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Utilizing Cover Letters to Promote State Licensed Counselors - Part 1

You may not have thought of your cover letter as a means to promote state licensed counselors, but it is a valuable tool in your advocacy tool box. As a state licensed counselor with one of my specialties in career, I’ve worked for several years with individuals to help them with all aspects of their career including cover letter construction. I will write on this topic in several sections as there is much to cover especially subtle nuances in cover letters for state licensed counselors.

First, are cover letters really necessary these days? The answer is yes! Thompson (2009) suggests one-third of employers always read a cover letter, one-third of employers read the cover letter if the resume stands out, and one-third of employers only read resumes. Schullery, Ickes, and Schullery (2009) found that cover letters are preferred by a majority (56%) of employers despite size, industry, or job function. Dekay’s (2006) literature review suggests that resumes and vitas without a cover letter communicate to employers a lack of emotional engagement with the position by the applicant. In addition, the study suggested that interviews were not offered unless a cover letter was attached (Dekay, 2006). Further, 55% of the time the interviewer only referred to the cover letter during the interview and not the resume (Dekay, 2006).

Second, how do you send the cover letter? Thompson (2009) states that e-mailed cover letters should avoid jargon and should be written just as formally as a printed and mailed cover letter. Being casual or very brief in an e-mailed cover letter is insulting to the reviewer. Research suggests that employers prefer electronic delivery by email (46%) (with 41% preferring attachments and 7% preferring all information in the body of an e-mail), then at the company’s website (38%), next standard mail delivery (7%), and lastly, no employer wanted to visit a candidate’s website to obtain information about them (Schullery et al., 2009).

In conclusion, write a formal cover letter in a word processing program as you will want to attach a copy of the cover letter with your resume to the e-mail. Further, copy the cover letter as the text of your job application e-mail. Be warned that texting and Twitters do not suffice as cover letters and will be viewed as too casual and insulting to the reviewer (Thompson, 2009).

Check back for additional tips on writing effective cover letters that not only promote you, but also your license, training, and competencies as a state licensed counselor.


Utilizing Cover Letters to Promote State Licensed Counselors - Part 2
We discussed why cover letters are still useful in Part 1, even with today’s technology changes. In Part 2, we will cover the purpose of the cover letter. Keep in mind that there will be many parts to this series so stay tuned! Please see Part 1 or the Advocacy Resources page for the two example cover letters that illustrate the points that I will make in this blog.

What purpose does the cover letter serve? It gets the reviewer motivated to read your resume and invite you to an interview (Ryan, 2011). For most jobs, the cover letter will be no longer than 1 single spaced page (Thompson, 2009). There are a few exceptions to this rule, as in the case of applying for a position in counselor education where it is expected that you would have more to say about such a complex role.

So, how do you get the reviewer motivated? The cover letter is not only a self introduction and sales pitch, but also sets context, tone and perspective (Ryan 2011; Thompson, 2009) Consider it the vehicle for delivering your brand where you promote your unique skills and values that you will bring to support that unique workplace (Thompson, 2009) It will showcase your command of grammar, professionalism, and ability to communicate all in one page (Thompson, 2009; Woloshin, 2009). As a state licensed counselor, this cover letter will demonstrate your attention to detail (if you are sloppy and vague on the cover letter, maybe that’s how you run your practice?), your writing abilities (is this what they can expect from your reports, case notes, etc.?), and your sense of pride in yourself and what you have to contribute (how would you represent that unique workplace as a counselor with coworkers, clients, and the greater community that they serve?).

Employers don’t want to know why you want to work someplace like theirs; they want to know why you want to work for THEM (Binns, 2010). Your cover letter must demonstrate that you know and understand that unique workplace (Thompson, 2009; Fields, 2011). This requires you to do research on the workplace by looking up their website, asking questions of current/former employees, asking questions of individuals who have had some form of contact with the workplace, etc. You must be a detective. Don’t be afraid to use Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, the Internet, etc. to find out more about the workplace from their own sites as well as individuals with connections to the workplace. If you are in the area, what can you find out in person?

You can see this technique demonstrated in the two example cover letters. Both cover letters refer to the mission and/or goals of the organization. For the mental health letter, one sentence ends with “that meet Smithvalley Community Services’ commitment to assist individuals in our community affected by mental illness and serious emotional disturbance to achieve their hopes, dreams and quality of life goals.” For the school letter, one sentence ends with “that meet Smithville Local Middle School’s mission of creating a respectful environment where individuals learn and succeed by developing character, intellect, wellness, and a desire for lifelong learning.”

Further, these mission statements/goals are validated by the skills and values that each counselor discusses in the rest of the cover letter. Make sure that you keep what is important to that workplace front and center in your cover letter. They want to know how you can further their mission and contribute to their clients and their community at large (Binns, 2010; Fields, 2011). In addition, address what you like about the work that they do and why you would like to work specifically for THEM. (Binns, 2010; Fields, 2011) The cover letter is your one link to tie what you have to what they want (Fields, 2011).

In conclusion, writing a cover letter for each job application should take you several hours. It is a difficult task, which requires a considerable commitment of your time and energy (Woloshin, 2009). Check back for additional tips on writing effective cover letters that not only promote you, but also your license, training, and competencies as a state licensed counselor.


Utilizing Cover Letters to Promote State Licensed Counselors - Part 3

We discussed why cover letters are still useful in Part 1, the purpose of the cover letter in Part 2, and now we will cover addressing the cover letter in Part 3. Keep in mind that there will be many parts to this series so stay tuned! Please see Part 1 of this blog series or the Advocacy Resources page for the example cover letters that illustrate the points that I will make in this blog.

You will write your cover letter using standard business format. This means that the letter is single spaced, printed in black ink, aligned flush left, typed in a 10 (at the smallest) to 12 (preferable) point serif font (for example, Times New Roman, Georgia, etc.), spaced with each paragraph followed by a blank line (Crosby, 2009; Jenkins, 2010).

Starting from the top and working our way down the examples, you will note that the letters begin with the individual’s full name and current contact information including e-mail address. As long as it is legible, you can get creative with the header containing your personal contact information at the top of the page.

Next, you will include the reviewer’s full name (followed by appropriate licenses and degrees), title, company, and address aligned flush left on the page. When you attach your cover letter to an e-mail you will want to keep this beginning format just as you would for a mailed cover letter. When you paste the cover letter into the body of an e-mail, you can leave out your address and the company’s address (Crosby, 2009).

You must address this cover letter, whether mailed or e-mailed, to an actual person at the company (Applegate, 2009; Crosby, 2009; Jenkins, 2010; Schullery; 2009; Walton, 2009; Woloshin, 2009). Doing anything less comes across as impersonal. Never send a cover letter addressed to a department, to “Whom It May Concern,” to “Dear Sir or Madam,” or to “Dear Committee Members.” While all those salutations are sure to turn off the reviewer of your application, the biggest kiss of death is to address the cover letter to “Dear Sir” (Walton, 2009). In addition, don’t ever begin the salutation of cover letter (as an attachment, when mailed, or in the body of an e-mail) with “Hi,” “Hi Sue,” “Sue,” “Dear Sue,” etc. (Von Drasek, 2011). This type of salutation is too informal and is insulting.

Many job postings do not give you the name of the person who will review your application materials. This means that you will need to see if you can find that information on their website, LinkedIn page, or Facebook page. If you cannot find the information on-line, make a call to the organization to find out the name of the individual and gender if the name is neutral. You need to pay very close attention when putting Mr. or Ms. in front of that individual’s name in the salutation (Crosby, 2009). Make sure to also have the correct spelling of the reviewer’s name. Getting the gender and spelling wrong are additional details that you must make sure that you have correct. It will set you considerably apart to have the correct individual addressed directly in the cover letter. Even if that person’s administrative assistant initially receives your application, how you address the cover letter will make a considerable difference (Jenkins, 2010)!

In conclusion, how you address your cover letter will make a huge first impression on the reviewer. When you have all the necessary details to address the reviewer respectfully and appropriately, it will get you much closer to getting an interview and landing the job!

Check back for additional tips on writing effective cover letters that not only promote you, but also your license, training, and competencies as a state licensed counselor.
We discussed why cover letters are still useful in Part 1, the purpose of the cover letter in Part 2, addressing the cover letter in Part 3, and now we will focus on what to say in the opening paragraph. Keep in mind that there will be many parts to this series so stay tuned! Please see Part 1 of this blog series or the Advocacy Resources page for the example cover letters that illustrate the points that I will make in this blog.

The first paragraph of your letter needs to convey four things (a) the specific job title that you are seeking, (b) where you heard about the job, (c) your enthusiasm and interest for the job, and (d) that you know something specific about the company (Applegate, 2009; Crosby, 2009; DeKay, 2006; Von Drasek, 2011). The individual who first views your materials may be sorting through not only hundreds of applications for this one position, but also hundreds of applications for other openings at the same organization. Clear information about specific job titles and where you heard about the job will go a long way to make sure that you materials don’t end up in the trash.

The first sentence of the mental health cover letter states: “I am writing to express my interest in the Therapist position in the Adolescent Treatment Unit at Community Health Services as publicized in the Smithvalley Times.” This sentence addresses the specific job title that the individual is seeking and where the individual heard about the position (Crosby, 2009; Jenkins, 2010; Ryan 2011).

Your first sentence could change depending upon your circumstances. For example, you may be sending out letters to organizations that are not currently posting a job opening. In this instance you might say something like; “Although I understand that you currently don’t have any job openings in this area, I am writing to express my interest in a Therapist position in the Adolescent Treatment Unit at Community Health Services.” This again will help the person organizing job applications to know what to do with your materials. No employer knows from day to day who from their staff will be leaving and when. They may need to fill a vacancy so fast that they just don’t have time to advertise it! It is not uncommon for job openings to never be officially advertised. Employers will ask employees for recommendations and they will review their files for individuals who have shown the drive to send in their materials without an advertisement. It is in your best interest to send your cover letter and resume out to employers that you have a sincere interest in working for; even if they don’t advertise an opening.

Second, you may also know someone in common with the reviewer (Crosby, 2009; Ryan 2011). If so, you would mention them in the first sentence. “Following the recommendation of your colleague Janice Stanhauser, I am writing to express my interest in the Therapist position in the Adolescent Treatment Unit at Community Health Services.”
Lastly, you may want your first sentence to begin with a value statement (Ryan 2011). "After working for five years in the Adolescent Services Department at City Hospital, I am writing to express my interest in the Therapist position in the Adolescent Treatment Unit at Community Health Services as publicized in the Smithvalley Times."

Now that you have conveyed to the reviewer what position you would like to apply for and where you heard about the position, you next need to convey your focused enthusiasm and interest for the position and the company throughout the cover letter (Crosby, 2009; DeKay, 2006; Thompson, 2009; Woloshin, 2009). You want the organization to briefly know that you have done your homework and that you can contribute to their vision and mission (Applegate, 2009; Woloshin, 2009). Displaying knowledge about the organization (mission, mentioning their recent accomplishments, etc.) in the first paragraph further connects you to the actual job (Crosby, 2009). You can see this demonstrated in the school counselor cover letter, which states: “This enables me to provide individual and group counseling services that meet Smithville Local Middle School’s mission of creating a respectful environment where individuals learn and succeed by developing character, intellect, wellness, and a desire for lifelong learning.”

At some point you want to include some statement that communicates that you are “extremely interested in the job” somewhere at least once in the cover letter. You can do this in the first paragraph or in other places in the cover letter. Both example cover letters begin with "I am writing to express my interest.." It is far more important to focus on your emotional engagement and interest with the potential position than on your personal character traits (enthusiastic, compassionate, patient, efficient, etc.) (DeKay, 2006). The school counselor cover letter states: “I am excited to put this knowledge to work for Smithville Local Middle School as these skills directly match the request for a school counselor who can design and implement a comprehensive school counseling program.” You can see that both examples display both interest and appropriate emotional connection to the job.

In conclusion, you must state (a) the specific job title that you are seeking, (b) where you heard about the job, (c) your enthusiasm and interest for the job, and (d) that you know something specific about the company. When you demonstrate these four areas in the first paragraph of your cover letter, it will get you much closer to getting an interview and landing the job!

Check back for additional tips on writing effective cover letters that not only promote you, but also your license, training, and competencies as a state licensed counselor.


Utilizing Cover Letters to Promote State Licensed Counselors - Part 5

We discussed why cover letters are still useful in Part 1, the purpose of the cover letter in Part 2, addressing the cover letter in Part 3, what to say in the opening paragraph in Part 4, and now we will begin to focus on the body of the cover letter. As this is a very critical component, the body of the cover letter will be discussed in several blog posts. Keep in mind that there will be many parts to this cover letter series so stay tuned! Please see Part 1 of this blog series or the Advocacy Resources page for the example cover letters that illustrate the points that I will make in this blog.

Write cover letters in your own voice to reflect your personality and writing style (Binns, 2010). You must use an active, powerful voice to land the job (Binns, 2010). Avoid using qualifying statements such as “I think,” “I feel,” or “I believe” (Binns, 2010; Woloshin, 2009). These are weak, tenuous statements that will not impress the reviewer. It’s more effective to state: “Volunteering over the last three years for the county suicide hotline trained me to work with individuals in a crisis.” It is weaker to state: “I believe that volunteering over the last three years for the county suicide hotline trained me to work with individuals in a crisis.” Further, discuss your achievement-oriented traits (such as assertive, dynamic, independent, and decisive) instead of your service-oriented traits (such as kind, helpful, sympathetic, and concerned about others) (Heilman, 2001). The employer wants to know that you can accomplish the tasks of the job and you are very often not rewarded with an interview for discussing your interpersonal skills.

Cover letters should avoid jargon and casualness (Thompson, 2009). Often, the individual reviewing your cover letter is not a counselor and will not have knowledge of counseling jargon. Keep in mind that many other organizations use the same acronyms that we use in counseling. For example, do not assume that the reviewer understands that when you use ACA in your cover letter that you mean the American Counseling Association (The American Cornhole Association is also an "ACA"). A second example would be talking about CBT in your cover letter, but never spelling out Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) so that the reviewer can understand the relevance. Lastly, no slang or texting jargon can be used in cover letters (Woloshin, 2009).

Use the same language that was used in the position description (also known as keywords) to create a personal connection to the job and to help the reviewer know that you meet the requirements and qualifications of the job (Fields, 2011; Walton, 2009). This comes in very handy if the reviewer uses a chart to quickly identify who has met the requirements of the position (Whisler, 2004). In addition, cover letters and resumes are often scanned to identify keywords that match the job opening to determine promising candidates to interview (Walton, 2009). Using their words from the position announcement will work to your advantage in many ways. At the same time, do not randomly fill your cover letter with keywords, which can limit your ability to uniquely and fluidly express yourself (Walton, 2009).

In conclusion, the body of your cover letter should (a) avoid qualifying statements, (b) use an active voice, (c) discuss achievement oriented tasks, (d) avoid jargon, and (e) use the keywords used in the job opening. When you demonstrate these five areas in the body of your cover letter, it will get you much closer to getting an interview and landing the job!

Check back for additional tips on writing effective cover letters that not only promote you, but also your license, training, and competencies as a state licensed counselor.


Utilizing Cover Letters to Promote State Licensed Counselors - Part 6

We discussed why cover letters are still useful in Part 1, the purpose of the cover letter in Part 2, addressing the cover letter in Part 3, what to say in the opening paragraph in Part 4, part of the body of the cover letter in Part 5, and now we will focus deeper on the body of the cover letter. As this is a very critical component, the body of the cover letter will be discussed in several blog posts alone. Keep in mind that there will be many parts to this cover letter series so stay tuned! Please see Part 1 of this blog series or the Advocacy Resources page for the example cover letters that illustrate the points that I will make in this blog.

The body of your cover letter describes how you are uniquely qualified for the job based upon past relevant skills, experiences, accomplishments and results (Crosby, 2009; DeKay, 2006; Fields, 2011; Jenkins, 2010; Ryan, 2011; Whisler, 2004; Woloshin, 2009). Telling the employer how much you enjoy helping others won't land you the job (Binns, 2010). In the same way that you are more likely to buy a product with a proven track record, an employer is looking for the same type of track record from a prospective employee. Remember, resumes tell employers about your qualifications and cover letters tells employers what sets you apart from the other candidates (Walton, 2009).

You want to demonstrate to the employer that your professional and personal backgrounds are a good fit and that your skills can add immediate value to the organization when you walk in the door (Thompson, 2009; Walton, 2009). You must establish how you fit the employer's expectations and can benefit the organization's mission and clients. To do this, identify the requirements and qualifications that were outlined in the ad and directly speak to those in the body of the cover letter (Applegate, 2009; Binns, 2010). You must provide evidence and facts to support your claims that you meet the requirements and qualifications (Binns, 2010). You need to provide examples that demonstrate that you have certain skills and not just say that you have those skills (Whisler, 2004).

Your research on the employer, which was already discussed in previous posts, also helps to guide what you discuss in the body of the cover letter (Jenkins, 2010; Ryan, 2011; Von Drasek, 2011). For example, you can demonstrate both preparation and initiative by suggesting ideas about how you can benefit the job and the organization on top of the requirements outlined in the ad (Applegate, 2009).

If you are applying for a position that is obviously out of your current area (2 or more hours away), you need to let the employer know how you are or will become connected to that new community (Binns, 2010). It will help the employer to understand that you are doing more than job hopping and are planning to become a stable part of their organization and the community (Binns, 2010).

In conclusion, the body of the cover letter must (a) describe how you fit the employer’s requirements and qualifications, (b) provide evidence and facts to support your claims, and (c) suggest ways that you can benefit the organization. When you demonstrate these three areas in the first paragraph of your cover letter, it will get you much closer to getting an interview and landing the job!

Check back for additional tips on writing effective cover letters that not only promote you, but also your license, training, and competencies as a state licensed counselor.


**Utilizing Cover Letters to Promote State Licensed Counselors - Part 7**

We discussed why cover letters are still useful in Part 1, the purpose of the cover letter in Part 2, addressing the cover letter in Part 3, what to say in the opening paragraph in Part 4, the body of the cover letter in Part 5 and 6, and now we will focus on the closing of the cover letter. Keep in mind that there will be many parts to this cover letter series so stay tuned! Please see Part 1 of this blog series or the Advocacy Resources page for the example cover letters that illustrate the points that I will make in this blog.

The closing of your cover letter demonstrates your commitment, qualifications, and availability for the job (Crosby, 2009). It should assertively express why you deserve an interview and close the sale by asking for an interview (Applegate, 2009; Jenkins, 2010; Ryan, 2011).

First, remind the reviewer very briefly your qualifications and enthusiasm for the job. You can see this demonstrated in the example mental health cover letter in the paragraph that begins, "I am challenged and excited by assisting adolescents and their families overcome self-injurious behavior to lead healthy, happy, and productive lives. I look forward to putting my skills into action for the Self-Injurious Behavior Team of the Adolescent Treatment Unit at Community Health Services."

You will note several things in this part of the closing. First, there is once again an appropriate emotional connection to the job, which indicates commitment. Second, there is a reminder to the reviewer that this counselor has already worked with the target clientele, which is a reminder of their qualifications. Third, there is appropriate assertiveness and the beginning of the closing of the sale by actually putting themselves in the position by saying "I look forward to putting my skills into action for the Self-Injurious Behavior Team of the Adolescent Treatment Unit at Community Health Services."
The next section of your closing is asking for the interview. You can accomplish this two ways. First you can write it in the form of a question. For example “May I travel to Cincinnati to discuss this position with you in person?” Second you can write it as a statement. From the school counselor cover letter example, “I am enclosing my resume and desire an interview to discuss further this position. Thank you very much for your consideration.” I would highly recommend using a statement. Questions are very weak and suggest that you are unsure, timid, and nervous. Statements have conviction and show hopeful confidence, self-assuredness, and strength. Which person would you rather employ? Lastly, make sure that you thank the reviewer at the end for their time and consideration. You can see this in the second sentence that was quoted earlier in this paragraph.

Some like to include a statement at the end that they will follow up with a phone call or e-mail. If you make this statement then you must follow through. If you don’t, you appear to not honor your word and keep your commitments. If you do follow through, it will help to keep your name in the mind of the reviewer. It’s certainly a good idea to follow up after you send in your cover letter. However, you don’t have to include that statement to follow up and it also eats up more space in your one page cover letter where you could talk about important skills, qualifications, and appropriate enthusiasm. The choice is yours.

In conclusion, the closing of the cover letter must (a) demonstrate your commitment, qualifications, and availability for the job, (b) assertively express why you deserve an interview, and (c) close the sale by asking for an interview. When you demonstrate these three areas in the closing paragraph of your cover letter, it will get you much closer to getting an interview and landing the job!

Check back for additional tips on writing effective cover letters that not only promote you, but also your license, training, and competencies as a state licensed counselor.


Utilizing Cover Letters to Promote State Licensed Counselors - Part 8

We discussed why cover letters are still useful in Part 1, the purpose of the cover letter in Part 2, addressing the cover letter in Part 3, what to say in the opening paragraph in Part 4, the body of the cover letter in Parts 5 and 6, and closing the cover letter in Part 7. Now we will focus on some additional points that have not been mentioned elsewhere.

First, make sure to mention in your cover letter any practicums, internships, volunteer work, or professional work that has offered you experience with the population that you would like to work with as a counselor. Then be sure to discuss how that experience prepared you to work with that population.

Second, make sure to use action verbs in your cover letter and in your resume/vita. Some action word examples for supervisors, counselors, and counselor educators include:

administered
advised
appraised
assessed
arranged
assisted
authored
balanced
budgeted
clarified
conceptualized
coordinated
communicated
counseled
created
diagnosed
designed
developed
directed
educated
established
evaluated
expedited
explained
facilitated
familiarized
founded
guided
improved
increased
informed
influenced
initiated
instituted
integrated
introduced
managed
organized
originated
oversaw
performed
planned
prioritized
produced
recommended
recorded
referred
researched
revitalized
screened
shaped
scheduled
specified
strengthened
supervised
trained

Third, watch your sentence construction. Not only will it make your cover letter more powerful, but it will also make you letter more succinct so that you can fit more detailed information into the letter. For example, "I was responsible for providing group and individual counseling to 36 middle school students,"
would be more powerful and succinct if it was written, “I provided group and individual counseling to 36 middle school students in the course of 15 weeks.”

Fourth, make sure that you offer not only what you did, but also in what time period. For example, “I supervised three internship students while maintaining my full client caseload,” does not give a context to the performance of the duties discussed. The statement “I supervised three internship students over the course of six years while maintaining my full client caseload,” is very different from “I supervised three internship students over the course of six months while maintaining my full client caseload.” Just as when writing case notes, creating treatment plans, and establishing goals, think SMART! (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely.)

Fifth, school counselors will want to demonstrate in their cover letter that they can implement/have implemented the ASCA National Model in the schools. Further, elementary counselors will want to mention their group experience, middle school counselors will want to mention their individual and career/college counseling experience, and high school counselors will want to mention their academic and career/college counseling experience.