

Cover Letters - How Important Are They?

Writing a Winning Cover Letter

The cover letter is perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of the application process. Some people disregard cover letters completely, and others put way too much emphasis on them. If you take a random sampling of cover letters submitted for jobs, you'll find letters ranging from one sentence to three pages and containing vastly different types of information.

When it comes to a resume and cover letter packet, it is important to note that the resume is the more important document of the two.

That said, there are several essential functions of a cover letter.

One might compare the relationship between a resume and cover letter to that of a novel and the blurb on a novel's back cover.

Here's why:

- A novel doesn't need a back cover to be considered good, and if the novel is strong enough, people will want to read it based on its reputation alone (this could equate to the reputation of your school or residency program).
- If someone is trying to decide between several similar novels, however, he might read the back cover in order to find something that draws him in. Similarly, a well-written cover letter could help set you apart from other applicants at your level.
- Sometimes during the reading of the novel, the reader will reference the back cover in order to clarify a relationship or to see what a major plot point is going to be. In this same vein, someone may turn to your cover letter while perusing your resume to look for further clarification of some of your experiences.

While the cover letter serves a valuable role, you want your resume to be able to stand on its own without a cover letter if need be. Resumes are often passed along from person to person and, should the cover letter get lost along the way, you want all of the most relevant information about your candidacy to be on your resume.

At the same time, there are certain things that just cannot be communicated through the resume alone. These might include:

- reasons for relocation;
- practice;
- reasons for entering medicine from a prior career;
- information about gaps or potentially misunderstood information on your resume;
- a further explanation of particularly unique or impressive qualifications; and/or
- a summary of your most relevant experience.

A cover letter should not simply offer a condensed version of what is already on your resume. If your resume is very straightforward and speaks for itself you should stick with a brief cover letter. You'd rather have someone focus the bulk of their attention on your resume than discard

it because he/she was turned off by a lengthy and pointless letter. Likewise, if you feel that your resume is lacking in certain areas, you will want to try and compensate for that with a well thought out and well written cover letter.

To figure out what your cover letter should say, first write down any things you feel you need to communicate to the employer - things that he will not realize from simply perusing your resume. Then jot down the four most impressive aspects of your background with regard to the type of position you are seeking.