

# **Secrets of Application Letters that Work:**

Strategies for Creating Materials that  
Stand Out & Land Interviews

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*Secrets of Application Letters that Work*

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## **Dedication**

*for my mother, Grace, who taught me to believe that  
we are capable of doing anything we set our hearts and minds to*

*and*

*for my students over the years, who have and continue to challenge and inspire me with their questions*

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# Introduction

As jobs remain scarce, employers stay selective about the applicants they interview. There are, however, ways an application letter, also known as a cover letter, can set you apart from other applicants—if you know what to do.

If you're reading this guide, chances are you're entering the workforce, between positions, or looking to change jobs... and, perhaps, you've been finding today's market is less accessible or accommodating than ideal. If so, you're not alone. Unfortunately, the overwhelming number of resources offering varying lists of do's and don'ts regarding application letters make it harder for even the most earnest job seekers to know which advice to follow in general, and which advice will help their application materials stand out. More unfortunate is that information overload is only part of the problem.

Offering prescriptive rules and ready-to-apply suggestions, job search advice often strips away contextualizing elements that help applicants understand why some strategies may work, why others may not, and why the success of most strategies ultimately depends on the context. In essence these materials omit critical information that could help job applicants make better, more informed choices as they create or revise their application letters. This guide is different.

*Secrets of Application Letters that Work* examines secrets of successful application letters, yet while the word “secrets” suggests this guide will present gimmicks job applicants can use to trick prospective employers into considering their application, nothing could be further from the truth. Certainly there are applicants who misrepresent their skills and abilities during a job search in general, and in application letters in particular, but such deception serves neither employers, nor applicants in the long run. Therefore, rather than support superficial razzle-dazzle, this guide advocates and offers a framework of credible practices to highlight your experiences and capabilities to organizations that interest you.

The principles and strategies outlined in this guide may be little known and, thus, little used, but they aren't secret. They're time-tested practices of effective communication. Still, the fact that so few application materials reflect these principles validates the need for a guide that explains what these practices are, and how they can be invaluable in the context of a job search.

This guide starts with secrets that can help you identify and target positions and opportunities that best match your talents and interests. It then discusses the expectations hiring managers often use to evaluate job applicants, further contextualizing the secrets about application letters that wrap up this guide.



Although many jobs may not require an application letter, the information in this section can help you stand out when application letters are possible. And should you decide *not* to submit an application letter, the secrets in this section can help you prepare for interviews.

Throughout the guide, you will find step-by-step exercises to help you look at, revise, and create more effective, competitive job application documents. These activities require time—certainly more time than the “plug-n’-chug” application materials that dominate the market. Therefore, if you don’t have the time, energy, or interest to invest in something you hope to do for the next year or more, you may not be ready to do it. Similarly, if you’re seeking easy answers and instant results, this guide is not for you. But if you’re willing to approach each discussion in good faith and complete the corresponding exercises with care, you will find ways to discuss your talents with greater precision, clarity, and conviction, and do so in ways that get the attention of hiring managers.

In picking up this guide, you demonstrate that you’re not only wanting to set yourself apart, but that you’re willing to take concrete steps to do so. My hope is that by reading this guide and completing its exercises, you will find ways to identify, articulate, and showcase your talents and, in turn, land interviews with companies that value your abilities.

Sincerely,

Caroline M. Cole





# Getting Started



## Secret 1: Career assessment is valuable at any stage of a career, helping individuals identify (or verify) what they want to do, and why, so they can convince others to pay them to do it.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* focuses on Alice who, following a mysterious White Rabbit down a rabbit hole under the hedge, enters "Wonderland," a fantastical world inhabited by many strange characters, such as the March Hare, Mad Hatter, the King and Queen of Hearts, and the Cheshire Cat. Although Carroll's story may seem to have little relevance to those launching a job search, the way many people look for jobs may reveal more similarities than differences.

There is, for example, the effect of impulsively, haphazardly, and uncritically chasing people, things, illusions, and so on that catch our eye. People may have moved through school, positions, companies, and even careers in such a manner that, upon reflection, they find they have tumbled into an absurd and unfamiliar world peppered with characters they consider unusual, eccentric, and even a bit frightening.

Trying to adjust to their new environments, they may inevitably discover the instability of their own—and others'—identity. Along the way, they may encounter rules, social norms, and expectations that defy everything they have known to date. The naïve would dismiss these conventions as silly, yet eliminating them completely would be as dangerous as upholding them blindly.

Ultimately, it's a person's ability to manage situations that seem controlled by inconsistent, arbitrary policies that leads to success. The twists and turns required to move through unfamiliar and, at times, confusing places are ever-present and ever-uncertain, especially in the workplace. Choices may not be choices *per se*, but reactions to known and unknown forces, leading to greater anxieties. And while there may be moments of calm or even clarity,



those moments may be short-lived and quickly undermined by the next, unexpected encounter, just like Alice found.



*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* documents a wonderful journey, but it also offers a cautionary tale about letting others lead us on paths that can make us unsure of who we are, what we want, or if we truly belong in the places we land. Career assessment aims to mitigate these dangers by helping us thoughtfully examine our values, talents, and interests so that we might discover work that would engage our best selves, find forums to support our efforts, and pursue those opportunities with passion.



To help in this endeavor, we turn to a question that is often asked of children, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”



As a child and, perhaps, even as an adult, you may have envisioned yourself in a particular field or position that, to date, remains elusive. Or, possibly, you're on the way to achieving your dream job, but need guidance navigating the intermediate steps. Maybe you've found a career by default, rather than by choice, and wonder if there could be something more for you if you only knew what those alternatives were. Perhaps you have experienced detours that have not only moved you further from your target destination, but left you unsure about how to find your way back on course. Or maybe you're struggling to develop a strategy for leaving a familiar and safe, but mundane job—especially in today's economy—in search of a position that engages your talents and stimulates your interests. It's also possible you have reached the position you thought you wanted only to learn it wasn't for you after all.

Career aspirations change—sometimes unconsciously. Therefore, all successful job searches should include opportunities to identify or validate career options that both excite and inspire you. Because guided daydreaming can help identify personal and professional ambitions, the following exercises provide an occasion to consider work and forums that match your interests and talents, helping you to decide where and how to move forward.



## Exercise: Fast-forward...

Set a timer for 10–15 minutes and let your mind drift to the first day on the job of your ideal career or position, whatever you define it to be. Envision the day from start to finish, thinking less about a specific organization you'd like to work with and more about the people, the environment, the tasks that would give you pleasure. Consider, for example...

*what time do you begin your day... what clothes do you put on for your work...*

*what activities do you do prior to leaving for work... how do you get to work... what is that commute like...*

*what and whom do you find when you first arrive at your place of business...*

*how do you start the day's work, and what do you do as you move through the day...*

*what problems do you solve and what needs do you fulfill... whom do you encounter along the way, what types of*

*interactions do you have, and how do you feel during those encounters...*

*what's necessary to ensure the success of your various endeavors, and where, how, and with what effort*

*are you able to secure those resources...*

*when and how does your day wrap up... what's the reverse commute like...*

*who or what awaits you upon your return home...*

Engage all of your senses as you think about “doing” your profession and your work, creating a forum that you could actively and enthusiastically think about, participate in, and contribute to—every day, if necessary—regardless of how much you are paid.

If it helps, use the space below to jot down notes or key words that come to mind. If you're feeling artistic, sketch out possibilities or use images from magazines to create a collage of elements you'd like to have in your professional world.





## Exercise: “Top 5” Standouts

Set the timer for another 5–10 minutes and, as quickly as possible, identify the top five images, ideas, details, characteristics... that stand out as the most appealing for you from the “Fast-Forward...” exercise. The items you list might include people, projects, venues, opportunities, or any combination of these elements.

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②

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③

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④

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⑤

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## Exercise: Rankings

Set the timer for another 5 minutes and, as quickly as possible, *rank* the items you listed in the “Top 5 Standouts” exercise from the most important (1) in your ideal job to the least important (5):

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②

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③

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④

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⑤

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## Exercise: Current Awareness Levels (CALs)

Using the information you identified in the “Career Possibilities” exercise, consider the fields and industries where this work is done, companies that value this work, positions that do this work, skills employees need to do this work efficiently. Then, in the chart below, record what you *currently* know about these fields, companies, positions..., what you *don’t* know, and what you *could* know if you were to talk with people, research the work or position online, and so on. Use additional paper as necessary.

| Element                                                                                                    | What and who I Do Know... | What and who I Don't Know... | What and who I Could Know... |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| fields and industries that value this work                                                                 |                           |                              |                              |
| top companies doing this work                                                                              |                           |                              |                              |
| possible position(s) or jobs that would allow me to do this work                                           |                           |                              |                              |
| expectations of the employees holding these positions or doing this work (e.g., degrees, training, skills) |                           |                              |                              |
| individuals doing this work                                                                                |                           |                              |                              |



## Exercise: Moving Dreams Into Reality

Now that you've identified contexts and opportunities that may be of interest, list *specific* actions you can take in the next 6, 12, 18 and 24 months to complete, update, and build upon the areas you identified in the "Current Awareness Levels (CALs)" exercise. Be as specific as possible, breaking larger, abstract tasks into several smaller, concrete ones if necessary. For example:

Read 10 job descriptions concerning *Position X* each week to identify and compare company expectations for employees doing the work that interests me

Do a skills assessment of what I presently have and what I need to develop to be competitive in this area

Meet with five people in my immediate circle to brainstorm ways to...

Go to a career fair to talk with...

Research different organizations that offer positions that support work in...

Ask five friends for contacts they may have in the field of...

Arrange an informational interview to discuss...

Attend a networking event to meet...

Read about one company in my target field each week to learn more about...

Make appointment with current supervisor to discuss...

Participate in online discussion forums with others who...

Look for local course, workshop, or training opportunity to learn or update skills in...



Now create your Personal Plan of Action by identifying specific actions to take in the next...

**...6 months**

1

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2

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3

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4

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5

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**...12 months**

1

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2

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3

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4

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5

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**...18 months**

①

②

③

④

⑤

**...24 months**

①

②

③

④

⑤



**Congratulations!** You have identified and narrowed possibilities that will make your search easier and more focused on finding opportunities that can bring you closer to your dream position. This information will also help you revise and develop your application materials to apply for such positions, as we'll discuss in the following secrets.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before discussing secrets that directly affect application materials, a word on this guide's use of "hiring manager."

Every company—whether it's a sole-proprietorship or a corporation with offices around the globe—has its own structure and process for hiring team members and, by extension, titles for those working with prospective employees and their files. In some cases, it may be a manager or director in the specific division needing more assistance. In other cases it may be members of the organization's Human Resources department. In a startup, it may be the CEO. Given the range of possibilities, this book uses the term "hiring manager" to simplify and streamline references to the individuals who may recruit applicants, review and screen applications, interview candidates, and help bring job searches to a successful conclusion.

So, with that, we turn to more secrets...

\* \* \* \* \*



## Secret 2: Applicants are not the primary focus of a job search.

Most job applicants look for jobs with their interests in mind: What kind of work do they want to do? What company would they like to work for? What kind of people do they want around them? How much money will make the work worthwhile to them? Such questions can help applicants find and narrow positions of interest, but they also have a tendency to obscure the most important character in the story, at least according to the people making the ultimate decision: the employer.

Hiring managers know why people submit applications for the jobs they're advertising. Applicants want a paycheck, they want the status of having the company's name on their résumé, they want an opportunity to move one step closer to their dream job.... Any one of these reasons—or even all of them—could bring top-notch candidates to the applicant pool, but none of them matter to hiring managers who are mostly concerned with what *they* will get from the hire.

Hiring managers generally look for two things in an applicant: someone who can help *the company* make more money, and someone who can help *them* look good in front of management so *they* can make more money. Certainly hiring managers need to make sure that the prospective applicants are likable, that they can play nice, and that others in the office would want to work with them; that's what the interview is for. But to get an interview, applicants must demonstrate that they can make the company and the hiring manager look good.

Recognizing that you and a hiring manager will view your application materials differently can help you contextualize and frame your experiences to appeal to the audiences you want to reach: companies wanting to hire reliable, competent individuals.

The following exercises can help you identify concerns that may be of greatest interest to the hiring managers reading your materials and, ultimately, deciding whether to advance your application.







Next, think about the types of people you want on your team to help with that work. Think about the people who would be working with you, or even alongside you, sometimes for hours at a time. Think about the individuals you would need to depend on to get the work done when and as needed. Think about those who would help the company do well, but also help you look good to your supervisors and among your colleagues. Now, consider that you want to hire *the best* person from among the possibilities ...

*What education, training or experience would be mandatory for the person you would need and want to hire?*

*What experiences would be highly desirable, and why? What training and experience would help this person start doing the work immediately, saving you time with training and oversight?*

*For the training that would be necessary, what characteristics would make that work easiest for you?*

*What skills, training, experiences, and so on would give this new hire an advantage in the work he or she would be doing in the short- and long term, and in what ways?*

*What skills and interests would your ideal applicant have to make them more effective and efficient in their primary and secondary responsibilities? What would be bonus skills and experiences?*

Take 15–20 minutes to list the training, experiences, characteristics of the best type of employee for this work—someone who could both complete the work that needs to be done *and* help you build your own reputation and image within the organization; use additional paper, as necessary. If you get stuck, look at job announcements for positions in the industry to see how companies package their requests for employees.

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Finally, think about your greatest fears, anxieties, challenges, and problems in the industry, in your office, in your division and, perhaps, in your own life—the things that keep you up at night. In this context, what kind of person would you want by your side? Take 15–20 minutes to list the characteristics, traits, and so on would you want in the person you hire so that even if that individual could not address or ease your concerns directly, that person would not be adding to them.

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## Exercise: Mash Up

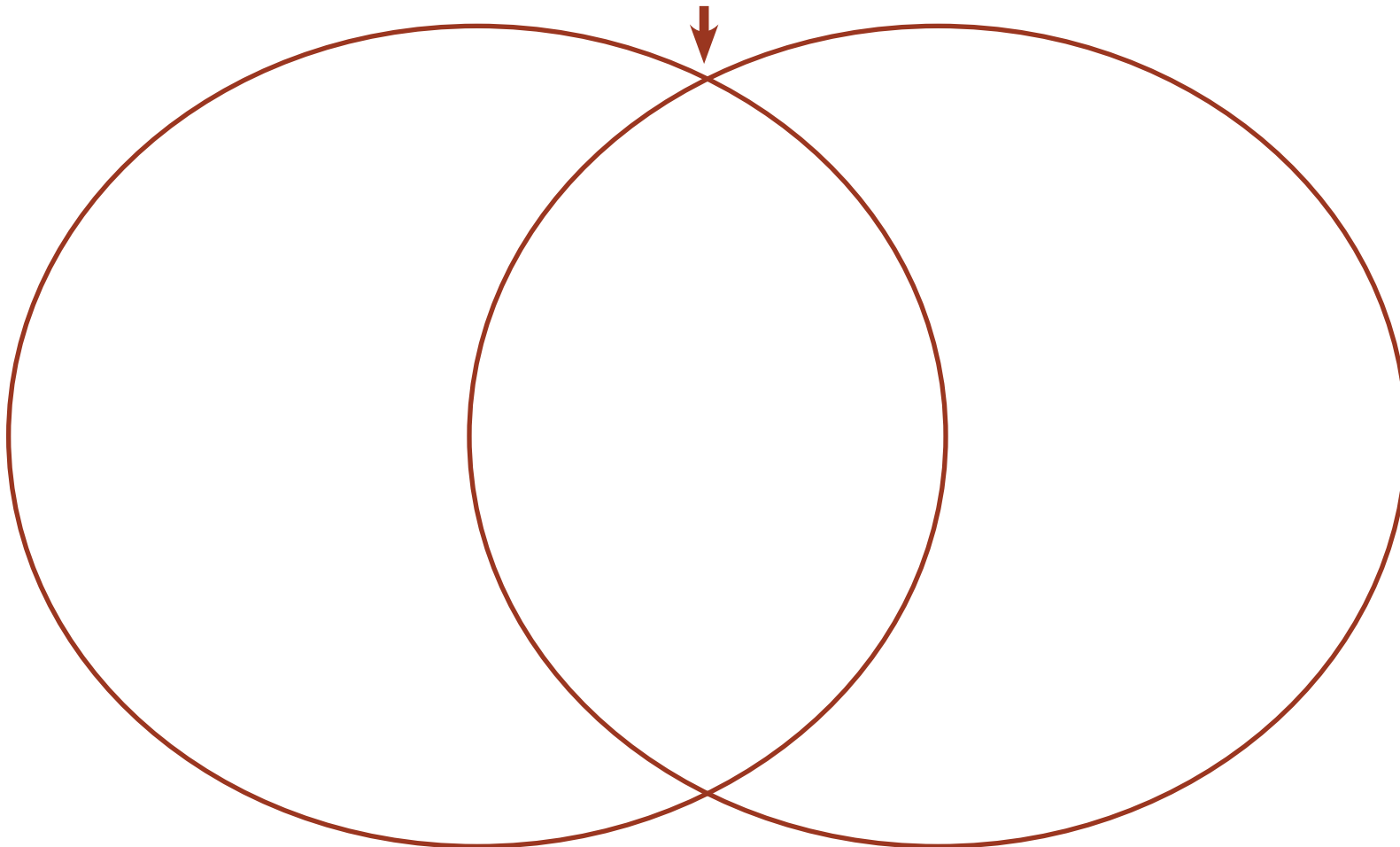
In reviewing the lists you generated for the “Ideal Employer Profile” and the “Ideal Employee Profile,” you might begin to see places these lists overlap. List items that appear on *both* lists in the overlapping area of the circles below.

### Applicant “Sweet Spot”

What Your Ideal Employer Wants

Where the wants of your Ideal Employer  
overlap with what you can offer

What You Can Offer





The place where the circles overlap represents the “Applicant Sweet Spot,” characteristics both a hiring manager for your dream position would want *and* you can presently offer. We’ll examine how you can highlight this information in application materials but, for now, let’s focus on where the circles do *not* overlap.

### What Your Ideal Employer Wants, Highlights

Review the elements that remain solely in the “What Your Ideal Employer Would Want” circle and record the top three skills or abilities your Ideal Employer would expect to find in the most competitive applicants:

1

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2

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3

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Now, identify tangible ways you could acquire or strengthen these skills and abilities in the weeks, months, or years ahead.

1

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2

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3

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Although you might not be able to develop full proficiency or expertise in any or all of the areas *before* you apply for a job, starting to learn or strengthen these skills and abilities would let you discuss ways you are working to fill in potential gaps, making you more viable for positions that require these traits.



### What You Can Offer, Highlights

Review the elements that remain in *solely* in the “What You Can Offer” circle and record the top three skills or abilities you can offer your Ideal Employer in the space below.

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②

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③

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Now, identify tangible ways your Ideal Employer could put these experiences to use.

①

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②

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③

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These items may be details to address in an application letter or even during an interview, as we’ll discuss in the following pages.



## Secret 3: Applicants over-estimate the time employers spend reading application materials.

Ask job applicants how much time they think hiring managers spend reading an application, and the answers are all over the place: 7–10 minutes... 2½ minutes... 5 minutes... 60 seconds... While the numbers people toss out may be wishing thinking, the reality is that hiring managers spend an average of 5–10 seconds on any one application, highlighting the arbitrary, subjective, and even whimsical approach hiring managers might use when reviewing applications.

Some hiring managers, for example, dismiss applications outright if they're printed on a particular color paper, or because the typeface is too small, or because the content is too scattered. Others breeze through application materials looking for a particular detail that, when found, determines whether the application moves forward or gets tossed into the recycle bin. And as more companies adopt online Application Tracking Systems, key word filters and auto-sorting software cull a majority of applications before they're seen by a person. Each of these methods requires only a second or two.

Although some applicants may be outraged to learn that their documents get little more than a passing glance, here context can be valuable. Whereas people used to spend hours crafting and submitting materials to a handful of organizations, computers now allow applicants to write a single letter and respond to hundreds of job announcements with a few keystrokes, overwhelming companies with minimally qualified applicants who have decided to apply as broadly as possible with the hopes that *something* will materialize.

Companies are fighting back with technology that ruthlessly sorts and cuts applicants, making hiring decisions faster and easier. Yet even organizations that don't use applicant screening software and comparable systems look for reasons to eliminate applicants quickly so they can make the necessary offers, close the search, and move on. In such a context, hiring managers argue that a cursory look at applications is sufficient.

The good news is that hiring managers *average* 5–10 seconds on each document, so while some applications get a split-second of attention, others will get more time—much more time. And, while it may not be possible to know what criteria each company uses to rule out an applicant, there are ways to increase the chances your materials will be among those that get a more thoughtful review.



We'll examine some of those ways in the coming discussions, but understanding that prospective employers may not spend the amount of time you think—or hope—your materials deserve can encourage more strategic decisions both in what you decide to present, and how.



## Exercise: The 10-Second Review

For this exercise, you need a hard copy of your application materials (an application letter, résumé, or both) and a volunteer reviewer who has not seen these materials, or seen them recently.

- Step 1: Set a timer for 10 seconds (or, if you're feeling generous, 15 seconds)
- Step 2: Give the reviewer the following instructions: *"I'm going to give you my [application letter and/or résumé] and ask that you digest as much information as possible about my credentials in an undisclosed amount of time."*
- Step 3: Hand your materials to your reviewer and start the timer.

When the timer goes off, ask the reviewer the following questions and record the answers in the space below: What attracted your attention? Where did your eyes focus first, second, third..., and why? What details stood out? What do you recall most easily from the materials you saw?

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## Secret 4: Applicants who know and leverage the purpose of application materials can make better decisions about what details to include—and exclude—within these materials.

One of the most common questions applicants have regarding the application letter is, “What should it say?” In considering information to put into their letter, applicants then begin to ask whether it’s mandatory or appropriate to mention particular details. For example, is it better to focus on the positions they’ve held, the work they’ve done, or the work they aspire to do? Should applicants address work they didn’t like and, therefore, would never want to do again? Should they mention that they were let go from a particular position? Some even question whether application letters are even necessary today; after all, they argue, doesn’t the résumé provide most information a hiring manager would want or need?

To answer these and countless other questions about what to include in an application letter, we must consider the purpose of application materials.

Most applicants think their goal in submitting application materials is to get a job. It’s not. It’s to get an *interview*, and the purpose of the interview(s) is to get the job. It’s a subtle, but critical difference, and one that’s vital when considering what information to offer companies and when. For example, some information may be understandable with context that isn’t always possible—or appropriate—to give on a résumé or in an application letter, but the only way applicants could strategically provide that information is to get their foot in the door. Therefore, by knowing when and how to disclose information, you can build a stronger case for employment.

There is, however, a caveat to this secret: Applicants must be willing and prepared to disclose all job-related information, even that which may be unflattering. In other words, delaying the presentation of information is not the same thing as hiding, or otherwise misrepresenting potentially unflattering information; it’s simply a matter of choosing *when* to reveal it, if you have the option to decide.

If, for example, a job announcement requires particular information in applicant materials, you may need to provide that information up front—especially in, say, online applications that require specific information before the system will accept



the submission. If, however, you have flexibility in the information you provide in the initial application materials, you might be able to postpone the discussion of some details until you can offer more context and commentary.

The following discussions examine ways to present information in the most strategic manner, but understanding the purpose of materials at each stage in the job search process can help you make better choices about what information to present, and when, to strengthen your application for a job.



## **Secret 5: Applicants who know the audiences of particular application materials can be more strategic in presenting their credentials in ways that matter.**

Application materials target prospective employers, but résumés and application letters actually have different audiences. And while those differences are subtle, they can affect what applicants provide and, by extension, the case they are able to make for employment.

Résumés are *industry* specific, allowing applicants to submit the same résumé to multiple companies with comparable job openings. In contrast, application letters are unique to the particular organization. Application letters may draw upon and highlight details from the applicant's résumé; moreover, the letter an applicant sends to one company may have elements that overlap with letters the applicant sends to different companies with comparable positions, yet *each* letter should be unique, explaining how, why, and to what extent the applicant fits the particular position, as the particular organization has envisioned it. Again, this distinction is subtle, but critical—and one that few applicants make, often to their detriment.

By understanding that résumés and application letters have distinct audiences, you can use each document to attract the attention of hiring managers in the companies that appeal most to you.



## **Secret 6: Applicants who understand Secrets 4 & 5 get more space to demonstrate their qualifications for the positions they seek.**

Job applicants often complain that they “have only one page” to convey substantial experience to a prospective employer when, in fact, they may have *two* pages to make their case for employment: an industry-specific résumé and a company-specific application letter. Yet while all applicants may have the same amount of space to explain their qualifications for a particular position, the ways applicants use that space can make a difference in the case they are able to make.

Résumés, for instance, offer hiring managers a synopsis of an applicant’s professional experiences and abilities in the larger industry. What may not be clear, however, is where and how that expertise could transfer to the hiring manager’s specific organization. That’s where an application letter comes into play. Specifically, the application letter would highlight information from the applicant’s résumé to help the hiring manager understand how a particular combination of experience has prepared the individual to do the work the company wants done.

Certainly the résumé and the application letter will draw upon the same information, but keeping each document’s distinct purpose and audience in mind can help you coordinate these documents’ content and strategically demonstrate how you are a match for the specific opening.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following sections examine ways to incorporate these secrets into application letters that convey your talents and abilities in ways that appeal to hiring manager.



# Application Letters

As noted earlier, whereas résumés are industry specific, application letters are *company*-specific documents, which means applicants should write a unique letter for each organization to which they apply.

Certainly some of the information that appears in one application letter may appear in others, since a specific position may require a core set of skills, regardless of the employer. Even so, each organization may have distinct expectations and demands for how its employees do that work. Therefore, you can set yourself apart by writing letters that explain how the configuration of your training and experience can be of use to the specific company, showcasing your awareness of and, by extension, your interest in the particular organization

Although recruiters and head hunters may have personal preferences and biases when reviewing an applicant's materials, hiring managers generally agree that application letters with the following characteristics can damage the applicant's chances to secure an interview:

- **Too long.** Application letters should offer a one-page argument of how the applicant can be of service to the hiring manager's specific company.
- **Applicant-centric.** Application letters should focus on the company and how the applicant can help the organization meet its short- and long-term goals.
- **Weak, unclear opening.** Application letters should grab a hiring manager's attention without relying on artificial, contrived techniques.
- **Cryptic.** Application letters should explain the applicant's qualifications, rather than assume hiring managers can or will infer this information.
- **Superficially appealing.** Application letters should use concrete, verifiable details to demonstrate credentials.
- **Overly generic.** Application letters should explain how, why, and to what extent the applicant's experiences are relevant to the hiring manager's company.
- **Weak, disengaged closing.** Application letters should end on a confident, yet professional note to keep the application under active consideration.
- **Overwritten.** Application letters should convey applicant credentials in the most concise, precise manner.



- **Disorganized, incoherent, ungrammatical.** Application letters should demonstrate the applicant's technical competency for the position, as well as the applicant's proficiency in the conventions of written communication.
- **Misdirected.** Application letters should reach audiences who are in a position to making hiring decisions for the best review of materials.

Addressing these and other concerns hiring managers have about application letters, the secrets that follow offer strategies for generating precise, concise narratives that explain why you are qualified for the position you seek.



## Secret 7: “Plug-n-chug” application letters can be deadly, especially in tight job markets.

Hiring managers want—and expect—applicants to make a case for why they are qualified to work in their company, yet most applicants write a single, catch-all application letter that focuses primarily, if not exclusively, on themselves, “personalizing” these letters in superficial ways. The most common method is the “plug-n’-chug” document, in which applicants use word processing software features to “find” the name, address, and target job title of one organization and “replace” them with the name, address, and job title of another company for each announcement they find. Although this approach helps people “write” and submit hundreds of applications with a few key strokes, the resulting mass-produced application letters are the equivalent of junk mail or spam, telling hiring managers the applicant isn’t interested in *their* job, but simply *a* job.

As job hunters blanket the market with countless generic documents, hoping to find a match somewhere, hiring managers look for signs of applicants who can make knowledgeable contributions to *their* organization. Many of these signs appear during an interview, where applicants show what they know and don’t know about the company by the answers they give, the comments they make, and the questions they ask. But application letters also reveal how much the applicant knows or cares about the particular organization and the work it does.

The secrets below explain how you can move beyond the conventional plug-n-chug application letters that dominate the market. Before turning to these secrets, however, the following exercises can help you determine whether the application letters you have been submitting may be more generic than ideal. For these exercises, you will need a printout of an application letter you have been distributing (either through the mail or through email), as well as a highlighter, color pencil, or color marker of your choice.



## Exercise: The Salutation Test

The salutation (that is, the *Dear \_\_\_\_\_*: or *Dear \_\_\_\_\_*, portion of the letter or email) is often the first place readers look to see whether the document is, in fact, directed to them. It is precisely for this reason that generic salutations can work against job applicants, for the more generic the reference, the less the familiar the applicant seems to be with the reader.

Using a scale of one to five, where “1” represents “No familiarity or awareness at all” and “5” represents “inner-circle alliance,” look at your application letter’s salutation and identify where it falls on the following familiarity continuum.

| Salutation |                                                                                                                                                                                 | Guidelines and Considerations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1          | To Whom It May Concern:                                                                                                                                                         | Applicants might as well be writing: “Dear Occupant.” Consider how quickly messages addressed in such a manner can be dismissed if the reader were to say, “It doesn’t concern <i>me...</i> ”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 2          | Dear Sir:<br>Dear Sir or Madam:<br>Dear Sir/Madam:                                                                                                                              | Better than “To Whom in May Concern,” but still generic. It also makes it harder for the applicant to envision specific characteristics and interests of a hiring manager defined only by gender. It’s like saying, “Hey, you! Listen up...”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 3          | Dear Hiring Manager:<br>Dear Human Resources Manager:<br>Dear Hiring Committee:<br>Dear Director of Marketing:<br>Dear Director of <division/department>                        | Professional default when the applicant doesn’t have or know the hiring manager’s name. Even if responding to job announcements with P.O. Box addresses or their equivalent, applicants can use the announcement for clues on the department or division overseeing the hiring process for potential title references.                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 4          | Dear Elizabeth Doe:<br>Dear Patrick Smith:<br>Dear Yu-Ting Chen:                                                                                                                | Professional option when the applicants has the hiring manager’s name but has neither met that person, nor been explicitly invited to address the reader by his or her first name.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 5          | Dear Elizabeth: <i>or</i> Dear Liz:<br>Dear Patrick: <i>or</i> Dear Pat:<br>Dear Jonathan: <i>or</i> Dear Johnny:<br>(if you have been invited to use reader’s Anglicized name) | Professional familiarity matching that of an immediate peer or colleague. Presuming this familiarity can raise questions about the assumptions the applicant might make with clients and others who uphold conventional introduction etiquette—especially in an increasingly global economy, where different cultures have different protocols. Therefore, the applicant should use first-name and abbreviated name salutations <i>only</i> if the reader has given explicit permission to use these more familiar, collegial references. |



More applications are being sorted electronically before human hands touch them, so specific names may not hold the same weight as they did in the past. Still, thinking about an actual human reading your letter can help you provide company-specific, reader-appropriate information. Therefore, if your application letter's salutation falls into either category 1 or 2, revise your salutation to help you envision a person, rather than a faceless entity, reading your application letter—someone with interests, likes, fears, passions, biases, and so forth that will inform what details stand out in applicant materials.

If your salutation falls into categories 3–5, you're on the right track. You should make sure, however, to verify the correct spelling of the reader's name. Even common, familiar names have more unique spellings nowadays, and one misspelled word—especially in the reader's name—can be enough to remove an application from consideration.



## Exercise: Spotting The “Plug-n-Chug” Application Letter

Even when the salutation is effective and appropriate, application letters can be overly generic based on how—or if—the letter references the target company. Using the same letter from the previous exercise:

- Step 1.** Highlight every reference to the company or organization with your highlighter, color pencil, or color marker of choice. Here, mark every reference to the reader’s or company’s name, as well as second-person references, such as *you* and *your*.)
- Step 2.** Insert the phrase “Surf’s Up Sloppy Jo’ Burger Joint,” “Huntley’s Tar and Gravel Supply,” or the name of an organization you would *not* want to work for each reference to the target employer’s name or company you highlighted in Step 1.
- Step 3.** Read the letter and ask if the information still makes sense, in full or in part—that is, *could* you submit this letter to the named company and still be considered a viable applicant?

Application letters in which the primary (or exclusive) focus is on the applicant tend to make sense regardless of which company or organization is being referenced, because such letters aren’t about the company; they’re about the applicant.

Considering that hiring managers want letters that reflect an awareness of and interest in *them*, the following secrets present ways to generate (or revise) your application letter in ways that hiring managers can see the talents *you* bring, but in ways *they* value.

## Secret 8: Applicants can use the application letter's structure to highlight their qualifications to hiring managers.

Nowadays, especially in our highly digitalized world, people are uploading and submitting more application materials online, altering the expectations of both what job applicants should submit and what hiring managers might consider. Convention has dictated that individuals send a résumé *and* an application letter in response to every job posting, but as more announcements ask applicants to “submit a résumé,” many people have come to believe that the application letter is optional, or even obsolete. Unfortunately, few hiring managers will spend time guessing how your industry experience might transfer to their particular company; therefore, unless an application letter is explicitly forbidden, you should submit both a résumé and application letter to strengthen your case for employment.

The following discussions explain how application letters can emphasize your credentials in ways that hiring managers value—starting with the letter's structure.

### **The Principle of Burying**

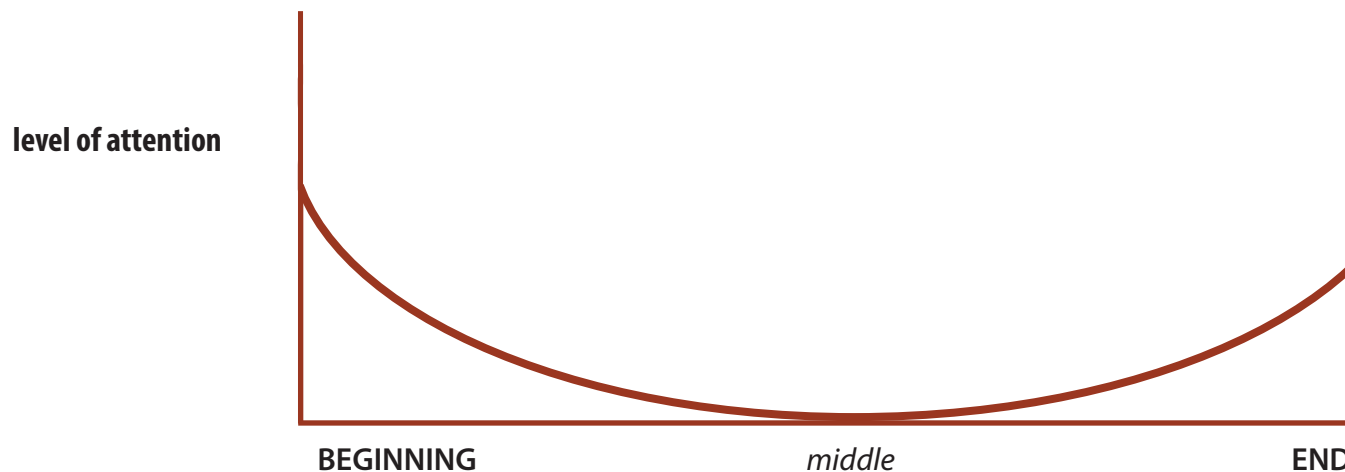
To make strategic choices about the best places to present information in your application letter and elsewhere, it helps to understand a communication strategy known as the *Principle of Burying*, a principle that uses an audience's varying levels of attention to its advantage. Here's how it works.

Although its content and length may vary according to the purpose, audience, and context, information typically has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Given these parts, audiences are most attentive to information that comes at the beginning and at the end, and they are least attentive to information that appears in the middle.

Take, for example, a speaker's presentation. People sitting in the audience will be most attentive in the early moments of the talk, as the speaker lays out the focus of the discussion. As the speaker continues, audience members may notice information here and there but, along the way, their attention may drift. Some people may begin to think about how they might use the information the speaker is offering; some may turn their attention to others in the audience or to the venue itself; some may be thinking about emails they need to write, people they need to call, deadlines they need to meet; and others may be thinking about their plans for dinner or for the weekend. Then, in the final moments of the presentation—



usually signaled by the speaker saying something like, “In conclusion...”—the audience members refocus their attention, waiting for the digest version of what they should take away from the presentation or how they might apply the information to best advantage.



The same phenomenon happens in written documents, both in the larger sense and within the document itself. For instance, readers are most attentive at the beginning (the introduction) and at the end (the conclusion) of documents, since the information in these locations typically outline what the materials will cover, and what readers may need to do, respectively. In contrast, the internal paragraphs often get a quick, cursory look—unless, of course, something within that area attracts the readers’ attention.

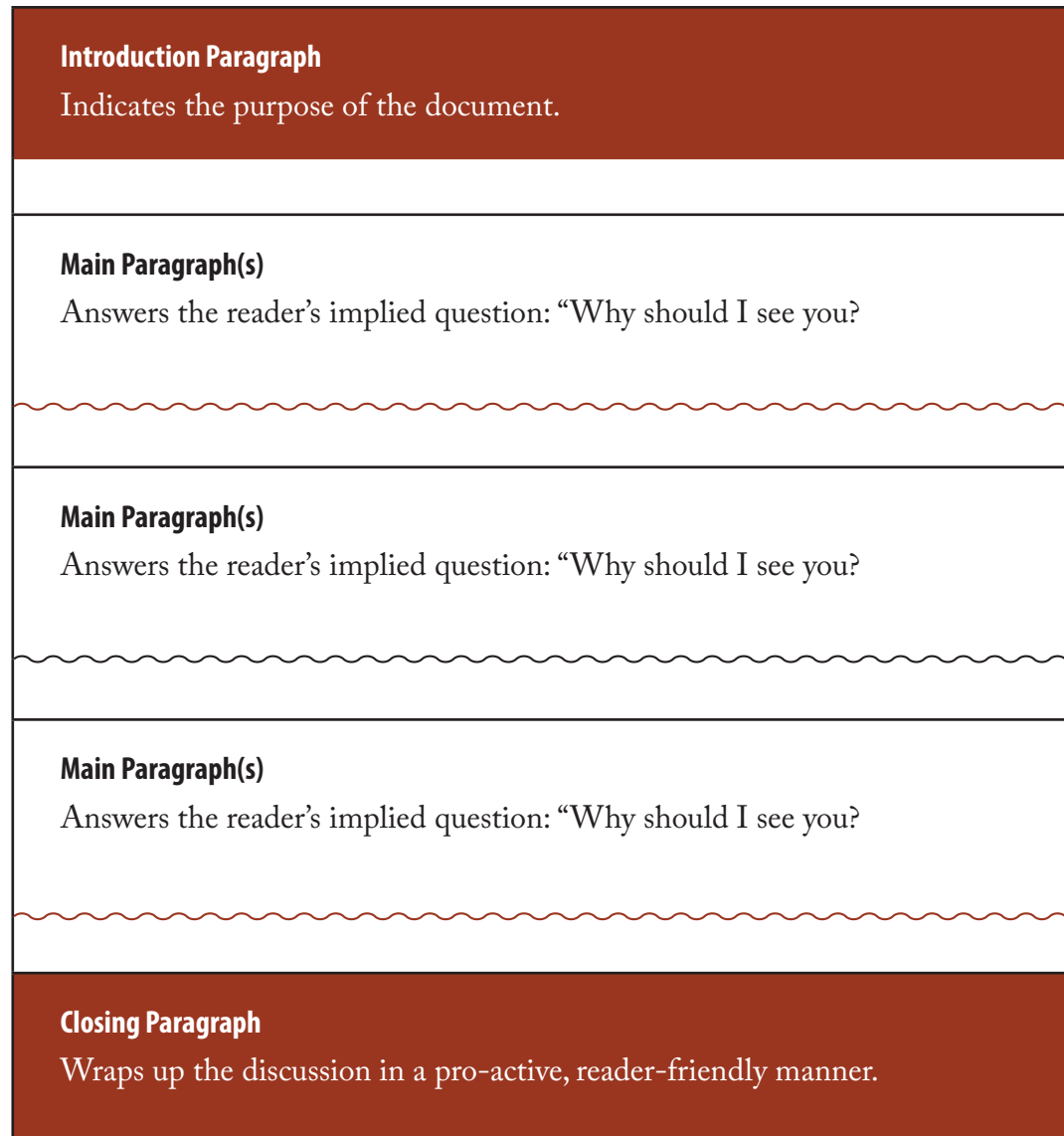
Similarly, readers are more attentive at the beginnings and ends of sections and paragraphs, skimming information in between.

By considering the Principle of Burying as you write application letters, you can identify places a hiring manager may be more, and less, attentive while reading application material and use that information to present your credentials in the most strategic places of a conventional application letter:

Attention is **HIGH**, as readers aim to identify what the document is and its relevance to them

Attention is **MODERATE** and **UNEVEN**, as readers skim or bypass details within these areas. Although the Principle of Burying may suggest that readers will skim all information in the middle of a document, we will discuss how to use the Principle of Burying to greatest advantage, even in these paragraphs

Attention is **HIGH**, as readers aim to identify what, if anything, they need to do



The following secrets explain how you can use each segment of the application letter structure to stand out to hiring managers.



## Secret 9: A concise, precise, targeted opening paragraph can put your application into the right hands—not the recycle bin.

Wanting to capture a hiring manager's attention, many job applicants begin their letters with superficial tactics, including metaphors (e.g., I am like the missing puzzle piece that will complete the image of your company...), personal anecdotes and narratives (e.g., Since I got my first Xbox, I have dreamed of working in the gaming industry...), textbook definitions (e.g., Marketing aims to sell products and services...), and industry pontifications (e.g., Current secular trends in the field of finance reveal that managers today must...). Unfortunately, what applicants may consider thought-provoking, surprising, or unique introductions to their credentials are often clichéd story lines that have appeared in countless applications: I was lost, but now I'm found... I've overcome the odds and picked myself up by the bootstraps... I can do amazing things for your company... I have a dream... One need only look at the “real” application letters endlessly circulating online with snarky annotations by the letter's recipients and their coworkers to see that such openings seldom have the desired effect.

Considering that e-mail and snail mail application materials inevitably arrive alongside countless other documents that demand a hiring manager's attention, your application letter should quickly, directly, and concisely identify the point of your message. You can do so by including the following information in your letter's opening paragraph:

- **The specific position you are applying for.**

Companies may have several openings available at any one time. By identifying the specific position or job title you're applying for, you can ensure the most appropriate readers within the organization evaluate your materials.

- **Position or job number references, if any.**

Companies may have several openings with the same job title; for instance, there may be a senior management position available both in Accounting and in Human Resources. By including a position or job number reference, when available, you can help hiring managers evaluate your qualifications within the context in which you aim to work.

- **Where or how you learned of the position.**

Companies may advertise a position in several forums, each of which vets prospective candidates. If, for example,



a job announcement appears in a national newspaper, the number of applicants applying for the position will be significantly larger than the number of applicants who may hear of the position through an alumni network, community job fair, or current employee. By specifying how you learned of the position, you may find a more favorable reception for your materials.

- **When you might be available, if not immediately.**

Companies generally assume job applicants are available immediately, or they can be with a conventional “two week notice.” Some positions, however, may be advertised weeks or even months in advance. Jobs in academia, for instance, may be advertised months before a school year starts; similarly, entry-level positions for new college graduates may be filled a semester or two prior to the students’ graduation. There may also be times when the person applying for a position cannot be available immediately, either because of industry cycles (e.g., seasonal employment opportunities) or because of other commitments with a definitive ending. In such cases, you may find it more strategic to identify tentative start times up front, saving the hiring manager, and yourself, time.

The following samples show how all of this information might come together precisely and concisely in the opening paragraph of an application letter:

I am applying for the position of Financial Analyst Supervisor II (Job ID # 12357), posted on your company’s website.

After speaking with your company’s representatives, Erica Tzu and J.D. Mueller, at the Blarney City Networking event on June 21, 20XX, I am applying for the Client Services Administrator position.

Graduating next December with a degree in criminal justice from the University of Missouri–St. Louis, I am applying for one of the student internships in the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the spring 20XX semester.

Thank you for talking with me about Byron, Inc.’s new office in Fremont. Thinking more about our conversation and the opportunities you mentioned, I am applying for the position of Marketing Specialist.

As a junior at Library Science with an interest in digital archiving, I became aware of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries In-Residence Program while attending a workshop on archives in the Capital Gallery. Reading more



about the In-Residence Program on your website and seeing the options available to undergraduates, I am applying for a semester or year-long appointment in the Digital Library and Information Systems division, starting Fall 20XX.

Julie Nigel, Director of Accounting in your office, suggested I write to you about opportunities in your group. Graduating with a degree in advertising from the University of Texas this May, I am applying for an entry-level position in the Marketing Division.

On November 3, 20XX, a representative from your organization spoke to our division about employment opportunities in the Miami office. As a Staffer in the Daytona branch, I have developed skills that could be of service to Manager Directors and their teams, prompting my application to the Real Estate group in your office.

As requested during our meeting on Friday, April 23, this letter chronicles my experience in acquisitions as part of my application for the 20XX Summer Internship at Brower Press.

As these examples demonstrate, identifying the position, job numbers, how you learned about the position and, if necessary, your availability makes it easier for a hiring manager to know what, exactly, the letter is about, instantly contextualizing the discussion. Equally important is that this information, appearing in one or two sentences, demonstrates your awareness of and respect for the reader's time. Finally, it sets up the following paragraphs, which present a case for why the hiring manager should talk to you.



# Exercise: Creating a Company-Specific Opening Paragraph

To start your application letter in a professional, reader-oriented manner, you will need information about the position for which you are applying, such as a job announcement.

**Step 1.** Record the following information about the position you're applying for:

- The specific position/title:* \_\_\_\_\_
- Position or job number references, if any:* \_\_\_\_\_
- List all of the places and resources from which you learned about this position, using exact name(s), dates, references... when available (e.g., newspaper, specific career website; particular job forum; target company's website; company employee or affiliate, with person's name and title; any combination of these resources)*

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- When you might be available, if not immediately:* \_\_\_\_\_





## **Secret 10: (Seemingly) Ego-centric applicants struggle to get an audience with prospective employers.**

Although job applicants are most interested in what they will get from a position, hiring managers are most concerned with how *they* will benefit from the hire. And while there are several ways hiring managers can distinguish applicants who seem more or less interested in helping their company succeed, one of the most immediate indicators is how often applicants refer to themselves during the process, as the following exercises demonstrate.



## Exercise: The “I’s” Have It...

For this exercise, you will talk with someone you know for 3–5 minutes. The topic(s) you address during this conversation is up to the two of you. The only restriction is that neither of you can use the following words (or their non-English equivalent): *I*, *Me*, *My*, and *Mine*.

- Step 1.** Write the words *I*, *Me*, *My*, and *Mine* (or their non-English equivalent) on a sheet of paper for each participant’s reference.
- Step 2.** Set a timer for 3–5 minutes.
- Step 3.** Begin your conversation, calling out each time someone says *I*, *Me*, *My*, or *Mine*.

After the buzzer sounds, take 5–10 minutes to record the observations you and your conversation partner have about the interaction. In doing so, you might consider the following questions: How easy or challenging was it to get the conversation started, or to sustain the discussion? What helped or hindered the conversation for each speaker? What did each participant do to overcome the conversation hurdles they encountered? How “natural” did these actions feel during the exchange?

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## Exercise: The “I’s” Have It . . . , Variation

As an alternative to the exercise above, observe another couple’s conversations for 3–5 minutes, and the ways their communication is affected by the use, or non-use, of the words *I*, *Me*, *My*, and *Mine* (or their non-English equivalents).

- Step 1.** Divide a sheet of paper in half and record each participant’s name at the top of each column.
- Step 2.** Write the words *I*, *Me*, *My*, and *Mine* on a separate sheet of paper for each participant’s reference.
- Step 3.** Instruct participants that they can discuss any topic(s) they choose, but they cannot use the words *I*, *Me*, *My*, and *Mine* during the conversation.
- Step 4.** Set a timer for 3–5 minutes, and ask the participants to begin.
- Step 5.** Document each time one of the participants uses *I*, *Me*, *My*, and *Mine* (or their non-English equivalent) with a hash mark or some other indication below the speaker’s name, as well as other communication cues (e.g., body language, facial expressions, pitch, pace, pauses) for each participant when they use, or hear, these words.
- Step 6.** After the timer goes off, ask the participants for their observations about the conversation. For example, how easy or challenging did they find it to get the conversation started, or to sustain the discussion? What helped or hindered the conversation for each speaker? What did each participant do to overcome the conversation hurdles they encountered? How “natural” did these actions feel during the exchange?
- Step 7.** Share your own observations about their conversation and ask the participants if their impressions of the conversation change in light of the observations you share.

\* \* \* \* \*

These exercises demonstrate the difficulty many people have when they are unable to talk about themselves, even briefly. We are selfish individuals, interested in the world from *our* points of view, and *we* want to share *our* points of view with others. Even when listening to other speakers, *we* often hear and interpret information through the filters *we* deem important, wondering



how *we* can use the information to best advantage. The insights *we* have, in turn, compel us to share *our* ideas, perhaps becoming impatient waiting for *our* turn; after all, *we* tell ourselves, *our* thoughts and observations are relevant, important, and interesting, and others will clearly benefit from what *we* have to say....

The desire to share ideas, perspectives, thoughts and opinions is not necessarily a negative, but we should recognize that the more we focus on ourselves, the less we focus on others, even inadvertently, and this imbalance can become a problem, especially in the job search. Specifically, when applicants focus mostly—or primarily—on themselves and what *they* will get from the job, they inevitably are less attentive to the company and how the *company* can be better off by hiring them.

To be clear, this discussion does *not* suggest you avoid talking about yourself; you must talk about yourself and your credentials to make a case for employment. However, you should be attentive to where, how, and how often you may be talking about yourself at the expense of a company looking to hire someone that can satisfy *its* needs and interests. It's a subtle difference, perhaps, but a critical one—especially in a context where applicants are trying to make a solid first impression, as the exercise below demonstrates.

## Exercise: First Impressions

Imagine that you are a hiring manager looking at materials from prospective applicants when you come across the following application letter. Because you have a stack of applications to review before lunch, you decide to read the letter quickly and record your initial impressions to help decide whether this applicant deserves further consideration.

Dear Hiring Manager:

I am applying for the position you advertised on [www.jobbank.com](http://www.jobbank.com).

Having seen your advertisement for an opening in your company, I believe I can bring much to your organization. I have diverse experience in the field, as well as extensive leadership experience to offer. My most recent work experience was as a sales representative for Empire Reserves, where I assisted a range of teams in analyzing the best markets for potential prospects. I was instrumental in my team's ability to promote several main and peripheral products to our clients, and I have received numerous commendations from peers and supervisors verifying my contributions to the company's efforts.

I also bring a passion for problem solving. My experiences at EMT Services were both challenging and exciting, and the aspects of the job I found most rewarding was working closely with intelligent individuals who were dedicated to their work. I have learned much from them and, in the process, I have acquired both an appreciation for the difficulties companies face in meeting client needs and an excitement for the myriad of creative solutions possible to meet those needs. This experience has strengthened my interest in customer service, and has given me expertise I can bring to your company.

My excellent communication abilities can likewise be of service to your firm. I regularly deliver pitch presentations and have been active in Toastmasters since 2010. My work in ABC organization has likewise helped me hone my abilities to communicate clearly and effectively with others; it's also helped me strengthen my abilities to delegate tasks, manage time, and promote an organization.

In addition to my communication abilities, I can type 75 wpm and use a Microsoft Word, Excel, Claris Works, and PowerPoint. I also work well with people and have participated in several team projects, showing my ability to work independently as part of a team.



I am confident that I can meet your expectations you hold for incoming employees and believe I would be a valuable addition if given the opportunity. I have enclosed a copy of my résumé so you can read more about the experiences and skills I could offer your company, and I would welcome the chance to talk more about the ways I can be of service to you. Please call me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX so we can talk further. Thank you.

Sincerely,

J.P. Candidate

**First impressions and observations about the applicant ...**

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Having read this letter, you may have found that the applicant has experience that could be of use to several organizations, including your own. Moreover, because the letter explains where and how the applicant acquired that experience, you may be able to envision places this person could fit into your organization. Such favorable impressions can serve the applicant well, but looking more closely at the letter, you might have noticed that something is missing. Specifically, while the letter says much about the applicant, it says little about your company. In fact, any references to your company are overly general and generic, as the following version demonstrates, where references to the applicant are italicized and highlighted in red, and references to the company are bold and highlighted in blue:

Dear **Hiring Manager**:

*I* am applying for the position **you** advertised on www.jobbank.com.

Having seen **your** advertisement for an opening in **your** company, *I* believe *I* can bring much to **your organization**. *I* have diverse experience in the field, as well as extensive leadership experience to offer. **My** most recent work experience was as a sales representative for Empire Reserves, where *I* assisted a range of teams in analyzing the best markets for potential prospects. *I* was instrumental in **my** team's ability to promote several main and peripheral products to our clients, and *I* have received numerous commendations from peers and supervisors verifying to **my** contributions to the company's efforts.

*I* also bring a passion for problem solving. **My** experiences at EMT Services were both challenging and exciting, and the aspects of the job *I* found most rewarding was working closely with intelligent individuals who were dedicated to their work. *I* have learned much from them and, in the process, *I* have acquired both an appreciation for the difficulties companies face in meeting client needs and an excitement for the myriad of creative solutions possible to meet those needs. This experience has strengthened **my** interest in customer service, and has given **me** expertise *I* can bring to **your company**.

**My** excellent communication abilities can likewise be of service to **your firm**. *I* regularly deliver pitch presentations and have been active in Toastmasters since 2010. **My** work in ABC organization has likewise helped **me** hone **my** abilities to communicate clearly and effectively with others; it's also helped **me** strengthen **my** abilities to delegate tasks, manage time, and promote an organization.

In addition to **my** communication abilities, *I* can type 75 wpm and use a Microsoft Word, Excel, Claris Works,



and PowerPoint. *I* also work well with people and have participated in several team projects, showing *my* ability to work independently as part of a team.

*I* am confident that *I* can meet *your* expectations *you* hold for incoming employees and believe *I* would be a valuable addition if given the opportunity. *I* have enclosed a copy of *my* résumé so you can read more about the experiences and skills *I* could offer *your company*, and *I* would welcome the chance to talk more about the ways *I* can be of service to *you*. Please call *me* at (XXX) XXX-XXXX so we can talk further. Thank you.

Sincerely,

J. P. Candidate

In looking at the number, placement, and content of the highlighted items, we can identify elements that may affect a hiring manager's views of the applicant, even subconsciously, including:

- **Number and proportion of references.**

The number of references to the applicant in this letter (especially when compared to the number of references to the company) focuses every discussion on the applicant, at the expense of the company. Certainly applicants need to talk about themselves and their experiences, but when discussions are overwhelmingly tipped in favor of the applicant, hiring managers will struggle to see themselves and their companies in the discussion. Considering that hiring managers are most concerned with what *they* will get from the hire, applicant-centric letters will have more difficulty making a case for employment. Even combining and condensing sentences and clauses to minimize the number of references to the applicant could visually downplay the effect of writer-centric documents.

- **Location of references.**

Most of the references to the applicant in this letter are at the beginning of sentences and paragraphs, while references to the company are generally tucked into the middle of sentences and paragraphs. According to the Principles of Burying, the locations of these references consistently puts the applicant at the center of attention and the company on the sidelines.



- **Grammatical emphasis of references.**

Most of the references to the applicant in this document are the grammatical subject of the sentence, while references to the company are grammatical objects. Considering that grammatical subjects carry the weight of the sentence—noting who or what is the main topic—the sentence structures of this document reinforce that the applicant is the primary focus of this conversation, while the company is peripheral at best.

In addition to these elements, this letter relies on overly-generic references to the reader's company. While this tactic would allow the applicant to distribute this same letter to countless other organizations, it also suggests the applicant knows little, if anything, about any particular organization's needs and interests.

Few hiring managers will dissect application letters to this degree, but most feel the effect of an applicant-focused, plug-and-chug letter: The applicant isn't interested in what *this* company does, or how; the applicant is simply looking for *a* job.

The following secret explains how to create more company-sensitive application documents. If, however, you have an application letter that you've been submitting as part of your job application, complete the following exercise to indentify the impression your letter may be making on its recipient(s).



## Exercise: What Color Dominates?

To identify the focus of your application letter, you will need a hard copy of an application letter (either one you submitted by email or by snail mail), as well as two highlighters, color pencils, or color markers of your choice.

- Step 1.** Fill in each circle with a different color, assigning one color to each of the following elements: references to yourself (the applicant), and references to the reader (the prospective employer).

1 = first-person references to me, the applicant (e.g., *I, me, my, mine*)

2 = second-person references to the reader (e.g., *you, your, yours*), as well as reference to the reader's or company's name

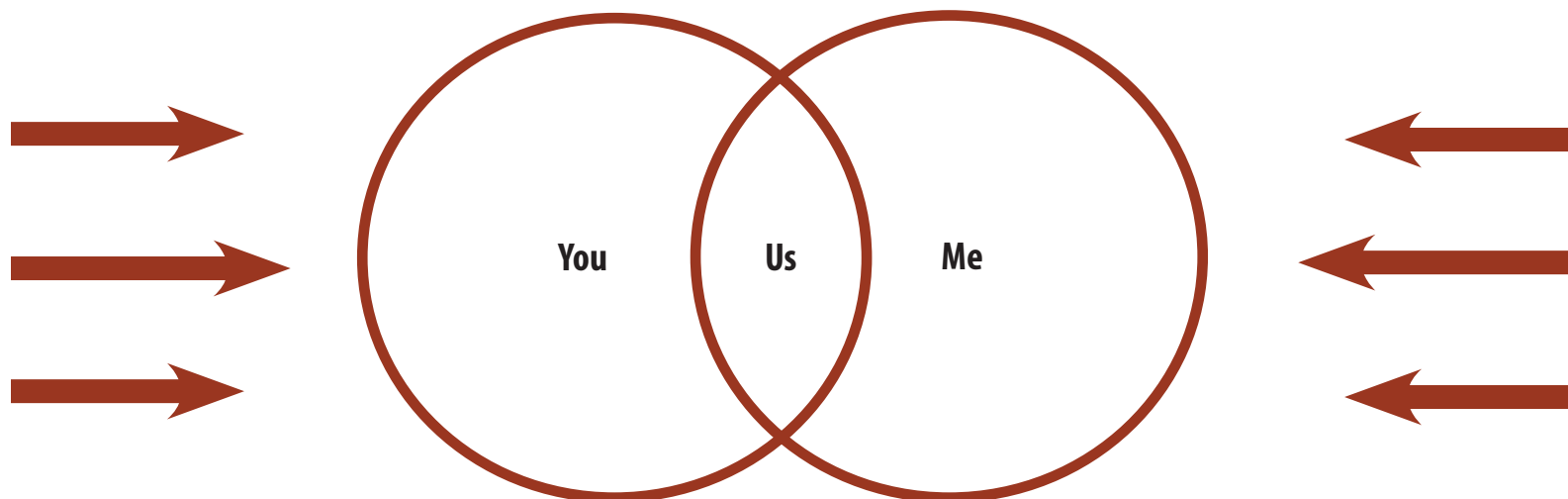
- Step 2.** Locate first- and second-person references in your application letter, and color-code each reference with its respective color.
- Step 3.** Look at the number and locations of each colors—in isolation, as well as in proximity to and proportion with other colors—to identify who is the focus of sentences, paragraphs, the larger document.

This exercise is not a prescriptive list of things you should or must do in your application materials. It simply highlights—figuratively and literally—the focus of your current application letter in preparation for the next discussion, which will examine ways you can make your case for employment in ways that stand out to hiring managers.

## Secret 11: Using the “You–Me–Us” approach in the main paragraphs of an application letter can downplay even the most (seemingly) ego-centric applicant.

Often job searches are broken into “us” versus “them” discussions. There are companies with positions to fill, and there are job applicants looking for a job, and whether someone is classified as “us” or “them” depends on which side of the interview desk the person sits. Rather than adopting a two-party mentality, effective job applicants must consider *three* characters in the discussion:

- You** The hiring manager/company with particular needs and interests, prompting a job opening.
- Me** The job applicant needing to demonstrate the ability to do the work the company has.
- Us** A combination of the “You” and “Me” characters at the conclusion of the search, enhancing the position and status of *both* parties.





The “You–Me–Us” approach to writing application letter engages all of these characters by offering character-appropriate information in strategic places, and in strategic ways.

To best understand this approach, it helps to distinguish between solicited and unsolicited job applications. *Solicited* applications are those in which a company announces a position’s availability and, in doing so, invites individuals to apply. These job announcements typically indicate what a company wants, as well as what applicants need to do the work.

*Unsolicited* applications, in contrast, are initiated by individuals who contact organizations to offer their services; whether a company would be willing to consider the person for any future openings, or even create a position to bring the individual on board, depends on the need that person has been able to identify and propose filling.

| Type of Application | Reader Expectation          | Reader’s (Initial) Reception |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Solicited           | expected                    | favorable → neutral          |
| Unsolicited         | unexpected or even unwanted | neutral → hesitant → hostile |

Of the two, solicited application letters are generally easier to write. After all, applicants not only face a more receptive audience, but they can know up front what the company is actually looking for in candidates since job announcements provide the company’s “wish list” of applicant qualifications. Therefore, the applicants who can speak to those qualifications would be—at least on paper—more viable than those who cannot.

Still, applicants must do more than claim they have the qualifications a company seeks; they must be able to verify those qualifications in context and, ideally, demonstrate an awareness of where and how those qualifications could help the company meet its short- and long-term goals. This connection is the foundation of the “You–Me–Us” approach.

Consider, for example a job announcement for a Regional Sales Manger:

**HELP WANTED**

**Regional Sales Manager (US and Canada)**

The Journals Division of Nance & Talley, a leading publisher in the biological sciences, has an excellent opportunity for a



dynamic sales professional to join its growing sales team. Reporting to the Director of Journals Sales, the successful applicant will be responsible for the development and management of online sales throughout the United States and Canada.

**Responsibilities:** Increase and promote sales of print and online journals throughout assigned region; identify and pursue opportunities for growth and development; negotiate and execute sales agreements; produce monthly reports on activity and development; assist in the development of sale proposals, management reports, supporting sales contact/CRM database; manage and train Journal Sales Executive and supporting staff; and attend library meetings and industry events, as required

**Qualifications:** Excellent organizational and project management skills with the demonstrated ability to manage and train staff. Must be able to handle multiple projects and deadlines simultaneously. Excellent written and verbal communication skills and advanced presentation skills at all levels of business. Must have effective account management skills. The ability to develop relationships and partnerships, both internally and externally, is critical. Fluency in French is preferred.

**Requirements:** Bachelor's degree, preferably in a biological science. At least five years' outside sales experience in academic publishing with previous management and training experience. Proficiency with Windows including MS Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and CRM software required. Domestic and international travel is required.

**About Nance & Talley:** Founded in 1989, Nance & Talley has become a leading international publisher of journals and textbooks emphasizing the biological sciences. With offices in 15 countries, N&T specializes in human embryology, genetics, microbiology, and molecular biology. Its list presently includes over 450 active textbook and 25 active journal titles.

Although advertising for a sales manager, this job announcement is fairly conventional. It offers an overview of the company, explains what it does in general, describes what the employee would be doing, and provides a list of training and experience the company seeks in the applicants it would hire to perform those tasks. In the process, this and comparable announcements provide critical information for the “You” and “Us” portions of the “You–Me–Us” approach, which may be easier to see when details from the job announcement are mapped into a “You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart.”

The “You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart” is a tool for summarizing and synthesizing key details about a job opening's requirements and a prospective applicant's offerings. By completing this chart, applicants can strategically identify where, how, and to what extent their experience and training may correlate with the target company's needs and interests, as evident in the way someone interested in the Nance & Talley Regional Sales Manager position might complete the chart.



### You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart, Sample

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Company Name and Address:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Nance & Talley, 1234 Main Street, Wichita Falls, TX 76308                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Position and, if available, reference number:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Regional Manager                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Where/How learned about position:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i> , online job database (November 1, 20XX)                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>“YOU”<br/>Wish-List of Characteristics</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>“ME”<br/>“Proof” you have characteristic</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <b>“US”<br/>Transferability Factor</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Here, insert applicant qualifications called out in the company’s job announcement                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Here, list the specific positions, activities, training, experiences, degrees, classes and workshops, and other tangible practices demonstrating you have the desired characteristic or skill (consult your résumé and other application materials for ideas) | Here, identify ways you could use or apply this skill in the target company’s construction of the position; incorporate details you’ve gained by researching the company, networking...                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>LEADERSHIP/MANAGEMENT:</b><br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrated ability to manage and train staff.</li> <li>previous management and training experience.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>manage and train Journal Sales Executive and supporting staff</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>COMMUNICATION/SALES:</b><br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>excellent written and verbal communication skills.</li> <li>advanced presentation skills at all levels of business.</li> <li>fluency in French is preferred.</li> <li>at least five years’ outside sales experience in academic publishing.</li> <li>proficiency with Windows including MS Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and CRM software required.</li> </ul> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>develop relationships and partnerships, both internally and externally</li> <li>negotiate and execute sales agreements;</li> <li>increase and promote sales of print and online journals throughout assigned region</li> <li>pursue opportunities for growth and development</li> </ul> |
| <b>ORGANIZATION/TIME MANGEMENT:</b><br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>effective account management skills.</li> <li>excellent organizational and project management skills.</li> <li>able to handle multiple projects and deadlines simultaneously.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>produce monthly reports on activity and development</li> <li>assist in the development of sale proposals, management reports, supporting sales contact/CRM database</li> </ul>                                                                                                          |
| <b>(RESEARCH?)</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>identify opportunities for growth and development</li> <li>attend library meetings and industry events, as required</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>OTHER:</b><br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bachelor’s degree, preferably in a biological science.</li> <li>domestic and international travel is required</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

Having completed the “You” and “Us” portions of this chart, applicants would then review their résumés and other job-related materials for specific experiences and training that might demonstrate the skills the company wants in the employee it hires; the resulting information would go into the middle column of the Brainstorming Chart, next to the corresponding qualification or skill.

As you review this sample, know that there is no “right” way to complete the “You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart.” Depending on your particular training and interests, you could group details from the job announcement in different ways to streamline discussions, or to emphasize (or downplay) particular expectations. Also know that, while completing the “You” and “Us” portions of this chart may be easier with a job announcement in hand, you could use this chart to generate information for unsolicited applications, too. The difference is that for unsolicited applications, you would need to identify and fill in the “Wish-List of Characteristics” that your target company would want to see in prospective employees, as well the “Transferability” factors for those characteristics. Here’s one reason that knowing about the industry in general and the company in particular would be invaluable.

You should complete a You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart for *each* company you intend to solicit, and while that task may seem time-intensive, comparable positions within a single industry will have details that inevitably overlap; therefore, completing one chart will make it easier to complete Brainstorming Charts for other companies. Furthermore, as you create charts for each company that appeals to you, you may begin to see differences between and among each company’s portrayal of the specific position; for example, you may find differences in the tasks you’d be asked to do, the goals you would support, the procedures you could use, the products you might promote, the clients you would serve, or the results you’d be accountable for depending on the particular organization.

By understanding how a given job title or position might be represented and performed across an industry, you can identify and prioritize organizations you would like to pursue. You would also be able to discuss a specific position and its requirements in more knowledgeable ways, such as during an interview or salary negotiations.

For now, however, we will examine how the information in a You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart can help you create application letters that stand out to hiring managers, and the following exercise can get you started.



## Exercise: Creating a You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart

For this exercise, you will need a copy of the following You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart and a print out of the job announcement for a position you'd like to apply to in the near future. You may also want to have on hand a copy of your résumé(s), and other job application materials you have generated.

- Step 1.** List the specific requirements, expectations, qualifications and so forth from the company's job announcement in the first column, "You."
- Step 2.** List training and experience you could offer the company as "proof" that you meet each particular requirement, expectation, qualification... in the second column, "Me," next to the company's corresponding "Wish List" entry. For ideas, you might refer to your résumé and other application materials you have generated—even those you may no longer be using.
- Step 3.** Indicate where, how, and to what extent your general, industry-oriented training could be put to use in this specific company, given its place in the industry, as well as its culture, clients, products, services, and values... in the third column, "Us." This information might be ascertained from the job description itself, as well as from discussions with recruiters and company representatives, the company's website, or other materials you have on the organization.



### You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart

| <b>Company Name and Address:</b>                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position and, if available, reference number:</b>                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Where/How learned about position:</b>                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>“YOU”</b><br><b>Wish-List of Characteristics</b><br>Here, insert applicant qualifications called out in the company’s job announcement | <b>“ME”</b><br><b>“Proof” you have characteristic</b><br>Here, list the specific positions, activities, training, experiences, degrees, classes and workshops, and other tangible practices demonstrating you have the desired characteristic or skill (consult your résumé and other application materials for ideas) | <b>“US”</b><br><b>Transferability Factor</b><br>Here, identify ways you could use or apply this skill in the target company’s construction of the position; incorporate details you’ve gained by researching the company, networking... |
|                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |



| <b>"YOU"</b><br>Wish-List of Characteristics (continued) | <b>"ME"</b><br>"Proof" you have characteristic (continued) | <b>"US"</b><br>Transferability Factor (continued) |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
|                                                          |                                                            |                                                   |
|                                                          |                                                            |                                                   |
|                                                          |                                                            |                                                   |
|                                                          |                                                            |                                                   |
|                                                          |                                                            |                                                   |
|                                                          |                                                            |                                                   |



While plugging details into these columns, you may discover information that falls into one or more columns, giving you options of where and how to best address those details. You might also discover that some details overlap with, or even duplicate other information. In such cases, you could group several elements under a single, larger characteristic or skill, indicating the relationships you see between and among particular information.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once you complete this chart, you're in a position to write the main paragraphs for your application letter, using the "You-Me-Us" structure to highlight your qualifications for employment.

Drawing upon the Principle of Burying, the "You-Me-Us" paragraph structure starts and ends each paragraph with information that is of greatest interest to the reader, burying information that is important, but of less interest, in the middle. For application letters, then, paragraphs should begin and end with information of greatest interest to the hiring manager and downplay, or bury, information about applicant.

### The "You-Me-Us" Paragraph Structure, Overview

|                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Topic Sentence<br/>Reader's attention is<br/><b>HIGH</b></p>             | <p><b>"YOU"</b><br/><br/>Particular skill/ability/trait... the company asks for in its advertisement or, if an unsolicited application, a skill/ability/trait... that would be expected or desired in the target company's employees</p> |
| <p>Middle Sentence(s)<br/>Reader's attention may be minimal or sporadic</p> | <p><b>"Me"</b><br/><br/>"Proof" that you have that skill/ability/trait...</p>                                                                                                                                                            |
| <p>Closing Sentence(s)<br/>Reader's attention is<br/><b>HIGH</b></p>        | <p><b>"Us"</b><br/><br/>Ability to transfer skill/ability/trait....</p>                                                                                                                                                                  |

The information from your "You-Me-Us Brainstorming Chart" will help you fill in the particular details.



### **Topic Sentence**

To begin with information that's of greatest interest to hiring manager, your topic sentences should focus on a particular feature or skill the company requests in the advertisement—information you transcribed in the first column of the Brainstorming Chart, the “You” column. For solicited positions, most of this information will come from the job announcement, but you could also use details from the company's website or references to conversations you may have had with a company representative, say at a job fair or during an earlier informational interview. In fact, doing so can be advantageous, suggesting you have researched the company or otherwise invested time in learning about the organization—an action that speaks well of applicants wanting a position with the particular company.

Sample topic sentences highlighting something from the company's Wish List include:

#### **Example 1**

Your advertisement notes you are looking for someone who can write code for portability across platforms, and my background developing client server applications that have run on the Windows, Linux, Android and iPhone platforms have given me skills I can use to help your division build mission critical software.

#### **Example 2**

During our conversation, you said that you were most interested in applicants who can oversee several projects simultaneously; my experience managing 7–10 client portfolios at Industrial Angel Designs has prepared me for such work.

By focusing on a single “wish” in each topic sentence—rather than listing everything the organization may want in an applicant—you establish a context for discussing aspects of your training in greater depth, but in ways a hiring manager would value.

### **Middle Sentence(s)**

Once you've identified a characteristic or skill of interest to the hiring manager, you would then explain the training and experience that demonstrates where and how you have developed that characteristic or skill, drawing upon the information that appears in the second column of your Brainstorming Chart, the “Me” column. Typically, this information would come from your résumé, but it's also possible to include details that are not on your résumé—either because they didn't fit or because the information may not be appropriate in all forums in which your résumé circulates. For example, someone applying

for positions in publishing might not indicate a passion for gardening on the résumé, but that detail could be appropriate to mention in an application letter to a gardening magazine looking for an editor.

Because it may not be possible to present all of the experience you have with a particular skill, the sentences in your application letter should focus on the skills, training, projects, positions, companies, and so on that would be of greatest interest to the particular company, demonstrating your awareness of its practices and values.

### **Closing Sentence(s)**

The final step is to write a sentence or two that ends the paragraph explaining how you could transfer your experiences to help the hiring manager and the larger company meet their specific goals. Drawing upon the information that appears in the third column of your Brainstorming Chart, the “Us” column, these sentences might note where and how could you apply the training and experience you acquired in other forums to satisfy a requirement mentioned in the job announcement. Or, you might explain how your experiences have prepared you to contribute to a particular project or effort you learned about through the company’s website or in conversations you had with company employees. Or, you might note how your experiences can help you uphold company values and ideals, or particular elements of the company’s philosophy or mission statement. This “transferability” information helps hiring managers envision you working within their company in like-minded ways.

To demonstrate how an application letter might bring all of these elements together, consider the following paragraphs, which apply the You-Me-Us structure. To highlight each area, the “You” portions are in bold, the “Me” portions are in standard typeface, and the “Us” portions are in bold italics:

#### **Example**

**Your advertisement notes that the applicant for Detrio’s Product Help-Line Manager should have strong communication abilities, and the work I do for Zangram Associates has helped me hone my speaking and writing abilities.** For example, each week I generate pitches that document product specifications and benefits to prospective clients. Understanding that our clients first learn about Zangram products through secondary vendors, I ensure the product literature I review with current distributors, as well the materials I present at sales conventions and use during on-site demonstrations, are comprehensible to prospective representatives and their team members. I then call vendors and representatives every 1–2 months to discuss how products are meeting their expectations, address their questions and concerns, and promote products in



the production pipeline that may be of interest. *Such experience will help me answer questions about Detrio's products and services for colleagues and customers who may be unfamiliar with engineering terminology.* My participation in Toastmasters will *further ensure that I can accurately describe Detrio's products to customers who call the company for assistance.*

**Working with teams of 2–8 people has also given me teamwork experience your advertisement says applicants should possess.** As the point person for a team that was exploring new audiences for one of our computer modules, I have learned to introduce, support, critique, and negotiate ideas with team members in ways that encourage each member to contribute information while simultaneously allowing the team to assess and build upon the most appropriate ideas for the task at hand. *At Detrio, I could use these teamwork skills to...*

Now that you have seen the You–Me–Us structure in action, it's your turn to use this structure to write paragraphs for your own application letter.



## Exercise: Generating “You–Me–Us” Paragraphs

To generate reader-oriented paragraphs that might appear in your application letter, you will need the “You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart” you completed in the previous exercise.

- Step 1.** Select one item from the company’s Wish List (the “You” column) that you could satisfy or, if writing an unsolicited application letter, identify one characteristic or skill that’s common to employees doing the work you’d like to do for this company. As noted earlier, if there is overlap in items that appear on the company’s Wish-List, you might consider combining and condensing the entries under a single, larger characteristic or trait.

Company’s Wish List Item: \_\_\_\_\_

- Step 2.** Write a topic sentence that identifies the “wish” you can fulfill and where you learned about that wish, starting the discussion with the *hiring manager’s* need or interest. Sample sentence structures include:

Your advertisement notes you are looking for applicants who can \_\_\_\_\_, and I offer \_\_\_\_\_.

During our conversation, you said that you were most interested in applicants who had experience in \_\_\_\_\_; my position at \_\_\_\_\_ has prepared me for this work.

Talking with one of your representatives at \_\_\_\_\_, I learned that my training in \_\_\_\_\_ could help your company \_\_\_\_\_.

Visiting your website, I noticed that your company values \_\_\_\_\_, and my work on \_\_\_\_\_ would allow me to uphold these views.



Your Sentence:

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**Step 3.** Write 2–3 sentences to explain the background, training, and experience you have to demonstrate that you can satisfy that particular Wish. For these sentences, incorporate information from the “Me” column of your You–Me–Us Brainstorming Chart, as well as details from other application materials that verify you have the particular skill, experience, or expertise you identify in Step 2. In writing about this training and experience, briefly explain *what* you did, *how* you did it, and the *short- and long-term impact your efforts had*. In doing so, focus on details this specific company would value.

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## Secret 12: Too much hype and too little substance make applicants seem insecure, or even desperate.

Many job applicants work to convince prospective employers that they're not just qualified for a position, but that they're the *most* qualified, often engaging in linguistic gymnastics to express superlative qualifications to the hiring manager. In such cases, applicants are never average; they are *excellent, outstanding, exceptional*. And their skill sets are never just sufficient; they are *wide-ranging, comprehensive, superb, extraordinary*.

Stanley J. Randall, former vice-president of the Canadian Manufacturer's Association and chairman of the Ontario Economic Council, once observed that "the closest to perfection a person ever comes is when filling out a job application," and the following descriptors—representative sentences from application letters in various industries—echo Randall's observation:

I am highly motivated, friendly and personable.

I am a fast learner, able to master complex details quickly with minimal supervision.

I have diverse experience in customer service and extensive leadership experience, which I can use to make valuable contributions to your company.

My experiences have given me exceptional experience in sales.

I am eager to apply my wide-ranging training and skills in your firm.

I am very interested in working for your firm. I bring excellent communication skills and strong team work.

As applicants pull out their thesaurus or scour the internet for adjectives that suggest they're matchless in every qualification, application materials increasingly portray supernatural individuals who are able to process data and solve complex problems faster than a speeding bullet, bend competitors' minds with their will, and leap industry hurdles in a single bound. Unfortunately, unless you're planning to show up to an interview wearing a cape, there are problems with this approach to the job search.

Describing every skill and ability with superlatives and other hyperbolic language, for example, can suggest you don't have credible standards or reference points of evaluation; consequently, when everything is depicted as amazing, extraordinary, stellar, top-notch, and so on, hiring managers become skeptical of the most basic assertions. Moreover, by relying on “powerful language” to sell your skills rather than tangible evidence, you run the risk of appearing arrogant and cocky, rather than competent. There is, however, a way you can present your capabilities accurately, authentically, and competitively, once you understand the secret concerning relative terms.

Consider the earlier sentences from representative application letters, each of which contains one or more relative terms:

I am **highly motivated, friendly** and **personable**.

I am a **fast** learner, able to master **complex** details **quickly** with **minimal** supervision.

I have **diverse** experience in customer service and **extensive** leadership experience, which I can use to make **valuable** contributions to your company.

My experiences have given me **exceptional** experience in sales.

I am **eager** to apply my **wide-ranging** training and skills in your firm.

I am **very interested** in working for your firm. I bring **excellent** communication skills and **strong** team work.

Relative terms are words—typically adjectives, but also concepts—that assume *identical* points of reference for defining, gauging, and understanding what *comprehensive, thorough, proven, unsurpassed*, and so on means in a particular context. Applicants may know what *they* mean when they use these words, and hiring managers may know what *they* mean when they see or hear these words, but whether applicants and hiring managers mean *exactly* the same thing is unclear, and unlikely.

When people do not share *identical* points of reference, relative terms become “relative” to each participant’s individual point of reference. Consider gruff service representatives who describe themselves as “customer-oriented,” or “supportive” managers that bark orders to their subordinates, or “team players” who are absent from most project discussions. These different interpretations and, by extension, different understandings of terms and phrases, inevitably result in miscommunication—especially in written communication.



Oral communication has the advantage of stress, tone, pitch, rhythm, pace and so on to help convey meaning. Face-to-face communication has the added benefits of facial expressions and body language. Written communication, however, relies on what's printed on the page or what appears on the screen, and we cannot always guarantee readers will see, hear, or interpret words as we intend.

Take, for example, the sentence “That was really interesting.” Speaking to an audience, we could alter our meaning simply by emphasizing particular words. To demonstrate, read the following sentences aloud, stressing the word that's italicized:

*That* was really interesting.

That *was* really interesting.

That was *really* interesting.

That was really *interesting*.

By simply emphasizing different words in our speech, we can encourage an audience toward surprise, agreement, enthusiasm, or cynicism. Yet, written communication is different. We cannot write something like the following and retain our professionalism:

That was **REALLY** INTERESTING!! ☺☺

We can, however, accurately convey our meaning by giving indisputable facts. In other words, we need to identify and replace the relative terms.

Before discussing how you can make this shift in your application materials, we'll start with non-job related sentences to show how to replace relative terms with details that others can understand—regardless of their context, background, and biases.

**Original:**

This building is tall.

In this example, the adjective “tall” is the relative term. What “tall” means depends on a person's experiences and frames of reference for architectural structures. A resident of New York City, for instance, will define a “tall” building differently

than a resident of earthquake-prone San Francisco, or a resident of an Iowa farming community. Therefore, if we want each of these residents—and countless others—to understand exactly what *we* mean by “tall,” we must provide tangible, uncontested details that others can use, test, evaluate, research, and so on. So, how do we identify the details we should offer?

One strategy is the “*X* was so *Y*” trope comedians would use to encourage audiences to respond, “How *Y* is it?” or “How *Y* was it?” In the case of our example, “The building is tall...” would prompt the response, “How tall is it?” Comedians might offer a punch line, but we would offer details to answer the audience’s question.

**Revisions:**

The building is 75 stories.

The building is 750–1050 feet high. (assuming 10–14 feet per floor).

Such information needs no additional commentary or qualifiers to help readers interpret what we mean (e.g., “The building is really tall—75 stories!”). The details we offer should speak for themselves, allowing readers to understand the structure is tall, massive, conventional, or any other adjective *they* might provide on their own, based on the details we offer, and those we don’t. Here’s another example.

**Original:**

We are looking for a quick turn-around on the Olivier project.

The audience call-back might be, “How quick is ‘quick?’” And while it may be tempting to offer a response like, “As soon as possible” or “ASAP,” such responses are relative, providing a time-frame that varies from person to person. For some, “as soon as possible” may represent by the end of the day; for others, it may be next week or even next month, increasing the possibilities for miscommunication.

If the “*X* was so *Y*” trope cannot generate the details an audience might want or need to understand information as we intend, we might turn to the conventional “Five Ws” that guide journalists (Who? What? Where? When? Why?), perhaps adding the questions “How?” and “So what?” to the list. With this strategy, the statement “We are looking for a quick turn-around on the Olivier project” might prompt a revision that answers the following questions: “*Who* needs the project?” “*By when?*” “*Why?*” “*Where* do I submit it?” and “*How* do I submit it?”

**Revision:**

To ensure the department meets this year's budget request submission deadline of May 1, 20XX, please email the Olivier project to <jdoe@anyserver.com> by 5pm, Friday, April 23.

One final example addresses adverbs, since they, too, appear in job application materials.

**Original:**

The Canon XE-3 copy machine can print documents really fast.

If we were to use the “*X* was so *Y*” trope “How fast does it print?” readers might say the answer is already in the original: *really* fast. But the adverb “really”—and all of its synonyms, including *very*, *incredibly*, *enormously*, and *truly*—are relative, since not everyone holds the same measures of gradation. All Olympic sprinters are “really fast,” for example, especially when compared to non-competitive runners. Still, 1/100th of a second can, in fact, distinguish how fast is “fast.” Therefore, providing indisputable facts can give readers information they can use to make the decisions they may want and need to make.

**Revision:**

The Canon XE-3 copy machine can print 30 pages per minute in black and white, and 20 pages per minute in color.

Although some people might argue that details strip away the power and the beauty of adjectives, writing is about communication—conveying information and ideas others can use, often in the writer's absence. And this objective becomes more evident in job application materials, which hiring managers must use to determine if an applicant can actually do the work required by the position, or if that person is simply making heroic claims.

Consider once again the sample application letter sentences with one or more relative terms:

I am **highly motivated**, **friendly** and **personable**.

I am a **fast** learner, able to master **complex** details **quickly** with **minimal** supervision.

I have **diverse** experience in customer service and **extensive** leadership experience, which I can use to make **valuable** contributions to your company.

My experiences have given me **exceptional** experience in sales.

I am **eager** to apply my **wide-ranging** training and skills in your firm.

I am **very interested** in working for your firm. I bring **excellent** communication skills and **strong** team work.

Running through the “X was so Y” trope, or the reporter’s “Five Ws” and the questions “How?” and “So What?,” we can understand the concerns hiring managers may have about the applicant’s professed expertise. “Highly motivated” according to what standards? “Friendly” by whose definition? “Personable” in what forum? What constitutes “complex details,” how “quickly” were they learned, and what kind of supervision is deemed “minimal”? Such questions, left unanswered, make it harder for hiring managers to gauge what an applicant has done and, more importantly, what the applicant can do for their company, especially since claiming competency doesn’t make it so.

By revising sentences in ways that replace relative terms with concrete, non-disputable details, applicants can clarify *what* they did, *when, how, for whom*, and the *results* of those efforts, thereby helping hiring managers understand their credentials, as the following revisions show:

### **Original**

I am a fast learner, able to master complex details quickly with minimal supervision.

### **Revision, Example 1**

Although my position did not require me to work with AutoCAD, I completed online tutorials to familiarize myself with the program and, within two months I was using the program to incorporate client specifications into a senior partner’s designs and to draft preliminary architectural drawings for pitch meetings.

### **Revision, Example 2**

Because the West Coast office did not have conventional staffing, as an entry-level analyst I had the opportunity to assume responsibilities typically reserved for Associates and Vice Presidents. Therefore, in addition to researching industries, building models, and preparing pitch books, I provided project updates during weekly team member calls, represented our group at out-of-town client meetings, scheduled administrative and industry group staff members throughout deal offerings, and fielded team leader and client calls during deal offering development.



### Revision, Example 3

In November 2010, I joined LuxCom as a mid-level sales associate, selling modular systems to corporations and individuals. In April 2012, I was promoted to Sales Manager, overseeing 15 representatives covering the company's Midwest Division. In addition to assigning territories, establishing individual representative and larger division sale targets, and running monthly training programs for the team, I have attended company-sponsored sales training seminars every year and have participated in SMEI's national marketing programs, learning skills that have helped my team increase sales in LuxCom's technology division by 7% in two years.

This secret gets more attention than most because it addresses one of the most critical elements of application documents in general, and application letters in particular: describing your training, experiences and abilities in ways that help hiring managers know what you have done and how so they can understand what you can offer their organization. Consequently, learning and applying this secret alone can distinguish your application letter from countless others presently circulating. Still, revising and generating descriptions to include tangible, uncontested details takes time; in fact, adopting this secret's information requires more time than most, because moving beyond superficial assertions involves analyzing and describing what, exactly, is involved in the work you do. But the time invested in this work will be worth the effort, for the following reasons.

First, with practice, you will become more familiar with the type of information to include in your application letters, making you more sensitive to the ways you think about and describe the work you do to hiring managers. Second, you will have and retain greater control over the expectations people have for you and, by extension, the ways you're positioned in the market; after all, hiring managers will not need to guess or infer what you may be able to do, since you have explicitly identified what you *can* do. Third, considering that few job applicants take the time to offer concrete explanations, your materials will begin to stand out from the rest, generating interviews in even the toughest economy. Finally, even modest changes can shift a hiring manager's understanding of what you can do, ensuring a better match between you and the work you're hired to do.

Despite these benefits, writing sentences that contain tangible, non-negotiable details can feel intimidating, so the following exercise offers strategies for finding and replacing the relative terms in your application letter with information that stands out to hiring managers.

## Exercise: Application Letter Show or Tell?

This activity focuses on conveying what you do—or what you have done—to those who may not have first-hand knowledge of the work you have performed. For this exercise, you will need a hard copy of your application letter. For additional room to make comments and edits, you might consider double spacing your letter before printing it.

- Step 1.** Highlight the relative terms (adjectives, adverbs, concepts) that assume identical points of reference.
- Step 2.** Ask yourself, “What information do *readers* need to understand what I did, as I did it, in the forum(s) in which I did it?” for each element you highlighted. To generate information that might appear in a revised description, use the “*X* was so *Y*” trope, and provide details to clarify “How *Y* was it?” Or, use conventional reporter questions (Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?), and add “So what?” to identify short and long-term effects.
- Step 3.** Answer each question with concrete, tangible details (e.g., dollar figures, percentages, numbers, ranges, software programs, industry protocols, actions, sequence of actions), one description at a time.
- Step 4.** Revise each highlighted application letter entry to incorporate your answers into the descriptions.

In moving through these steps, your explanations and, by extension, your application letter will become longer, but you should resist the urge to censor yourself *at this stage*. For now, focus on providing the most complete and accurate information to help the hiring manager understand the work as *you* performed it.

Once you have clarified what you have done, you will be able to identify which information this hiring manager needs to know to call you in for an interview, and which information might be best presented during the actual interview. Using that information, you can then condense and tighten the details in the application letter you ultimately submit.



## Secret 13: A concise, action-oriented closing paragraph demonstrates your interest in—and hunger for—the position.

After spending one or more paragraphs explaining how and why they are a match for the position, job applicants should end their letter on a positive, action-oriented note. Unfortunately, most application letters end with passive, wishy-washy sentiments such as, “If you’d like to hear more about my qualifications, please call me at your earliest convenience. Thank you in advance.”

Such closings present the applicant as someone who is content to sit back and wait for job opportunities to come to them, but in tight job markets, opportunities often go to the individuals who can both make a case for employment *and* go after prospects in professionally assertive ways. Therefore the way you close your application letter can make the difference between securing an interview, or not.

To wrap up your letter and stand out from the competition, the closing paragraph of your application letter should do several things, as outlined below.

### **Mention enclosed (or attached) résumé**

Some application letters mention the enclosed (or attached) résumé in the opening paragraph; some letters mention the résumé in the middle paragraphs; some mention it in the closing paragraph; some mention it in an enclosure notation, such as “Encl: Résumé”; some letters mention the résumé in all four places; and others don’t mention the résumé at all, assuming its enclosure or attachment is self-evident. Yet the most strategic place to mention the résumé is the *closing* paragraph. Here’s why.

Mentioning an enclosed document at any time before the last paragraph encourages readers to redirect their attention elsewhere, often at the expense of the present discussion. For example, application letters that begin, “As my enclosed résumé indicates...,” encourage hiring managers to put down the application letter and pick up the résumé. In such cases, the two pages the applicant did have to make a case for employment (i.e., an industry-specific résumé *and* a company-specific application letter), now becomes a single page: the résumé. Mentioning the résumé in a body paragraph has a similar effect; it prematurely redirects the hiring manager’s attention elsewhere.

Of course hiring managers could turn their attention immediately to the résumé upon opening the envelope or computer file. The difference is that you, the applicant, are not explicitly directing the reader to look elsewhere. By waiting until the last paragraph to mention the résumé, you have a better chance of keeping the hiring manager's eyes on the letter that explains why *you're* qualified for *this* particular position. Therefore, with one exception, you should plan to reference your résumé in the last paragraph of your application letter.

The exception to this guideline is when you are following up on an earlier conversation in which the hiring manager has explicitly asked you to forward your résumé. In this case, you would mention your résumé in the opening paragraph. For example:

Thank you for talking with me at the Alonex Software Developer Job Fair on June 23, 20XX, about opportunities in your company. As requested, I am sending along a copy of my résumé.

Such openings are strategic for several reasons. First, by reminding the reader of your earlier discussion, you indirectly suggest you have been vetted, even briefly, standing apart simply applying to a job announcement. Second, by noting that you're following up on the reader's request—to send along a résumé—you demonstrate that you can follow through on a task without needing to write, "I can follow through on tasks." Finally, such openings can set up an extension of the earlier conversation; for instance, by using the You–Me–Us paragraph structure, you could use details from your conversation with the reader to start your application letter's main paragraphs, indicating that you paid attention to what he or she said and, by extension, reinforcing your awareness of the reader's needs and interests, as the following example demonstrates:

During our conversation, you mentioned that DigitCorp values applicants with experience in both conventional and new programming languages; my coursework at Louisiana Tech University, as well as my industry experiences, have given me theoretical and hands-on experience with languages on Linux, Microsoft Windows, and Mac OS platforms, which I could bring to projects similar to those you mentioned. For example..."

In cases where you mention the résumé in the opening paragraph of your application letter, you do not need to mention the résumé again in the closing paragraph; in fact, doing so would be repetitious. The closing paragraph in this case would pick up on other details that should appear in an application letter's final paragraph.

### **Ask for "Interview"**

In their effort to distinguish themselves from the competition, applicants may use words other than "interview." They might



write, for example, “I would welcome the opportunity to talk with you further about this position.” Or, “I would be happy to meet to discuss what I could bring to your organization.” The problem with these and comparable phrases is that they suggest the person writing the letter may be interested in something other than employment, say, an informational interview. By using the word “interview,” you clarify that you are applying for a job. Therefore, use the word “interview” in your closing paragraph—unless, of course, you *are* seeking an informational interview to learn more about the industry, the company, positions the company often has available, skills applicants must demonstrate, and so on so you can be a stronger applicant when you do apply for a job.

### **Note you will call 7–10 days, and be sure to follow up**

Many job applicants claim they are energetic, eager, up-to-the challenge kind of people who take the initiative to go after what they want, and yet most application letters end on a note that suggest otherwise. Phrases such as, “If you would like to talk further, please call me” depict applicants who assume hiring managers will pursue them, even though hiring managers are not the ones looking for employment. Therefore, by taking a professional, proactive approach to employment, you can increase your chances of securing an interview. The following sentences demonstrate this principle in action:

#### **Example 1**

Enclosed is a copy of my résumé offering further details of my qualifications. I will call your office in 7–10 days to arrange an interview for the sales manager position.

#### **Example 2**

Enclosed is my résumé, and I will call your office in 7–10 days to confirm you have received my application.

Such sentences may seem presumptuous, and in some ways they are. But, considering you’ve just spent the last several paragraphs explaining how you are a solid match for *this* position, not just *a* position, you’re less presumptuous than applicants who say they’ll call without having demonstrated an awareness of the company or its needs. In the context of a reader-specific, You–Me–Us application letter, you’re simply taking the next, logical step—to meet—and you’re making it easier for the reader by initiating the call. To use this phrase, however, there are some considerations.

First, telling the reader that you will call in 7–10 days is not permission to hound or harass a hiring manager; rather, it is an indication that you will follow-up on whether your application has arrived, giving you an opportunity to gauge whether further conversation about the position is possible at this time, or at all. Second, noting that you will call in 7–10 days

when the job announcement explicitly indicates “no calls” indicates you are unable to follow directions, so you should confirm whether calls are feasible before making this offer. Third, you should have (or verify that you can find) the reader’s phone number—or at least a number that is more direct than the corporate office general directory—so you can call and, if necessary, leave a message for the reader. If phone numbers are unavailable, or if most correspondence for the position is done online, alternative phrasing for your follow-up sentence may be, “I will e-mail you in 7–10 days to confirm you have received my application.” Still proactive but, for some readers, less intrusive.

Finally, you must follow up. To say you will call in 7–10 days and then blow off the call suggests that you’re using job applicant gimmicks or, worse, that you don’t keep your word.

### **Give information on how to reach you if the hiring manager has questions in the meantime**

Even when applicants note they will be calling the company in the coming days, prospective employers may need more information before that call. Therefore, you should include a phone number and email address in your application letter’s closing paragraph, with the following considerations.

First, you should provide a phone number and email address that offers the most immediate and direct access to you; offering phone numbers you seldom use, voicemails you hardly check, and email addresses you don’t consult will not reflect favorably on you and your application if a hiring manager cannot reach you with the information you’ve provided. That said, you should offer a phone number and email address that allows you and the hiring manager to discuss job opportunities without reservation. In other words, you should resist giving your work phone number and e-mail address during a job search, especially if your current employer does not know you’re looking for another position.

Finally, you should be attentive to hidden messages your contact information may give prospective employers. Voice mail messages, for example, can reveal phone skills in a professional context, while email addresses may offer details a hiring manager can use against you (e.g., beerlover@gmail.com, ratherbesleeping@aol.com, sexyback@gmail.com, imathrillseeker@yahoo.com). By ensuring that your contact information will help you convey and reinforce a professional image, you can enhance the case you make for employment.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following examples show how an application letter’s closing paragraph might bring together all of these elements into a few sentences:

**Example 1**

Enclosed is my résumé, and I will call you in 7–10 days to schedule an interview. If, in the meantime, you have questions, please call me at 415-555-1212, or email me at [jdoue@gmail.com](mailto:jdoue@gmail.com). Thank you.

**Example 2**

As requested, I am enclosing my résumé, writing samples, and the names of three references. I will call in 7–10 days to confirm that you have received these materials. Meanwhile, if you have questions about these materials or need additional information, please call me at 202-555-1212, or email me at [jdoue@gmail.com](mailto:jdoue@gmail.com). I look forward to meeting you. Thank you.

One final note about the closing paragraph. Saying thank you at the end is a professional courtesy, but often applicants misidentify what they are thanking readers for. Some applicants write, for example, “Thank you for your consideration,” presuming they are, in fact, being considered when the hiring manager may have stopped reading the letter after the opening paragraph—or earlier. Other application letters end with, “Thanking you in advance,” suggesting that the applicant cannot be bothered to thank the hiring manager at a later point. To end of application letter politely and professionally, you need only write “Thank you.”



## Exercise: Creating a Concise, Action-Oriented Closing Paragraphs

This exercise guides you through the steps of ending your application letter with precision and professional good will.

- Step 1.** Identify the best place to mention your résumé in this letter, based on any earlier interactions you may have had with the hiring manager:
- In the *Closing Paragraph*
  - In the *Opening Paragraph*, if following up on an earlier interaction
- Step 2.** Identify the next immediate exchange you want to occur because of this letter
- Interview*, for employment
  - Informational interview*, to gather more information prior to applying for employment
- Step 3.** Ensure that you could call or email the hiring manager in 7–10 days to verify receipt of your application materials by confirming:
- The job announcement does not say “no calls,” or sometime comparable
  - You have the hiring manager’s phone number or email address:  
Hiring manager’s phone number and extension: \_\_\_\_\_  
Hiring manager’s email address: \_\_\_\_\_
- Step 4.** Identify the most direct and immediate ways this company could reach *you*
- phone number: \_\_\_\_\_
  - email address: \_\_\_\_\_
- Using the information you recorded in the previous steps, write a 1–2 sentence paragraph that will close your application letter in a concise, proactive manner.





## Exercise: Bringing It All Together

The last few exercises helped you create segments of the You–Me–Us application letter. Now it's time to bring these pieces together into a single, cohesive letter that explains why you are qualified for the position in a way that appeals to hiring managers.

- Step 1.** Copy and paste the elements from the previous exercises into a single document, making sure your letter includes the following elements:
- Salutation
  - Company-specific opening paragraph
  - You–Me–Us internal paragraphs
  - Concise, action-oriented closing paragraph
- Step 2.** Review the letter for cohesion, clarity, and grammatical accuracy, editing as necessary to meet the conventional one-page limit.
- Step 3.** Run the spell checker, recognizing that spell checkers do not catch everything.
- Step 4.** Print two copies of the document.
- Step 5.** Ask someone to read your letter aloud—exactly as it is written—as you follow along with the second copy, noting areas the reader stumbled, struggled, or otherwise had difficulty moving through the document.
- Step 6.** Revise the document to address the reader's concerns, as well as other elements you may have noticed when hearing your document read aloud.



## Final Notes...

You could spend countless hours churning out hundreds of application materials for companies that, ultimately, may be of little interest, or you could spend that time researching companies that seem like places you'd like to work and generate company-specific application materials to 4–5 organizations that offer the greatest match for your talents and interests.

Statistically, both approaches would generate the same return: a handful of interviews. Yet by researching and evaluating companies that interest you up front, you develop a richer understanding of the how the work you'd like to do may be situated within and constructed by a particular company—and across industries—and this information can be invaluable as you compare job opportunities, applicant expectations, and position requirements. This information could also help you prepare for interviews and create a stronger position from which to negotiate job offers.

\* \* \* \* \*

May you always have work that engages and inspires you, and a forum to do that work for or alongside those who will appreciate your contribution.



## Exercise: The \$50k Investment Test

It is one thing to ask a company to pay its employees for the work they do on the organization's behalf, but it is another thing for *employees* to pay the organization for the opportunity to do that work. And yet employees *do* pay their employers. Granted, they may not be writing out checks, but employees are investing in their employers with the energy they spend, the materials they produce, the products they sell, the ideas they offer, the clients they secure ... all contributing to the company's brand and bottom line. The question then becomes whether employees are investing their resources in the ways or in the forums they value.

Assume you had \$50,000 (or the annual salary your profession supports) to invest in a *single* company for one year. Would you trust your current employer—or a company you'd like to work for—with that *entire* investment? For example, would you write a personal check to the company's CEO? Would you buy stock in the company as it is presently configured or managed? Would you invest in the research and development of the organization's products and services, or actually purchase the results of those efforts? Would you financially subsidize work the organization does, the values it espouses, the direction its heading, the reputation it holds, the leadership it offers, and the systems it maintains?

By understanding where you would invest the resources *you* can offer, you can identify organizations that could both benefit from your contributions and help you achieve the returns you seek from your investment.

