



Resumes

# Cover Letters Still Matter— Even If They're Not Required

by Joel Schwartzberg

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**Summary.** Many companies now don't require candidates to submit cover letters. But should you still submit them? The author argues that cover letters are still important and uses research and his conversations with six career experts to support the argument.... [more](#)

As someone with decades of experience as a job interviewer and applicant, I'm always surprised when I encounter dismissiveness—and outright disdain—of cover letters (especially when that sentiment comes from someone applying for a communications role). Cover letter critics argue that recruiters don't read cover letters and that they are a waste of everyone's time.

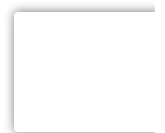
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I couldn't disagree more, but don't take it from me. Research and recruiting experts support the argument that submitting a thoughtful, personalized cover letter—*whether the request is mandatory or optional*—can significantly boost your chances of getting to the next stage in the application process: an interview. In a 2023 survey of 625 U.S. hiring managers by Resume Genius, 83% of hiring managers said they frequently or always read the cover letters they received. An astonishing 73% of the managers whose companies *don't* require cover letters still frequently read them. And nearly half said they read an applicant's cover letter before they read their resume. That's not just an impression; that's a *first* impression.

In a June 2024 survey of 753 recruiters by Zety—a career service that helps people improve their resumes and cover letters—89% of recruiters said they expect candidates to submit cover letters, and an amazing 81% report rejecting candidates based solely on their cover letters.

Allison Hemming, CEO of digital talent management agency The Hired Guns and a 20+-year veteran recruiter, told me that reviewing cover letters is easier nowadays due to more efficient hiring processes. “Hiring managers and their recruiting partners almost always take notice of compelling cover letters, especially now that modern screening technology gives them more time for high-value activities like reviewing cover letters and LinkedIn pages.”

## What a Cover Letter Can Do That a Resume Cannot



With so many resume advisors now counseling the same lockstep approaches to resume writing—often to conform to the widespread use of applicant tracking systems—the modern resume has become a rigid inventory of experiences and highlights. But this stiff, bullet-heavy structure makes the resume a poor conduit of personal expressions, critical context, and tangential but telling details.

“A cover letter can reveal important aspects of your character and skills that a resume doesn’t, including attention to detail, collaboration skills, creativity, and growth mindset,” career advisor Allison Cheston told me.

Career consultant Fran Berrick, founder of Spearmint Coaching, says cover letters can dig deeper into an applicant’s driving motivations. “While a resume delivers a proven ‘what’ about your qualifications, a well-written cover letter reveals an equally valuable ‘why’ about your interest,” she says. “Whether you’re passionate about gaming, inspired by healthcare experiences, or are an early tech adopter, these personal connections can grab the recruiter’s attention more than a resume can.”

For jobs where communication skills are critical, cover letters also uniquely demonstrate writing and proofreading ability—and inability. “Investing time to craft a persuasive cover letter offers your target company a glimpse into how well you’ll communicate internally if hired,” Hemming says.

Unlike a resume, a cover letter also provides an opportunity for describing unique personal expressions, including work that inspires you and endeavors you enjoy.

Finally, only a cover letter can provide critical details and context that may mitigate disqualifying assumptions about issues like



career trajectory changes, relocation flexibility, and career gaps. In fact, 57% of recruiters in the Zety survey preferred that applicants use cover letters to explain employment gaps, beating out the resume (44%) and the job interview (49%).

## Giving Recruiters What They Want

Far from being pointless, the cover letter can be a game-changer. In the Resume Genius survey, 49% of hiring managers said a strong, persuasive cover letter could convince them to interview an otherwise weak candidate, and 33% said a weak cover letter could hurt an otherwise strong applicant.

So, what are these recruiters and hiring managers looking for? It helps to understand the distinct purposes of a resume and a cover letter. A resume answers the question, “Why I’m *qualified* to do the job,” while a cover letter communicates, “Why I *want* the job.”

“Why you want the job” can include many details, but the cover letter is not a place to recount your job history or list your skills—your resume already does that job well. Appropriate examples of why you want the job can include how your experiences fuel your passion for the mission or product and how job roles you enjoy—not simply performed—match requirements or preferences in the job description. It’s also your opportunity to convey how your personal workplace values—like collaboration, open communication, inclusion, consensus-building, and adaptability—align with work culture descriptions in the job listing.

There may also be a job-related coincidence worth sharing, like having previously worked or partnered with the company or staff, relatives who’ve done mission-adjacent work, or experiences from your past that were instrumental in building your interest in the field. For example, tech job applicants may want to reference their



first mind-blowing experiences encountering new technology or family members in the tech field who've inspired them.

My cover letters over the years have included references to my family of schoolteachers, rescuing homeless cats, being an early Macintosh user, having a close relative suffering from Alzheimer's disease, growing up in Texas, and being a news junkie. In each case, I explained why those experiences fueled my professional pursuits.

The benefits of a cover letter may start even *before* recruiters read them, job search coach [Melissa Grabiner](#) told me. “The very act of sending a personalized cover letter—whether required or optional—immediately shows valuable qualities of initiative, commitment, and eagerness.”

Berrick likens a cover letter to raising your hand in a crowded room. “A well-constructed cover letter demonstrates initiative, enthusiasm, and job-specific thinking and research,” she says.

### **When to Submit a Cover Letter**

Obviously, don't send a cover letter if you are explicitly asked not to. That's a rare request, but Amazon is a prominent example of a company that prohibits cover letters in recruiting. On its [jobs FAQs](#) page, Amazon writes, “Being a peculiar company, we don't accept cover letters. Just ensure your resume is up to date, and you're all set.”

On the other end of the spectrum—when a cover letter is mandatory—your decision to submit one should be just as clear-cut. With hundreds of applications in front of them, recruiters may be looking for easy rejections. Why give them a reason?

If a job application platform indicates a cover letter is optional, most recruiters still recommend submitting one because the odds are in your favor. “You never know who values cover letters and who doesn’t, so unless a company explicitly indicates they don’t want a cover letter, submitting one is worth your time and effort,” says recruitment consultant [Mike Peditto](#), Director of Talent at the career growth platform Teal. “In a world where every resume is beginning to look the same, a personalized cover letter can make you stand out.”

What if a cover letter isn’t mentioned at all in a job posting? Many recruiters and common sense still say, go for it. You can often upload multiple documents where the application says, “Upload a Resume/CV.”

At worst, the recruiter won’t read it. At best, your cover letter may stand out even more because other applicants aren’t being as proactive.

## **Crafting an Effective Cover Letter**

A cover letter can only do its job if the information is relevant, the writing is persuasive, and it is organized intelligently. Former recruiter [Samantha Glatzer](#), founder of YourCareerCompass, advises cover letter writers to “Draw the recruiter in, differentiate yourself, and share that you’re not only qualified to do the job but personally excited about the position.” To do that, you can use a mix of joy (happy, love, enthusiastic, excited) and non-joy words (skilled, capable, qualified, experienced) to convey both the personal and professional sides of your alignment.

Length is as contentious an issue for cover letters as it is for resumes. According to the Zety survey, most recruiters (49%) prefer half a page, followed by one page (26%). Fitting your cover letter on a single page shouldn’t be challenging as long as you



follow the unanimous guidance of not duplicating qualifications in your resume.

Cheston advises applicants to write a tailored cover letter for each job and recommends sending them through the company's careers portal and as an email to the hiring manager. If you don't have contact information for a recruiter, [find employees from that company in your LinkedIn network](#) and ask if they can help you connect with one. They may not respond but typically take no offense if the ask is that simple. (Don't ask them to review or pass along your resume and cover letter unless they offer).

Confused about how to begin drafting one? Here's a useful six-part template to get you started.

**1. Start with an opening statement** that expresses or illustrates how your enthusiasm for the position drives your interest in working there. Be specific—not generic—about the company, the role, and the mission.

For example: “The Senior Medical Copywriter role aligns with my healthcare writing experience, my ability to communicate scientific information clearly, and my passion for public wellness in a very inspiring way. I'm excited to tell you why.”

**2. Connect your job skills and experiences to the desired skills and experiences in the job description.** Don't rely on the interviewer to make those connections—spell them out explicitly in your cover letter.

For example: “I feel very matched to the needs of the HR Lead role given my experience managing a six-member HR team and my work planning and launching our Learning and Development program.”

**3. Mention contacts or partnership experiences you've had with the company**, as well as any personal connections to their mission.

For example: “I bought my first DigiCorp laptop in 2021, and it transformed the way I work and communicate. I’m so excited by the prospect of running technical help desk operations for the next generation of Digicorp products.”

**4. Add supporting relevant details**, like published writing, special skills (like video editing and proofreading), unique lived experiences (like internships and volunteer activities), or aligned values (like inclusion and teamwork).

**5. Briefly explain any likely-to-come-up concerns in your resume**, including career gaps, very short job stays (or job hopping), lack of career progression, and significant career changes (like shifting from IT to Internal Comms). As I noted earlier in the Zety survey, recruiters see cover letters as the optimal place to bring up resume red flags.

**6. End with your excitement about *contributing* to the specific mission or bottom line.** “Contributing” makes a stronger statement than “working” because anyone can work; valued employees contribute.

For example: “I look forward to contributing to the success of LexiCo Publishers and its talented authors through my email and social marketing expertise.”

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Many applicants are now using AI to help them write cover letters—and that’s okay. Gen AI tools can be a great starting point to



help you organize, simplify, and polish cover letters, but they can't make up for deficits in authenticity and personal voice. That's something you'll have to do on your own to ensure your cover letter doesn't sound generic or robotic. Whether written by a human or AI, a poorly written or generic cover letter will always be a liability.

If you're still on the fence about cover letters, remember that in a competitive job market, an effective cover letter can be the difference between getting an official interview and getting an automated "thanks, but no thanks" email. As long as human beings are still making hiring decisions, a cover letter is the most human impression you can make before an interview, so pass on it at your peril.

### More Resources

- [How to Write a Cover Letter That Sounds Like You \(and Gets Noticed\)](#)
- [How to Get Hired When AI Does the Screening](#)
- [10 Common Job Interview Questions and How to Answer Them](#)
- [How to Answer "What Are Your Strengths and Weaknesses?"](#)
- [HBR Guide to Your Job Search Toolkit \(from the HBR Store\)](#)

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