

# The Ladders®

The Most \$100k+ Jobs

RESUME

## Getting Your Cover Letter Noticed

Understanding your cover letter's electronic journey will give you an edge when matching wits with automated applicant tracking systems.

By Lisa Vaas

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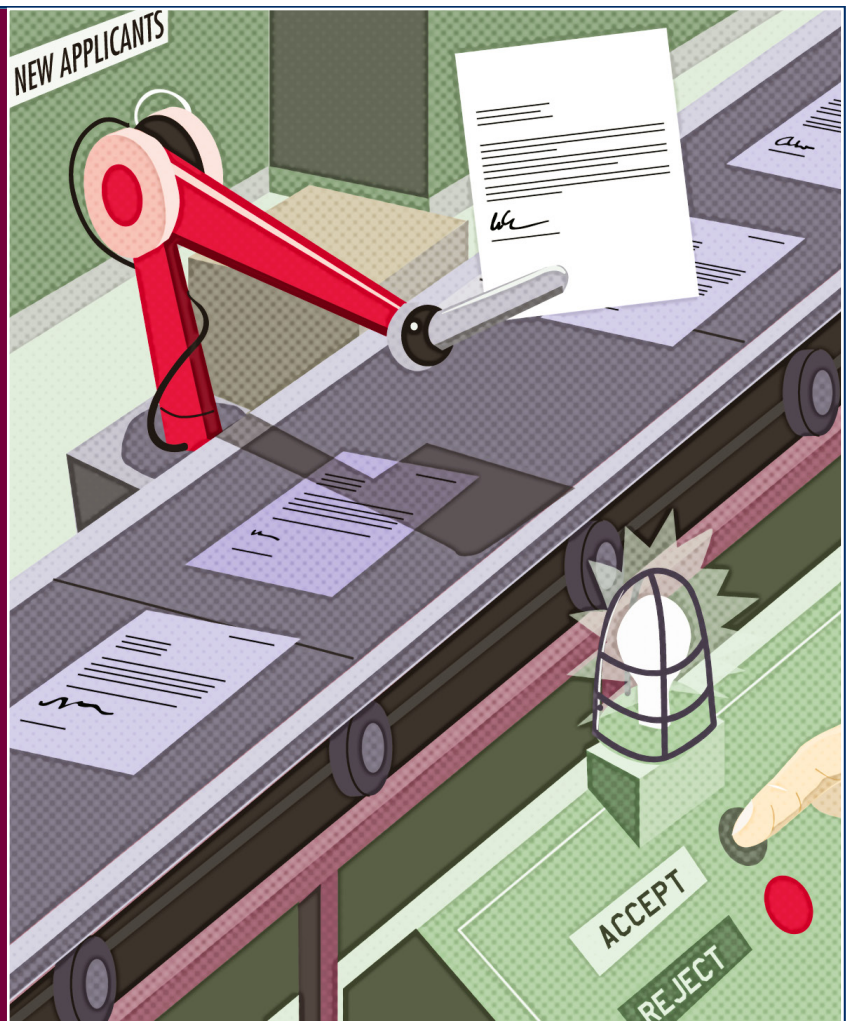


ILLUSTRATION: Chip Buchanan



### Manuscript vs. Machine

By Matthew Rothenberg, Editor-in-Chief, TheLadders.com

OVER THE PAST YEAR, TheLadders' editorial team has done extensive research into what exactly happens to your resume once you submit it.

A sign of the times: Whether it leaves your desk as an electronic file or an old-fashioned paper document, the chances are its first stop will be screening software known as an applicant tracking system (ATS). This ATS applies an unforgiving set of rules

to determine whether your qualifications match the requirements of the job; many distinguished candidates are eliminated from consideration before human eyes ever see their bona fides.

In this era of software screeners, how does your cover letter make the cut?

To answer that question, reporter Lisa Vaas spoke with resume writers, ATS vendors and HR pros. Bottom line: Not every computerized or human screener pays attention to

cover letters, but any applicant worth her salt had better assume that letter will be screened. After all, executive career coach Phil Rosenberg reports that most hiring managers he surveyed had passed on candidates with great resumes because of their inadequate cover letters.

Cover letters may seem like small stuff, but sweating the small stuff could make the difference between making the cut or missing your chance. ■

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What did you think of this package? Got a story of your own to tell? Have ideas for future coverage? Please write Editor-in-Chief Matthew Rothenberg at [matthewr@theladders.com](mailto:matthewr@theladders.com).

## ▶ COVER LETTER

**I**F YOU'VE LOOKED FOR A JOB in the past few years, you're likely aware that employers are finding new ways to use resumes as screening tools. Web sites (TheLadders included) devote thousands of pages to discussing the best practices of resume writing. Meanwhile, a cottage industry has grown up around certified professional resume writers (CPRWs) who study the art and technique of producing a resume with the best chance of navigating the software and human readers who review and judge your document.

While experts talk less about cover letters, they must navigate the same course as your resume. If the sources are quiet on cover letters, do they matter anymore?

Yes, said CPRWs, ATS vendors and human-resource managers who handle the documents at both ends of the process.

Granted, your resume is center stage. Your cover letter may not be read at all, and it won't salvage a poor resume, but it must be crafted just as carefully to satisfy software algorithms and HR screeners.

The introduction of the ATS as a first link in the chain has changed everything about the writing process, say CPRWs and HR managers. Like your resume, your cover letter has little room for error and demands exacting attention to structure and usage of keywords.

To determine the best rules for writing a cover letter, TheLadders asked the experts how cover letters are handled throughout the process.

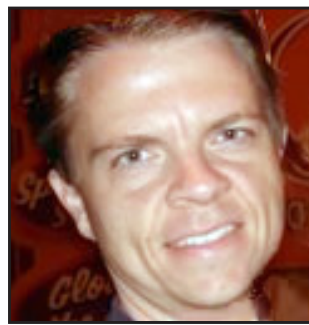
### Do you need a cover letter?

To start with, do you even need a cover letter?

Technology-wise, some ATSes treat cover letters as searchable text, the same as your resume; many don't. Human process-wise, however, it's the rare recruiter who even bothers to pass cover letters on to hiring managers.

But that doesn't mean that you should stop writing them. Cover letters are a concise way to communicate your value to a company, and some recruiters and hiring managers do use them to winnow candidates. They demonstrate your attention to detail and anticipation of the company's needs. Finally, small employers don't necessarily employ ATSes, meaning your cover letter will more likely be read by human eyes.

### How an ATS handles a cover letter



*Shackles*

Nathan Shackles is a sales manager for ApplicantStack, an ATS made by [Racarie Software](#) and one of the software programs that render cover letters as searchable text. Shackles said that, like many ATSes, the application accepts cover letters as text pasted into its online form, not as an attachment. Therefore, the application stores cover

letters with the resume as searchable text.

"I'd say this is fairly common, that cover letters are searchable," Shackles said. "Because often, people will describe technologies in their cover letters and not put them in their resumes, for whatever reason. That's the reason we search the cover letter as well."

## How to Write a Great Cover Letter

**Skip the "Dear Sir or Madam" and zero in on exactly how you're going to solve whatever problems the hiring company has.**

By Lisa Vaas

**D**O HIRING PROFESSIONALS even read cover letters for senior candidates anymore? Some say yes; some say no, they don't bother unless the resume in question has grabbed their attention.

The simple answer is that you should assume your resume will merit a look at your cover letter; always in-

clude one (either as a separate document or an e-mail that acts as one); and make it exceptional, so you stand out from the crowd.

### Dear who?

The salutation is your first chance to make contact with a hiring professional, but it's one spot where laziness

often wins out over due diligence. We're talking about the "Dear Sir or Madam" approach. What this generic salutation says isn't positive: Namely, that the author couldn't be bothered to find out the hiring manager's name.

Abby Kohut, president and staffing consultant at [Staffing Symphony](#), suggests job seekers can easily locate

From that vantage point, Shackles recommends that job seekers look at the cover letter as a way to put in additional skills and credentials to add additional searchable keywords that a company may have programmed in the ATS to identify candidates for a specific job posting.

### Your e-mail is the cover letter

Many ATSes, including ApplicantStack, also process resumes received via e-mail. In those cases, the ATS renders the content of your e-mail as the cover letter and assumes any attachment is your resume. Thus, when asked to e-mail a resume as an attachment, assume your e-mail content will be saved as a cover letter and write it accordingly.

On the flip side are ATSes that only process resumes, not cover letters. Tom Boyle is director of product strategy at one such ATS vendor, [SilkRoad Technology](#).

Most ATS programs update or create a job seeker's profile by uploading a resume; next, they cherry-pick information to parse and fill in the fields to create a profile within the ATS. While Boyle has seen ATS software parse "all sorts of resumes and formats," he noted that SilkRoad only renders cover letters as attachments and doesn't divide it up into fields.

That means the ATS doesn't render your cover letter as searchable text. Thus, finessing the cover to make it machine-friendly by seeding it with keywords won't influence your application's ranking with this type of ATS.

Once a cover letter has become an attachment, it's unlikely that it will be searched and processed like a resume, Boyle said,

given that the number of ATS programs that have the ability to search an attachment on a candidate's profile is "very small."

### How do humans process your cover letter?

What happens to your cover letter once it reaches human hands?



Rosenberg

David Couper, a career coach, said that the recruiters at most Fortune 500 companies don't even send him the cover letter, let alone scan it into an ATS.

His experience is backed up by research conducted by Phil Rosenberg, president of [reCareered](#), an executive career-coaching service. Over the past two years, Rosenberg has surveyed hundreds of HR managers and recruiters and interviewed management at the Top 10 job boards. He found that:

- Less than 10 percent of HR departments scan cover letters.
- Eighty percent of HR staff, hiring managers and recruiters read the resume first.
- Job boards don't keyword-search cover letters, only resumes.

However, don't count those cover letters out. According to the survey:

- Most hiring managers have denied interviews to candidates qualified by their resumes, but disqualified by additional information in their cover letters.

the right person online: "To find the name of the hiring manager, try searching on Google or LinkedIn," she said. "Even a good guess scores you points because it indicates that you tried harder than everyone else."



Kohut

### Why do you want to work here?

Kohut recommends that job applicants make sure to mention the name

of the company in the letter, followed by an explanation of why they're interested in working there. "Make sure that you really mean what you say," she said. "Recruiters have a way of sensing when you are being less than truthful. Our goal is to hire people who sincerely want to work at our company — it's the job of your cover letter to convince us."

Bombastic claims are just as bad as insincerity. Brooke Allen, a hiring manager at Maple Securities, said he hates it when job seekers claim

in their cover letters that they're his "best candidate."

"How can they know without evaluating all my candidates?" he asked.

You also need to make a sales pitch as to why the employer should want to work with you, Kohut said.

"Your letter should explain what you can do for your 'customer,' not what you are selling," she said. "The key is to give the reader a small glimpse into your background, which encourages

“Lead in with a hook, preferably a personal contact, to someone the recruiting manager knows or some specific information that relates to the company or industry.”

— David Couper

### Tailor the resume as well as the cover letter

Couper advises his clients that you just never know whether someone is going to read the cover letter and whether it will make or break your application. “I recommend that the job hunter matches the job posting and includes keywords,” he said. “I also suggest that you lead in with a hook, preferably a personal contact, to someone the recruiting manager knows or some specific information that relates to the company or industry. ... The cover (letter) is one of those items that you never know about but in the end you hope that it gets to someone — not a machine — and they read it.”

But this attention to customized cover letters may be missing the mark as far as achieving a high ATS ranking. Rosenberg noted that most candidates “put the majority of their customization (if any) in their application in a cover letter, using a largely static resume.”

Job seekers do that in the hope that the words on their resume “magically match the keywords a company’s HR department or recruiters are searching for in their prescreening

process,” he said. But the odds of matching keywords between a job listing and an uncustomized resume “stink,” Rosenberg said, generating response rates that range between 0 percent and 5 percent in healthy hiring years and sank to less than 2 percent in the current job market. Hence, he advises clients to spend more time customizing their resumes than tinkering with their cover letters.

What’s the safest thing to do? Tailor both your resume and your cover letter to match a given job opportunity. Mandy Minor, a resume writer with [J.Allan.Studios](#), handles the possibility of ATS scanning by giving her clients several choices of what to use in a cover letter:

“I build a template with phrases such as, ‘I am an accomplished [CHOOSE ONE: marketing manager or marketing director or project manager]’ so that they can pick the title that will line up best for each job opening,” she said. “I also use industry keywords in a brief, bulleted list of accomplishments in the cover letter, which gets the attention of not just the ATS but also the human reader.” ■

them to want to learn more by reading your resume.”

#### Length and format

Job coach and author Susan Kennedy, of Career Treking, provided this outline for a good, succinct cover letter:

- First paragraph

Introduce yourself and state why you’re writing; you are enthusiastically presenting yourself for a job, and your background makes you the best candidate. List a referral source if possible.

- Second paragraph

List your value to the company. Describe how you will contrib-

ute to the company from Day One. This should be based on research of the company and job. Share knowledge of the company’s goals, accomplishments and opportunities.

- Third paragraph

Call to action. Ask for the interview and state when (exactly) you will follow up.

If you are responding to a job posting, Kennedy recommends a column approach. Below is a sample of how that might look, with bulleted lists of requirements and descriptions of how your background matches them:

Job Requirements: 1-2 years of general accounting experience.

Your Experience: Tracked expenses and all financial reporting for a government subcommittee.

#### Job Requirements: Attention to detail.

Your Experience: Edited manuscripts to ensure American English vs. British English.

Kennedy notes that cover letters “can also be used to bridge your background and the job.” She offered up an excerpt from the cover letter of a client with a degree in political science who wants to get a job in the video-gaming business:



*Kennedy*

“As you can see, my resume is attached. But what you won’t see on my resume is my passion for video gaming: it is how I see the world. My analytical skills and attention to detail will enable me to help solve the caller’s problems and ensure a high-quality product.”

### Perfect spelling and grammar are must-haves

A cover letter is “a writing-skills evaluation in disguise,” Kohut said. “When recruiters are faced with large stacks of resumes for new positions, you’ll never make the first cut if they notice even one spelling or grammar mistake on your resume or cover letter.” Make sure that even an e-mail is scrupulously proofread.

### Tactics hiring professionals love

Sometimes a gesture can impress a hiring professional. Kohut was once beguiled by a candidate who read her LinkedIn profile and saw that she had won a ping-pong tournament. “He sent me a ping-pong paddle in the mail and wrote a cover letter with ping pong-themed language in it,” she said, including sentences like these:

- “I’d like to get in the *game*.”
- “I bring energy, intelligence and motivation to the *table*.”
- “I now feel compelled to *drive* home positive business results.”

For Allen, the most effective cover letters are those that do one of the following two things in one sentence or two: They make a compelling statement that begs a response, or they ask a question that must be answered.

“A good approach is to ask for clarification of a point that makes it clear they have done their homework, as in: ‘Your ad said X while your Web site said Y ... Could you help me understand Z?’” he said. “I believe the goal of the job seeker is to start a conversation rather than just throw a resume into a pile.”

### Tactics hiring professionals hate

Allen said that cover letters or cover e-mails should not only be “well written with proper spelling, grammar, punctuation and capitalization,” but they should also leave out abbreviations or emoticons.

Phrases like “i dunno,” lolh,” “i dnt cf,” “!!!,” “dgms,” “WTF” and using all capital letters have no place in professional correspondence, he said.

“I am not against people who are into texting, if they use it when they text,” he said. “But I like the full expressiveness of our language and the keyboard.”

Abbreviations are also inappropriate. They’re not expressive, Allen said, and using them risks confusing your reader, who might not know what their spelled-out versions are. ■

## Who Uses Cover Letters — And How?

**Phil Rosenberg, president of reCareered, an executive career-coaching service, surveyed hundreds of HR managers and recruiters and interviewed management at the Top 10 job boards. He found that:**

- Fewer than 10 percent of HR departments scan cover letters.
- Eighty percent of HR staff, hiring managers and recruiters read the resume first.
- Job boards don’t keyword-search cover letters, only resumes.
- Ninety-six percent of candidates either customize a cover letter with a static resume or don’t customize anything at all.
- Only 4 percent of job seekers send a customized resume.
- Most hiring managers have denied interviews to candidates qualified by their resume, but disqualified by additional information in their cover letter. ■

### Career Advice from TheLadders

- [Writing Cover Letters That Sizzle](#)
- [Composing a Persuasive Cover Letter](#)
- [Cover Letters that Command Attention](#)
- [Help, The Internet Ate My Resume!](#)