

THE ART OF WRITING JOB-SEARCH LETTERS

by William J. Banis

Perhaps one of the most confusing aspects of finding a job that you'll face is writing appropriate job-search letters. The job search may be the first time you'll have to compose and produce professional-level correspondence.

You face the challenge of deciding both what to say and how to say it for a number of important, unfamiliar situations, such as applying for positions, showing appreciation, and accepting or rejecting offers. Because there is no single formula or model letter that will work well for every occasion, you should give as much careful consideration to your letter writing as you do to other job-search activities.

This article introduces you to the art of writing job-search correspondence. The information applies to both paper (hard copy) and e-mail letters.

JOB-SEARCH LETTERS IN CONTEXT

Letters can enhance your employability, but they first must be connected to your most important job-search tool—your brain! The purposes and impact of every letter should be considered carefully. Generic, impersonal letters simply don't work. It's important that you craft your letters to reflect what is appropriate for your audience, your objectives, and the requirements of the situation.

Effective letters are only one component in a larger system of interrelated tasks and activities. Ideally, your letters should flow from, and be linked to, the following career-development tasks:

- Assessing your abilities, skills, knowledge, interests, preferences, values, and motivations;
- Researching and evaluating occupations, jobs, and employers;
- Defining your work objectives and career goals;
- Writing a professional-level resume;
- Planning and implementing your job-search campaign;
- Interviewing for job opportunities; and

- **Choosing appropriate work.**

Most often, letter writing supports the last three tasks, but the key point to remember is that effective letters are part of a larger process. If you're struggling unduly with your written communications, perhaps you need to do more work in clarifying your career direction and articulating your value to employers.

WRITING STYLE

As an act of communication, your letters say something important about you as a professional and as a prospective employee. To create a positive impact, analyze your audience by considering his or her problems and requirements, then plan your letters accordingly.

Audience analysis is a process of introspection by which you put yourself in the reader's situation in order to understand his or her needs and problems. After such analysis, you can then compose your letters to show how your background and talents can meet the reader's needs; convince the reader of your value as a prospective employee; and persuade the reader to take action in your favor.

You and your situation are unique; strive to allow your individuality to be expressed through your writing. A key point to remember is that responsibility for effective communication rests with the writer, not with the reader.

There are seven basic letters you will probably use during your job search:

Thank-you Letter (Most important!)

This is one of the most important, yet least used, tools in a job search. It is used to establish goodwill, express appreciation, and/or strengthen your candidacy. The basic rule of thumb is that everyone who helps you in any way gets a thank-you letter. When used to follow up on employment interviews, thank-you letters should be sent within 24 hours to everyone who interviewed you. (Not possible or appropriate to send a thank-you letter to everyone you met during the interview? Send a thank you to your host and ask that he or she extend your appreciation to the group.) Also, be sure to send thank-you letters to each of your contacts who granted you information interviews and to people who provided references for you.

- **Express your sincere appreciation.**
- **Reemphasize your strongest qualifications. Draw attention to the good match between your qualifications and the job requirements.**
- **Reiterate your interest in the position. Use the opportunity to provide or offer supplemental information not previously given.**
- **Restate your appreciation.**

Application Letter

The purpose of this letter is to get your attached resume read and generate interviews. Use this letter in response to specific job advertisements and vacancy announcements. Demonstrate that your qualifications fit the requirements of the position. Study the position description carefully and decide on one or more themes—education, experience, interests, and so forth—that show how well you fit the position. Link major job dimensions with your related past performance and experience.

Structure your application letters with three or four paragraphs:

- Come to the point. Reveal your purpose and interest. Identify the position and your source of information. Introduce your themes.
- Outline your strongest qualifications that match the position requirements based on the themes you selected. As much as possible, provide evidence of your related experiences and accomplishments. Refer to your enclosed resume.
- Suggest an action plan. Request an interview, and indicate that you will call during a specific time period to discuss interview possibilities.
- Express appreciation to the reader for his or her time and consideration.

Networking Letter

This is designed to generate information interviews—not job interviews—which allow you to meet individuals who can give you specific information about your intended career. Your purposes in seeking information interviews may vary, but your reasons for wanting to meet with a contact person must be genuine and sincere. Information interviewing isn't a magic shortcut to employment; it requires solid preparation, sincerity, and much effort. The networking letter is the first step in the information interviewing process.

- Normally, a resume is not attached to a networking letter, but it may be presented during the interview itself to help the interviewer address your questions.
- Make a connection between you and the reader—e.g., alumnus/alumna of your school, mutual acquaintance, similar interest or background, and so forth
- State your purpose without pressuring the reader. Explain your situation briefly.
- Request a meeting at a mutually convenient time, and indicate that you will call to make arrangements.

Prospecting Letter

The purposes of this letter are to prospect for possible vacancies in your occupation, get your resume read, and generate interviews. Target specific individuals in specific organizations. Structure this letter similarly to the application letter, but instead of using specific position information, focus on broader occupational and/or

organizational dimensions to describe how your qualifications match the work environment.

- **Indicate your interest and reveal your source of information.**
- **Outline your strongest qualifications—focus on broader occupational and/or organizational dimensions to describe how your qualifications match the work environment.**
- **Convince the employer that you have the personal qualities and motivation to contribute to the organization.**
- **Suggest an action plan. Request an interview, and indicate that you will call during a specific time period to discuss interview possibilities.**
- **Express appreciation to the reader for his or her time and consideration.**

Acceptance Letter

Use this letter to accept a job offer, to confirm terms of your employment (salary, starting date, medical examinations, and so on), and to positively reinforce the employer's decision to hire you. Most often, an acceptance letter follows a telephone conversation, during which the details of the offer and the terms of employment are discussed.

- **Confirm, accept, and reaffirm your employment decision.**
- **Confirm logistics.**
- **Express your appreciation for the opportunity.**

Rejection Letter

Rejecting an employment offer should be done thoughtfully. Indicate that you have carefully considered the offer and have decided not to accept it. Be sure to thank the employer for the offer and for consideration of you as a candidate.

In rejecting an offer, demonstrate your professionalism:

- **Acknowledge the offer**
- **Show thoughtful consideration.**
- **Express appreciation.**

Withdrawal Letter

Once you accept a position, you have an ethical obligation to inform all other employers of your decision and to withdraw your employment application from consideration. Your withdrawal letter should express appreciation for the employer's consideration and courtesy. It may be appropriate to state that your decision to go with other organizations was based on having a better person/job fit for this stage of your career. Do not say that you obtained a better job.

- State your decision, and provide an explanation.
- Express appreciation for the employer's consideration and courtesy.

Be sure to sign the original hard copy letters and to keep copies of all your paper and electronic correspondence.

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR LETTER WRITING

- Decide your purpose in writing, then plan accordingly. Place the most important items first, supported by facts.
- Group similar items together in a paragraph, then organize the paragraph in logical relationship to the other(s). Do the work of organizing your information for the reader.
- Keep your letters personal, warm, and professional. Avoid being either overly familiar or overly officious in tone. However, do remember that business letters are formal, not informal, documents.
- Say what you mean directly without a lot of verbiage. Demonstrate that you understand the value of the reader's time by being as brief as possible.
- Write clearly and simply. Avoid jargon and overly complex sentences.
- Be positive in content, tone, word choice, and expectations. Suggest that you are an optimistic, responsible, productive, and reasonable person.
- Use active voice and action verbs.
- Keep the reader's interest by varying sentence structure and length.
- Reduce uncertainty for the reader by including specific facts.
- Stress benefits for the reader that reflects the reader's interest.

William J. Banis, Ph.D., is Vice President for Student Affairs at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. He is a National Certified Career Counselor and is coauthor of two books, High Impact Resumes and Letters and Moving Out of Education: The Educator's Guide to Career Management and Change.