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Designing a Cover Letter

You have received Monster.com's email, notifying you of your dream job and you are double checking that you have everything ready to go. Résumé, references, but wait... cover letter? What is that? Isn't that what the résumé is for?

Every time you apply for a job you are expected to send a cover letter along with your résumé. While your résumé lists your job experience and skills, the narrative nature of the cover letter provides a more complete picture of "what you're all about." Trinity College's webpage tells us it "should answer the question—why should I hire you? It should grab the employer's attention and point out why you, above all other applicants, should be contacted for a personal interview" (Trinity, 1). Thus, the cover letter could arguably be the most important part of your application. Okay, do not freak out. They are really simple pieces of writing that last no more than a page and should:

A. Be Addressed to the Person Doing the Hiring:

Sorry to have to tell you, but the days of handing in a generic cover letter are over. JobStar Central tells us that: "It is regarded as a sign of laziness...to send out a cover letter that is not tailored to the specific company" (JobStar, 1). So: 1) find out who will be making the hiring decision and address the letter to them; and 2) read the job description and cater the letter toward it, anything you feel would help you establish a connection between the company and yourself. Yes, it might be tedious, but it will increase your chances of getting that dream job.

B. Mention What You Can Provide for the Company:

This letter, much like school applications, is about the relationship between you and the institution. One major element of this connection is what you can provide for the company. Why should the company hire you? This would be a good place to elaborate on some of the skills and experiences listed in your résumé. So you worked as a candy striper your junior year of college? Great. How does your time in that position qualify you for that nursing position? You are ready to move from McDonalds to AT&T's customer service department? What did that McDonald's job teach you about customer service that the next guy does not know?

C. Note What the Company Can Give You:

Remember what I said about cover letters dealing with the relationship between you and the institution? Now that you've mentioned why you're such a great candidate for the company, it's time to consider why you want to work for this company rather than any other. For this, you are probably going to want to research the company. No, I don't mean locking yourself up in some musty library in some self-induced stupor of caffeine as you look up all their quarterly earnings. What are they known for? Did you have a good experience with them as a customer that has motivated you to want to join their team? Do they support a cause you really believe in?

If you know someone who works for the company, you might ask them what it is like. Barring that, you might just peruse their online customer reviews. Basically, you want to answer the question: Why do I want to work for this company above all others? If you cannot answer that... look elsewhere.

D. Contain No Spelling Errors:

I recall working at a coffee shop while attending college, and my boss posting cover letters full of spelling mistakes in the back by the kitchens for people to see when they needed a laugh. Needless to say, those individuals were not hired.

Remember, this is one of the first impressions a possible employer gets of you. No one wants to hire someone who cannot even be bothered to spell correctly in a document they are sending to people they hope to work for. Before you send in your letter, read it over, use spell check, or have your resident English major go over it for you. Do NOT send it in with spelling errors.

Works Cited:

- How to Write A Cover Letter. "What Should Your Cover Letter Do For You?" Trinity College. 17 March 2010. Web.
- JobStar Central. "Who Needs A Cover Letter." 17 March 2010. Web.