target-job-deconstruction-technique/>

Books

Talking your way to the top - Gretchen Hirsch

Cover letters that Knock Em Dead - Martin Yate - The definitive resource.

Search Committees: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Faculty, Staff and Administrative Searches - Christopher D Lee, PHD, SPHR

On my Facebook Page, Duerr Consulting, you can also find [Quick Links for Job Search](#).

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<https://www.facebook.com/groups/892265440846855/>

Target Job Deconstruction

The most productive résumés start with a clear focus on the target job, and look at its responsibilities from the point of view of the selection committee. Let's start Target Job Deconstruction to determine the proper focus for your job-targeted resume:

Step One. Collect 6-10 job postings of the job you are best qualified to do. Save them in a folder and also print them out. Not sure where to start? Try www.indeed.com, it's a job aggregator (or spider) that runs around thousands of job sites looking for jobs with your chosen keywords.

Step Two. Create a new MSWord doc and title it TJD for Target Job Deconstruction. Start with a first subhead reading JOB TITLE, then copy and paste in all the variations from your samples. Looking at the result you can say, "when employers are hiring people like me they tend to describe the job title with these words."

This will help you to come up with a suitable Target Job Title for your resume. Coming right after your name and contact information, this helps your resume perform well in resume database searches and acts as a headline giving human eyes an immediate focus.

Step Three. Add a second subhead titled SKILLS/RESPONSIBILITIES/REQUIREMENTS/DELIVERABLES ETC

Look through all the print job postings across your desk for a single requirement that is common to all six of your job postings. Take the most complete description of that single requirement and copy and paste it (with a bullet) into your TJD doc; put a #6 by your entry to signify it is common to all.

Underneath this pasted entry add any other words and phrases from the other job postings used to describe this same area. Repeat this exercise for any other requirements common to all six of your job postings.

Step Four. Then repeat the exercise for requirements common to five of the jobs and then four and so on all the way down to those requirements mentioned in only one job posting.

When this is done you can look at your work and say, "when employers are hiring people like me they tend to refer to them by these job titles, they prioritize their needs in this way and use these words to describe them."

Step Five. This step will get you focused on the very practical competency issues of interest to employers, it is information you might well use in an interview as well as in your resume.

For each of the prioritized requirements you identified in Steps Three and Four, identify the problems and challenges that arise when you are executing your duties in this area. Then for each problem challenge identify

- Examples of you successfully tackling such an issue
- Examples of tactics and strategies you employ to reduce the occurrence of such problems occurring in the first place.

Step Six. Looking again at the prioritized requirements you identified in Steps Three and Four, consider each individual requirement and recall the best person you have ever known doing that that aspect of the job.

Then identify what made that person stand out in your mind as a true professional; think of personality traits, perhaps he always had a smile, specific skill sets, perhaps she had good listening, critical thinking and time management skills.

Take the time to do this conscientiously and you will have a complete behavioral profile of the person every employer wants to hire, plus a behavioral blueprint for your future professional success. Consider the role of dress, body language, and social skills in your evaluation

Step Seven. Looking one last time at the prioritized requirements you identified in Steps Three and Four, consider each individual requirement and recall the worst person you have ever known doing that aspect of the job.

Then identify what made that person stand out in your mind as a failure: think of personality traits, perhaps he was passive aggressive; the lack of specific skill sets, perhaps she never listened, thought things through and was never on time with projects or for meetings. Consider the role of dress, body language, and social skills in your evaluation

Take the time to do this conscientiously ***and this time you will have a complete behavioral profile of the person no employer wants to hire***, plus a behavioral blueprint for total professional failure.

Pulling it all together

The most productive résumé focuses on your professional experience, as it relates to your ability to deliver on the requirements of job you have targeted.

We now know the story your resume needs to tell to be maximally productive in the resume databases and when it eventually gets in front of those human eyes: we have the essential information and insight into your target job to give the right focus to your job-targeted resume.

We also have a comprehensive list of the keywords employers use when looking for someone with this job title. These descriptors can be used in the **Core Competency** section of your resume, and repeated in the body copy, placing them in the contexts were they were applied.

Now you are ready to start looking into your background and gathering the information for the story your resume need to tell.

<http://my.knockemdead.com>