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The Cover Letter That Gets Read

In five short sessions, write a cover letter a hiring manager finishes — and a structure you can refill for every application after it.

5-day guide · 5 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was built with the Self-Directed Learning Framework (SDLF): every chapter gives you a short starting action, the one idea you actually need, a fully worked example, a checklist, and exercises on a real job ad — no filler, no re-reading required.

Work through the chapters in order; each takes 20–30 minutes. Have one real job ad open throughout — the guide is written to produce a finished letter for that specific job by the end of Chapter 5, not a template you still have to fill in.

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CHAPTER 1 OF 5 · DAY 1 · 20 MIN

What a Cover Letter Is Actually For

> **Outcome:** "I can say in one sentence what my letter has to do that my CV cannot."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Take the last cover letter you sent — or any sample you can find — and delete every sentence that only repeats something already visible on the CV. Look at what survives. Usually it's two or three lines, and those lines are the only real letter in there.

The minimum you need to know

A CV lists what you have done. The letter explains why that matters for this job, at this company, now. Hiring managers skim it for one thing: evidence that you understood the role and can handle the part of it they're actually worried about. Anything that restates the CV in prose is spent space. Half a page, 200–300 words, four short paragraphs — longer letters don't get read further, they get read less.

Worked example: the same opening, twice

Weak: "I am writing to apply for the position of Operations Coordinator as advertised on your website. I have five years of experience in operations and believe I would be a good fit for your team." Three lines, and every fact in them is already on the CV. Strong: "You're hiring an Operations Coordinator to get a warehouse move done without pausing shipments. I ran exactly that move for a 40-person distributor last year — we lost half a day, not the two weeks everyone predicted." Identical length. The second tells the reader you read the ad, identified the hard part, and have done it before — which is the entire job of the document.

Checklist

- ☐ Old letter stripped of every CV-repeating sentence
- ☐ What's left identified as the actual content
- ☐ Target length set at 200–300 words, four paragraphs
- ☐ One sentence written stating what this letter must prove
- ☐ That sentence checked: does it name something the CV can't show?
- ☐ No sentence in the plan that begins 'I am writing to'

Exercises

1. Strip a previous letter of everything already on your CV and count the surviving words.
2. Write one sentence naming what your letter has to prove for the job you're targeting.
3. Show that sentence to someone and ask what job they think you're applying for.

CHAPTER 2 OF 5 · DAY 2 · 30 MIN

Mining the Job Ad for the Three Things That Matter

> **Outcome:** "I can pull the three requirements that actually drive the hiring decision out of any job ad."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Paste the job ad into a document and highlight every sentence describing a problem or a responsibility. Ignore everything about culture, benefits, and being a fast-paced team — none of it tells you what the job is.

The minimum you need to know

Job ads are written by committee and list far more than matters. Three signals separate the real requirements from the noise: what appears in the first third of the ad, what gets repeated in different words, and what the job title itself promises. A requirement buried at the bottom of a twelve-item list — "familiarity with Jira a plus" — is decoration. Pick the top three and build the letter around them. A letter that answers all twelve bullets in turn reads like a form and proves nothing.

Worked example: a Customer Support Lead ad, twelve bullets long

The first third mentions response times twice in different words — "faster first replies" and "cut our backlog" — so that's real and it's the priority. The title says *Lead*, so managing people is real even though it appears only once. Bullet nine asks for Zendesk experience, but tools are learnable and belong on the CV, not in the letter. The three that matter: reducing first-reply time, running a small team, and owning a queue end-to-end. Everything else in that ad is context. The letter now has a target, and one paragraph of evidence aimed at the first item will do more than a paragraph mentioning all three.

Checklist

- ☐ Whole ad read once before highlighting anything
- ☐ Problem and responsibility sentences highlighted; culture and benefits ignored
- ☐ First third of the ad weighted more heavily than the rest
- ☐ Repeated ideas noted, even when the wording differs
- ☐ Job title itself read as a requirement
- ☐ Exactly three requirements chosen and written down in priority order
- ☐ Tool and software mentions consciously left for the CV

Exercises

1. Run this process on the real job ad you're targeting and write down your three.
2. Rank them — which one is the problem the role exists to solve?
3. Check your three against the job title: if they don't match it, re-read the ad.

CHAPTER 3 OF 5 · DAY 3 · 30 MIN

The Four-Paragraph Structure

> **Outcome:** "I have a structure I can refill for any application in under an hour."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Write four headings on a blank page: Hook, Proof, Fit, Ask. You'll fill them in that order, which means you never again start a letter from an empty page.

The minimum you need to know

Hook (2–3 sentences): name the problem the role exists to solve and claim you've solved it. **Proof** (3–5 sentences): one concrete story with a number in it, aimed at requirement number one from Chapter 2. **Fit** (2–3 sentences): why this company specifically — something true that you could not have written about a competitor. **Ask** (1–2 sentences): a plain request for a conversation with your availability. No "I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience."

Worked example: the Support Lead letter, paragraph by paragraph

Hook: names the backlog problem from the ad and claims a fix. **Proof:** "At my current employer the queue averaged 31 hours to first reply. I re-triaged by issue type instead of arrival order and set a two-hour target on the two most common types; within six weeks the average was four hours, with the same five people." One story, one number, aimed squarely at requirement one. **Fit:** refers to a specific product change the company shipped recently and what it implies for their support mix — impossible to write without having looked. **Ask:** "I'd like twenty minutes to walk you through how I'd triage your current queue — I'm free most afternoons this week." Total: 260 words.

Checklist

- ☐ Four paragraphs, in order, nothing else
- ☐ Hook names a problem rather than announcing an application
- ☐ Proof contains exactly one story and at least one number
- ☐ Proof aimed at requirement number one, not spread across all three
- ☐ Fit says something that couldn't be said about a competitor
- ☐ Ask states a specific request and your availability
- ☐ Whole letter between 200 and 300 words

Exercises

1. Draft all four paragraphs for your real application.
2. Cover the Fit paragraph and ask whether it would still be true for a rival company — if yes, rewrite it.
3. Count the words; cut to under 300 before going further.

CHAPTER 4 OF 5 · DAY 4 · 25 MIN

The Opening Line Almost Everyone Gets Wrong

> **Outcome:** "My first sentence says something only someone who read the ad could have written."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Write your current opening line, then write underneath it: "Could someone applying for a different job at a different company have written this?" If the answer is yes, it isn't an opening line — it's a throat-clear.

The minimum you need to know

Roughly nine in ten letters open with "I am writing to apply for the position of X as advertised on Y." It isn't wrong, it's empty: it spends your most-read sentence telling the reader something they already know. Three openings that work — name their problem, lead with your most relevant number, or open with a specific observation about their product or market. All three prove you did work before you wrote, which is the only thing the opening has to achieve.

Worked example: one job, three working openings

Problem-first: "Your ad says first replies currently take over a day. That's usually a triage problem rather than a headcount problem — and I've fixed it before." Number-first: "I cut a support queue's first-reply time from 31 hours to four, without adding a single person." Observation-first: "Since you launched self-serve onboarding in March, your support mix has probably shifted from setup questions to billing ones — which needs a different queue structure, not more agents." Each one is impossible to recycle for another company, and each one earns the second sentence, which is all an opening has to do.

Checklist

- ☐ Opening line rewritten to fail the 'could this be reused' test
- ☐ No sentence beginning 'I am writing to apply'
- ☐ Company or product referenced specifically where the observation opening is used
- ☐ Any number in the opening is real and verifiable
- ☐ First sentence readable in one breath
- ☐ Opening and Hook paragraph now say one thing, not two

Exercises

1. Write all three opening types for your target job.
2. Read them aloud and pick the one that sounds least like a template.
3. Give the three to someone else and ask which makes them want to read on.

CHAPTER 5 OF 5 · DAY 5 · 25 MIN

Cutting, Proofing and Tailoring in Ten Minutes

> **Outcome:** "I can adapt my letter to a new job in ten minutes without it reading like a template."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Take your draft and cut it by twenty percent without removing a paragraph. Every letter survives this and most improve, because the first thing to go is always throat-clearing.

The minimum you need to know

The Proof paragraph is the reusable part: own two or three stories and rotate whichever fits. Hook and Fit get rewritten for every application — those are the two paragraphs a reader judges for whether the letter was written for them. Before sending, three checks: the company name appears and is spelled correctly (the most common fatal error in the entire process), nothing in the letter contradicts the CV, and the file is a PDF named FirstnameLastname-CoverLetter-Company.pdf rather than 'cover letter final v3.docx'.

Worked example: one letter, two jobs, eleven minutes

The support-queue Proof paragraph carries over word for word — it's true for both applications. The Hook changes, because the second ad emphasises churn rather than backlog, so the problem named changes with it. The Fit paragraph is rewritten from scratch: the first referenced a product launch, the second references the company's expansion into a new market. Elapsed time: eleven minutes. The two letters share a paragraph, but they read as separately written — because the two paragraphs that signal effort are both new, and those are the two the reader actually weighs.

Checklist

- ☐ Draft cut by roughly 20% without losing a paragraph
- ☐ Company name present, spelled correctly, and checked twice
- ☐ No claim in the letter that contradicts the CV
- ☐ Proof paragraph identified as the reusable one
- ☐ Hook and Fit confirmed as rewritten, not adapted
- ☐ Saved as PDF with a professional file name
- ☐ Read aloud once end to end before sending

Exercises

1. Cut your letter by 20% and compare the two versions.
2. Adapt it to a second real job ad, timing yourself — aim for under fifteen minutes.
3. Run the three pre-send checks on both letters and send the first one.

You've completed this guide.

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