

PLUME

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*To my parents and teachers,
on whose shoulders I stand:
infinite gratitude for shaping and guiding
my work and my life.*

And

*to singer, songwriter, and daydream believer
John Stewart (1939–2008):
thanks for providing the soundtrack.*

CHAPTER 9

CHANNELING JANE AUSTEN

WRITING THAT WILL GET YOU HIRED

You don't write because you want to say something,
you write because you have something to say.

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *THE CRACK-UP*

F Ernest Hemingway wrote a short story using just 6 words. Actress/writer Portia Nelson wrote her autobiography in less than 150 words. Think you can write a good cover letter in four paragraphs?

During your job search you will encounter several opportunities to write. Everything you send out during this process has the power to cast you in a positive or negative light. You will be evaluated on many things, and well-written correspondence can be a decisive factor in your employment. It is your chance to make a good impression, demonstrate your writing skills, and convey your enthusiasm for the position or company. If you fail to represent yourself well in writing (even when it's "just an e-mail"), you have given the employer a reason to choose someone else. Because cover letters, just like résumés, are so important to the job search, you will see hundreds of books and Web sites on the subject. And once again you're going to find all sorts of conflicting advice: cover letters should be just two or three sentences to introduce your résumé, cover letters should be at

least three paragraphs but never more than one page, cover letters are completely unnecessary, and so on. In this chapter, we're going to cover the basics of good business writing and provide you with several illustrations to use as starting points for creating your own brilliant letters. And just as was recommended in Chapter 8, you will want to seek examples of good cover letters and other business writing from Web sites and books, and you will want to enlist someone to critique your letters.

No matter what career field you're considering, good writing will not only help you get the job, it will also help you keep the job and get faster promotions. That's a rather bold statement: I can hear some of you saying "Wait a minute. I'm going to be a _____. I'm not being hired for my writing ability." And you may be right. But do you think you might have to send an e-mail at some point to your supervisor? Is there a chance you will need to craft a letter to sell a product or your services? Do you dream of becoming an entrepreneur and developing your own business? No matter what field you're in, you will write; and because so few people take the time or energy to hone the craft, good writers easily stand out from the competition. And good writing will serve you throughout your career.

Want one more reason for developing strong writing skills? *Money*. Good writing skills are consistently one of the most sought-after skills by employers. The employee who can write a great memo, send the perfectly composed e-mail, write grants that result in funding, or write the perfect proposal will stand out for promotion every time. In fact, even now you're about to be "paid" for your ability to write a good cover letter and other business correspondence by landing a job, internship, or a volunteer opportunity that will lead to something better in the future.

For years you've been writing to please your teachers or professors with the hoped-for result of an A. Some of you have perfected this skill; others would prefer to avoid it and have mastered the art of finding courses that require tests rather than papers. If you haven't enjoyed academic writing, the good news is that the type of writing you'll be doing for the job search differs from the writing that professors have expected. Business writing is generally more direct and easier to write. If you're a strong academic writer, you will find that you can adapt your style quickly. The basic rules of good writing

apply everywhere, but business writing (the term we're going to use for the kind of writing you'll be doing to land a job) is a new skill even for experienced A writers.

It's a myth that writing is some kind of natural gift bestowed upon only certain people. Sure, not all of us can write like Jane Austen or Maya Angelou, but good basic writing skills can be developed and learned by anyone. So if you're still in school and you've been avoiding those writing-intensive courses, consider taking one. If that's too intense, take a creative writing course that allows you to write about your interests, or a workshop on journaling or blogging, because practice and feedback from your professor or facilitator will be invaluable to your goal of becoming a better writer. Some colleges even offer business writing courses that would be a great place for you to practice your technique. If you're out of school, there are still lots of options for improving your writing skills, from getting a book on business writing to taking a Web-based writing class. Even your local bookstore might host writing groups where you could practice your writing and have it critiqued by fellow writers. And by the way, because good writing is good writing, you don't always have to take a business writing workshop or course if that doesn't sound appealing. Learning to write science fiction, creative nonfiction, mysteries, poems, or other forms of writing will also develop your business writing skills.

One of the common challenges for students accustomed to writing five-hundred-word essays or twenty-page research papers is the myth that the longer a piece of writing is, the better it is. Good writing isn't about length. It's about covering the subject and then stopping. An apocryphal story about Ernest Hemingway places him in a bar where he bet someone that he could write the shortest short story ever written. Supposedly he won the bet by writing a six-word story on a napkin:

"For Sale. Baby shoes. Never worn."

Now, that's not exactly a mood lifter and arguably Mr. Hemingway would have benefited from some of that positive mindset in Chapter 3, but in six words he beautifully encapsulated character, plot, and story. You can picture it, can't you, and fill in the details yourself?

Right now many of you are well versed in academic writing. And that's good because academic and business writing have many characteristics in common. Good academic and business writers strive for clarity, know their purpose for writing, know their audience and write accordingly, organize their writing in a logical manner, and use the amount of space needed to adequately cover their points. Both types of writing have three key elements: format, style, and content. The table below illustrates some of the differences and similarities between academic and business writing:

KEY CONSIDERATIONS		
	ACADEMIC WRITING	BUSINESS WRITING
Audience	Faculty; well educated and knowledgeable about subject	General; education varies; sometimes unknown
Subject	Topic appealing to academic world, such as humanities, history, and so on	Topic appropriate to workplace needs; job finding, promotion, informative memos, and so on
Expected length	Usually lengthy; three-plus pages	Minimal; one to two pages
Tone/Style	Academic, formal, learned; focus is on research/theories	Attention getting, professional, businesslike straightforward, sales oriented
Vocabulary	Academic, formal, technical, specialized	Short words/short sentences. Can be technical or specialized, but must be clear and to the point
Use of References	Bibliography; sources carefully citations	Simple references—no formal bibliography, less formal citation
Purpose	To inform, advance, and demonstrate knowledge, research and writing skills	To inform and inspire the reader to take action, to sell a product or an idea

In this chapter we're going to focus on the cover letter, the key piece of job-hunting correspondence. We will briefly discuss other correspondence in the job search process, but the writing knowledge you acquire when crafting a cover letter can be easily transferred to other documents. You are going to use a system for developing your cover letter that will help you avoid writer's block and keep your letter interesting and focused. You will also learn to avoid the five fatal errors that can ruin your chances of getting a job: a lack of focus in your writing, poor sentence structure and/or bad grammar, misspelled words or typographical errors, an inappropriate style (too casual or academic), and a failure to focus on the reader's interests and needs.

PREPARING TO WRITE

Your cover letter and other correspondence (including e-mails) related to the job search are a part of your marketing campaign. A good marketing campaign sells the product. Have you ever stood in the grocery staring at the myriad toothpastes available, unable to make a decision because there are just too many? Do I want the whitening or the fluoride or the one with the little speckles or the one that says it has breath freshener? Well, while no one is comparing you to a tube of toothpaste, you *are* selling yourself to an employer who likely has many candidates to choose from, and is sometimes just as confused and overwhelmed as you are in the toothpaste aisle. So it's your responsibility to make sure they consider you first.

A good marketing campaign is designed to connect you to your future employer by establishing a relationship that will lead to a personal interview and a job offer. Other aspects of your marketing campaign include your résumé, your interview technique, and any portfolio of work you've compiled related to your chosen profession. A well-executed marketing campaign can place you miles ahead of the other individuals seeking the same position. With your marketing campaign, you control what is said. You can tell the employer only what you want them to know about you by selecting the most important and relevant aspects of your background.

As you prepare to write your letter, you can expect to spend about one-third of your time *planning* your writing, one-third *writing*, and one-third *rewriting and editing*. You will need space and time to write these documents, so find a place where you can focus and won't be disturbed. You need to clear all the clutter from your mind—this is not the time to make that to-do list or help your roommate find his or her lost shirt. Try sitting still and breathing for a few minutes before you begin. For inspiration, try checking your career center's Web site first and read a few of the sample cover letters to get the general gist of what you'll be writing. *Just don't copy the sentences verbatim*. Don't worry; the letter you write will be equally good or, more likely, even better.

In the next section of this chapter you will learn a series of guidelines to help you develop the best possible letter. Stay within the guidelines as appropriate, but remember that your letter is the best place to demonstrate your less tangible strengths, such as teamwork or detail orientation. Develop your own style and let your personality shine through, always keeping in mind the line between creativity and crazytivity discussed in Chapter 8. And just as recommended with your résumé, bring your letter to your career center or writing center for review. If you don't have access to a career center, let several friends read it and critique it for you.

Before we move to the letter-writing process, the issue of marketing or selling brings up a common concern among students and recent graduates: How do you sell yourself when you're not even sure you want the customer to buy you? That is, how do you write a compelling letter when you don't know if this is *the* job—the one you really want? Back to chaos theory: focus on what you know, what you don't know, and what you need to learn. Right now you probably don't know enough to know whether it is *the* job. And you probably won't until you do the interview. The great psychologist Alfred Adler had a wonderful phrase for people who weren't sure about something. He would say "act as if" you're sure—in other words, sort of a fake-it-till-you-make-it theory. Because you won't know if this is *the* job without more information, the best way to get that information is to "act as if" it is and move forward. If at any point in the process you discover it's not for you (whether it's the

moment you upload your résumé and cover letter to their Web site or ten years after you've been working for the organization), you can always change plans. Right now your goal is to get the interview. During the first interview you will be better able to determine if you might be a good match and during a longer second interview at the site you'll have a much better idea. So let's get started.

The aim of marketing is to know and understand the customer so well the product or service fits him and sells itself.

—PETER DRUCKER

When conducting interviews for a pharmaceutical sales position, one recruiter hands the students a pen and says, "Sell me that pen." It is an anxiety-provoking moment for the students, but it is a good test of how quick they are on their feet and whether they have any feel for the selling game. After the interview, the recruiter shares with students the three basic ways to sell a product: tout its features, tout its benefits, or put the pen down and ask questions to help you understand your customer so that you can sell more effectively by tailoring your sales pitch to his or her needs. In a résumé you are generally limited to the first two aspects of selling: your features and your benefits, although you can focus those features and benefits to fit what the employer is seeking. In your letter you have the opportunity to develop the third and most powerful element of selling: establishing or developing a relationship with the reader. Let's examine those three methods of selling and how they apply to your marketing campaign.

➤ **Features** are the basic characteristics that define you. They tend to be hard facts or data easily observed or quantified. Features appeal to logic because they provide tangible evidence of accomplishment. Your features might include your major, your GPA, your job or volunteer experiences, and so on.

➤ **Benefits** are less tangible and are more likely to be your "soft" skills, the special talents and features you bring to a job, such as hard working or team player. You already discovered many of your benefits when you did the Wandering Map and identified your strongest mindsets. Benefits appeal to emotion and logic, particularly if you can back up your statements of talent with examples.

While both of these selling points are necessary, in order to use them effectively the third aspect of sales must come into play: What is your potential employer seeking and how can you build rapport and demonstrate that you fulfill that need?

⇒ **Asking appropriate questions** might seem more applicable to an interview than a cover letter, but as you write your letter, answering certain unasked questions will help you frame your correspondence in a way that will state your qualifications, demonstrate your knowledge of the company and the position, and address any potential concerns. Extend your research, if necessary, to find answers to the following questions about the cover letter you're preparing to write:

- To whom am I writing? Do I have a specific name and address?
- What action am I hoping this person will take?
- How do my features and benefits fit and support the position, the organization, and/or the career field?
- What features and benefits should I include/exclude from the letter?
- How knowledgeable is this person likely to be about my features? For instance, will she or he already know a lot about my major, or will I need to include a line or two explaining the connection between my major and the position or industry?
- Why do I want to work for this employer and how can I convey my knowledge and understanding of the position or the field?
- How am I connected geographically to this opportunity?
- What else does this person need to know about me?

Writing your letters with these three key sales elements in mind will help you build rapport with the reader and establish your credibility. As in your résumé, you want to develop brief short stories that convey a lot of information in one or two sentences. The reader will know that you have done your research because you will be showing (rather than telling) the reader through your stories and examples.

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor. —ANNE LAMOTT

Following the five-step method presented below will help you avoid the form letter look that is generally rejected by employers and reviewers, and it also has an added benefit: it is designed to eliminate, or greatly reduce, writer's block. Most students sit down to write their cover letters, and fully aware of the importance of the task, immediately freeze. You stare at the blank piece of paper waiting for the inspiration to start your letter. The five-step process will guide you through your letter in a manner that will destroy the usual causes of writer's block: the lack of a great opening line, not knowing what information to include, the fear that you will be rejected, and the need to be perfect. You can write the opening line later; in fact, it will likely come to you without effort once you're in the middle of writing your letter.

Certain characteristics are common to all good letters, and for this reason a sample letter is presented. You may not agree with the example. In fact, you may think it's terrible and that you wouldn't write like that. Actually, that's the point. Writers have to write in their style, not someone else's, and as long as you're following the basic guidelines, you'll produce a document that represents you in the best possible light.

FIVE-STEP PROCESS FOR CRAFTING LETTERS

I. ESTABLISH YOUR AUDIENCE AND YOUR REASON FOR WRITING.

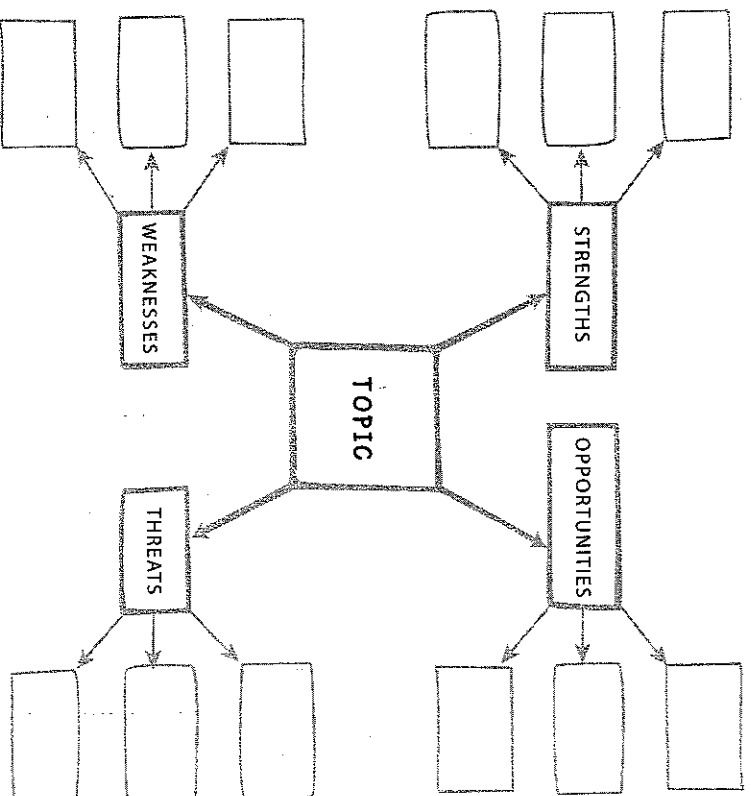
If you already answered the questions on page 230, you won't need to spend as much time in this step. Consider how formal or informal your writing style needs to be. Are you writing to someone you've never met? Then your style will be more formal. To an alumnus you met recently? Then you can be less formal, while still remaining professional. The important component in this step is recognizing what your audience is expecting from you and getting their attention from the first line on. You want to persuade the employer to want to speak with you. If you're writing a cover letter, you will likely establish your reason for writing in the opening line, which is designed to hook the reader and motivate him or her to keep reading.

For now, though, *don't write anything*. The goal in this stage is to know your audience well so that you keep their point of view in mind as you follow the next four steps.

2. SWOT MAP IT

Got another blank piece of paper handy? In this step you're going to brainstorm your ideas for your cover letter by combining two techniques: a SWOT analysis briefly mentioned in Chapter 3 under strategic mindsets and the mapping skills you've developed throughout the system. This technique can be used to write a specific letter for a specific job, or to draft a generic cover letter you can modify later when you see a position that appeals to you. There's only one rule: you must start with one mindset—that of the employer. Remember, it's not "What do I want to say?" It's "What does the employer need to know or want to hear?" Just like your other maps, creating a SWOT Map is fairly easy:

- Are you directing your letter to a specific job opening? Then start by placing the job title in the center of the page and draw a circle or rectangle around it. If you're writing a generic letter, put the general field or type of job you're seeking in the center.
- Draw four rectangles or circles around the center and label them with the following words: *Strengths*, *Weaknesses*, *Opportunities*, and *Threats*. As you focus on each of these areas, start drawing lines from their boxes with examples that demonstrate your connection to the position and/or the ways you can overcome a discrepancy between you and their ideal candidate:
 - *Strengths* refers to your features and benefits as they apply to the position you're seeking. Why are you the best candidate? What do you want the employer to know about you in particular? What three skills or talents do you want to be sure to mention?
 - *Opportunities* refers to the learning opportunities and other benefits you see about this job. Is this a place where you'd really like to work? What is appealing about it? Is there an opportunity for you to use and build your skills and/or provide a service? Does the organization focus on a longtime interest of yours? Are there opportunities for growth and challenge?
 - *Weaknesses* refers to what you might be lacking from the point of view of the organization. For instance, the



advertisement might say they're seeking an advertising major. And there you sit with your American studies major. What arguments do you plan to use to overcome their resistance? What could you say about your American studies major that would interest an advertising firm? Keep the employer's point of view in mind.

- *Threats* is kind of a scary word. While no one is threatening you, the truth is there are outside factors that could influence your situation. Who might be your competition for the position? In the example above, a threat might be those pesky advertising majors who tend to apply for advertising jobs. Another threat might be the economy. How hard is it to get a position in this field or company? Another threat could be your geographic location: Are you living in Utah and applying for a job in Atlanta? How do you explain that to an employer? If they assume their ideal candidates already live in Atlanta, how do you overcome their reluctance to consider you? (Hint: Do you have relatives or other connections to the area? Are you going to be in Atlanta and available for an interview at no cost to the employer? Mention that.)

Let's follow Kayla, a recent college graduate who is currently working at a coffee shop in Oregon, through this SWOT-mapping process. She's going to apply for a position in a different geographic area that is not related to her major.

Kayla graduated from college with a music major and an English minor. She has always been interested in environmental issues and found an interesting job posting for a field associate with an environmental organization in California. According to the job posting, she would need to be knowledgeable about environmental issues, including global warming, clean water and air, energy policies, and so on. In addition to surveying the general public about attitudes toward environmental concerns and acquiring signatures for petitions, the field associate would work with local media to promote environmental causes and increase awareness of issues. The position requires that the individual be outgoing, have an understanding of local and statewide politics, be familiar with sales or customer service and/or fund-raising, and have a bachelor's degree, preferably in environmental science. Preferred experience includes grant writing and managing staff. Applicants are asked to submit their cover letters and résumés directly to the agency via e-mail. To preserve the environment, no paper-based applications will be accepted.

Kayla knows she could do this job, but she's concerned that employers won't look past her major when they see her résumé. She knows she needs to immediately overcome some reservations an employer might have. Her SWOT map is on pages 236–37.

3. CREATE SAMPLE SENTENCES AND POSSIBLE PARAGRAPHS

Now that you've outlined the pluses and minuses of your candidacy for the position, you're ready to start developing your ideas into sentences. Do not try to write the full letter yet. Use your SWOT Map information to identify the key points (strengths, experiences, education) you want to emphasize, and try writing some sentences or phrases around them. Create a list of the sentences you might use in no particular order. What do you most want the reader to know? Or more important, what does the employer need to know about you? Can you articulate that information in a sentence or paragraph? Refer to your original source (the position announcement or whatever) as necessary. Keep the tone of your sentences positive and natural. You want your letter to be specific and persuasive. Presenting challenging or novel thoughts will motivate the reader to meet you, but always be careful to avoid crazytivity.

Here are some suggestions for writing your sentences:

- ➔ Use an active voice and focus on action verbs.
 - Write "As chairperson, I organized..." not "The event was organized by..."
- ➔ Connect your experiences to the position you're seeking, establishing mutual interests or similarities between your background and the position or industry:
 - "During my three years as a night desk clerk for Hilton Hotels, I learned the importance of good customer relations. I believe my knowledge prepares me for your sales division because..."
 - "Your job description indicates you are seeking someone with leadership potential. As captain of the soccer team, I developed a strong team spirit by..."

- "In my philosophy course work, I used the same logical and analytic thinking a good consultant uses when..."
 - "I led a Boy Scout troop throughout my four years of college. To fund troop activities, I created a list of twenty prominent corporations in the area and met with each of their public relations staff. Not only did I raise enough money to fund a week-long camping trip for the boys, I acquired interesting observations about the public relations field..."
 - "My history major emphasized the importance of precise research combined with concise communication of knowledge and information. I would use these skills to research your product line to develop the best possible sales presentations for you."
- ➔ Back up what you say with evidence.
- "Your advertisement stated that you're looking for a hard worker who is willing to 'go the extra mile.'" This past year, in addition to maintaining a B+ average as a full-time student, I worked twenty hours..."
- ➔ Expand on your résumé by providing more depth about an experience or new information.
- "One of the experiences I list on my résumé is as a server at Pizza Shack. While on the surface that position seems uninteresting, in reality I learned valuable lessons about business management when I served as the manager two evenings per week. During that time I was particularly challenged by..."

Here are some of the sentences Kayla is working on (and remember, these are just drafts and ideas that she may or may not use in her final letter):

On the surface, a music major might not seem particularly relevant for an environmental position. But through my major I have developed an analytic mindset that helps me take apart and fully understand an issue, an ability to easily perform in front of people, and a focus on minute details, not to mention the dedication and commitment needed to learn an instrument at a professional level.

I managed a busy schedule of classes, performances, and practices, but still found time to volunteer for a cause I consider imperative in today's society: the environment.

I was required to take a science course and specifically chose environmental science due to my interest in acquiring more understanding of the issue. We studied not only the science of global warming and the management of natural resources, but also the political forces which have an impact on those issues.

I am originally from the region of California where your office is located. I am quite familiar with the environmental policies of the politicians in the area as well as the way the citizens have voted on environmental issues in recent elections.

Now it's your turn. See if you can craft some sentences that might ultimately fit into your cover letter.

4. WRITE A FAST DRAFT

I wanted to write "very fast," but the voice of my ninth grade English teacher still haunts me: "You mean as opposed to 'unvery'?" Fast writing is a common and successful exercise for a first draft because it clears away the cobwebs and heightens your focus. See if you can write the letter in less than ten minutes.

Sit down at your computer or grab your pen and notebook and just write and write and write. Try using the sentences you've already developed or write new ones. Don't try to make it perfect; it's not supposed to be. It's a draft. Let it be as bad as any draft can be. If you can't think of an opening line, skip it. Write the middle of the letter first if that works best for you. Write the closing line first. You'll clean it up later. The goal now is to get everything down on the paper. Ready? Set? GO!

See Kayla's first draft on page 240. You'll note that it's too long, contains some misspelled words, and isn't all that well organized or styled. But she has captured a lot of the information she will use in her final letter, and that's the point of a first draft.

Dear _____

I read your job announcement for a Field Associate position in Santa Barbara, California and I would like to apply. I read your website and I was particularly impressed with the work you've done to save national forests and strengthening the clean water act. I am originally from Santa Barbara and I believe that my background in environmental issues and my knowledge of the politics of the region could be valuable in your fund-raising and advocacy efforts.

I am a hard worker and understand the importance of dedication to an important cause. As a musician, I had to be very dedicated to my craft, and devoted numerous hours to practicing and perfecting my skills. In addition to managing a busy schedule of classes, performances and practices, but still found time to volunteer for a cause I consider imperative in today's society: the environment. I also worked in a department store where I developed my skills of persuasion. I received an award for outstanding sales person because I increased sales in my department (juniorwear) by 20% in one month.

The first thing you will likely notice on my resume is that I'm a music major. On the surface, a music major might not seem particularly relevant for an environmental position. But through my major I have developed an analytic mindset which helps me take apart and fully understand an issue, an ability to easily perform in front of people, and focus on minute details, not to mention the dedication and commitment needed to learn an instrument at a professional level.

I was required to take a science course and specifically chose Environmental Science due to my interest in acquiring more understanding of the issue. We studied not only the science of global warming and the management of natural resources, but also the political forces which have an impact on those issues.

As I mentioned, I am originally from the region of California where your office is located. I am quite familiar with the environmental policies of the politicians in the area as well as the way the citizens have voted on environmental issues in recent elections. I hope you will consider my resume and experience. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this important opportunity.

5. EDIT AND PROOFREAD IT RUTHLESSLY

Congratulations! You've finished the hardest part: getting that first draft down on the paper. Now it's all about refining it: seeing what works and changing what doesn't. Someone once said that all good writing is rewriting, and one of the best ways to start rewriting is to read your letter out loud. The minute you stumble over a phrase or something doesn't flow smoothly, chances are you need to make a change. Most people find their first draft starts falling apart after about the fifth word (!). Not to worry. You're going to turn your draft into a better draft and then to the best final copy you can write. Notice you haven't seen the word *perfect*. There is no perfect letter—like résumés, reviews of letters are based on opinions, not hard facts. One person's "perfect" is another person's "OK." Edit and organize your letter now, using some of the suggestions below. Once you've worked it up to the better draft stage, get other people's opinions. Ask your friends to read your letter (or try reading it aloud to your friends). If you're still in college, ask someone at the career center to review it with you.

- Cover letters are generally three to five paragraphs, but you can break this rule if you have a good reason, and have carefully considered your audience.
 - In the first paragraph connect yourself with the reader by explaining what you're applying for, how you heard about the job opening, and some sort of indication as to how/why you are qualified for the position or they should consider you for it.
 - The middle paragraphs allow you to expand on your résumé and bring up the "soft" skills that you couldn't explicitly state in your résumé such as teamwork or your personality. Use the sentences you developed in the third stage, keeping brevity in mind and distilling your letter to the most important information of interest to the reader. Remember, your reader has little time to devote to your document (unlike a professor or teaching assistant who actively reads your papers), so get to the point.
 - The final paragraph closes your letter with an indication of what action will be taken. You will need to know your field to determine the best close. In general, the more sales, marketing, or business oriented the position, the more appropriate it is to end with the action you will be taking.

- With government, nonprofit, or educational fields you can often get away with a less assertive close. In education, for example, it's common to write something like, "I look forward to hearing from you..."

- In the business arena the previous ending would be less acceptable. There you would close with a more assertive, "I will contact your office in one week to discuss the opportunities in greater detail." (And by the way, take that action. If you say you're going to contact them, do it.)
- If you're going through your on-campus recruiting program, an appropriate close would likely be, "I look forward to having the opportunity to interview with you when you visit..."

- ➔ Vary the openings of your sentences. Make sure each sentence doesn't begin with *I* or another common opening.

- ➔ Remove any fluffy language. Just like résumé guides, many cover letter guides recommend fluffy phrases. You have way too much substance at this point to waste your time writing phrases like

- "I am looking for a position in a growth-oriented company that will utilize my many skills."
- "I am a team player who enjoys hard work. Don't hesitate to contact me."
- "I am seeking a position in a well-known company such as yours."
- "It is for this reason that I am hopeful you will consider me for this position."
- "I believe I would be a strong asset because I have exceptional communication skills."

- ➔ Don't brag, deprecate yourself, complain, or appeal to sympathy.

- "You'd be lucky to have me working for you."
- "Don't miss this opportunity to interview me."
- "Although I don't have any experience in your field..."
- "I know that this letter is late, but..."

- ➔ "I didn't major in business, but..."

- ➔ This probably goes without saying, but don't exaggerate or lie. If you're caught, you could lose your job and your reputation.

FORMATTING YOUR LETTER

So your content is strong and you've created the best possible document to market yourself to employers. Let's make sure you don't ruin those beautifully turned phrases with poor formatting. Here's what you need to know about formatting a business letter, whether you're sending a paper copy or uploading an electronic version.

1. If you're printing the letter, always use good quality white, gray, or cream-colored 8½ by 11 bond paper. Use the same paper to print your résumé. Do not print the final letter or résumé on the typical paper found in most copies.
2. When possible, address the recipient by name, and use the appropriate courtesy title: Mr., Ms., Dr., and so on. Do not use "Dear Sir or Madam" or, worse yet, "Dear Sir" or "Gentlemen." Even if the job announcement doesn't show a name, a little detective work on the Internet can often uncover it. Lacking that, use "To Whom It May Concern" as an absolute last resort.
3. Proofread. Repeat. Let someone else read it. Proofread again.
4. Copy traditional business letter guidelines (headings, locations of dates, spacing, and so on) from the sample letter in this book and/or on your career center's Web site.

You'll find Kayla's final cover letter, which she sent via e-mail, on the next page. Remember, this is just a sample letter and not intended to be the only style of letter acceptable to employers. You should visit your career center's Web page (even if you've graduated) to see if they recommend a different style or have other suggestions you might find helpful.

August 10, 2009

Ms. Susan Smith
Employment Manager
Environmental Agency
10500 East Main Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93102
s.smith@email.net

Dear Ms. Smith:

I was pleased to discover the field associate position listed on your Web site recently. As a former resident of the Santa Barbara area with a deep concern for the environment, I am particularly impressed with the work your agency has done to save state forests and strengthen the Clean Water Act. I would like to be part of the team that assists you in your efforts, and I believe I have the fund-raising and advocacy skills you are seeking.

I worked in sales throughout my college years while pursuing a challenging and time-intensive major (music), but I always found time to demonstrate my concern for the environment. I received an A in the two-semester environmental science class I took in college and volunteered for numerous environmental projects, doing everything from highway cleanup to canvassing and fund-raising to protesting at the state capital when it appeared that much-needed environmental legislation might not pass.

I suspect you do not often receive applications from music majors, but it is my music background that actually honed many of the skills I would use at Environmental Agency. I developed my strong analytic skills through music theory classes, my dogged determination and attention to detail through musicless practicing and rehearsing, and my communication skills through performances and presentations.

As requested, I have attached a copy of my résumé. I will be in the Santa Barbara area the week of September 7-14 and would like to arrange a meeting if that would be convenient for you. I will contact your agency within the next week to confirm that you received this e-mail. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Kayla Jones

100 Pine Street

Portland, OR 97212

kaylajones@email.com

Cell: 503-555-5555

Résumé attached as MS Word document

WISDOM BUILDERS

1. COVER LETTER HAIKU

One fun way to prepare to write your cover letter is to write it as a haiku, an ancient Japanese form of poetry consisting of exactly seventeen syllables. That sounds a little odd for a cover letter, but the structure of haiku requires you to be succinct and make every word count. In haiku, the first line has five syllables, the second has seven syllables, and the third five syllables. Here are some samples:

Nursing Position

Lifelong dream to heal
Tough, smart, caring hard-worker
How can I serve you?

Social Worker in Youth Program

Adolescents rock.
I enjoy challenge and growth.
Hire me to change them.

Event Planner

Details. Beauty. Class.
Organized. Experienced.
Work wonders. Call me.

Investment Banker

Money. More Money.
Never stop working for you.
Bottom-line results.

If you had to distill your cover letter to these essentials words, what would you include?

2. CONSTRUCT A GOOD HOOK FOR YOUR COVER LETTER

You will want to open your letter with a good hook. A good hook keeps you reading; a bad hook doesn't. Did you ever think about using your favorite authors as inspiration for your writing? Now, don't get all stressed and think you have to be John Grisham or James Baldwin to come up with that perfect opening line. You just need to create an opening sentence that is interesting to the reader and conveys necessary information. Try to avoid the obvious "I am a senior at..." And don't cross over the line into crazy territory with a silly or weird opening like quoting a famous author ("It was the best of times, the worst of times...") or writing "You don't know it yet, but you have just discovered your best employee."

If you received the reader's name from a mutual friend or contact, mention it. Mention where you heard or read about the job opening.

- "Your advertisement in the *New York Times* captured my attention for two reasons..."
- "My sociology professor, Dr. Sara Jenkins, suggested I contact you regarding..."
- "While preparing an economic analysis for the United Way program in San Francisco, I..."
- "The *Washington Post* recently reported that Apple is opening a new facility in..."

One source of inspiration could be your favorite author. Think about your favorite writers and stories and how their opening lines hooked you. Here are the opening lines of some of my favorite books and writers. It may just be that their opening lines kept me reading and taught me something about writing.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

—JANE AUSTEN, *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

My wound is geography. It is also my anchorage, my port of call.

—PAT CONROY, *THE PRINCE OF TIDES*

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. "Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *THE GREAT GATSBY*

I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice—not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God, I am a Christian because of Owen Meany.

—JOHN IRVING, *A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY*

The very first thing I tell my new students on the first day of a workshop is that good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are. Sheep like do not seem to share this longing, which is one reason they write so very little.

—ANNE LAMOTT, *BIRD BY BIRD*

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

—J. D. SALINGER, *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*

3. FOUR HOT TIPS FOR CREATING THE BEST RESPONSE TO A JOB POSTING

1. READ THE AD CAREFULLY, UNDERLINING KEYWORDS, SKILLS, OR POINTS

Immediately Google the organization to learn as much as you can before you respond. A ten-minute Internet search should give you the information you need to write your letter. Note how the position is described, not just its title. Assume that the duties mentioned first are the most important and focus your letter accordingly, linking your strengths to them.

2. NOTE THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE POSITION

Create a SWOT Map to analyze your relationship to the position. If your qualifications don't match exactly, explain why you might still be qualified for the position. Be positive and don't lead with "Although I'm not a business major, . . ." but rather with "Through my _____ major I acquired many of the skills you are seeking, including . . ."

3. FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONTACTING THE ORGANIZATION CAREFULLY

If the advertisement requests three letters of recommendation, send three letters. If it says "no phone calls," don't call. Failures to follow directions could cost you the interview. Spell all names correctly, including the name of the organization.

4. INCLUDE ALL REQUESTED INFORMATION

Sometimes employers will ask for more than your résumé. They may want a writing sample, letters of reference, or more specific information, such as your salary requirements. Always include all requested items, including a salary requirement. The salary requirement is always a challenge: shoot too high and they won't interview you; shoot too low and you might not earn what you deserve. Because it is likely that this is your first or second professional job, and you don't have a long track record of professional compensation, simply state that fact in your letter, and if you want, indicate the general range of salary for the field. You will need to research this (try the Occupational Outlook Handbook at <http://www.bls.gov/OCO/>). For example: "Salary is not my prime consideration for this position and I am willing to consider a reasonable offer. My understanding is that salaries in this field tend to range from _____ to _____, which seems to be an appropriate compensation range."

4. RESOURCES TO DEVELOP YOUR WRITING SKILLS

Here are some of my favorite books on writing. While they are not specifically related to the job search, their ideas and exercises will help you improve your writing for all purposes. They will also help you deal with writer's block and learn to think like a writer.

The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron

The Right to Write by Julia Cameron

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft by Stephen King

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamont

Write Mind by Eric Maisel

Writing from the Inside Out by Dennis Palumbo

One Continuous Mistake by Gail Sher

The Elements of Style by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White

A FINAL QUESTION

What could you do in the next twenty-four hours to begin crafting your best possible cover letter?
