

7 Cover Letter Mistakes Entry-Level Candidates Make—and How to Fix Them Now



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If you're a first-time job-seeker, you probably feel a lot of pressure to find a job quickly. And at this stage, the fastest way to land more interviews is to take your cover letter seriously.

Yes, your resume is also important, but here's the thing: In a sea of youthful candidates, most of your resumes will look very similar. And as most companies deal with a huge influx of entry-level applications, so hiring managers find that judging candidates based on virtually indistinguishable resumes ends up being inefficient and cumbersome. Instead, they'll use your cover letter to gauge your potential.

The clincher? Entry-level and internship candidates tend to make the same cover letter blunders, which are fatal to their applications. Here are seven big mistakes entry-level candidates make, and [how you can avoid them to come out on top](#).

Problem #1: It's Too Long

Everyone learns how to write a 500-word, one-page essay in school. To most of us, it sounds like “the bare minimum.” But for a cover letter, it's way too much—and will only serve to annoy the hiring manager.

The Fix: Keep it Simple, Direct, Clear, and Short

Aim for 250 words. According to the [Orange County Resume Survey](#), almost 70% of employers either want a half page cover letter (250 words) or “the shorter the better” approach.

If that seems short, just remember: All you really need to include in your cover letter is the job you want to fill, the reason you can do the job, and how you intend to do the job—with a little flair of personality. No need to write out your whole resume. No need to pen your personal manifesto. Keep it short and sweet for the hiring manager who's reading through dozens of these.

Problem #2: It's Overly Formal

Too many cover letters have sentences that read like this: “I wish to convey my interest in filling the open position at your fine establishment.”

Is that so, Mr. Shakespeare?

The problem with this stilted and unnatural language is that it's off-putting to hiring managers: It makes you seem insincere and even robotic, not anything like the friendly, approachable, and awesome-to-work-with person that you are

The Fix: Use Common Language and Speech Patterns

[Skip the frills, and just use clear language](#)—"I'm thrilled to be writing to apply for the [position] at [company]." You can sense that this sentence has a much more genuine and friendly tone than the first example. Here are some other complicated terms and their simpler, more natural synonyms:

- Advantageous — helpful
- Erroneous — wrong
- Leverage or utilize — use
- Attempted — tried
- Subsequently — after or later

There are a couple ways to spot overly formal language in your cover letter. First, try reading it out loud to see if there are areas that feel unnatural coming off the tongue, and rework them to flow better. You can also try using a program like [Hemingway App](#) to help you identify over-complicated language in your writing.

Problem #3: It Sounds Disingenuous

All career advisors will [tell you to target your cover letter](#). Unfortunately, too many people think that this simply means writing something like "I love [insert target company here]."

I've got news: That's simply not good enough to show a hiring manager your enthusiasm for a company.

The Fix: Demonstrate Your Understanding of the Company with Details

Instead, you'll need to read enough about the company to make a truly personalized comment in your cover letter. First, you should study the content, advertising, branding, business strategies, and culture of the company. Pay especially close attention to the department you'd like to join. Find out what the team is doing and how they're doing it, and take note of the areas that you know you can contribute to.

Including that specific information in the cover letter shows that you're interested and already have ideas for how you can help the company. So let's say that you're applying for an internship position at a company like The Muse. You might say something like:

I really enjoy reading the productivity section on The Daily Muse—it's got a great blend of psychological and technical tips, many of which I've taken to heart. I'm a sucker for this type of "food for thought" material, so I have my own ideas and resources that would make me a strong contributor in this vertical.

Problem #4: You're Underselling Yourself

If you have any lines in your cover letter that read like these, you must remove them:

I'm probably not the most qualified candidate...

I'm sure you have many other more qualified candidates who have applied...

Give me a chance to prove myself...

Why would the hiring manager not hire the most qualified candidate? That would be absurd!

The Fix: Make an Argument for Yourself

[Even if you feel under-qualified, put on a brave face](#) and tell the hiring manager the attributes that would make you a strong candidate. Respond to the job description, and play up the directly related and transferable skills you have that would allow you to meet the challenge.

For instance, someone applying for an entry-level position as a salesperson might write:

During college, I was responsible for ad sales in our newspaper, The Blue and Gold. I learned how to create, manage, and maintain professional relationships with business owners around our campus. My direct efforts led to a 10% profit margin increase over the year, and I believe that those skills can be directly applied to your open position.

If you're still unsure, check out [career counselor Lily Zhang's suggestions](#) for drawing out your strengths instead of your weaknesses.

Of course, remember that having too much bombast ("I'm absolutely the best and you better believe it!") also isn't good.

Problem #5: It Sounds Selfish

The following is one of the most important rules to remember about writing your cover letter: It isn't just about you.

In other words, avoid writing about how working at your target company will create a great boost for your resume and career. Hiring managers are fully aware of that. What they need to know is how you're going to provide a boost for the company.

The Fix: Ask What You Can Do for the Company

Your cover letter should state [what you can do for the company](#). Ask yourself—what is it about your education and experience that would allow you to meet the challenges of the open job position? How can you leverage your expertise for the benefit of the company? What ideas do you have to move the business forward?

It's perfectly fine to mention that being hired would be mutually beneficial—the hiring manager wouldn't want you to be a demoralized worker in a role that doesn't suit your career prospects. Just keep it to a quick sentence and then move on to wooing the reader with what you can do for the company.

Problem #6: It's Full of Irrelevant Filler

Got a paragraph about [your semester abroad, or some other travel experience](#) where you found your "true calling?" You should probably delete it. Do you have sentences like, "I am a hard working, efficient, and loyal person?" Don't make a series of lists of positive sounding words about yourself. It's not convincing.

Most importantly, if you've included personal information about your religion, marital status, or race, delete it. Even if you think it's adding personality, it's actually irrelevant to the job and could cause you to be discriminated against.

The Fix: Focus on Your Relevant Skills and History

Only talk about the experiences that directly relate to your skills and abilities that will help you succeed in the position. So if you learned a relevant skill while you were abroad, like a language? Then it's perfectly fine to bring it up.

You should also make sure to show the hiring manager proof of your skills rather than simply say that you have them. For any word you choose to describe yourself, make sure to include an example from your work experience to back up your claim.

For example, instead of saying that you're "hard-working" or "a problem solver," write something like:

I felt like my own training could have been better, so I took the initiative to create new documents and checklists to make employee training less resource-intensive, which led to shorter training periods and faster content production.

Problem #7: It Has Too Much Information About College Metrics

This may be strange to hear, but here are four things that don't really factor in your cover letter: [the university you attended](#), your GPA, the classes you took, or your senior thesis.

You should be proud of yourself if you got into an Ivy League school and have a great GPA, but in most cases, they aren't great metrics for determining whether you'll be a strong employee.

The Fix: Stick to Activities and Responsibilities

To the greatest extent possible, talk about activities you participated in both inside and outside of college that have some relevance to the job. A student with a 2.9 GPA but with experience as editor of a college newspaper is still very likely to get an interview for a media job.

The reason that activities speak louder than statistics is because they act as proof that you have the soft skills necessary to be a good employee and co-worker. Activities provide experience you can use to show that you are organized, have leadership skills, can work in a team, and can easily get used to a professional environment.

Above all, activities show that you were motivated to succeed beyond simply earning a degree.

By fixing these seven mistakes, your application will stand out from the sea of other entry-level candidates jockeying for the same position. A genuine, refreshing, and smart cover letter is sometimes all it takes to get attention—and kick start your career.

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