Cover Letter Basics

Your cover letter is one long answer to this question: “Why should I read your resume and call you for an interview?”

Here are 5 ways to answer that question and get called for an interview.

1.) Build rapport
Cover letters are read by people, so address yours to a person. NEVER start your cover letter with such clichés as "Dear Sir or Madam" or "To whom it may concern."

Take that extra two minutes to call the employer and get the recipient's name. Ask the receptionist, "I'm writing a letter to the person who manages (your target department). May I have the correct spelling please?" This will set you apart from most applicants. If that fails, begin your letter with, "Greetings", It sounds positive and friendly.

2.) Show evidence of your research on the company
Use the cover letter to display your knowledge of the company, the industry and even to share specific recommendations you have for problems or opportunities you've researched.

Example: “Upon research I learned that (target company) has averaged an annual growth of 20% in the last 8 years by developing a niche market in sustainable products. My interest in your company aligns with your company’s mission to improve the global environment by developing alternative energy sources”.

3.) Avoid stating the obvious
We know you're a quick learner, honest and hard working. So are the other 500 applicants who want this job. Don't waste precious space in your cover letter saying so. Instead get the reader’s attention quickly and build interest by making the connection between your skills and the job description.

Example: “During my senior year, I developed my own website using Photoshop, HTML and CSS. I have some innovative ideas I would like to share with you on how to give your website a refreshed look”.

4.) Stick to one page in length- no more than 3 paragraphs
Doing this proves you can prioritize your thoughts and present them concisely -- both important communication skills. Also, it shows respect for your busy reader, who may have hundreds more cover letters and resumes to wade through.

5.) Get input from others
When you finish your one-page masterpiece, let friends, faculty and the Career Center proof and critique your letter. Typos and grammar errors are certain to get you rejected.