

## COVER LETTERS:

# COVER LETTER BASICS: 5 STEPS TO A TOP-NOTCH LETTER

### Takeaway Points

- A cover letter should complement – rather than echo – your resume.
- A quote from a colleague or former boss that attests to your skills is worth adding as long as it's written tastefully.
- Gather some information about the company and use some of it in the cover letter. That can impress a hiring manager.

By: Team Pongo

If you're interested in a job that you've seen posted online or advertised in a newspaper, you can be sure many others have seen it as well. So the employer may have to sort through dozens of resumes, each of which will probably get only a brief scan, as the employer looks for a few candidates to interview.

How do you get into that select group? A solid, organized resume is essential, but first, you'll need a compelling cover letter that will pique the hiring manager's interest.

Follow these five steps to build a cover letter that will make your resume almost irresistible:

1. Avoid Anonymity
2. Complement – Don't Echo – Your Resume
3. Include an Endorsement?
4. Share Your Knowledge about Them
5. Put it All Together

#### 1. **Avoid Anonymity**

In many cases, the job ad or posting will tell you the name of the hiring manager. If so, use it and be sure to spell it right. If not, don't stop there; find out the name. Search the company's web site. If you can't find it there, call the company's main phone number. Ask for the individual's name (with correct spelling), title, and department. In doubt about gender? Ask, "Is that Mr. Lee Jones or Ms. Lee Jones." Your cover letter will be more impressive if you've taken the time to find out the name and use it.

#### 2. **Complement – Don't Echo – Your Resume**

Job applicants use the resume to list their qualifications, accomplishments, and relevant work experience to land a particular position. The cover letter, meanwhile, serves as the applicant's "opening act" whose objective is to generate enough interest that the hiring manager will want to read the resume.

Accomplishing that requires two things:

- Phrases that call attention to relevant qualifications and background, which are detailed in the resume.
- A little self-promotion through the use of persuasive language.

Your resume should contain *detailed* proof that you have the skills and background to do the job. Your cover letter, on the other hand, provides a sneak preview that should highlight how well your background matches the employer's needs, and how your skills have benefited previous employers. By writing an

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effective cover letter, you can help the hiring manager get to know you a little, and you might actually help set the tone for an interview.

Let’s say you’re responding to a job posting for a software project manager. One of the key qualifications reads: *Proven ability to complete projects on time and within budget*. You have that ability, and your resume says so. But what if the hiring manager never looks at that part of the resume? You can call attention to it in your cover letter by saying something like this:

*During my tenure at ABC Company, I have directed three software development projects within tight timeframes and delivered them ahead of schedule, saving \$25,000 in budgeted development costs and thousands more in productivity costs by making the software available for use weeks ahead of schedule.*

You’ve just improved your chances that the hiring manager will flip to your resume and see what else you did for ABC Company.

### 3. Include an Endorsement?

Another element you might consider adding to your cover letter is an endorsement from a former boss or colleague. Tooting your own horn too loudly can come off as self-serving or even a bit obnoxious, but a quote from someone else attesting to your skills and dedication can’t hurt.

For instance, a statement like this may be an incentive for a hiring manager to read your resume:

*Our COO, Pat McDonald, had this to say about my work on a recent software upgrade project: “Jane exhibited strong leadership skills and a high level of dedication to her work. Her great attitude helped motivate all her teammates, who pulled through under her direction to beat the project deadline by two weeks.”*

### 4. Share Your Knowledge about Them

Conducting research about the company before an interview is a must. And dropping some of that knowledge in a cover letter can impress a hiring manager. To show that you’ve done your homework, consider citing data in one of the following categories:

- The industry or industries in which the company operates;
- The company’s market position;
- The company’s potential for growth; and
- The importance of the job you’re applying for within the company (as you see it) and how your experience can help deliver in that role

You might throw in a line such as: *I believe XYZ Company has great potential to be a leader in its industry through its publicly stated software development initiatives.*

One piece of knowledge you don’t want to share in the cover letter is your idea of how much a position in the company might pay. Focus on the value you can bring to the company.

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### Did you know?

Pongo's [Letter Builder](#) enables you to craft well-written cover letters to accompany your resumes. The Letter Builder can even help you write post-interview follow-up letters!

#### 5. Putting it All Together

Incorporating all the recommendations from above, here's how the entire cover letter might read:

January 15, 2008

Mr. John F. Jones  
Director of Technology Operations  
XYZ Company  
123 Main St.  
Anytown, USA 22222

**RE: Software Project Manager – Job Posting RF637 on XYZ Company Web Site**

Dear Mr. Jones:

I believe I am exceptionally well qualified for the Software Project Manager position, and have attached a resume that highlights many skills and accomplishments that align closely with your current needs. Among the qualifications that will enable me to make a significant contribution to your organization are:

- Three years of experience as a software project manager;
- Two certifications in project management from accredited organizations;
- Many years of development experience in Java and Windows; and
- A strong track record of project management and leadership in multiple industries.

During my tenure at ABC Company, I have directed three software development projects within tight timeframes and delivered them ahead of schedule, saving \$25,000 in budgeted development costs and thousands more in productivity costs by making the software available for use weeks ahead of schedule.

Our COO, Pat McDonald, had this to say about my work on a recent software upgrade project: "Jane exhibited strong leadership skills and a high level of dedication to her work. Her great attitude helped motivate all her teammates, who pulled through under her direction to beat the project deadline by two weeks."

Thank you for taking the time to review my qualifications. I will call you next Wednesday to see if you will be available to talk further. I would appreciate the opportunity to interview and answer any questions you might have. Let me emphasize my interest in the Software Project Manager position and my confidence that I can make a strong contribution to XYZ, a company that I believe has great potential to be a leader in its industry through its publicly stated software development initiatives.

Sincerely,  
Jane C. Smith

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