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Creating Winning Cover Letters

If you want to make a strong impression with a prospective employer, start with the cover letter. While this document often seems like an afterthought, you should spend as much time perfecting your cover letter as your resume. Why? This introductory note is typically the first thing hiring managers see, and it is the primary enticement for them to read your resume. Following are some tips that can help you convey the best message:

- While you've likely heard this before, don't forget to tailor your cover letter to the specific job opening and law firm or company. If your letter seems like a cookie-cutter document that could be sent to any business, you are unlikely to get an interview. Research the firm by reading industry publications, searching the Internet and speaking with members of your professional network. Then, demonstrate your knowledge of the business and interest in helping it succeed by including some of this information in your cover letter. For example, if the law firm to which you are applying recently acquired a competitor, you might write, "I followed with great interest your recent acquisition of XYZ Law Firm. I was a member of the project team that helped merge two law firms after my former employer bought a competitor, and I believe I can benefit your firm in a similar way."
- Don't use your cover letter as a venue for rehashing your resume. Instead, focus on key aspects of your employment background that relate directly to the job opportunity and expand upon them. This is your chance to tailor your experience and demonstrate why you should get the job. If you're applying for a position that may require some public speaking, for instance, highlight in your cover letter that you recently spoke on a panel at a local ALA conference.
- It may seem like a minor detail, but make sure to address your cover letter to the person who is hiring for the position. Writing "To Whom It May Concern" or "Dear Sir or Madam" will not set you apart from the crowd. By making a quick phone call to the firm or company's receptionist, you should be able to get the hiring manager's name and title. And, of course, once you have this information, make sure you spell both correctly.
- Have a trusted friend carefully proofread your cover letter before sending it. Just one typo could cause your application to end up in the "no" pile.