

## Five Steps to Dressing Your Naked Resume With the Perfect Cover Letter

By Lisa M. Newman, Marigold Consulting

Did you wear clothes to your last job interview? Silly question, right? As unthinkable as it would be to arrive nude to an interview, you are essentially committing the same faux pas when you send your resume to a potential employer unaccompanied by a well-written cover letter.

### Three Indisputable Truths About Cover Letters

Whether we're talking about a cover letter or your best interview suit, three indisputable truths apply.

First, like a good interview suit, **a cover letter is essential**. At some point in your life before you embarked on your career, a wise person advised you to purchase a quality business suit. And you did just that. Somewhere in your closet hangs the black, navy blue, or gray suit you've reserved for your interviews. No employer needs to tell a rational candidate that professional dress is expected for the interview. Even in creative industries, it is understood that the candidate should wear a business suit, although more latitude is given for color and style choices than in traditionally conservative fields. Similarly, unless the job announcement indicates otherwise, a potential employer expects that the applicant will provide a cover letter. Although the announcement may not explicitly state that a cover letter is preferred, it is always good practice to include one if for no other reason than to demonstrate how effectively you can communicate your ideas and thoughts in writing.

Second, **a cover letter complements your resume**. One goal of any interview is to project a confident demeanor and a polished appearance. In preparation for your interview, you'll have your suit dry cleaned, the hems mended, and any loose buttons secured. You may also starch your shirt or blouse and polish your shoes. To complete your ensemble you'll carefully select the perfect accessory, perhaps a gold watch, pearl necklace, or leather attache'. Just as the right accent piece can enhance your interview attire, so, too, can a well-written cover letter add to the attractiveness of your resume. When you lay out your wardrobe for your upcoming interview, you would not plan to wear two shirts, two suit jackets, and two pair of pants. Likewise, your cover letter should not merely be a duplication of the information included in your resume. Think of your cover letter as the finishing brushstrokes on a painting masterpiece.

Third, **a cover letter is tailored**. Your interview suit is tailored to fit *you* perfectly. The pants are neither too short nor are the jacket sleeves too long. You could lend your suit to a friend, but it wouldn't look nearly as wonderful on him or her because it has been tailored for you. In like manner, the most effective cover letters don't read as though they could fit any and every position. Instead, they are individualized to fit the specific position for which the applicant is applying. In other words, if you are submitting your resume for ten different positions, you need to write ten different cover letters. Nothing signals a questionable work ethic more to a potential employer than receiving a generic, cookie cutter cover letter where it appears the applicant did little more than change the date and cut and paste the addressee's contact information.

### The COVER Formula to Writing a Cover Letter

Writing the perfect cover letter doesn't have to be an ordeal. In fact, it can be as easy as spelling **C-O-V-E-R**. COVER is an acronym for a five-step paragraph-by-paragraph approach you can use to write an effective cover letter. Over the next few pages, I will show you how you can use

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the COVER formula and the announcement for the position for which you are applying as a handy guide to craft the perfect complement to your resume.

To illustrate how this works, we'll use an actual job announcement that was recently posted on a popular online job site. The entry level position was for a human resources assistant at an Atlanta consulting company that, for purposes of this article, we'll refer to as ABC Consulting. Assume you've read the job announcement and wish to apply for the position. Your resume is ready. Now, let's write the cover letter!

### Step One: Cultivate a CONNECTION in the first paragraph.

The C in the COVER formula stands for *connection*. Step one in creating the perfect cover letter is to establish a connection in the first paragraph. When you are introduced to someone, you engage in conversation to get to know the person better and discover what the two of you have in common. The same principle holds true when cultivating an authentic connection with a potential employer.

To build a connection with an employer, you need to conduct what I call *intelligence*. Intelligence is conducted on three distinct levels: (1) the company or organization at which you would be working; (2) the specific department or division in which you would be working; and (3) the individual(s) for whom you would be working. Doing your homework on a prospective employer serves a dual purpose. First, educating yourself about a company will help you better assess if the company's mission, values, and culture are compatible with your own goals and working style. Second, if you decide there *is* a good fit, the person reading your cover letter or sitting across the desk from you during the interview will be impressed that you took the initiative to investigate the company for which you aspire to work. I suggest creating a file (as simple as a manila folder) for each company you research where you can organize your notes, store your printouts, and save your correspondence. This way all your vital information will be in one place for quick reference and easy retrieval later.

Let's return to the sample job announcement posted by ABC Consulting. Here is the basic job description for the position:

"ABC Consulting located in downtown Atlanta, GA is currently seeking a professional, bright, savvy, and hard working Human Resource Assistant for our corporate office. If you are a bright individual who is seeking to work in the HR field in a great entry-level position and likes to work in a fast-paced environment, this could be the experience for you!!"

The first crucial piece of information in the job description we are given is the name of the hiring company. Armed with that information, your initial step is to **visit the official corporate website**. Pay particular attention to those pages detailing the company's philosophy, culture, core values, vision, and mission statement. While there, you'll want to familiarize yourself with the company's history and the names of its officers or executive board members. I also suggest that you visit the media page to read recent press releases. This is an excellent resource to learn about any community service initiatives with which the company may be involved. After you review the company's website, **head over to its Twitter or Facebook pages** to continue your research. Thanks to the fluid nature of social networking, you can find the most current news events there.

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The final front of research on the company level can be conducted using internet search engines such as Google and Bing.

The second level of intelligence you'll need to conduct is on the department level. While on the corporate website, look for a **link for the department where you would be working**. There you may find a personnel directory, an explanation of newly instituted programs, links to online newsletters, and other valuable information.

The third level of intelligence is on the individual level. If the job announcement lists the name of the person to whom you would report, or if you can find this information out, check to see whether the **person's biographical details** are included on the company's official website. You'll also want to check whether the person maintains a profile on social networking outlets such as LinkedIn and Facebook. Bear in mind that your ultimate goal is to discover what things you have in common with your potential boss. For example, you may be alumni of the same college, belong to the same professional group or club, or share a unique hobby or interest.

After you have completed and compiled your research, give some thought about how you can incorporate one aspect of what you learned into the first paragraph of your cover letter to cultivate a connection.

For instance, suppose that your research revealed that ABC Consulting's employees helped construct a Habitat for Humanity house last month. If you are a regular volunteer with Habitat for Humanity, you can make a connection with the company by explaining your personal commitment to working with Habitat on previous projects and expressing the enthusiasm with which you look forward to working with the company on its future projects.

If you conducted research on the human resources department and learned that it would be launching a software program for the first time next month and you have used that program successfully in a previous position, you can use this commonality as a basis for a connection:

*"Please accept this cover letter and the enclosed resume in application for the Human Resources Assistant position with your company. I had an opportunity to visit your official website. I understand from reading the December 2009 newsletter that the human resources department plans to transition from its current software system to the PeopleSoft system in March. In my previous position, I helped train 10 people in my department on how to use PeopleSoft."*

Through your research on the individual level, you may have learned that person for whom you would be working graduated from your alma mater's arch rival. If you were composing a cover letter to that person, your first paragraph might include the following connection:

*"I read in your online biography that you are actively involved in the University of Alabama's Alumni Association – Atlanta Chapter. I can assure you that this Florida Gator harbors no ill feelings about last year's SEC Championship Game."*

Cultivating a connection is all about beginning to form a relationship. People want to work with other people they like and with whom they share similar interests and values. It follows that if

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you can cultivate an authentic connection in your cover letter *and* you have the requisite skills the employer is seeking, there's a much greater likelihood you'll be called in for an interview.

### **Step Two: Give a brief OVERVIEW of who you are in the second paragraph.**

The O in the COVER formula stands for *overview*. While your resume gives great insight into *what* you have done, it is equally important to devote a few sentences in your cover letter to describe *who* you are. Ideally the connection you made in the first paragraph was enough to encourage the person reading your cover letter to read further. Now you must seize the moment to heighten that connection in your second paragraph.

One way to do this is to elaborate on your personal brand statement, if you included one on your resume. In my article entitled *Is It Time to Rethink Your Resume's M.O.?*, I wrote about the importance of including a powerful brand statement on your resume. An effective brand statement weaves your key strengths into tangible benefits you can provide a prospective employer. You can use the overview section of your cover letter to explain some aspect of your brand statement in more depth. Another option is to explain why you chose to pursue a particular career path. Perhaps you are passionate about promoting green issues, advocating for children with special needs, or writing advertising copy. Infuse the enthusiasm you have for pursuing your professional passion into your cover letter to show a potential employer you will bring that same degree of dedication to the position.

### **Step Three: VOICE your interest in the position in the second paragraph.**

The V in the COVER formula stands for *voice*. In the first two or three sentences of the second paragraph, you told the person reading your cover letter more about who you are. In the next few sentences, you want to connect who you are with why you are interested in the position. Consider what prompted you to respond to the job announcement or explain how you felt when you learned about the job opening. Incorporate some of the intelligence you conducted under Step One to list two or three strong reasons why you want to work for this particular employer.

Returning to the ABC Consulting job announcement, here's an example of how our cover letter looks so far, including the second paragraph:

*"Please accept this cover letter and enclosed resume in application for the Human Resources Assistant position with your company. I had an opportunity to visit your official website. I understand from reading the December 2009 newsletter that the human resources department plans to transition from its current software system to the PeopleSoft system in March. In my previous position, I helped train 10 people in my department on how to use PeopleSoft.*

*Up until five years ago, I ran a small internet-based business from my home. A chance encounter at a friend's dinner party changed my career path forever. It was there where a mutual friend introduced me to Jane Doe, then-Chair of the Board for the Society for Human Resource Management – Atlanta. Our conversation ignited a longstanding desire to work in the human resources field. I was excited to learn of this opening with ABC Consulting because of its ongoing partnership with local area charities including the Atlanta Community Food Bank, where I have been a volunteer for the past ten years. I was also impressed to read on your*

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*corporate blog that ABC Consulting has been named one of the Best Places to Work in Atlanta for a third consecutive year.”*

### **Step Four: Include specific EXAMPLES of your experience and skills in the third and fourth paragraphs.**

The E in the COVER formula stands for *examples*. In the previous two paragraphs, you cultivated a connection with your potential employer and explained why you wanted to work for the company. Over the next two paragraphs, you need to make your sales pitch, explaining the concrete value you can provide the employer. The cues provided in the job announcement are the blueprint for your sales pitch. Most job announcements include a description of the position’s duties, essential functions, required and preferred education, work experience, skills, and abilities, or any combination of these. This is where we’ll start.

To understand how to approach your sales pitch, let’s return to our hypothetical Human Resources Assistant position at ABC Consulting. The expanded job description appears below:

“HR Assistant performs a wide range of personnel duties within the procedural framework set forth by the Human Resource Department. Assists in the hiring and termination process, the company’s recruiting and orientation programs. Compiles, keeps and maintains all aspects of the company’s personnel records. Supervisory reports on disability, and date and reason for termination. Compiles various HR Reports. Oversees HR recognition programs, files employment records, searches employee files and furnishes information to authorized persons as requested. Oversees Payroll function adhering to payroll guidelines, acts as liaison between HR department, its managers and PEO as necessary.”

Additionally, the announcement listed 19 essential functions. I’ve listed the first five below:

1. Conduct New Hire Orientation; explain company personnel policies, benefits, and procedures to employees or job applicants.
2. Examine employee files regularly to respond to state and federal compliance requirements on behalf of company. Responds to managerial and state inquiries providing information for personnel actions.
3. Answer questions regarding examinations, eligibility, salaries, benefits, and other pertinent information.
4. Process, verify, and maintain documentation relating to personnel activities such as staffing, recruitment, training, unemployment claims and appeals working with outside vendor by supplying information timely. Upkeep of company job descriptions, assists in comp studies as requested. Maintain performance evaluations and classifications.
5. Gather personnel records from other departments or employees.

Job duties and functions are generally listed in order of importance. In applying for a position, endeavor to address the first three duties and functions in your cover letter. If your experience doesn’t match the top three, descend the list chronologically until you identify three. Using the keywords and phrases in the job announcement, provide quantifiable and specific examples of your work experiences.

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For instance, in applying for the Human Resources Assistant position, you might detail in this paragraph your experience conducting new employee orientation, maintaining personnel records, and answering employees' HR-related questions. Here's an example of how the third paragraph in your cover letter to ABC Consulting might read:

*"In my present role at XYZ Company, I am intimately involved in every phase of our employees' life cycle. I assist in the hiring process, including coordinating career fairs, creating job advertisements, screening resumes, and preparing offer letters. I conduct a two-day orientation and on boarding program to familiarize new hires with company benefits, policies, and procedures. I also maintain accurate payroll and personnel records for the 125 employees in our office. During a typical day, I interface with employees, all management levels, and outside agencies, as authorized, to answer personnel questions and furnish requested information."*

The ABC Consulting job announcement also listed numerous preferred skills and attributes a candidate should possess. These included active listening, speaking, time management, critical thinking, writing, and proficiency with Microsoft Office products and HRIS software. In paragraph four of your cover letter, you would describe particular instances when you used two or three of these preferred skills. More importantly, though, you should be able to articulate how you will use these skills to make a valuable contribution to your potential employer. Here's an example of how the fourth paragraph in your cover letter might read:

*"If extended an offer to join your company, I am prepared to make an immediate contribution in three ways. First, I have used the PeopleSoft software program for two years and have a high degree of proficiency. As ABC Consulting will be transitioning to this software in March, I can assist in training your employees on the system. Second, because I am comfortable speaking in front of any size group, I will be able to represent your company effectively in offsite recruiting events and succinctly convey information during new hire orientation. Last, my current position involves working on several projects at one time and generating reports under strict time deadlines. These tasks have enabled me to sharpen the kind of time management and prioritization skills that will be an asset to your company."*

### **Step Five: REQUEST an interview in the fifth paragraph.**

The R in the COVER formula stands for *request*. In the previous paragraphs, you made your sales pitch by giving specific examples of your relevant work experience and skills. In the final paragraph of your cover letter, it's time to close the sale by requesting an interview. First, you'll want to state how and when you will follow up with the person to whom you are writing to arrange an interview. Second, provide your own contact information in case the addressee is so impressed by your resume and cover letter he or she wants to call you first to arrange an interview. Last, by all means, you should thank the person who read your cover letter for his/her time and consideration. Here's an example of how the final paragraph in your cover letter to ABC Consulting might read:

*"I look forward to speaking with you in greater detail about how I can benefit ABC Consulting. I will follow up with you by phone in a few days to arrange an interview. Or, you can reach me at (555) 555-5555. Thank you for your time and consideration."*

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Now, let's see how each of the elements in the COVER formula come together...

### Sample Letter

Please accept this cover letter and the enclosed resume in application for the Human Resources Assistant position with your company. I had an opportunity to visit your official website. **[CONNECTION]** I understand from reading the December 2009 newsletter that the human resources department plans to transition from its current software system to the PeopleSoft system in March. In my previous position, I helped train 10 people in my department on how to use PeopleSoft.

**[OVERVIEW]** Up until five years ago, I ran a small internet-based business from my home. A chance encounter at a friend's dinner party changed my career path forever. It was there where a mutual friend introduced me to Jane Doe, then-Chair of the Board for the Society for Human Resource Management – Atlanta. Our conversation ignited a longstanding desire to work in the human resources field. **[VOICE]** I was excited to learn of this opening with ABC Consulting because of its ongoing partnership with local area charities including the Atlanta Community Food Bank, where I have been a volunteer for the past ten years. I was also impressed to read on your corporate blog that ABC Consulting has been named one of the Best Places to Work in Atlanta for a third consecutive year.

**[EXAMPLES]** In my present role at XYZ Company, I am intimately involved in every phase of our employees' life cycle. I assist in the hiring process, including coordinating career fairs, creating job advertisements, screening resumes, and preparing offer letters. I conduct a two-day orientation and on boarding program to familiarize new hires with company benefits, policies, and procedures. I also maintain accurate payroll and personnel records for the 125 employees in our office. During a typical day, I interface with employees, all management levels, and outside agencies, as authorized, to answer personnel questions and furnish requested information.

**[EXAMPLES]** If extended an offer to join your company, I am prepared to make an immediate contribution in three ways. First, I have used the PeopleSoft software program for two years and have a high degree of proficiency. As ABC Consulting will be transitioning to this software in March, I can assist in training your employees on the system. Second, because I am comfortable speaking in front of any size group, I will be able to represent your company effectively in offsite recruiting events and succinctly convey information during new hire orientation. Last, my current position involves working on several projects at one time and generating reports under strict time deadlines. These tasks have enabled me to sharpen the kind of time management and prioritization skills that will be an asset to your company.

**[REQUEST]** I look forward to speaking with you in greater detail about how I can benefit ABC Consulting. I will follow up with you by phone in a few days to arrange an interview. Or, you can reach me at (555) 555-5555. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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The sample letter provided above is simply that...a sample. Use the COVER formula explained in this article as a guide to draft a cover letter that best expresses *your* personality, qualifications, and desire to land the interview for the job you want. The time you invest to research a potential employer and craft a carefully worded cover letter will set you apart from your competition and pay dividends in the long run when your phone rings off the hook with interview opportunities!

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Lisa M. Newman is the Founder and CEO/President of Marigold Consulting in Atlanta, GA. Marigold Consulting offers snooze-proof training experiences to individuals in all settings who want to bloom out of proportion personally and professionally. Marigold partners with session attendees to foster a comfortable and productive learning environment in which extraordinary ideas are birthed, practical solutions to everyday challenges are discovered, and raucous laughter is encouraged. To learn more about Marigold's services or to schedule a session for your group, please visit [www.marigoldconsulting.com](http://www.marigoldconsulting.com).