

The ABCs of Great Cover Letters...

Simple Steps to Increase Impact and Effectiveness

A Special Report prepared by Louise Kursmark

Don't let cover letters be a roadblock preventing your search from moving forward. These easy A-B-C-D-E steps will lead you through the process of writing good cover letters quickly.

A. Address Your Audience. Different audiences dictate different introductions.

Consider these guidelines:

- Whenever possible, write to an individual by name. This creates a better impression and gives you a better opportunity for follow-up. Don't be afraid to call a company and ask who your letter should go to. (Just be prepared with your professional introduction, in case you get that person on the line!)
- When responding to an online posting or ad, where you are likely one of dozens if not hundreds of applicants, don't worry so much about writing to an individual. In these cases, it's perfectly okay to omit the salutation—especially the outdated openings “Dear Sir or Madam” or “To Whom It May Concern”—and simply use a clear, concise subject line (“Re: VP Marketing”) as your opening.



B. Be Clear. While most readers enjoy a snappy, interesting opening more than the standard, “I’m writing in response to your posting,” never sacrifice clarity for cleverness. Be sure that the opening of your letter clearly communicates why you are writing and why the reader should care. For example:

- “Your need for a VP of Marketing is a close fit for my experience at Megacorp and my proven ability to drive up revenues, successfully launch new products, and steer growth in strategic channels.”

C. Communicate Value. The body of your cover letter should tell the reader what they care about—namely, what you can do for them. You can best communicate your value through specific accomplishments rather than vague statements. A bullet-point format is extremely useful for highlighting three or four relevant points, and this format forces you to keep your letter to a concise, readable length.

You can easily tailor this section of your letter to the specific needs of your audience—whether described in a job posting, related to you by a networking source, or learned through research. Use your accomplishments as evidence of your ability to assist them with precisely the challenges they are facing.

Consider these three value-packed bullet points that make up the body of an executive's cover letter:

- *Revenue Expansion:* During my tenure as VP Marketing/Sales, we averaged 24% annual revenue growth during a time of industry contraction. Our strong brand and benefit-focused product development were pivotal to our ability to steal market share from competitors.
- *Successful Product Introduction:* Launched the same year as two key competitors, MegaSystem grew to 43% market share within two years; MegaAddon penetrated 78% of existing product users; and the entire MegaMini line was recognized as Product of the Year by the NAITP.
- *Strategic Growth:* Our MegaMini launches met the corporate goal of successfully penetrating the consumer market, which now represents 27% of company revenues.

D. Don't Overdo It. After delivering your value message, provide just enough information to give your audience a sense for your scope of experience and key selling points. Don't overwhelm readers with too much detail; don't retell your entire career history; don't feel you must respond to every requirement listed in an ad; and don't go overboard relating your personal attributes. In fact, if your letter is too long, your paragraphs too dense and wordy, your audience may give up before finishing. Your goal is simply to entice them to read your resume and want to know more about you, inviting a call for an interview.

Here's an example of a semifinal paragraph:

- “In brief, I am an accomplished marketing executive with experience developing and executing global marketing strategies for Fortune 500 companies. My deepest expertise is in technology products (business and consumer), and I have a solid background in classical marketing methodologies for the CPG industry. My strengths in vision, strategy, and execution are complemented by a talent for building high-performing, highly motivated teams... we work hard, smart, and aggressively to achieve our goals and outdo the competition.”

E. Exit Gracefully. You've said your piece, given your readers the initial information they need to evaluate your candidacy. End your letter on a positive note, expressing your interest in a meeting. Again, it's more important to be clear than to be clever, but try keep your language fresh by avoiding language that is overused.

Here's an example of a brief, positive closing paragraph:

- “May we schedule a time to meet? I'd like to learn more about this interesting opportunity and explore the fit between my background and your needs. I will call within a few days to answer any questions you might have and to discuss the next steps.”

If you are not writing to an individual, you cannot state that you will call to follow up. Otherwise, you should take the initiative to make contact a few days after sending your letter—just as you would with any important business correspondence.

There you have it! Each time you write a cover letter, save it to use as a template for the next letter. Soon you'll have a library of good letters filled with apt phrases, strong accomplishment statements, and graceful opening and closing paragraphs that you can use repeatedly to keep your search moving forward quickly and smoothly.

Louise Kursmark is an award-winning resume writer, president of Best Impression Career Services (www.yourbestimpression.com), and one of the most widely published authors in the careers field. Her 18 resume and career books can be purchased at online and traditional booksellers and directly from the author via this web page—<http://www.yourbestimpression.com/books.html>.

Louise works with executive job seekers to develop powerful resumes and related marketing documents and to craft efficient and effective job search strategies. She can be reached at 888-792-0030 or by email at LK@yourbestimpression.com.
