

CV basics – Covering letters

Covering letter? Are we talking about envelopes and letters and stamps?

In the olden days, about three years ago, most job applications came in the post. And in those, more halcyon days, every CV was accompanied by a covering letter.

The covering letter, often even hand written, was a call to action by the candidate to the recruiter, be they a consultant or an employer. With the arrival of email, the covering letter has gone, at very least, into abeyance, and at worst is a terminal case.

Most applicants idea of a covering email is, if they have even thought that far, to cite the job reference and a single line along the lines "Here is my CV". And that is that.

This is a mistake.

What should a covering letter do?

Help you to stand out from the crowd.

How?

Consider that your application, especially in these difficult days, is very likely to be one of possibly hundreds of applicants.

Just for a moment put yourself in the recruiter's shoes. He or she knows what they are looking for. They have a pile of several hundred CVs (either a literal pile or an electronic one) to wade through. It is getting on for 7pm, the time spent on each CV has dropped from about two minutes to under a minute.

A CV comes with a letter, a short letter, succinctly highlighting the applicant's relevant details and expanding on some of the information in the attached CV. The letter explains why they are the right person for the job. It is all there, in a few, tight paragraphs. It can make the difference between getting "Please can you contact us to arrange an interview ..." letter and getting the "thank you for your recent application. However ..." letter.

What should it contain?

- **A reference number** Every opportunity has a reference number. It is essential that that number be on the letter. Without it your application may well be binned. Speculative applications will be dealt with below.
- **An opening paragraph that explains why you are writing** Avoid stating the obvious. "I am writing in connection with your recent ad". You don't say. This is the first line. It should make an impact. Use it to get across your key message.
- **What you have to offer them** This is the hard sell. You have to sell your proposition in just three sentences. It is not about repeating your CV but about explaining your unique proposition.
 - What you do
 - Who you do it for

- How long you have been doing it
- **Anything on your CV that might need explaining** There is no stigma to being made redundant, but you might need to explain a long period, particularly if you have been undertaking freelance work.

You might want to avoid salary details on your CV, in which case put them on the covering letter.

It might also be worth mentioning your notice details.

Each covering letter, like the CV it goes with, is unique to that application. It has to be. How could you produce an effective sell if it is not tailored to the audience. A one-size-fits-all covering letter has as much style as a one-size-fits-all coat. Go through the advertisement or specification with a red pen, and underline the skills and experience they are looking for. Sell yourself in response to these, highlighting the features that show you are right for the job,

Style

As with everything to do with CVs, it needs to be brief and to the point.

- judicious use of bullet points
- short sentences
- Factual — not opinion. Make sure everything you say is backed up by your CV
- Avoid any quasi-management waffle. Nobody ever "leveraged their core competencies." Ever.

Tone

In a way think of your covering letter almost as a press release — in as much as it has to cover the same ground. It needs to answer the same questions: who, why, what, where, when and how.

Ending

Don't just tail off with a rather lame, "yours sincerely". At the very least explain if you are not going to be available for interview because of commitments. But this is the call to action. Even if you say no more than you are very much looking forward to hearing from them, it is better than simply stopping.

Don't, however, be tempted to go too far and turn the ending into some over-the-top paean of self-indulgent praise. Stick to the facts.

Speculative applications

The principles are no different, simply that you have to do more work in a speculative application.

In replying to an advertised position the recruiter is expecting to receive your letter. Speculative applications come out of the blue.

The absolute rule is that they must be addressed to the right person.

How do you find the right person?

Pick up the phone and ask them. It really is that simple.

Call the company, ask to speak to the HR department and ask them to whom you should address the letter. Do make sure you get the right address and that you know how to spell

their name. A name as simple as Stephen Smith could be Steven, or Smyth, or even Smythe. Getting the person's name wrong is not going to help you case.

Find out how they want to receive the application. Some companies even today do not take applications by email. If they do use email, find out if they accept MS word documents. Some companies insist on text only, or RTF format.

Old fashioned print

Should you actually have to print it out and stick it in an envelope then remember some basic layout points. It should be no more than a single side. Give yourself generous margins — at least 1.5cm either side. Single line spacing is fine.

Use a decent weight of paper — not the stuff you took out of the photocopier drawer.

Send it first class. One HR manager chucks away applications sent in second class letters, on the grounds that if they don't value themselves enough to warrant a first class stamp, then nor should she.