

Starting a Job Application

Putting together a job application—usually consisting of a cover letter and resume—can be an intimidating process, and it's not uncommon to feel unsure about what to include on the 2-3 pages you have to put your best foot forward. The information in these handouts is intended to answer your questions and put you on more confident footing for creating a strong set of job application materials.

Application Documents

Your cover letter and resume should work together like a well-structured argument: when successful, they convincingly persuade the employer to hang on to your application and to keep you in mind for an interview.

The Cover Letter

Your cover letter introduces your resume and introduces *you*. Think of it like a central claim, or thesis: it's the first thing an employer typically reads in your application and, when written well, makes the employer want to turn the page to find out more about you. It should be written in a narrative style (imagine introducing yourself to the employer in person) and emphasize why you want the job and are a good fit with the announcement. The letter should include lots of concrete details.

The Resume

Your resume is a summary of your most relevant qualifications for the job. If your cover letter is like an argument's thesis—claiming that you are a good choice for the job and need an interview—then your resume is the supportive evidence needed to back that claim up! Resumes include the nuts and bolts: your contact details, education, skills, work experience and accomplishments, and it should be quick to read. When describing projects and past jobs, use fragments that begin with strong verbs.

The Job Announcement.

As you study the announcement, *take notes* and *look for questions*. Include key words (computer programs the organization wants the employee to be fluent in, languages, degree programs, communication skills or data analysis skills, and so forth). Look for and note the organization's mission statement or values. Look at the company website to find out more about the kind of work that's done or other causes the organization supports. Look for the name of who to address your cover letter to (so that you can write to a person instead of "to whom it may concern").

Unless an announcement specifically says not to, call with questions to show the employer that you're a) interested in the job, b) carefully reading and thinking about the position, and 3) not afraid to seek out answers to questions. In this way, announcements also offer the opportunity to make an initial contact with the company before sending an application.

The most successful job candidates show that they understand and can meet the employer's needs. So before beginning an application, it's important to recognize the job announcement's different parts—and read them carefully:

The Job Description

Job descriptions outline what the employer will need the person who gets the job to *do*. The description often includes a break down of how much time or effort is spent on different kinds of tasks.

Required Qualifications

These are typically nonnegotiable skills and qualities the employer says a person with the job must *have*. Education level, language or computer proficiencies, or organizational or communication skills are often listed as required qualifications.

Desired Qualifications

Desired qualifications may not be necessary to the job but might make the job easier. You don't have to have the desired qualifications to be considered for a job, but it's helpful if you do. Also, close inspection of this section gives you extra clues as to what kind of person the organization hopes to hire, which can help you decide what information about yourself you want to convey—or whether the job is one you really want.

Understand Yourself

It's important to recognize the difference between the *tasks* you performed on a job and *qualities and skills*, the *professional traits*, you might have honed from that work. The traits are often more transferable than you think.

Maybe working as a line cook in a busy diner doesn't at first seem to have much to do with your dream job in journalism, but a proven record of handling the chaos of a dinner rush can go a long way to demonstrate your ability to handle the pressure of a busy newsroom. A senior design project for your engineering degree doesn't just show that you have experience working with a particular computer modeling program; the project can also speak to your interpersonal skills and ability to work well on a team. Keep these activities in mind—whether or not you add them to your resume, you might write about them in your cover letter.

Keep a Personal Data File

One of the most useful exercises you can do in preparation for a job search is to develop a personal data file of your work-related activities. A data file does two important things:

- 1) It helps you remember the details of the work and projects you've done (including date ranges, wages, contact details for previous employers, and duties and responsibilities from previous jobs and internships);
- 2) It gives you a place to think beyond paid jobs and internships to list the skills developed in your academic or even your academic or extra-

curricular activities.

There is no set format for a data file; its purpose is solely for you. Some people format it like a more long and detailed resume, while others keep a Word or spreadsheet file. The important thing is to keep adding to it—and make it as detailed as possible. Include job titles, internships, major school projects, descriptions, dates and contact information, conferences attended, organization memberships, and notes about skills.

Understand the Overlap

The final step is to show how the *employer's needs* dovetail with *what you've done*.

Using the keywords from the job description in both your resume and cover letter can get your application through the initial screening process and show that you know the job description. However, it's also important for your genuine voice to come through in your cover letter (remember, it's the equivalent of your personal introduction), so you need to be able to put the employer's needs into your own words.

Before you embark on the actual resume and cover letter, spend some time writing "off the page." Try writing a short, informal letter to yourself that explains why you want the job in question, and why, after looking at the description and your personal data file, you think you'd be good at it. Once you've got that down, you're ready for the resume, and then the cover letter.

Conclusion

It can be daunting and tiring to hunt for jobs, especially with so many responsibilities as a student. Just remember: no one knows your own talents and skills better than you do, so give yourself some credit! Using the job posting, think about what qualities a potential new employer might be looking for. In your cover letter and resume, try to talk yourself up the same way you'd talk up a family member or a good friend.