

THE COVER LETTER CHECKLIST: 9 INGREDIENTS YOU NEED FOR A STAND-OUT COVER LETTER.



YOUR COVER LETTER MATTERS.

Nothing turns off a recruiter or hiring manager more than a generic cover letter. It's important to always, always, always tailor your cover letter to the specific position and organization so that you're not wasting a valuable opportunity to explain why you are a perfect fit for this job. If you want your cover letter to stand out, make sure you include these 9 ingredients.

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1. A LEADING POWER SENTENCE.

After stating the position to which you are applying, go directly into a statement that sums up your key skills and qualifications that match the job requirements. Do not distract the recruiter/hiring manager by adding additional skills not required by this job. Focus directly on how you meet all (or most) of the criteria they seek straight off the bat.

Example:

Dear Sir or Madam,

It is with great pleasure I submit to you my application for the advertised Experts for Technical Support to Iraq position. Fluent in Arabic, I have over 18 years of experience implementing and providing technical advice to good governance, institutional development and public administration programs, in post conflict countries with specific experience in Iraq and the Middle East.

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2. DETAILS ABOUT YOUR SOFT SKILLS.

Elaborate on soft skills that are harder to quantify in a CV. But rather than simply listing them, give examples of how you applied these skills in similar contexts, and with results.

Example:

While working as a technical expert for XXX organization on the XXX program in Iraw, I advised the Parliamentary Budget Committee on budgetary review and analysis and public financial oversight.

This role required me to coordinate with all levels of government, including senior officials and those at a technical level. Under my guidance, the program was able to successfully XXX...

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3. THE REASON YOU WANT THIS JOB.

Explain why you are interested in this specific position and organization. But, don't make it about you. A need to pay rent, further your skills or gain experience that will help you land your real dream job down the road are not compelling reasons for hiring you. However, an opportunity to leverage your past experience and technical skills with an organization whose values and missions match yours is something an employer can get excited about.

Example:

My recent experience in Iraq has provided me with in-depth knowledge of the political, cultural and economic climate under which this project will operate. I am confident that this context will allow me to transition into the role. Having worked on the XXX Sida financed project, I am also familiar with the rules and regulations specific to this donor.

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4. AN EXPLANATION FOR EMPLOYMENT GAPS (IF ANY).

Explain any employment gaps that exceed 3 months. The project-based nature of development means employers have a higher appetite for employment gaps than other industries. However, if you have been unemployed for more than 3 months or have significant employment gaps in your past this will likely raise red flags. These are best explained in a cover letter succinctly and with a focus on how you used that time to stay current on your skills.

And, no sad stories please.

Example:

My CV, which is enclosed, details my background. Although I have not worked on a project for several months, I have hardly been idle. I volunteered my skills with XXX non-profit, and took an online course in XXX to advance my skills in XXX.

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5. A CONFIDENT STATEMENT ON WHY YOU'RE A STRONG FIT.

Telling an employer that you are definitely the best candidate for the job can appear arrogant and, in many cases, naïve. A confident statement on why you are a strong fit based on the qualifications shows that you know your value. However, be sure to hold back on the hyperbole and over-the-top language.

Example:

Being of Iraqi descent, I am passionate about helping to strengthen the public financial institutions and to improve the good governance in Iraq. My experience both with the country and subject matter will be an asset to your organization and the project.

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6. DETAILS ABOUT YOUR AVAILABILITY.

If you are applying to a domestic position that's not in the city where you live, give dates of when you plan to be in town and can attend an interview.

Example:

I am available to start in April 2014 and could commit to the 34-month duration. I will be in your area the week of XXX and can be available to meet in person to discuss this role further. Alternatively, I can be available for a phone or video interview at your convenience.

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7. FRESH INFORMATION THAT'S NOT ON YOUR CV.

Remember, recruiters will only look at your cover letter after looking at your CV and liking what they see. This means that there's no need to repeat what is already in your CV. You should, however, focus on highlighting relevant skills and experiences that you have developed over the course of your career, which can be harder to describe in the itemized format of a CV.

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8. CAREFUL EDITING.

Before sending your job application make sure that you are:

- a) addressing the letter to the right person,
- b) naming the right hiring organization,
- c) referencing the correct job title.

Forgetting to change these details when sending out job applications en masse is one sure way to have your cover letter end up in the wastebasket.

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9. THE RIGHT LENGTH.

Cover letters should be one page only. No exceptions.

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HERE'S WHAT A STAND-OUT COVER LETTER LOOKS LIKE.

Your address

City, State, Country

Date

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My CV, which is enclosed, details my background. Although I have not been on a project for several months, I have hardly been idle. I volunteered my skills with XXX non-profit, and took an online course in XXX to advance my skills in XXX.

Being of Iraqi descent, I am passionate about helping to strengthen the public financial institutions and to improve the good governance in Iraq. My experience both with the country and subject matter will be an asset to your organization and the project.

I am available to start in April 2012 and could commit to the 34 month duration. I will be in your area the week of XXX and can be available to meet in person to discuss this role further. Alternatively, I can be available for a phone or video interview at your convenience.

Optional section to explain employment gaps.

WE'RE HERE TO HELP.



KATE WARREN

Kate is our resident expert on what it takes to advance your career in global development. She works closely with recruiters at top development organizations and has first-hand insight into the latest hiring trends in international development. Subscribe and tune in to the Career Matters Blog each week as she shares her insider perspective.

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