

Writing Effective Cover Letters

How to tailor your skills to fit the job you want!

1. Ask yourself (or have a friend/colleague ask you): “Why do you want this job?”

You need to be able to answer this question to write a compelling cover letter. Being able to articulate why you want a job creates a sense of excitement about and investment in the position. This will come through in your cover letter and let the review committee on the other end know that you care about the same things they need from the position. Articulating why you are excited will also keep you going when writing, searching, and interviewing gets tough.

You can talk about why you want a job out loud with a friend or colleague, you can write out your answer, or you can do both—whichever method works best for you.

If you cannot answer this question even after talking it out and mulling it over, move on to another job posting. This isn't the job for you.

(2) Review the job announcement line by line.

a. Highlight &/or number each “thing” the posting is asking for—skill, experience, knowledge of, etc.)

b. If there are multiple versions of the job posting (Ex: a short position description online that outlines the basic needs of the position AND an in-depth formal position description), do this process for both.

(3) For each requirement or skill listed in the position description(s) ask yourself:

(a) Do I have that skill/experience?

If YES, write an abbreviated note next to the line indicating where you gained that skill/experience. (Example: in-person, phone, and chat reference—“Ebling practicum”)

If NO, think harder---don't assume this skill or experience has to be gained in a library setting. Is the job posting looking for management experience? Your time as lead worker at Starbucks counts! Have you worked with children through a non-library community organization? This counts as working with kids!

If still NO, flag this as a potential weakness in your application.

(b) Assess the required and preferred skills that you flagged as weaknesses.

1. If there aren't any, then you're in great shape!

2. If there are just a few, you can be sure to emphasize the areas where you have lots of experience in the next step.

3. If there are several, and if any are required skills in the PD, you may need to re-assess why you are applying for the job.

i. Is this a pie-in-the-sky dream job? Maybe you take a chance and apply anyway. But be aware that you're far less likely to get the job if you cannot demonstrate that you have the required skills

ii. If you decide not to apply because you don't qualify, use the PD as a template for scheduling classes and practicum experiences so that you won't have any weaknesses the next time you see a job like this!

(4) Look through the list of skills/experiences you've highlighted in the job description, and look for patterns that will help you make an outline for your cover letter. There are a couple ways to do this:

A. Are there 3-5 main skills/experiences/characteristics the employer is looking for? You can structure your cover letter to hit those main items.

B. Or, you may notice that your experiences group around 3-5 main skills and so the letter can be organized in that fashion.

C. Either way, outline the skills and experiences you will include in your letter in the same order as they are listed in the position description. Use the language and terminology that is used in the PD, too. This will show the review committee that you are paying attention to what they want.

(5) Start writing!

The first draft/letter is always the hardest, and usually takes the most time. Don't worry about your first draft being perfect. Just get something down on paper. If you can't think of the perfect way to say something, just write it out how you might say it to a friend, and then worry about refining the language later.

(6) Have your first draft (and successive drafts) critiqued.

A. Set the appointment for the critique! This will give you a deadline and force you to complete that tough first draft.

B. Take tons of notes during the feedback session! Rewrite sentences on the spot, either with paper and pen, or directly into the electronic draft.

C. Set up the next appointment for the next draft and go home to revise.

(7) As you revise: read the letter draft out loud.

Does it ramble or sound awkward when you read it? Then it will seem rambling and awkward to the reviewer, too, and if he or she has been wading through a tall stack of resumes all day, those little details could be the difference between getting an interview and being recycled.

A. Refine your ideas. Get value out of every word and every sentence on that page.

Ask yourself, *Why did I write this sentence? What am I trying to communicate to the reader about how my skills fit the job?* If you can't answer that question, that sentence is wasting prime space on the page.

B. Polish and "tighten" the language until your letter makes you sound as smart as you are and is easy to read.

Ask yourself, *Am I communicating my idea effectively?* If you can't answer this question with YES, revise, refine, and read it out loud until it sounds right. Get help/input from the person critiquing your letter in successive drafts.

(8). Continue this process of revision until you have created a cover letter that truly represents you—your skills and your desire for this job—in the best possible light.

So, now you know the process. But what about the nuts and bolts?

A cover letter needs to include the following:

(1) That you are applying for this specific position (list posting number and title, location, if possible, and where you found the posting, i.e. the city of Fitchburg HR website)

(2) That you are a great match for the position

(3) Examples of why you are a great match for the position (body paragraphs)

This is where you write about the 3-5 skills / requirements you identified in the process above.

Be specific: don't tell the reviewer that you are "organized and can juggle multiple projects." This doesn't tell them anything besides the fact that you can parrot their PD back to them. Instead, give the reviewer an example of where and how you used that skill in the real world. Let the reviewer read your experiences as "supporting data" that will lead them to the conclusion that you are an exceptionally organized multitasker. This is a less generic and far more convincing way to write a cover letter.

(4) That you are excited/interested/psyched/jazzed, about this SPECIFIC position at this SPECIFIC library/company/branch/department. (Ideally you have this statement near the beginning of the letter, and come back around to it in your closing.)

KEEP IN MIND: The review committee is getting *hundreds* of applications. They don't have time for applicants that seem less than thrilled about the job. They want to hear you say that you are interested in this specific position—*translation*: you are interested in them and their needs. They need to know what you will bring in talent, skills, experience, and character to their agency and to your future colleagues that will make their jobs easier. Tell them what you can do that will fill the need that made them post the position in the first place and that you would be happy to do it.

(5) That you look forward to hearing from the committee (or whomever your letter is addressed to), and how you can be reached. Include phone, email, and specific hours of availability if appropriate. It doesn't matter that this info will be on your resume. They may not have it/may have lost it. Don't make them find it. Make it easy for them to contact you.

Top two things you will need for a successful job hunt:

(1) A realistic perspective about how job recruitments work.

Keep in mind that job recruitments are selfish operations on the side of the search committee.

They don't care about you. They care that you will meet their needs (professional needs of the position). If you can communicate this in your cover letter, then they may start to care about you, as an applicant and a potential employee.

(2) A team of folks who will support your job hunting efforts.

People critiquing your materials will have a variety of perspectives, skills and experiences. They will have their own strengths and weaknesses as reviewers. Don't rely on one person. Get feedback from colleagues, friends and professionals to make sure your materials look good from every angle.

Who to include on your job hunting team:

The Writing Center: their staff evaluates hundreds if not thousands of cover letters and resumes year-round. <http://writing.wisc.edu/>

L&S Career Services: same as above, and they work with you on mock interviews, how to dress, etc. <http://www.lssaa.wisc.edu/careers/>

Your advisor: two words—REFERENCE and NETWORK. Besides critiquing your applications and mentoring you in your chosen career interests, they are connected. Who do they know that might be able to help you, that you could shadow, ask advice from? (You get introduced that that colleague, and suddenly you are connected to their network, and so on and so on.)

Other staff/faculty/local LIS professionals: we're here to help you. We have to—we're librarians/LIS professionals! Ask for help. You will rarely get a no—sometimes that person will direct you to someone who can do more for you than they can.

Family: If your mom isn't the type of person who tells you that everything you do is amazing, and IF you can handle criticism from your mom!

Your peers: They are going through it to, and may have gained some tips/insight/experience that they can share. And they have been building their networks too. (However, see caveat regarding family members above!)

Your SLIS Student & Alumni Services Coordinator: I'm happy to meet one on one to work through the steps outlined above and to help you with your job search strategy.

Good luck!!!!