Job Application Letter

See also: *Résumé Pointers* and *Use LinkedIn to Start your Local Professional Network.*

The Changing Role of the Job Application Letter

You're probably not an old guy like me, but when I was taught about job search, photocopies were hard to come by and you typed everything by hand. The approach was to make lots of copies of your résumé and then type a custom letter to introduce it, to respond to employer expectations as revealed in a job ad.

That doesn't really work any more. Now, when you apply to any large organization, you are either applying into a text box online or sending your application in by email. Your application, most likely, will not be read by a person at all (unless it's the most wooden-headed clerk in the Human Resources Department) but it will be scanned into a database. Then the hiring manager will search the database to find applications that contain the key words appropriate to the job. See *Résumé Pointers* for ways to write an effective résumé in this situation.

Often it's only the résumé that is considered at this point, perhaps because some people feel that the application letter is principally "spin" (although the prepared job seeker will be organizing the résumé as well to make the strongest case possible). In *Résumé Pointers* the suggestion is that you include in your résumé the kind of information that, in the past, was put in the application letter: how your qualifications specifically address the employer's requirements.

Does this make the application letter obsolete? Some writers say so, but I would suggest that the letter is still important. ***But, it no longer introduces your résumé. Your cover letter will be read after the manager has found your résumé in the database, to find out more about a person who is, on the surface, qualified to be interviewed.***

So the application letter is still important and you need to make sure it supports the case you wish to make.

An Application Letter in 12 Parts and 5 Key Paragraphs

Here is a simple approach to writing a job application letters, based on an advertisement or a job description.

Before you start, consider the job advertisement or job description: it has two big parts, one part that describes the responsibilities of the position in general and a second part that lists the required qualifications or the major tasks associated with the job.

1. Contact information

Identify yourself: Name, phone number, email. Perhaps address, but you may not want to share that at this point. People will contact you by phone or email to come to an interview. Your LinkedIn profile url might be useful.

2. Date

3. Address of the recipient

The *name* and address of the person to whom you are sending the email.
- If the name is not given in the ad, phone or email to ask to whom you should be sending it.
- If no name can be discovered, it's the company's address and forget the salutation as well, just use a subject line.

4. Salutation

Address the person *by name*: *Dear Ms. Smyth: Dear Mr. Alay:* If you don't know the sex, say, *Dear Casey Brown:*
- If it's impossible to figure out the name of the person at the other end, forget the salutation and just use a subject line.
- Do not use "To whom it may concern" or "Dear Sir or Madam" or "Dear Manager." This screams of a form letter, and even if your letter is not a form letter, the reader will believe it is. 95% of applications are

apparently form letters and résumés that make no attempt to address the employer's specific requirements. This makes employers very impatient and frustrated with form letters.

5. Subject Line

Use a subject line. It should be centred on the line. Normally the subject is the competition number or the file number. If all else fails, use **Job Application: Name of Job**

6. Paragraph 1: What the letter is about.

This is a job application for a specific position, advertised somewhere, for a certain deadline. Say that. People don't expect to see anything important in this paragraph, so don't tell them anything important here.

7. Paragraph 2: Your most important qualifications.

Refer to your résumé and talk about your qualifications. Start with the first qualification or main task stated in the ad or the job description. Describe your experience in concrete terms (5 years product management at Mitel). Continue through the qualifications *in the order they appear in the job ad or description* and *using the same terminology* (If they call it "team coordinator" instead of manager, you call it "team coordinator"). Your purpose is to show that you have considered what they say their requirements are and you seriously believe that you are a good match.

T-Table

A very effective approach here is to use a T-table. In the left column list the job qualifications *exactly as they appear in the job advertisement -- word for word* and in the right-hand column list your concrete qualifications. Be sure not to parrot the left column in the right column, but give concrete information:

Your requirements	*My qualifications*
M.Sc in Computing Science	M.Sc. Computing Science, Ottawa U, 2001
6 years' experience in a development environment	10 year's development experience at Progress Corporation and Regress Inc, working on projects in Y and Z.
Teamwork skills	5 years' experience as a member and leader of a cross-functional development team on X Project.
Communication Skills	6 years' experience in client-facing development roles in Q corporation

This approach has the merit of ensuring that a computer scan of your résumé and application letter will find the "key words" they are looking for (left column) and that a human screener will find the concrete information (right column) that will put you in the "to be interviewed" pile

8. Paragraph 3:   More important qualifications.

As in paragraph 2 if you need to address more qualifications and don't want to create a huge, unreadable paragraph. Otherwise, go to Paragraph 4.

9. Paragraph 4:   Demonstrate that you understand the job

This is the time to think about the general responsibilities of the job: Think about them and your experience. Show them that you know about the challenges and rewards of this kind of job. Show your additional qualifications. If you have an M.Sc., but they're looking for a B.Sc, this is the point to tell them about it. So, your position is something like: I am familiar with what your company does and with this kind of job. *"Having done this job, I realize that for the demands of modern technology it's an advantage to you that I have an M.Sc."* If you were to tell them in paragraph 2 that you have an M.Sc when they're looking for less, they're likely to think *"We don't want an overqualified candidate."* If you have met their expectations in paragraphs 2 and 3, you have their interest and your additional qualifications or experience appear as a valuable asset.

10. Paragraph 5: Closing

Show confidence in the closing: You have something valuable to offer this company. Too many letters say "Here's my résumé and if you want to contact me .... " Possibilities are

- "I feel I can make a real contribution to X and am looking forward to discussing my application at an interview." (suitable for large places) and my preference, or perhaps
- "I feel I can make a real contribution to X and will phone your office on X to arrange an interview." (Over-the-top for big places, but may work in smaller ones, if you're comfortable with the hard sell.)

11. Complimentary Close

"Yours sincerely" or "Yours truly" (Take that "e" that everyone wants to put in "truly" and add it to "sincerely".

12. Signature

Don't scan your actual signature into digital messages!

Pointers:

- *Beware of starting every paragraph with "I".* This is an easy mistake to make, since you are writing about yourself and your experience, after all. Use formulas like "As you can see..." "My longest experience..." etc.
- *Use "you" as often as possible.* The purpose of the application letter is to address the reader's concerns. The reader is the most important person in the letter. The reader is "you".