

Mistakes Job-Seekers Make On Cover Letters

Writing a cover letter when you apply for a job is increasingly optional. 47% of job-seekers said they did not submit a cover letter with their application. And not every recruiter or hiring manager is going to read cover letters: But even when they're not mandatory, career experts say, you shouldn't skip a cover letter. Ashley Watkins, a job-search coach with corporate recruiting experience, said that's the biggest mistake she sees job-seekers make.

"You miss that opportunity to either fill in some gaps or really give context to your reason for applying, your personal situation — like if you want to relocate, if you want to change jobs. Anything that needs explaining," Watkins said. The goal of a good cover letter is to "succinctly, clearly prove that you are a fit for the job," and to serve as "a narrative for the résumé," said career strategist Linda Raynier.

Here's how you may be telling the wrong kind of story with your cover letter, beyond not doing one to begin with.

Mistake 1: You don't push past generic and boring.

If you copy/paste generic paragraphs about your interest in the company for every cover letter you use, hiring managers are going to notice. Watkins said to avoid using templates. "If you Googled a cover letter, nine times out of ten, so did the other 100 people that you could be competing against," she noted.

Too many cover letters are boring. "The reason no one reads cover letters anymore is because they all sound the same," said job search strategist Melanie L. Denny. "Instead of opening with 'I'm writing in response to the job ad I saw on Indeed,' start with a more compelling opening or a thought-provoking question."

To personalize your cover letter, write as if it's a conversation between you and the hiring manager. "Pretend that that's your only opportunity to say something to a hiring manager to convince them that you were the right fit for the role," Watkins said.

Mistake 2: You make the letter too long.

Keep in mind that a recruiter may be skimming your cover letter alongside dozens of others. You want to grab their attention right away.

"Our attention spans are shrinking by the day. No one, especially a busy recruiter, has time to read a two-page essay about your career history," Denny said. "I would advise 200 words or less. Be succinct, relevant and memorable."

Mistake 3: You don't sell yourself.

Don't just make your cover letter a summary of what you've done in your career. Make it a persuasive story that shows why you are the best candidate for the job.

“Instead of going on and on about your credentials and years of experience like everyone else does, talk more about the impact you’ve made and how you can support them in overcoming their challenges,” Denny said.

What’s persuasive to a hiring manager is showing how you’re the problem-solver they need right now. “In your letter, especially in the opening, it’s important for you to show that you understand what the employer needs and how you’re the answer to that problem,” Watkins said.

For example, if you’re a tax accountant applying to a company that has known legal troubles, you can speak to how you have helped past employers from failing audits through solutions you designed.

Mistake 4: You talk about your soft skills, not technical ones.

“Too many people talk about soft skills on their cover letter, meaning they say, ‘I have great communication skills, I have great teamwork skills, I have great organizational skills,’ and as much as those are great, those are not the types of skills [recruiters are] looking for,” Raynier said.

Raynier noted that technical skills can back up soft skills. Instead of saying you are good at communication, for example, explain how you prepare reports for management.

Raynier recommended bringing up three to four technical skills you possess and making achievements you mention relevant to those key skills.

Mistake 5: You don’t proofread for typos and grammatical errors.

It can be easy to miss mistakes in your excitement as you rush to send off your job application. But typos and basic errors, like addressing the cover letter to the wrong person, can signal carelessness.

That’s why Watkins recommends waiting a day before you submit your job application materials so you can reread them the next day with fresh eyes.

“Tired eyes, excited eyes — they miss things, because all you’re thinking about is the end goal. You’re not thinking that you made a mistake,” Watkins said.

Mistake 6: You don’t end with a call to action.

Watkins said that ideally, the beginning of your cover letter needs to grab a hiring manager’s attention, while the middle backs up the claims you made in the opening paragraph and the last paragraph sums it all up and ends with a call to action for what you want the reader to do next.

Watkins said these calls to action can be as simple as “I invite you to check out my LinkedIn profile” or “Happy to speak on the phone” with a summary of your availability. “What you say is implying that you’re looking for some form of communication,” Watkins said.

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