

Cover Letter Reboot:
A Crowdsourced Update of
Traditional Cover-letter Advice
for Today's Job Search



A QUINTESSENTIAL CAREERS WHITE PAPER

By Katharine Hansen, PhD

Twenty years ago, my partner and I wrote one of the first cover-letter books on the market, and since then we've written countless articles on cover letters (see <http://www.quintcareers.com/covres.html>) – as well as cover letters themselves. My views haven't wavered much in those two decades on the guidelines we wrote about all those years ago.

But recently, I've received a couple of condescending messages from readers that suggest my views are hopelessly out of date, especially my strong edict that a cover letter should be addressed to a specific, named individual. The people who wrote to me suggested that in these days of submitting resumes and cover letters through job boards, discovering the name of the hiring decision-maker to write to is nearly impossible, and that these employers neither want to be addressed personally nor followed up with after resume and cover-letter submission.

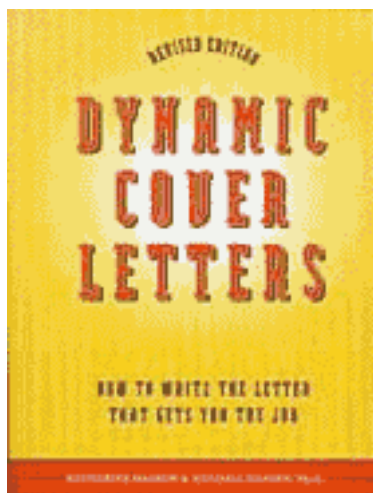
So I wondered if this advice and other guidelines we'd espoused all these years were indeed antiquated. I conducted e-mail interviews with hiring decision-makers – crowdsourcing, if you will – to find out. The research was neither quantitative nor scientific but provides a meaningful snapshot of some key employer opinions.

I also talked only with hiring decision-makers who read and value cover letters. Studies over the past several years suggest that somewhere between a third and half of hiring decision-makers do not read the letters.

What follows are the crowdsourced hiring decision-maker opinions on cover-letter advice I've given over the years. Remember that cover letters are highly subjective, and you'd be hard-pressed to develop a cover letter that would please every employer. But these sentiments can guide your thinking toward some pretty darned effective letters:

Although failing to include a cover letter is no longer the disqualifying factor it once was, submitting a high-quality cover letter with your resume can be a strong differentiator.

If such a significant portion of the employer audience does not even read cover letters, should you always submit them with a resume? That's a tricky question. Most of the decision-makers I talked to said they would probably not eliminate an otherwise qualified candidate for failing to submit a cover letter, even though these employers value cover letters and prefer to receive them.



<http://www.quintcareers.com/dcl.html>

Cover Letter Wish List: Hiring Decision-Makers Reveal What They Want to See in Cover Letters

We asked hiring decision-makers what they look for in a cover letter. Here's what they told us:

- Writing skills such as spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure.
- Ability to explain clearly what they are looking for.

– *Vicky Cassens Zillioux, senior partner/chief administration officer, Strategic Development Worldwide, San Diego*

Less is more. Since a cover letter and resume is, in a sense, a first blush presentation of yourself, doing it poorly suggests you will be unlikely to present our company well if you can't first present yourself well. Use the cover letter to let me know:

1. Which job you are applying for. Often we have many openings, and I do not know which resume is being submitted for which job.
2. If there is something pertinent I need to know, tell me (referred by a former employee, not able to start until May 1, etc.). If there is any personal connection, establish it (we met once at a trade show and you said, "if you ever need a job...").
3. Why are you applying? There should be a decent reason that of all the jobs available, you applied to ours.
4. If you have spent any time on our Website, with our catalog, or product, tell me. Those people almost always jump to the top of my stack if they have a decent resume.

– *Grant DiCianni, president, Tapestry Productions Inc., Temecula, CA*

You should, however, always include a cover letter if:

- *The employer specifically requests that you do so.* If a cover letter is requested, and you fail to submit one, you are showing you cannot follow instructions. "I tell people in my posting to include a cover letter about why this job is for them," says Bonnie Zaben, COO at AC Lion, New York City, "and still I get resumes without cover letters (which I don't read)."
- *Your targeted job requires strong writing, communication, persuasive, marketing, or sales skills.* Did you notice that list encompasses a huge portion of jobs? Yup. I still advise including a cover letter in most situations because your letter can demonstrate the skills on that list. "Unless the resume itself is completely incredible or it's from someone I know, [not including a cover letter is] an instant disqualification," says Erin Cheyne, creative director of Cheyne Creative. "My company is marketing- and advertising-centric, so it's especially important for job candidates to be able to sell themselves in this industry. If you don't even try to market yourself, how can I tell if you'll be able to work in marketing?" Similarly, Beth Smith, president of A-list Interviews, Boulder, CO, notes: "If I asked for a cover letter, it is usually because I need a writing sample. Most jobs require excellent written and oral communication skills, and I need to see how they articulate in a cover letter."

You may want to consider company size in deciding whether to include a cover letter. "When I was with a huge corporation, I did not even read the cover letters," says Grant DiCianni, president of Tapestry Productions Inc., a Christian fine-art reproduction gallery in Temecula, CA. Back then, DiCianni only skimmed the resume for the right qualifications because he had 300 applicants for each job. "Here at Tapestry," he says, "the *person* is more important than their qualifications, so I look for the cover letter and resume to give me a sense of a potential hire's ability to cogently and succinctly communicate."

And, as David Shelton, vice president for operations for Medical Advocacy Services for Healthcare (The MASH Program), Fort Worth, TX, points out, "Why wouldn't an applicant include a cover letter? It's a great way to address your skills and how they match to the opportunity; it demonstrates strong writing skills and, if done correctly, it allows your resume to be more memorable."

"A well-prepared cover letter that describes how the applicant feels he or she is a good fit for the position will absolutely help that applicant stand out from the crowd," notes Adam S. Toporek of IntenseFence Management Solutions, Altamonte Springs, FL.

Cover Letter Wish List

~ *continued*

- Clarity – well written, clear as to the intent and purpose.
- Consistency with my needs and what's on the resume and my job/company's needs addressed.
- Concise – tell me what I need to know about you.
- What have you accomplished that is relevant to my needs and my company.
- One page max.
- Attractive formatting – page layout, font size and style, white space, easy to read.

– Fred R. Cooper, managing partner, Compass HR Consulting, LLC

A cover letter that:

- tells me why the applicant feels that they are qualified for the job.
- shows some personality as we are looking for someone who will complement our company culture and will fit in.
- pays attention to details in the job posting and addresses them in the cover letter.

I always appreciate a cleverly written cover letter that has been written just for me, as opposed to a generic cover letter that is clearly sent out to every potential employer. I am looking to hire employees who stand out from the pack – and a cover letter that stands out tells me that the candidate is willing to put in the extra work it takes to stand out.

– Sheri Graciano, human resource manager, Sacramento Convention & Visitors Bureau

A cover letter certainly won't hurt your application – unless it's error laden and of poor quality. A cover letter can also miss the opportunity to show off skills integral to the targeted job, as Sheri Graciano learned. "Recently I was recruiting for a marketing position," recalls Graciano, who is human-resource manager for the Sacramento Convention & Visitors Bureau. "People who work in marketing are supposed to be creative, and we wanted to try to find the cream of the crop in terms of creative marketers. I asked applicants to submit 'the most creative cover letter they could muster.' Sadly, more than 85 percent of the submissions were standard, run-of-the-mill cover letters without an ounce of creativity included." So, if you prepare a cover letter, make it your best and most careful effort.

"In the old days, not having a cover letter made you stand out from the crowd; today, having a cover letter, makes you stand out from the crowd," Toporek observes.

If you choose not to include a cover letter, you must ensure that your resume can stand on its own.

Let me also add that the significant portion of employers who hold anti-cover-letter sentiments could make things a lot easier for job-seekers if they simply specified in their job postings that they *do not* want a cover letter.

Addressing your cover letter to a specific person by name can be a big plus, and some employers expect you to do so.

Regarding this issue that launched my crowdsourcing effort – while a few hiring decision-makers I talked with feel a letter that addresses them by name is "creepy," "spooky," and "disconcerting" – most appreciate the personalization and extra effort that go into using their name.

The advice I've given for all these years is reflected in the words of Mike Sprouse: "It is 100 percent expected that cover letters be personalized and well-targeted. If I do not receive a personalized cover letter, I immediately think this candidate is either lazy or not resourceful. With so much information available through LinkedIn and other avenues, I basically throw out 'To Whom it May Concern' letters immediately. So I would not say I'm impressed by people who research my name; I would just say I expect it," says Sprouse, who is a chief marketer, entrepreneur, author, and philanthropist.

Cover Letter Wish List ~ *continued*

Honesty, enthusiasm, and respect. If there are parts of the job description that you only have minimal experience in, tell me. I want to know why you'd be great at the job. I want to know why you're interested in working with my company. Spell my name properly, double check your grammar, and make sure your contact info is on the letter as well as on your resume. If you're submitting a hard copy, sign it with a decent pen, and print it on high quality paper. It sounds silly, but if you've got a stack of letters on cheap paper signed with a blue Bic, and one letter that has a nice left to it and a nicer looking signature, that one letter will stand out big time. Word of caution: Nice paper means high-end plain paper – not the crazy floral stationary that you got for Christmas a few years ago. I can't believe how many people will send out an otherwise professional document on hideous personal stationary. It's a big pet peeve of mine – really tacky. Your cover letter should simply contain:

- Brief introduction.
- What you do.
- Why you want to work here.
- One or two sentences on why you're the best candidate (without being arrogant!).

– Erin Cheyne, creative director,
Cheyne Creative

Cheyne agrees: "I won't even consider a candidate if they haven't taken the time to do their research and find my name," she says. "My line of work is centered around being able to reach the potential customer on a personal level. If a job applicant doesn't try to do that with me in their cover letter, I'll have major doubts about their ability to perform well in this line of work. With the amount of information available through search engines now, it has become offensive to use the traditional 'Dear Sir or Madam.' Take five minutes, and google the company. You'll figure out whom to address your cover letter to."

Most hiring decision-makers I talked to, however, were not as adamant as Sprouse and Cheyne in wanting a personalized letter. Still, they used descriptors such as "proactive," "ambitious," "creative," "resourceful," and "determined," for job-seekers who go to the trouble to learn their names. "While I will always choose the best candidate if all else is equal, the one [who] has researched us/me, sent in the personalized cover letter, contacted me directly, and showed aggressive interest will win all tiebreakers," says Ron Kubitz, recruiting manager at Brayman Construction Corp., Saxonburg, PA. Toporek adds, "A personalized, job-specific cover letter pretty much guarantees that we will look more closely at the applicant."

Here are the situations in which you *must* address the letter's recipient by name:

- When the job posting instructs you to do so.
- When the decision-maker's name appears in the posting.

I won't even consider a candidate if they haven't taken the time to do their research and find my name.

– Erin Cheyne

Also realize that some employers deliberately omit a name but expect the job-seeker to be resourceful enough to find it. "I purposely do not include my name in the ad, so that they have to seek it out," explains Lisa Pike, principal/CEO of ScribeRight Transcription Agency, Inc., Renton WA. "If they manage to find out my name and address the cover letter, I am impressed, especially if the position we are hiring for is one that requires research."

Our article, "Sleuthing Out Hiring Managers Key to Job-Search Follow-up" (http://www.quintcareers.com/hiring_managers.html), contains many tips for researching names of addressees – and it was written before the advent of social-media tools like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook that make such sleuthing even easier.

Cover Letter Wish List

~ *continued*

Poignant simplicity. In a sense, how much can the candidate tell me without actually writing much. To break it down I really need to see:

- who they are,
- what position they are applying for,
- where they came from,
- why are they relevant to this position and why I should bother opening their resume,
- a nice close.

That has worked for me in the past during my years in the corporate world, and given the hectic nature of hiring managers and recruiters, that's probably the best method to get a quick response.

– *Jeff Gordon, founder of LA-based online marketing agency*

A cover letter is an insight into how the job-seeker communicates.

- Does the job-seeker understand what I am looking for?
- Does the job-seeker make a clear logical connection between the job-seeker's experience and the job requirements?

If a job-seeker is not qualified for the position, the cover letter doesn't make much difference. But among qualified job-seekers, a good cover letter tells me more about an individual than a resume alone.

– *Jenson Crawford, director of engineering, Fetch Technologies, El Segundo, CA*

Tailoring your cover letter very specifically to the targeted job is still and always the way to go; if you don't, the cover letter has no point.

Nothing has changed in my long-standing advice that a cover letter cannot be a canned or generic form letter, but written specifically for each job you target. "It's really obvious when an applicant has written one cover letter that they use for all jobs," says Jessica Oman, owner/CEO of Write Ahead Consulting, Vancouver, BC, Canada. Generic letters that show no understanding of the targeted job are among the biggest annoyances hiring decision-makers mentioned. This tailoring is one of the most fundamental reasons cover letters even exist. They answer the questions: "Why are you sending me your resume, and why should I consider you for this specific job?"

These days, employers also expect resumes to be specifically targeted to each job, but it's usually not difficult to make just a few tweaks in a boilerplate resume to tailor it to a given job. The cover letter should go much further in showing the job-seeker has researched the organization and the job. "It actually irks me when job-seekers seem to have not taken the time to know more about the company," says Yoel Calek, owner/director at Strategic Minds. "Form letters with no research behind them that lack basic information about the role or the company ... go to the bottom right away," Sprouse adds.

Although hiring decision-makers vary wildly in what they want to see in a cover letter, some common themes emerge.

Twenty years ago, I offered a basic four-paragraph structure for a cover letter, and hundreds of career experts have suggested their own formulas and structures. In fact, when I asked hiring decision-makers what they wanted to see in a cover letter, they all said something different.

A few aspects pop up over and over, however, on employers' wish lists: Relevant accomplishments, fit with the job, understanding of the job, personality, enthusiasm, knowledge of the employer, and consistency with resume (but not a rehash of the resume).

To see much more detail about what hiring decision-makers want to see in cover letters, check out our sidebar, "Cover Letter Wish List: Hiring Decision-Makers Reveal What They Want to See in Cover Letters," at right, beginning on page 2.

Cover Letter Wish List ~ *continued*

I want to see a cover letter that understands what I as a hiring manager am looking for rather than the "recap" of previous job responsibilities and tasks completed. I do that by counting the number of "you/your/yours" versus the number of "I/me/my/mine" in a cover letter. A cover letter that has more instances of "you/your/yours" tells me (as a rule of thumb) that you are speaking to *my* needs, and not your own. I like a bullet list of key accomplishments that can be backed up with quantitative data – real numbers – that prove to me you have a "proven track record." A list of responsibilities and tasks says nothing about accomplishments. I also look for how well the candidate understands what I need in the way of a solutions-provider and problem-solver.

– J.T. Kirk, J.T. Kirk Industries, author of *Confessions of a Hiring Manager Rev. 2.0: Getting to and Staying at the Top of the Hiring Manager's Short List in a Confused Economy (May 2011)*

I want to be tantalized and teased by a cover letter! I do not want a rehash of the resume. I want to see the 3-4 juicy accomplishments from a candidate's career (that match my advertised need). These highlights must excite me to such a level that this candidate becomes a can't-miss prospect. If I am not swept away by the cover letter, then reading the resume is often anti-climactic and doomed for failure.

– Ron Kubitz, recruiting manager, Brayman Construction Corp., Saxonburg, PA

Hiring decision-makers offer no consensus on how they want to receive cover letters (in the body of an e-mail message vs. as an attachment), so research on each employer's preference is imperative.

Several employers said they had no preference for how they want to receive cover letters, and some said they wanted to receive them both ways. Others felt strongly about getting cover letters only in the body of an email, while still others were just as adamant about receiving them only as attachments. One respondent noted that if he gets a resume attached to a blank email, he almost always deletes it.

Ideally a job posting will tell you how to submit your resume and cover letter. But if it doesn't – given the wide range of preference on this issue – you'll need to do some research. The place to start is on the career portion of the employer's Website. Check carefully to see if a submission preference is stated. If you can't find it, you can try emailing or calling the employer to ask. Some employers are not receptive to phone calls related to applying for jobs, but most should be able to answer a simple question about how to submit your cover letter.

Also consider sending your letter and resume by postal mail in addition to whichever electronic method the employer prefers; few other candidates will do so, so you'll stand out.

Prospecting/cold-contact cover letters will probably not yield fast results, but an excellent, well-researched letter that tells how you can address an employer's challenges can be a terrific investment in the future.

One of the three kinds of cover letters I've talked about for 20 years is the cold-contact, or prospecting letter. (See an article about cold-contact letters here: http://www.quintcareers.com/cold-contact_cover_letter.html). This letter is used in an exploratory fashion to express an interest in working for a specific employer but not in response to a specific opening. A step beyond the cold-contact/prospecting is the job-proposal letter, in which the job-seeker has comprehensively researched an employer and is proposing that the employer create a position for the job-seeker who asserts that he or she can address one or more of the employer's challenges. (An excellent resource for how to compose a job-proposal letter is Denise Bissonnette's *Beyond Traditional Job Development: The Art of Creating Opportunity*, available at this site:

<http://www.diversityshop.com/store/beyondtext.html>).



**Cover Letter Wish List
~ continued**

[I want to see] evidence that the applicant has read the job description and attempted to describe how their skills match the required duties. If I see they've made an effort to address specific job requirements and shown how their skills transfer, I am much more likely to call them in for an interview. The cover letter is intended to tell me why the applicant a) wants and b) would be good at the position. It's my only window into who they are as an individual. I need this in order to make a decision about whether to interview.

– Jessica Oman, owner/CEO, Write Ahead Consulting, Vancouver, BC, Canada

I look for the candidate to first and foremost present a positive and confident, but not cocky, image of himself or herself. I also like to see how the candidate feels he or she can help me and/or my client personally, so taking the time to tailor the cover letter to me and my needs or job description is a big plus in my eyes.

– Shilonda Downing, founder, Virtual Work Team, Flossmoor, IL

Cover letters are appealing if they are personalized and show that the author of the letter has done their homework on me, the company and/or the role. General form letters need not apply

– Mike Sprouse, chief marketer, entrepreneur, author, and philanthropist

While a few of the hiring decision-makers I talked to had interviewed candidates based on a cold-contact/prospecting letter, none had ever created a position for one. They usually cited budgetary reasons for not doing so. Many of them, however, said they often kept those cover letters on file for future openings. Jeff Gordon's response was typical: "If I have a superstar candidate with a 'killer' cover letter but not a fit with current positions, I'll put them in the coveted 'save for future' file. That is indeed the golden file of sharp candidates who would be a great addition to the company in perhaps another role," says Gordon, founder of LA-based online marketing agency InterActive99.com.

For one of Graciano's applicants, that filed-away letter paid off: "I have absolutely interviewed candidates based solely on their outstanding cover letter," Graciano recalls. "In one case, we did not have a specific opening when I interviewed the candidate; however, about four months later we did have an opening and hired that person. Turned out to be one of the best hiring decisions we have ever made as an organization."

Some respondents, like Shelton, said they would be inclined to refer the writer of a strong cold-contact letter to another employer: "I have interviewed several candidates in the past based solely on their cover letter and resume – even if we didn't have a position for them," notes Shelton. "If they are talented, I can always refer them to other professional acquaintances that might be looking for a particular skill set." Others felt they might create a position if the right person came along.

Especially when the job market is weak, a cold-contact/prospecting/job-proposal letter is not the way to get a new job quickly. But it's a smart strategy, especially for those already employed who have time to invest in a job search.

A referral letter that mentions the name of a mutual contact of you and the letter's addressee will usually get your foot in the door, but you must be qualified for the targeted position.

The second kind of cover letter I've written about since Day 1 is the referral or networking cover letter, in which the job-seeker "name-drops" the name of someone mutually known by him or her and the hiring decision-maker ("Your Director of Marketing, Jose Perez, recommended I contact you about your opening in Sales.") See a sample: http://www.quintcareers.com/sample_referral_letter.html.

Hiring Decision-Makers Cite Top Cover-Letter Mistakes that Disqualify Job-Seekers

We asked hiring decision-makers what mistakes job-seekers make in cover letters that are so serious that the employers would eliminate these candidates, even if they seemed qualified. Their responses:

- Letter contains typos, misspellings, and/or correctly spelled words used incorrectly (such as to/two/too, their/they're/there, and it's/its). Some respondents are forgiving of one or two such errors, but eliminate applicants after that. Misspelling the addressee's name is especially egregious.
- Letter contains poor grammar.
- Letter is addressed to wrong person, wrong company, or is targeted at the wrong job.
- Job-seeker projects a tone of begging or pleading for a job.
- Letter rehashes past experience – or rehashes resume – instead of showing what the candidate can contribute going forward.
- Letter is boilerplate, generic, canned – not customized for the targeted position.
- Letter contains too much detail, is too wordy.
- Letter offers too much personal information, heart-wrenching sob stories, or is flowery, cutesy.
- Job-seeker uses emoticons.
- Letter has poor structure or layout.
- Letter contains religious references.
- Letter consists of little more than "See attached resume."

I have absolutely interviewed candidates based solely on their outstanding cover letter.

– Sheri Graciano

Most of the hiring decision-makers I talked with would interview a candidate who sent such a letter. "Our philosophy is to always honor referrals," Smith says. "We will grant interviews to anyone that comes to us through a referral, because it is a great way of giving back. People who thought enough of our company to go out of their way to make a referral should be treated with the utmost respect."

Shelton notes that social media can be instrumental in finding and establishing connections that can result in referrals for cover letters. "When we have a mutual acquaintance that referred the candidate my way, I'm going to make the effort to meet them. I think this is an area that LinkedIn and other sites bring value," he says.

As effective as referral letters can be, the respondents offered a few caveats about them:

- The decision-maker must actually know and respect the named referral person.
- The named referral person must actually be someone who will advocate for the candidate. If you name-drop a referral person, be sure this person truly will sing your praises if the letter's recipient contacts him or her. You can reinforce the referral's advocacy by asking him or her to separately contact the hiring decision-maker with a recommendation.
- As the sender of the referral letter, you must be qualified for the targeted job. Use of a referral name will rarely make up for a lack of qualifications. "A recommendation is not as important to me as someone being a great fit for the job," says Shilonda Downing, founder of Virtual Work Team, Flossmoor, IL
- Referral people within the letter recipient's own organization are usually the best choice.

We will grant interviews to anyone that comes to us through a referral, because it is a great way of giving back.

– Beth Smith

Hiring Decision-Makers Cite Top Cover-Letter Mistakes that Disqualify Job-Seekers

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- Job-seeker uses emoticons.
- Letter has poor structure or layout.
- Letter contains religious references.
- Letter consists of little more than "See attached resume."
- Information in letter is inconsistent with information in resume.

Hiring decision-makers have mixed opinions about two-column or T-formation cover letters; the more important writing and communication skills are to the targeted job, the less effective this type of letter is likely to be.

In the two-column or T-formation cover letter, the job-seeker quotes in the left-hand column specific qualifications that come right from the employer's job posting and in the right-hand column, his or her attributes that meet those qualifications.

Below, the two columns that form the body of a two-column cover letter:

You require:

- A Credentialing Manager who can supervise and develop the AAHIVM HIV Specialist Credentialing Program while providing leadership, vision, management, and strategic direction.
- Three+ years of experience working with professional credentialing programs, along with the ability to ensure the program's high quality, as well as effective, efficient development and administration.
- Demonstrated ability to work with non-profit organizational members, candidates, and credential holders.
- Someone who can oversee program marketing goals and strategies.
- Demonstrated understanding of credentialing processes and basic psychometric principles.

I offer:

- Extensive experience as an association-management professional specializing in professional certification programs and possessing advanced expertise in credentialing processes, as well as in certification program development, implementation, and expansion.
- Nine years of experience in directly contributing to the quality, efficiency, and success of a credentialing program's development and administration.
- Track record of effective collaboration with seven-member staff in developing and implementing programs for 16,000+ certificants.
- Strong marketing background and success in strategizing growth plan for new programs that contributed to 200 percent revenue increase and a 400 percent increase in operating reserves. Also identified numerous opportunities to increase number of active exam candidates.
- Proved this understanding through developing complex plan to transition thousands of exam candidates from cumbersome six-section variable-format examination to psychometrically valid, reliable three-section examination.

You can see a full sample two-column letter at:

http://www.quintcareers.com/sample_two_column_letter.html

Since I have touted this format as highly effective for many years, I was surprised that several of the hiring decision-makers I talked to were not very enthusiastic about two-column letters. (The most extreme comment was Smith's: "It causes brain hemorrhage.") The common theme among the naysayers seems to be that the format hinders the decision-maker's ability to gauge the job-seeker's writing and communication skills. "I much prefer to see how people compose sentences and paragraphs, and what their writing style is," Sprouse says. Others, like Oman, feel this format shows a lack of effort: "[Two-column formats] remove a lot of the work involved with writing a cover letter, so I don't particularly like them."

Top Cover-Letter Mistakes ~ *continued*

- Letter contains insincere-sounding statements about how this is the best job in the world.
- Failure to follow instructions. Sheri Graciano, human resource manager for the Sacramento Convention & Visitors Bureau cites a case in point: "Because I work in the tourism industry, I always ask applicants to submit a cover letter that tells me what they like best about Sacramento. You would be shocked at the number of resumes I receive that either do not contain a cover letter at all, or have a cover letter that does not include the answer to the question I asked in the posting. I will not even look at the resume if an applicant can't follow basic instructions."

Some hiring decision-makers liked this format. "I am a big fan of the two-column cover letter," Kubitz says, "if the second column (what they offer) is filled with quantifiable sizzle and not generic buzzwords. I want to see facts, figures, percentages, etc., in this second column, and I must come away from reading the second column knowing this person can make an impact within my organization. I like the layout of these cover letters, and they separate themselves from the rest of the pack." Downing agrees: "I love the T-formation. I want to know how you plan to 'add value' to me and/or my clients," she says. "The only thing I would caution job-seekers on is making the cover letter too long; just hit the key points outlined in the job description." (For an example of a two-column letter that is, in my opinion, too long and poorly formatted, see this sample, for which registration is required: <http://www.impacthiringsolutions.com/index.php/cover-letters>.)

Shelton likes the format for technical positions. "It's a great way to compare IT professionals' skill sets with my requirements," he says. "I can quickly match your skills to my position. If you have everything, then you move to the next pile. If not, then your resume is removed." Shelton disdains the format for non-technical positions, though, because "it gives a clinical analysis of the candidate and doesn't allow much room to stand apart from others."

So, should you use a two-column format in a cover letter? Proceed with caution. If you are in a technical field or one in which technical requirements are more important than writing skills, this format can work for you. You might also consider Cheyne's suggestion to create a two-column format as a supplement to a resume and cover-letter submission, but not use it for the letter itself.

Here is a case in which the subjectivity of cover letters means that with some employers, you'll be taking a risk if you use this format, while with others, you'll be taking a risk if you don't. Thus, you may want to experiment with the format before using it in all your cover letters. Try it for applying for a job that is not a high-stakes proposition for you, and see if you get an interview.

See more about two-column cover letters and other cover letters with unconventional formats in our article, http://www.quintcareers.com/special_cover-letter_formats.html

A new take on cover letters? Susan Whitcomb, a Quint Careers 15th Anniversary Career Mastermind, suggests the 5-Point Power Note, the "antidote to 'yawn bomb' cover letters." Read her article at: http://quintcareers.com/5_point_power_note.html

Cover Letters That Wowed: Hiring Decision-Makers Describe Winning Cover Letters

We asked hiring decision-makers to tell us about cover letters they've received that really made them sit up and take notice.

One particular cover letter stands out. It was attached to a resume for a mid-level skilled-trades management job I had open. It summarized the writer's skills in problem identification and solving, leadership, conflict resolution, and several other areas identified in the job ad. I was impressed.

– Fred R. Cooper, managing partner, Compass HR Consulting, LLC

When we were recruiting for our marketing manager, I asked candidates to submit the most creative cover letter they could muster. One of the job responsibilities for the position was to create one of our electronic newsletters, and one particular candidate took the time to create a cover letter for us in the form of an electronic newsletter. It was very cleverly written and designed.

– Sheri Graciano, human-resource manager, Sacramento Convention & Visitors Bureau

I recently hired a consultant whose cover letter blew me away. She had clearly read my job posting in detail and addressed nearly every aspect of the job. She also indicated she had read my company Website and mentioned the content, which was a huge plus. She had clearly done her research, and that translated into the interview and now, her job.

– Jessica Oman, owner/CEO, Write Ahead Consulting, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Careful attention to detail can help job-seekers avoid the most common – and disqualifying – cover-letter mistakes.

Most of the cover-letter mistakes hiring decision-makers cited were what you might expect, especially typos, spelling errors, and grammatical flaws. You can see the full list in the box on the side of this white paper, beginning on page 9.

But here's the one that surprised me the most: Almost every hiring decision-maker I talked to cited a scenario in which a job-seeker had written to a specific employer and then, when writing to a different employer, had forgotten to change the name of the employer from the previous letter. Apparently this error is rampant these days. "I receive cover letters all the time that are addressed to someone else," Smith notes. Not only does this lapse show a lack of time and care spent with the cover letter, but it also indicates that job-seekers are doing little to customize their letters for each employer. Can the content of a letter meant for Employer ABC really work for Employer XYZ? Probably not.

Final Thoughts

Back to the readers who wrote to me about the hopeless old-fashionedness of researching a hiring manager's name to which to address a cover letter ... I agree with Toporek, who notes: "Services such as CareerBuilder and Monster have made applying for jobs too easy." If all you're doing is sitting on your posterior submitting resumes and cover letters to postings on job boards, it's probably true that addressing those submissions to a specific person won't make much difference in whether you get an interview.

But that's not how you should be conducting your job search anyway. You should be out there meeting people face-to-face and sometimes dropping their names in referral cover letters. You should be researching on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and company Websites not only to find out to whom to address your letters, but also so you can include your knowledge of these organizations in your cover letters. You should craft a long-range job-search strategy that might include sending well-researched cold-contact/prospecting cover letters.

Above all, you should take the time and care to craft (and proofread) well-written, high-quality, error-free cover letters that are customized for each position and show your personality and fit for that position. The hiring decision-makers I talked to want candidates who stand out from the pack. Your cover letter can help you do that if you put some thought and effort into it.

Cover Letters That Wowed ~ *continued*

When I had been looking for a Web designer, I received an email with the cover letter in the body. It was from a woman who had good experience and happened to truly understand what I was looking for. The cover letter was short, but she really honed in on my needs. She took the time to review the job description in its entirety, reviewed my Website, and then in two sentences explained how she could fulfill the needs of my specific business and grow my business. I was very impressed with her going above and beyond and taking the extra time to do a little research. And she did it all in one short paragraph.

– *Jeff Gordon, founder of LA-based online marketing agency InterActive99.com*

The first time I received a two-column or T-formation cover letter I was blown away. The person who submitted it was interviewed and hired for the position. It's rare that I see that format, but it's a very effective way for the job-seeker to articulate how well the individual's experience matches the job requirements.

– *Jenson Crawford, director of engineering, Fetch Technologies, El Segundo, CA*

Want to know what kinds of letters made the hiring-decision-makers I talked to sit up and take notice? Read our sidebar, "Cover Letters That Wowed: Hiring Decision-Makers Describe Winning Cover Letters," starting on page 11.

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Cover Letters That Wowed ~ continued

Our current IT director had researched our organization and knew of a particular software that would benefit our company. His cover letter detailed the software he thought would help and included how he would implement it. He said he was passing the information along, whether we even interviewed him or not, because he thought it would be useful. I'm always going to take the time to visit with someone who is trying to help me. Even if we had not hired him, I would have made introductions to other colleagues on his behalf.

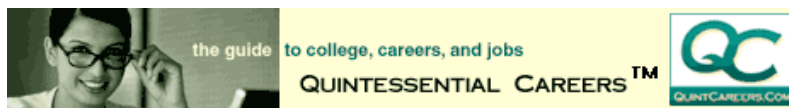
– David Shelton, vice president for operations for Medical Advocacy Services for Healthcare (The MASH Program), Fort Worth, TX

One candidate had done a lot of research on me and knew I was once a professional tennis player, and actually cited the time he took up tennis lessons as a kid, failed at it, and hated it. The resourcefulness, honesty, and humility impressed me a lot.

– Mike Sprouse, chief marketer, entrepreneur, author, and philanthropist

I am most bowled over when, while reading a cover letter, it is apparent that the candidate has researched my company. I look for candidate selling points in the cover letter that will help alleviate some of the internal problems and issues that my company faces that could only have been gained from researching our company. Candidates that have answered the "what can you do for my company dilemma" by relating their cover letters to problems my company faces are certainly thrust to the top of the good pile!

– Ron Kubitz, recruiting manager, Brayman Construction Corp., Saxonburg, PA



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