

# Don't give away your entire story in the cover letter

The process of getting a job is simply that — a process. In the early stages, when you're applying for jobs, you want to present enough information to move to the next step — the interview. On your cover letter, you want to keep an employer's interest and stand out from the competition, but also don't want to provide so much information that the interviewer can make a final decision about you.

How do you balance the information flow throughout the application process? How do you avoid giving away the entire story in the cover letter, or other application materials? The key is to take each step mindfully.

## Write your résumé first

To avoid repeating yourself throughout the application process, first make sure you understand the purpose of each application material. As Jene Kapela, principal and founder of Jene Kapela Leadership Solutions LLC, says, "The résumé demonstrates your experience. The cover letter, on the other hand, should be used to show how your experiences make you a great fit for the position you're applying for." This means that your résumé is what sets the tone for your candidacy.

Ideally, each person who receives your application will give it much time and attention, but in reality, some hiring managers only read a cover letter and others are only interested in the résumé. This means that you do need to share your essentials on both. However, your résumé needs to be written first, because it is often what moves you through to the next stage in the hiring process.

A common hiring trend today is to use applicant tracking systems (ATS), which scan résumés for keywords that appear in the job description to find people who are a good match. To catch the ATS's "eye," use keywords from the job description that are an accurate way to describe your experience and skills. You'll be identified as a close match for the job, and your application will likely then be put in front of a hiring manager.

## Use your cover letter to tell a story

An ATS may not love stories, but hiring managers who are looking for a good hire do. This is why your cover letter holds weight and shouldn't be used to repeat the skills from your résumé. "The cover letter 'connects the dots' for the hiring manager — it clearly explains why you're the right person for the job based on your past experiences," Kapela says. "It also communicates your interest in the position."

For instance, if you're applying for a nursing position, your résumé might have read that you "assess, treat and rehabilitate clients" and "help keep staff motivated." But your cover letter should elaborate on how you did that, why it was so successful and how you're able to implement those same strategies at this new organization. It should also speak to why this new organization interests you, whether it's their focus on innovative technologies, their emphasis on excellent bedside manner or the breakthrough research they're conducting. People like to hear a story that they're a part of and will identify with a candidate who can identify with them.

## **Treat the interview like a conversation**

Up to this point, the application process has been very much one-sided, as you've written letters and application materials to some unknown person in the hopes of impressing her. But in the interview, you're speaking to actual people and are being presented as an actual person. Use this to your favor.

Instead of listing your skills or number of years' experience, open up about your big career wins and successful work habits, and share this information in a strong, confident manner.

"You should be prepared with concrete examples that support every item listed on your résumé," Kapela says. "During the interview, don't just repeat what's on your résumé. Share what you did that really made a difference. Explain what led up to your accomplishments and how these accomplishments impacted the organization in a positive way."

Also ask questions throughout, and tie your experience to the strategies and goals of the company you're interviewing with. The goal of the interview is to present yourself as the best choice for the company, and the more you can align yourself with the organization while showing that it's a natural fit, the better your chances are of getting a job offer.