

Producing Stellar Résumés & Cover Letters

Do you hate applying for jobs? Does it feel like you invest hours into crafting documents that perfectly capture your accomplishments, and then get frustrated when the employer fails to notice your awesomeness?

I get it, and I'm ready to share my strategies for grabbing an employer's attention.

In a nutshell, rather than focusing on what **you want** to tell the employer about your background and accomplishments, shift your attention to what **the employer needs** to recognize that you have the qualities they are seeking in a candidate.

Your résumé and cover letter are marketing documents, and they need to address your audience's priorities directly. Unless the employer can see how your experiences can create opportunities for them, they will not be compelled by your interesting life's journey, or how joining their team will satisfy your professional aspirations.

Remember: the employer has a problem, and they are looking for the right person to help them solve it. Your job is to make it as obvious as possible that you are that person!

Here's my step-by-step process to creating high-impact job applications.

Step 1: Commit to applying for the job.

It may seem obvious, but one of the most common reasons candidates don't get job offers is that they never submit an application. They get intimidated by the job description, and if they can't check every box on the employer's wish list, they talk themselves out of applying. If you follow this approach, I guarantee that you won't get the job.

As the job seeker, it is your responsibility to make the best possible case for why you are a good fit; it's the employer's job to evaluate the strength of your application and assess whether you are a viable candidate. **Do not do the employer's job for them** by not submitting your application, or by apologizing for what you perceive are short-comings in your credentials! Give the employer the opportunity to determine whether you have what they are looking for.

To assess whether you are in the ballpark, start by conducting an honest appraisal of the position. First, review the qualifications, which typically appear towards the end of the job announcement, to assess whether you meet most of them. If you don't meet them exactly, can you make a compelling case that your experience is analogous?

Next, look at the list of job functions. Ask yourself:

- If you had **adequate training, supervision, and resources**, do you think you **could** perform those functions?
- If so, do you think you would **enjoy** performing them?

If your answer to both of these questions is “yes,” proceed to the next step.

Step 2: Analyze the job description to determine what to highlight in your application.

Take a closer look at the job description. (Print a copy so you can refer to it when you are selected for an interview.)

As you review it, ask yourself:

- What **problem** is this role designed to solve?
- What **opportunities** can the person in this role create for the organization?
- What are the **key skills** one must have to perform this role? (Hint: Pay attention to the verbs.)
- What **expertise** does the employer expect candidates to have?

Answering these questions will help you uncover the **skills and qualities** the employer needs to learn from your application and interview. Start thinking about how you can communicate this information in your application. What examples can you provide that demonstrate you excelling in these (or related) areas?

After completing this assessment, ask yourself:

- What makes me uniquely qualified for this job?

Use the answer to this question to formulate the **brand or theme** you want to communicate throughout your application.

Finally, ask yourself:

- Why do I want to align myself with this organization?
- Why do I want to serve its mission and its clients/customers/stakeholders?
- What about this opportunity will keep me motivated to perform at my best, even when the work is difficult?

Your answers here will help you identify your **motivation** for joining this organization and help you form a connection.

Step 3: Get the mechanics right.

The appearance of your documents matters! Use an easy-to-read font like Calibri or Garamond (try to avoid Times New Roman) and create a consistent look and feel to the format across all of your application documents.

Create a “letterhead” at the top of the page that includes your name and contact information. Use the same letterhead on all of your documents.

Here are specific guidelines for résumés and cover letters:

Résumé

Unless you are a student or recent graduate, your professional experience should be the first section on your résumé. List each job in reverse chronological order, placing the employer’s name and your job title along the left margin of the page. If you have significant professional experience, a two-page résumé may be appropriate.

Every sentence on the résumé should be about you. Don’t get bogged down in too many details about your prior organizations. Depending on your space constraints and style preferences, you can present your work descriptions in one of three formats:

- **Paragraph:** Best when you have a lot of information to include.
- **Bullets:** Best when you do not have a lot of information to fit on the page.
- **Hybrid:** Best when you want to offer some general information about your employer or function as well as detailed information about your role.

Each of these formats is acceptable; make sure you select **one** format and use it consistently throughout the document. (See the sample descriptions on page 5.)

Start each sentence with an active verb and do not include personal pronouns in your description. (If it helps, you can imagine that there is a silent “I” at the beginning of each sentence.) Conclude each sentence with a period. Use a variety of verbs to communicate the breadth of your skill set and try to incorporate the verbs from the job announcement into your résumé. Weave in phrases toward the end of each sentence that reveal your expertise, level of responsibility, and impact. Describe your current job in present tense and all prior jobs in past tense.

Be strategic in how you construct your descriptions. Highlight the aspects of your past jobs that overlap with the prospective role by placing them first in your descriptions. Minimize details that will be hard for prospective employers to connect with. Remember: the goal of the résumé is not to display the aspects of your work that were most meaningful to you; it is to share information that will be most meaningful to your prospective employer.

Your Education section should follow your Experience section. Include all of the institutions from which you earned a degree. The farther away in time you are from graduation, the less you should be including details regarding campus activities.

If you are an attorney, include a separate section for “Bar Memberships and Professional Activities” where you can include your license and any bar/professional organizations you belong to.

Depending on your experience, you can consider adding these optional sections to showcase:

- Community Service
- Leadership
- Professional Activities
- Interests
- Languages
- Publications
- Presentations

I’ve provided a sample résumé on the following page to give you an idea of how to arrange your information.

[Sample résumé for illustration purposes; Remember to be consistent with your format choices.]

Lily Legal

123 Main Street | Anytown, California 95403 | LLegal@gmail.com | (415) 555-1111

EXPERIENCE

Employer Name ["Paragraph" format]

City, ST

Job Title

Month year-Month year

Write a blurb that describes your responsibilities and expertise. Start each sentence with a verb that highlights a different skill, and incorporate information that showcases your impact. Craft longer blurbs for more relevant jobs and shorter blurbs for less related or more distant jobs. Using the paragraph format is helpful when you have a lot of information to fit on the page.

Employer Name ["Bullet" format]

City, ST

Job Title

Month year-Month year

- Write a blurb that describes your responsibilities and expertise.
- Start sentences with active verbs and remember to add a period to the end of each sentence.
- The bullet format works well when you don't have as much information to squeeze onto the résumé.
- Avoid sentences like the preceding one where one word takes up an entire line.

Employer Name ["Hybrid" format]

City, ST

Job Title

Month year-Month year

Start with a sentence that provides an overview of the organization and your role.

- Include a series of bulleted sentences that provide more detail about your contributions.
- Follow the guidelines from the bullet format example above.
- Remember to pick one format and use it consistently throughout your résumé.

EDUCATION

University of State School of Law, Collegetown, State

Juris Doctor, May 2009 (Note: Most schools award a "Juris Doctor," not a "Juris Doctorate")

Awesome State University, Anytown, California

Bachelor of Arts in Political Science *cum laude*, June 2006

BAR MEMBERSHIPS AND PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

State Bar of California, Member

City Bar Association, Litigation Section Member

Queen's Bench, Diversity Committee Member

ARTICLES AND PRESENTATIONS

"Interesting Article on Unique Area of Law," City Bar Association Magazine, Winter 2019

"Hot Topics in Civil Procedure," Beat the Clock CLE Program, January 2019

"Know Your Rights," Presentation at Anytown Community Center, September 2018

Cover Letter

The cover letter is your opportunity to communicate directly with the reader to help them visualize you performing their role. Return to these questions before composing your letter:

- What does this employer need to understand to recognize I am the right candidate for THEM?
- How can I show them I have the skills and knowledge to solve problems and create opportunities for them?
- How can I show them my desire to serve their organization and their stakeholders?

Do NOT use the letter to present a chronological narrative of your entire career or to re-hash your résumé. Instead, use your analytical skills to highlight those aspects of your background that will be most compelling for the employer. If you are a lawyer, you might think of this approach as akin to writing a brief. You are addressing each of the elements that are important to the decision maker, and then elaborating on each of those themes with evidence to support your position. Taking this approach will help the reader recognize your value.

Here's an outline to organize your thoughts. Craft strong topic sentences to introduce the focus of each paragraph and guide the reader through your letter. (Note: Paragraphs 2 and 3 might require more than one paragraph each to present your interest and qualifications effectively):

Paragraph 1: Introduce your brand or theme and indicate the role you are seeking. If you have a pre-existing history with the organization or were referred for the position, mention it here.

Paragraph 2: Highlight your interest in the organization using the answers to the **motivation** questions from Step 2 of this article. Emphasize why you want to support their stakeholders and further their goals (and not what working with this employer will do for you). Offer examples that show your connection to the work and demonstrate how you will apply your expertise or relevant knowledge base to support their work.

Paragraph 3: Identify the key skills necessary to perform this role using the **skills and qualities** you uncovered in Step 2. Organize the paragraph around these skills and offer specific examples that demonstrate how you've developed or excelled with them. Do NOT organize the paragraph around your prior jobs or work chronology. The key is to help the employer visualize you using these skills within **their** organization, not someone else's. Help them see what's in it for them by hiring you.

Paragraph 4: Closing paragraph. Reiterate your interest in the role and your interest in speaking with them.

Step 4: Review and Proofread!

Take another look at the job announcement; have you covered all of the key themes and points? Have you provided the employer with the information they need?

Proofread carefully. Consider reading your materials out loud to catch typos and awkward sentences. Share your application with trusted colleagues or your coach for a final review. Set your application materials aside for several hours and re-read them with fresh eyes.

Save your application as a pdf and submit it according to the process identified by the employer.

Conclusion

The goal of your application is to generate enough interest that the employer will want to advance you to the next stage in their hiring process. Resist the temptation to overwhelm the reader with every detail of your past career. By using your strong analytical skills to highlight the most salient aspects of your background and expertise, you will create the opportunity to share your story in greater depth in an interview setting.