

LETTERS THAT SHOULD BE OBSOLETE

Cover letters are covering up the truth, and not in a good way.

BY SARA ESTES



CREATIVE SELF-MARKETING,
YOU'RE DOING IT WRONG

Clearly this person knows what his cover letter is actually saying.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF IMGARCADE.COM

To whom it may concern:

I probably should not have used that salutation. It's not very professional, right? If I had done the proper research, I would have somehow managed to find the name of someone who might actually read this letter. Or, maybe get lucky and realize that my dad's college roommate's cousin is the head recruiter for Company X.

If only every cover letter introduction could be this honest.

It is no secret that young adults—especially us millennials—face competition that is more cutthroat than ever. I may not be talking about athletics, but finding a full-time job or summer internship might as well be a sport. Not only are college students fiercely searching for a paying job upon graduation, they are also constantly looking for internship opportunities: short-term positions at companies that are often low-level work and even more often unpaid. In addition to the beloved résumé that every future-professional “should” have, many job and internship applications also require a cover letter. These letters serve as a supplementary component of an application, and provide a way for the applicant to further explain his or her qualifications and relevant past experiences. Although seemingly transparent based on their description, I am not convinced that these one-page declarations are the best way to represent those who write them.

Take myself as an example. If you don't know me, I apparently describe myself as someone with strong communication skills and an excellent ability to connect with and understand others. Don't forget my organization and time-management skills and high emotional intelligence. Did I mention I have the drive to succeed? If by some miracle you are not already nauseous from learning about "me," I salute you. I cannot help but cringe reading back on the adjectives I so proudly used to describe myself. It is not that I don't believe that I am someone who can communicate clearly, work efficiently, and ultimately push myself to be better, because I (humbly) believe I do often possess these qualities. It is the nature of my language that truly makes me want to delete every trace of this cover letter.

Who was that person? There is no way that was the real me.

These bits of proud words reside in a cover letter I wrote a little less than a year ago. It was the spring of my sophomore year of college, and I could not have ignored the lurking pressure to find a summer internship even if I wanted to. At the time, I thought the internship to which I was applying was my literal dream job. I now have a new career pathway in mind (which is probably a good thing considering I was turned down for this job), but I am still thankful for this experience. I guess whoever said we should learn from our failures actually knew what he or she was talking about. But the lesson that resonated with me was not one about persevering, chasing my dreams, or taking my future into my own hands—even though these are important things to remember. The lesson I learned was more of a realization, one about the ridiculousness that is writing a cover letter.

Let's start with a simple fact: the majority of job or internship applications require a cover letter. And if they don't, you should probably still send one (apparently everyone is supposed to know this). At some point in time it was decided that a one-page letter suffices as a way for someone to declare whom he or she is and why they deserve to be considered for a specific job. In fact, résumés and in turn cover letters were introduced into the world by none other than Leonardo Da Vinci. Yes, you are reading that correctly.

As stated in an article from [TheEmployable](#), Da Vinci did not necessarily write what we might call a modern-day cover letter, but he is credited for the first-ever CV. Short for Curriculum Vitae—the Latin expression for “the course of my life”—a CV is simply defined as a place to put one's achievements. In 1492 Da Vinci wrote down his skills and capabilities and sent the document to a potential future employer, the Duke of Milan. Fast-forward to the 1950s and CVs began appearing as a component of job applications everywhere. Soon thereafter, the supplement shifted to a two-part package of a résumé and a CV (more commonly known as a cover letter these days). This infamous bundle has been a key factor in job applications since our nation's transition from a manufacturing to service-sector economy, which caused the percentage of white-collar jobs to nearly double. Unlike the factory jobs before them, service positions require more interactions with customers, and therefore raise the necessity to qualify the people behind the accomplishments listed in their applications.

CHEMIST.....

Industr'l Paint Chemist

"DUTCH BOY PAINTS"

To formulate pigmented industrial finishes . . . Work in modern paint laboratory in metropolitan N. Y.-N. J. area . . . B. S. degree & 3-5 yrs experience required. Salary based on exp & potential . . . Many benefits including profit sharing . . .

SUBMIT RESUME WITH
Cover letter to Ind'l Relations Dept.
NATIONAL LEAD CO
(Atlantic Branch)
PO BOX #831
Perth Amboy, N J

From a 1956 New York Times classified ad for Dutch Boys Paints.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THEATLANTIC.COM

It has been noted that cover letters aim to introduce the “human behind the accomplishments,” or in other words, explain qualities about someone that a straightforward résumé cannot. This is already contradictory, considering that these explanations about someone’s true identity are packaged in a formal letter. Especially for young adults like myself, it seems odd that the best way to elaborate on our qualifications is through a formalized letter—it leaves a lot of room for truth-stretching, even just within the cover letter’s rigid style. But let’s not rely on my opinion alone.

In a survey of 60 University of Michigan undergraduates, 17% of the participants answered “no” to the question: “Would you say that your cover letter accurately represented you as a person?” At the time, I’m sure all of these students were trying their best to properly portray themselves to their future employers. But it is very easy to write down a sentence here or there—or an entire paragraph—that embellishes one’s achievements and skills. Additionally, 51% of the surveyed students admitted that they felt they *needed* to stretch the truth “a little bit” in order to impress potential future employers. This “little bit” can go a long way, and it is very clear that the culture of cover letters has taken a dishonest turn. Before we know it, using Microsoft Excel in one college course turns into a paragraph about someone’s “high proficiency in Excel and analytics.” Clearly the latter statement sounds a lot more impressive, but is it accurate? That’s for the applicant to know and the employer to (hopefully) never find out.

If these results don’t get your wheels turning, how about the fact that the majority of cover letters are never actually viewed by company representatives? Or, the notion that they can ultimately lead to discriminatory practices? We’ll start with the lesser of these two evils.

Companies receive an endless number of cover letters for each job opening they have. That being said, it is hard to ensure all letters will be read. In an article for [Fortune](#), 90% of a survey of over 2,000 managers, HR representatives, and recruiters admitted to ignoring applicants' cover letters all together. That's a lot of wasted time and effort put forth by these applicants. As for the letters that are read, it is safe to say that they do not provide nearly enough—or the right type—of information to accurately judge someone's character and abilities. This causes perfectly qualified people, whether their cover letters are read or not, to slip through the cracks.

Now onto the more controversial topic. In a [New York Magazine](#) article about how the résumé and cover letter bundle need to go, discrimination is brought into the conversation. It has been found that specific elements of someone's cover letter, for example their “normal sounding” name or lack thereof, college alma mater, or gender can spark instances of discrimination. These attributes have the power to invoke confirmation bias: a phenomenon in which people (the readers of the letters) tend to seek out evidence that confirms what they already think to be true. Even something as simple as the thought, “Ivy League grads are smarter,” might cause the reader to look for more positive attributes rather than negative, just because they assume this applicant is extremely intelligent. Although this particular case seems somewhat trivial, a larger issue arises when this mental phenomenon is applied to attributes like race and ethnicity.

For me, cover letters raise a lot of questions.

If cover letters are meant to express who someone truly is, why are they required to be so formal and structured?

If they are supposed to be transparent and straightforward, why do so many people resort to purposely misrepresenting who they are in their cover letters?

Why are cover letters so often required if the majority of them never get read?

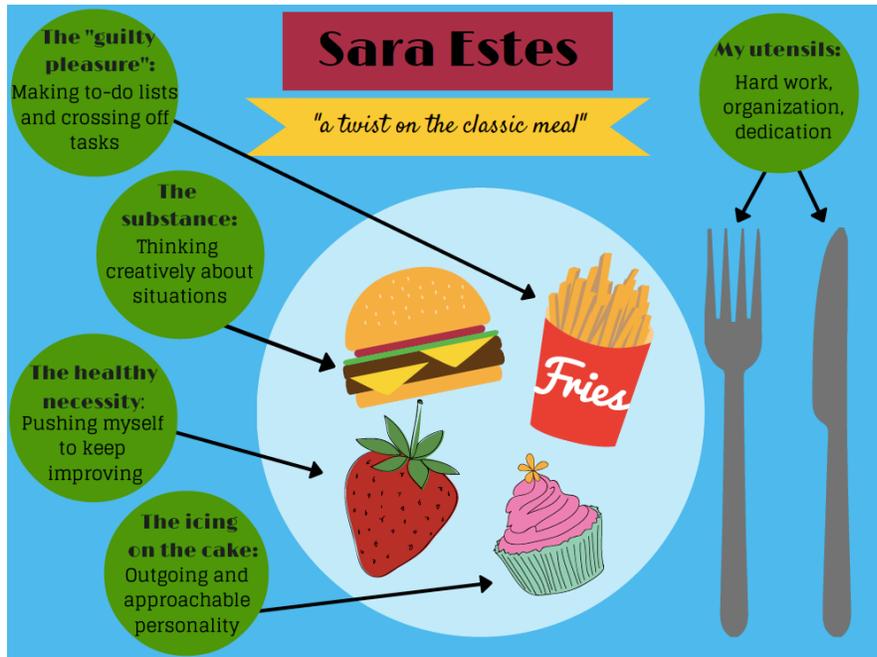
Rather than trying to answer all of these questions, there needs to be one overall solution. It is the year 2014. Technology has helped advance and improve so many companies, and it is time for the application process to be transformed as well. An applicant should not have to sacrifice who they are for who they think the company wants them to be. Whether this means the introduction of a more creative and visual form of a cover letter, or the downfall of them all together is not for me to decide.

For now, I leave you with how I wish I described myself in that God-awful cover letter that I wrote. (Keep in mind that exclamation points are completely acceptable in my fictional professional world).

Hi! My name is Sara Estes and I'm a junior at the University of Michigan studying Economics, Writing, and Digital Studies. If I had to describe myself in three words or less I would say, “Three isn't enough.” I believe in showing, not telling. I am a perfectionist. I am a hard worker, but also know how to prioritize my time for the many activities I dedicate myself to. I like to think that I am very dependable; I can't stand the idea of letting people down. I

cannot say that I am extremely skilled in the digital marketing field yet, but I am eager to learn. One thing I am sure of, though, is my passion. I believe it will take me to great places and will help me achieve my dreams.

And thus in a world full of rules and expectations, I will not allow myself to cover up who I am.



Sincerely/Best Regards/Cheers,
Sara Estes