CHAPTER 8

LETTERS THAT WILL GET YOU THE JOB

"The ability to write a cover letter has by far put me above my peers in terms of attempting to get a job."

—James Douglas Rocks-Macqueen, graduate student

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes in this day and age, being literate has more to do with one's ability to use technology and keep up with correspondence than with the ability to put together a well-written, grammatically correct, and coherent letter or document. Carol recently sat down with a pad of paper and a pen, thinking it would be nice to "write" a letter. As she started writing, she realized that she was so used to typing words that her brain and her hand didn't seem to know how to form letters and words. She laughed, put down the pen, and picked up the keyboard.
Correspondence has taken on new meaning. Cell phones, Twitter, texting, and chats have created a shorthand language that has replaced traditional forms of well-constructed words and sentences. We think in letter words and shorthand phrases, but, for the purpose of employment, “u nd 2 b” bilingual in your writing styles and further develop the basic letter-writing skills that your elementary schoolteachers, parents, and grandparents tried to teach you.

**Letters of Application**

Traditionally, letters of application were typed, signed, and placed in an envelope with a résumé or vita. Email and the Internet have changed how we research, locate, and apply for jobs. While some employers still prefer receiving a physical copy of the application via the mail, more and more request electronic inquiries and applications. Even the federal government lists all job notifications online and utilizes a central application process (www.usajobs.gov).

**The Email**

Before anything else, we feel compelled to offer this advice: treat your email as you would any other written document. This is the first view that a potential employer will see, your first opportunity to make that first impression. Don’t let the job go to someone else simply because you forgot to spell-check your note. Compose your email and send a draft of it to someone to review and edit, just as you would any other piece of writing.

We recommend against composing the body of your email in a word processing program for pasting into the email message. Most word processing programs have embedded codes that make things like apostrophes and quote marks look good in the document, but when pasted into an email may look something like `<A@i> <A@e` when you really meant ""). If you still want to use a word processing program, you can reduce the chances of a problem by saving the file as a text file (.txt), or you can use the Word Pad accessory if it is available on your computer.

As we mentioned before, before you begin applying for jobs, set up an email address that will not raise eyebrows. It needs to be something professional and simple, such as your initials and last name, and not something cute like digme2@aol.com. You want potential employers to remember you and to take you seriously. You also need to consider the email provider. Some junk filters will automatically send emails with certain extensions directly to the spam email folder. Strange but true: when a user
on the University of Oklahoma email system sends an email with a copy
to him- or herself, the incoming email goes straight into the junk mail
folder. According to the university’s IT department, there was no way to
fix the system so that the ou.edu address was considered okay, not spam.

Include a line toward the end of your email message requesting that
the recipient acknowledge receipt of your message. If you have the option
to send the email with a “Send receipt,” you can do that, but often people
will choose not to send the automated response. The key point here is that
you want confirmation that the email actually reached the destination. If
you do not receive a receipt, or if you have not received a response from
the recipient, do not assume that your email arrived. Too often, emails do
not reach their destination. Without being a pest, follow up on your initial
contact, confirming that your first email was received.

Cover Letters

Résumés and CVs are generalized overviews of your previous employ-
ment and accomplishments. They are intended to get you the job inter-
view so that you can demonstrate why you are the right person for the job.
Everyone who applies for the job has the requisite résumé, but the person
who gets the job has somehow stood out among the others. How do you
show that you are the best person for a job? What puts you in a better po-
sition for that interview? It all comes down to the cover letter (and your
references, but we will get to that later). The cover letter that accompani-
your résumé or vita is where you get to introduce yourself and market
your skills in direct relation to the employer’s needs. Creating a good
cover letter is an art that anyone can perfect through practice.

Nolan (2003: 109) breaks cover letters down into three categories:
those sent in relation to a specific job announcement, those sent as a let-
ter of introduction or at the suggestion of “a mutual friend,” and those sent
as a follow-up to an interview you have already had. Regardless of the type
of cover letter, they all share similar attributes and elements.

EXERCISE: Collect and List the Information

You may be a novice at writing a cover letter, but the skills involved
are not much different from others you’ve already accumulated, such as
analyzing an assignment and completing it so that it fits the instructor’s
requirements. Begin by looking at the job advertisement. What are they
looking for? Analyze the job summary, the list of desired skills, previous
experience, and education requirements. Begin the process by creating a list of the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for this job. You may want to type the list or simply highlight the key phrases or keywords.

After listing what the employer is looking for, consider your past experience. Look at the list you created of previous jobs and the knowledge, skills, and abilities obtained there, as noted in your journal (Chapter 5). How do the two lists compare? What are your strong points? What have you done that would set you apart from other applicants? The answers to these questions will form the body of your letter.

**Drafting the Letter**

The cover letter is a formal communication. In selecting stationery, we advise you not to use the letterhead or envelopes of your current employer. You are representing yourself in your job search, not your employer or your university.

Your address and the date should appear at the top of the page. You might consider creating your own letterhead in your word processing program and saving it as a template so that the only thing you need to change each time you write a letter is the date. Place the contact information in the header of the document.

The second section of the cover letter contains the employer's full name, company, and complete address. Be careful to get the name of the organization correct. One of our colleagues said she has received letters addressed to “University of Northern Arizona” instead of the correct name, Northern Arizona University. Another common problem results from reusing an existing cover letter. When you update a letter, make sure that you change everything that needs changing. If you are applying for a job at URS Corporation but in the middle of your letter you have a sentence saying you believe that SRI does the best research in the west, chances are your letter will be thrown in the reject pile.

The third component is the salutation. This is a formal situation. Even if you know the first name of the person to whom the letter is written, you should use the recipient's correct title—Dr., Mr., or Ms.—and last name. The proper punctuation following the name is a colon (:) not a comma. So, for example, if you were to address a letter to the authors of this book, the salutation would read “Dear Dr. Watkins and Ms. Ellick.”

A word of caution: If you do not have the name of the person or if the name is not gender specific, do not simply write “Dear Sir.” If there is a phone number, call and ask who will be reviewing the applications. If there is no way to know who will review your letter and vita, make the
salutation gender neutral by using “To Whom it May Concern,” “Dear Employer,” or “Dear Search Committee.” Only use “Dear Sir” if you are absolutely sure you are submitting your application to a man. Carol has been known to toss applications addressed to “Dear Sir” in the rejection pile because clearly the applicant (1) didn’t take the time to change the salutation to meet the needs of the current application, (2) didn’t read the job announcement well enough to see that the letters should be directed to a woman, or (3) didn’t follow directions well. In any case, this is not someone she wants working for her. As they say, the devil’s in the details; so is successfully obtaining the job.

The introductory paragraph should state the job that you are applying for. Use the title as listed on the job announcement and, if there is one, the job reference number. This is particularly important in case the agency or the organization is hiring to fill more than one position. You should also state that you have enclosed the specific components required for the application. Depending on the situation, this may include your résumé or vita, writing samples, and a list of references or letters of recommendation.

The second paragraph should state your qualifications and detail any special skills and abilities that would be an advantage to the employer in relation to the job you would fill. It is essential that you accurately describe who you are, what you have done, and what you can do. Make yourself look good, but do not lie or exaggerate your qualifications, as this will only come back to bite you. Use a sufficient (but not excessive) number of adverbs and adjectives as you write. You want to take this opportunity to fill in the details of your experience in a way you can’t do on a short résumé. Focus your information according to the requirements in the job description. If possible, list your abilities in the same order that the requirements were listed in the job announcement. This way, you know that you’ve covered everything they have asked for and you have given it to them in the way they have asked for it.

Your closing paragraph should thank them for the opportunity to apply for this position and should let them know that if they have any questions or require any additional information, they can contact you by phone (list the number) or by email (list the email address). Sign your letter “Sincerely,” leave a couple lines of space for your signature, and type your full name. You will sign your letter in the two-line space between “Sincerely” and your name. And, don’t forget to sign your letter in ink.

As with the email, if you do not hear back within a week or before the application deadline, pick up the phone and call to confirm the receipt of your application. This is also an opportune moment to ask the employer if they need any additional information or to request a meeting.
While your cover letter is not the place to detail your entire employment history, if you have a specific job that directly relates to the job for which you are applying, highlighting that job experience can help move your application into the pile for potential interviews.

Make it Stand Out
The final piece of advice we wish to impart before you start writing has to do with putting the finishing touches on the product. The employer will receive countless responses to their cry for help, and most of those responses will all look the same—a cover letter, résumé, and letters of reference, all printed on white, multipurpose, 96 bright, 20 lb., 8.5 × 11-inch paper. Some may have arrived in a 9 × 12-inch flat envelope, others folded in a No. 10 envelope, but in the employer’s mind, they will all blend together.

Printing your application components on high-quality bond paper will set your application apart from all others. Select a paper that is easy on the eyes and is slightly thicker than the standard copy paper. The subtle textural difference and color will make your application memorable and may be a tie-breaker between two applicants. Above all, send clean copies. Make sure that there are no smudges or smears (or telltale evidence from a previous meal). If you make a mistake, print a clean copy. This is your only chance to make a first impression.

In addition, think about whether to justify the margins of the letter. Some people prefer left alignment because the spaces between the words are equal and it produces a "ragged edge"; others prefer full justification because they like the even margins all around the text. Joe has found it’s usually easier to correct and read letters and documents that are left-aligned rather than fully justified. Regardless of which format you choose, be consistent throughout the document. Again, attention to detail and consistency are important to the employer, and your cover letter should not sabotage your application because of inconsistent spacing or justifications.

If you do your own printing, buy a ream of paper and matching envelopes. Don’t let the investment of $20 stop you; consider what you will make back if it gets you that job. If you plan to use a copying service, you can still take your own paper or you can select carefully from their stock on-hand. If your application materials add up to more than four pieces of paper, consider sending them in a flat 9 × 12 inch-envelope rather than trying to fold them to fit within a standard letter envelope. And be sure to provide sufficient postage on the application packet so that it gets there and doesn’t get returned by the post office.
EXERCISE: CREATE THE TEMPLATE FOR YOUR COVER LETTER

Select a job that you would like to apply for or choose one of the job announcements you have used in previous chapters. Following the advice in the sections above, create a draft cover letter for the advertised position. An example of a cover letter can be found in Appendix 4, Samples and Examples.

LETTERS OF INTRODUCTION

A letter of introduction is another form of cover letter. The main difference is that it is not sent in application for a specific job. A letter of introduction can be written by you as a self-introduction, or it can be written by a professor or someone who knows of your background and abilities. (This is where the impression you made during your volunteer position or internship can be especially useful.)

Letters of introduction can be of use when you are moving to a new location. The letter can help you establish an acquaintance in the new location with someone from a colleague's network. Use this ice breaker to set an appointment to meet for coffee and share your background and learn what opportunities might be available.

When you request a letter of introduction or a letter of reference from someone you worked for, provide that person with the day you started your position and the date you left. Give him or her a list of tasks that you accomplished and the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired while working there. Providing this information will make the writer's task easier and will help ensure that you will get a letter that you can use in the future.

LETTERS OF REFERENCE

Your résumé or CV shows a prospective employer that you have the qualifications needed for the job, but it is your letters of reference that will help get you an interview and ultimately will get you your job.

Requesting Letters of Reference

Several years ago, we gave a series of lectures and workshops at the Archaeological Research Facility, University of California at Berkeley. When we stopped by Dr. Meg Conkey's office, we spotted a table with a set of boxes
containing notes addressed to “All Students.” Curious people that we are, we took a closer look and discovered that the boxes contained instructions to “All Students” in the anthropology program on requesting letters of reference and letters of recommendations. Dr. Conkey states in the second paragraph of her instructions that “letters of reference are one of the most important parts of your application. They can highlight your strengths, explain your weaknesses, and give a sense of you as a living, breathing human being.” Her instructions go on to say that “when considering which faculty member to request the reference from, consider who knows you. Only individuals with whom you have worked or studied will have the background to write a strong letter.” If they don’t know you, then the letter they write will be nothing more than “lukewarm” (Meg’s word), and in this day and age, lukewarm will not get you where you want to be.

As with your letter of introduction, you need to provide the professor or previous employer with the information needed to write a glowing reference. If you are requesting a letter from a faculty member, Dr. Conkey suggests that you provide this individual with your résumé or vita, your overall grade point average (GPA), your GPA in your major, your personal statement, the grade in the class or classes you took with that faculty member, any glowing comments that the faculty member wrote on your exams or papers, copies of your papers, and your current address and phone number, as well as a permanent address and phone number of someone who will know how to reach you once you’ve moved. Assume that once the faculty member has written the letter that he or she will throw out (re- cycle) any papers that you have provided, so never send originals.

There are other ways to help faculty members or previous employers write a glowing letter of reference. Take advantage of their office hours or other “down times.” There is no better way for your professors to get to know you than for you to make the time to talk with them about career options. If possible, provide a copy of your job application (or scholarship or graduate school application) so that your referee can write a letter that addresses specifics. While your faculty member or previous employer will likely remember you if your tenure with them has been recent or long-term, it’s to your advantage to provide them with the opportunity to get to know you before you need a letter. Joe has received requests for letters from students who never spoke up in class or never participated beyond the minimum, and has wondered why they asked him for a letter. Such letters (if the person agrees to write one) are at best lukewarm and at worst impersonal, and rarely help the applicant stand out from other applicants.

In most cases, potential employers will request that letters of reference be sent to them directly from the person authoring the letter. Doing
so allows the referee to be candid in his or her assessment of your abilities. Professors have information that may be considered sensitive, such as your ranking in class, so sending the letter blind (not to you as a copy) allows them the freedom to include this information. In the exercise below, we take you through the process of requesting a letter of reference—in this case, a generic letter rather than one geared to a specific position.

This letter should be filed in your portfolio for future reference, for submission in the future, or simply for you to read over the years as a reminder of what you have accomplished. Provide a stamped, self-addressed envelope along with your request if you want to make it easier for your referee to send you the copy.

**EXERCISE: REQUEST A GENERIC LETTER OF REFERENCE**

Choose a person to ask for a letter of reference, someone with whom you have worked or studied, or someone for whom you've volunteered. Create your letter of request, addressed specifically to that individual. Let him or her know that you are creating your career portfolio and that you would like a letter of reference to keep on file for future use and not for any specific application. Provide the information suggested in the “Requesting Letters of Reference” section above, to assist your referee in writing the letter. Be sure to send your current email address as well, in case questions arise. An example of a request for a letter of reference is in Appendix 4, Samples and Examples. If all goes well, you should receive a letter of reference, most likely addressed “To Whom It May Concern.”

**Writing Letters of Reference**

To help you understand the amount of work involved in writing letters of reference, imagine that the roles were reversed. Think what sorts of questions you might have if you had been asked to write a letter of reference for a colleague, employee, or student. If that individual has performed at the highest level, writing the letter is easy. But what if the person did his or her job, did it adequately, but didn’t shine? How do you compose a letter that reads well, shows what the person can do, but is not negative? How do you present the facts of a problem or issue in a benign fashion that will allow the reader to read between the lines? In writing letters, it is important to be honest, to not give undeserved praise or criticism. Doing so may
threaten your future credibility as a reference. For more information on how to address these topics, go to Chapter 11, Communication.

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter, you created two or three very important components of the job portfolio: your cover letter, letter of introduction, and your request for a reference. In addition, you should have received one letter of reference that can be used in future job applications. Before finalizing your letters for the portfolio, give them to someone to review. The person you select for this task should be someone at the employer level or a faculty member, as they will have the knowledge to review and comment from the perspective of an employer. Consider their comments carefully before finalizing your letters.

**FOR THE PORTFOLIO**

Print copies of each of the letters produced through the activities of this chapter. File these in your portfolio. Chances are you will not be using these exact versions of your letter of introduction or cover letter in future job applications, but you should keep the paper record on hand in case the digital copy is misplaced.

You should also file the letter of reference or letters of introduction written by past employers, people you volunteer for, or professors in your portfolio at this time.