

Generic feedback for students resume and cover letter

Introduction

It should be noted that when I suggest improvements for a resume I am treating it as if I was hiring you for a paid role, not for an unpaid internship where you get course credit. This means the criteria for a good resume and cover letter is much higher.

I should also point out that everyone has a different opinion about cover letters and resumes. I can only give you my opinion. I know colleagues in the industry have different views.

You only have a limited time to catch their attention

I think estimates say that people take 10 to 30 seconds to review an application (resume and cover letter) before they decide to keep reading or ditch it. In that short amount of time, you need to capture their interest.

Most job ads have selection criteria or something that they say they are looking for. Your job is to ensure that you explain to them quickly and easily that you have these criteria and they should interview you.

That means you need to show all the things they want for the selection criteria early on in your resume and cover letter.

Provide a cover letter tailored to the organisation

A cover letter is like a written interview, in that you get an opportunity to tell a prospective employer all your good stories that relate to their organisation and the role. Tell me stories that show you are a good fit for this role, even if that isn't in a working environment.

A cover letter allows you to differentiate yourself from other candidates. It is an opportunity to share your stories and your strengths to create interest so you can get an interview. And just

remember, the stories you write in your cover letter are the ones you will probably tell in your interview.

The other thing with a cover letter is it shows how interested you are in the role. If you don't have a cover letter, it looks like you aren't interested at all. If you have a generic cover letter that doesn't mention the role you are applying for, it also looks like you aren't that interested.

If you have a generic cover letter that has one paragraph that talks about the application and why you are a good fit - that shows interest in the role and makes it easier for you to apply to multiple roles easily.

Use the cover letter to explain stories about why you would be able to help an organisation. eg. Take your strengths (from resume) and for each one, have a story to share.

What you can do is to look at the selection criteria for a role and then write a cover letter that explains why you meet or why you could meet each of those selection criteria. Remember, you can use non-work situations to show you meet these criteria as well.

If the recruiter reads the cover letter first, then you want it to be memorable so you stand out. Then your resume can fill in a little more about your background and maybe some more details too.

Example:

I learned Python in my first month in my XYZ internship even though I had never learned a programming language before. I have learned another two languages (R and C++) in my own time and applied them successfully in personal and work projects.

Some people use the STAR method (Situation - Task - Action - Result) to write their cover letters:

<https://www.teachingcove.com/writing/how-to-write-a-cover-letter/>

Explaining what you did at a job in your resume

When you are starting out in your career it can be helpful to explain in more detail what you did. It can also help to put numbers into the resume. I always find it handy to email myself things that I have done and write down at the time the numbers I could use to put inside my resume.

Here are some examples and tidbits:

- Use active verbs for resumes: I spearheaded the frontend team of X in the revamp of the company's entire web app. It was a \$Y budget and was delivered on time and on budget.
 - <https://www.visualcv.com/blog/19-action-verbs-that-convey-leadership-and-responsibility/>

- Other examples:
 - Learnt leadership skills and the importance of team culture when working in a team of 5 other qualified and diverse engineers.
 - Maintained a PHP website backed by a MySQL database. Provided suggestions for UX improvement. This resulted in more positive feedback by clients in 3 out of 4 trials that were run.
 - Best moment: suggestion for new UX design was accepted and implemented for production by the product manager. This improved sales in Q3 by 10%.

Be bold and share what you would really like to do

I also encourage students to really share what they want to do - it allows me to help them more specifically. This is especially important if it is in a specific industry. "I would like to do ML in finance" is easier for me to suggest people to refer you to than "I want to do ML".

When transitioning to another industry

The key here is to "translate" everything from your previous domains eg. turn the resume words from "engineering speak" into "IT speak" - or whatever industry you are keen on.

Smaller considerations

- Sending your cover letter, selection criteria, and resume/CV in PDF is preferred with most organisations. This is because you cannot guarantee that an organisation has Microsoft Word and the formatting may look strange or unreadable. There are some times when organisations specifically ask for Microsoft Word, so just read the instructions carefully. If you are unsure, reach out to the organisation to clarify what format is preferred.
- Most resumes show projects and jobs in reverse chronological order - from newer to older.
- Acronyms for school certificates or university grades should be explained so that even someone from a foreign country would understand.
- Depending on your comfort, it can be useful to have a skills matrix in your resume like the one below:

Programming Language	Expert Level	Details
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C	Beginner	2 undergrad subjects
CSS	Intermediate	3 years working with websites as a hobby
Java	Beginner	1 undergrad subject

- Look at Canva to make you resume stand out. Canva is free to use and there are free templates you can use. Here are just a sample:
 - <https://www.canva.com/templates/EADapMrIO58-red-and-white-two-tone-infographic-resume/>
 - <https://www.canva.com/templates/EAEoKzzoK50-white-and-blue-simple-software-engineer-resume/>
 - <https://www.canva.com/templates/EAEoLAXlWlo-black-and-white-color-blocks-software-engineer-resume/>

How I hire

My selection criteria is to look for the 6 continuous improvement skills:

- Learnability
- Collaborative by default
- Adaptability
- Critical thinking
- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Tolerance for complexity

Key Continuous Improvement Skills



Learnability



Critical Thinking



Collaborative by Default



Tolerance for Ambiguity



Adaptability



Tolerance for Complexity

You can read about it more here

https://figshare.com/articles/presentation/Future-Proofing_your_Workforce_while_Navigating_Organizational_Change/16725757

I also recognise that experience can be more about opportunity than ability. We aim to identify talented individuals who may not have been given the opportunities of their peers due to the cumulative effects of discrimination on factors such as race, gender, disability, gender identity, and the intersectionality of that discrimination.

You can find out more here:

<https://www.practicaldiversity.org/2021/11/05/resource-improving-diversity-and-inclusion-in-senior-leadership-a-workshop-to-help-recruit-diverse-senior-leaders-2/>

Here are also my expectations of students:

<https://www.practicaldiversity.org/2022/01/19/student-expectations-document/>

Appendix A - Default email for person giving feedback to an applicant

HI [XYZ]

I thought I would give you some feedback for your cover letter and resume.

Here is some generic advice that I give students that can apply to your cover letter and resume.

https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vTDviLT-JR_EmJP27LT0_jTHbZP0NSqVal5cMVLO57qPzMLBxISX5F6yCeo-chiWMgy17INTc7UgWRT/pub

Here is some specific advice that ties in with the generic advice:

- <advice>

I'm happy to provide you with more feedback or answer your questions at our meeting on
<meeting details>

Appendix B - Associated links

- [Link back to the editable document](#)
- [Link back to the viewable document](#)