Cover letters for Librarians: Your first (and possibly only) chance to make a good first impression

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A lot of new librarians ask me for the inside scoop on the hiring process: What do I really look for in an applicant? How do I go about figuring out the right person for the job?

Everyone in a hiring position – be they hiring managers or search committee members -- has a different approach at looking at job applicants. Many look at the resume first, some prefer the application form, but I look at the cover letter first. I love cover letters because I think they tell me more about the applicant than a resume or application. Cover letters have more personality. They reveal if the applicant can communicate effectively. And even more than that – call it lazy or call it efficient - if I’m digging through a pile of applications, the cover letter can be a quicker way of weeding the applicant pool than reading list after list of previous jobs and degrees. In other words, your cover letter is important!

First, let me qualify my statements. While I am a hiring manager, I am not a job application expert. I can only tell you what I look for myself. But I have conferred with some colleagues about this. Regardless of whether they share my affinity for looking at cover letters first, I find we are much on the same page about what we think is important in a cover letter. That said, following are my thoughts:

Your cover letter is your chance to sell yourself to me.  DON'T WASTE IT! A generic “here’s my application” cover letter doesn’t tell me anything about you. Well, maybe that you’re not very creative. Worse that that, it tells me that you’re not smart about taking this opportunity to sell yourself. From my point of view, part of your job as a librarian is to sell patrons and administrators on library services. If you’re not going to sell yourself when you’re trying to get a job, I assume that neither are you going to seek opportunities to effectively sell the library if you get the job. Generic letter = bottom of the pile, meaning I might come back to your application if I don’t find someone else better first.

Your cover letter is not your autobiography.  I get tired of cover letters that are a litany of the person’s life. I do not want to know about how you kept the church nursery in high school unless it has something to do with the job at hand. I don’t even care about the details of your 20 years cataloging if I’m not hiring a cataloger. With cover letters like that, I don’t read past one page.

Do not make your cover letter a prose version of your resume.  I mainly want to know what you’ve done that applies to this job.  Look at the job ad and see what qualifications the employer is seeking and tailor the cover letter to those things.  Be concise – less than a page if you can muster it -- and keep it relevant.  Highlight to me why you are qualified for this job.

Even better than highlighting your qualifications is to impress me with how well you’ve done what you’ve done.  For example, don’t just tell me you had reference duties in your internship.  Tell me how many people you helped and what types of resources you used.  Tell me what you LOVE about doing reference.  Tell me about something innovative you did that was adopted by other librarians at the institution.  Sifting through a pile of applications makes me tired and cranky.  Make yourself memorable and me think -- without my having to think too hard -- “This sounds like the right person for the job!”
But don't get too cocky. I’ve seen some cover letter advice that tells you to start with a punchy opening line. Maybe that works in the marketing world -- I don't know -- but I’m turned off by brash statements. Creativity is good, but a gentle, “I’m submitting these application materials for posting #777 as reference librarian at Georgia Perimeter College’s Alpharetta Center,” assures me we’re both talking about the same job. Then you can go on to tell me why you’re the best applicant for the job. But prove it to me, don’t conclude it for me. By all means, toot your own horn about your accomplishments, but if I run across a cocky line like, “Your search stops here!” Well, it does….right into the reject pile.

Grammar and punctuation, pu-leeze! Proper spelling and grammar are on every list of job-seeking tips, but I still get a significant number of cover letters with basic English errors -- not just one, but a bunch. I've had applicants misspell the words research, information, and even library! Spellcheck, friend-check, do what you have to do to make it perfect. I reason if you're not going to have good English in your cover letter, you're going to embarrass the heck out of the library with what you'll generate on a daily basis. And while you’re proofreading, be sure you have the right organization listed. I still chuckle about the cover letter that said the applicant couldn’t wait to work at another college! Librarians are supposed to be attentive to detail. Don’t blow it on a spelling error.

Tell me why you want this job. (This is the one most people miss!) Everybody wants a job, but why do you want this one?

In a recent article in Forbes magazine (see below for the link), George Brandt says there are only three true job interview questions:

1. Can you do the job?
2. Will you love the job?
3. Can we tolerate working with you?

As I read cover letters, I am not just considering qualifications, I am also thinking about goodness of fit: Will I enjoy working with this person and will they be happy enough in the job to stick around for a while? Hiring and training a new employee is an investment in time and energy. It’s frustrating to me as an employer to spend a lot of time training new employees and then, just when they're going strong, they leave for a job elsewhere. The only thing worse is hiring someone that ends up driving me nuts on a daily basis and then they never leave!

My personal favorite goodness-of-fit example was when the candidate wrote that she loved working in a small library within a larger organization. She explained that one gets to know the individual patrons at a small library, but the larger organization provided diverse opportunities for collaborating with colleagues. That statement said so much. One, I knew she was sincerely interested in the job because she had done her homework to find out about my library. It also told me that she knew the importance of relationship-building in libraries and that she enjoyed collaborating with colleagues. But most of all, it was a goodness-of-fit statement. Frankly, when I initially looked at this person’s impressive qualifications, I knew she was just what I needed, but I really afraid she was likely to leave my little library for a big university, but when I read those words, I knew she understood what my organization was about and was assured that she would be happy working there. And so I hired her. 😊