Cover Letters II

The BIG Idea

- How can I use my cover letter to highlight my skills and experience?

AGENDA

Approx. 45 minutes

I. Wanted: Assistant Manager (5 minutes)

II. Unique Selling Proposition (10 minutes)

III. Drafting the Cover Letter (20 minutes)

IV. Wrap Up: Partner Proofread (10 minutes)

MATERIALS

- ❑ **PORTFOLIO:**
  - Portfolio page 5, Blank Cover Letter Template
- ❑ **STUDENT HANDBOOK PAGES:**
  - Student Handbook page 68, Help Wanted: Assistant Manager
  - Student Handbook page 69, Bethany Carter's Cover Letter
  - Student Handbook page 70, Unique Selling Proposition
  - Student Handbook pages 71-72, Cover Letter Proofreading Checklist (2 copies)
- ❑ Electronic version of Blank Cover Letter Template
- ❑ Overhead projector

OBJECTIVES

During this lesson, the student(s) will:

- Recognize the usefulness of a cover letter.
- Craft an opening sentence that highlights a key aspect of their experience as it connects to the job they're applying for.
- Draft the remainder of the cover letter according to a specified format.
- Proofread a cover letter for spelling and grammatical errors.

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OVERVIEW

The lesson begins with a sample cover letter, with students considering a candidate from the point of view of the employer. Next, students compose a single sentence to describe their unique selling proposition, the hook they'll use to create interest in their skills and experience. The remainder of the lesson focuses on drafting the letter, followed by proofreading for form and content.

PREPARATION

- ❑ The following handouts need to be made into overhead transparencies or copied onto chart paper:
  - **Student Handbook page 68, Help Wanted: Assistant Manager**
  - **Student Handbook page 69, Bethany Carter's Cover Letter**
  - **Student Handbook page 70, Unique Selling Proposition**
  - **Student Handbook pages 71-72, Cover Letter Proofreading Checklist**
  - **Portfolio page 5, Blank Cover Letter Template**
- ❑ If possible, arrange for the class to meet in the computer lab with access to word-processing software. Arrange to download an electronic version of **Portfolio page 5, Blank Cover Letter Template** to each computer. (This template is available at http://www.roadstosuccess.org/materials/templates.)
- ❑ Make copies of **Student Handbook pages 71-72, Cover Letter Proofreading Checklist,** one per student, so students can do further proofreading at home.
- ❑ List the day's BIG IDEA, activities, and vocabulary word on the board.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Given the limited time an employer or admissions director has to review a cover letter, it is essential that the letter follow a business format and emphasize the most relevant information in the opening paragraph. An effective cover letter has the following qualities:

- **Business Format:** Left justified and single-spaced, except for a double space between paragraphs.

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- **Clear Text:** A traditional font, such Arial or Times Roman in 12 point. Bold text, italics, and artistic fonts are hard to read – as is very small text. The font should not attract attention; rather the letter's clean, clear appearance, and content should.
- **White Space:** 1" margins on all four sides. Avoid heavy blocks of text with narrow or nonexistent margins.

VOCABULARY

Unique Selling Proposition (USP): A term borrowed from advertising. The one thing that makes you different from (and better-qualified than) other candidates applying for the same job.

IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS

If you prefer, you may choose to use **Student Handbook page 68, Help Wanted: Assistant Manager** as a DO NOW. Give the students 3-4 minutes to complete it. After completing the activity, continue with the **Warm Up** discussion.

Ideally, students should use a word-processing program to write their cover letters. However, if computer access is limited or nonexistent, students may handwrite their letters. At some later point, students will need access to a school or home computer to complete and print out their cover letters.

For **Activity II, Unique Selling Proposition**, you may wish to have students share their USP's anonymously by collecting them and reading samples aloud without identifying who wrote them. (Students should put their names on their papers so you can return them for use in writing their letters.)

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ACTIVITY STEPS

I. Warm Up (5 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Last week, we talked about the importance of a good cover letter, and today you're going to create your own. Who remembers when and why such a letter might be required? (*often accompanies a resume, particularly when a job involves writing*)

   Employers don't always have great imaginations when reading resumes. If they don't see exactly the skills and experience they're looking for, they may move on. A good cover letter gives a more complete picture of a job candidate, which helps an employer make an informed decision.

2. [Display **Student Handbook page 68, Help Wanted: Assistant Manager** on the overhead projector. Have a student read the directions aloud. Then have students turn to **Student Handbook page 69, Bethany Carter's Cover Letter**, and determine whether or not they'd call her in for an interview.]

3. [Give students 3-4 minutes to complete the activity, then reconvene the class to discuss their hiring decision.]

   SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Bosses are often nervous about the qualifications of job applicants. The manager of the GAP store may be most comfortable hiring someone with very specific experience – for example, someone who's been an assistant manager at another store, or someone who has previous experience at the GAP. Would you be willing to hire Bethany based on her cover letter? Why or why not? (The store manager might like her positive attitude, understanding of retail clothing sales from her previous job at Target, and experience managing employees on the school newspaper.)

II. Unique Selling Proposition (10 Minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** One way to convince an employer that you're worthy of consideration is to create a **unique selling proposition**. What can you offer that no one else can? Advertising companies do this all the time for products: "Glass Plus does windows, and a whole lot more." "Bounty, the quicker picker-upper."

   If you think back to your college essay, you've already created a unique selling proposition by describing an experience that says something about who you are. (NOTE: not all college essay topics are suitable for sharing with a future employer. You might

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describe an extracurricular activity that provided you with important experience, but a topic like difficult family circumstances would be too personal.) In your cover letter, you're going to create a picture of yourself in a sentence or two. Will you highlight the same qualities or experience for every employer? (No, you're going to choose the qualities each employer cares most about.)

[Have students turn to **Student Handbook page 70**, **Unique Selling Proposition**, and create a USP about themselves that relates to a specific employer. As time permits, have students share these so the class can get a sense of what's effective and provide suggestions for improvement.]

III. Drafting the Cover Letter (20 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** The sentences you just wrote are a great beginning for your cover letters. You can add a few details to complete your first paragraph, or use this sentence just as it is.

2. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** In the next paragraph or two, you are to provide the employer with more evidence of your skills and qualifications as they connect to the job responsibilities. You already did a lot of thinking about this when you revised your resume two weeks ago. If you need to refresh your memory, you can find a list of your job-related accomplishments on **Student Handbook page 58**, **Accomplishment Statement Chart**. You'll choose one or two of these items to describe in more detail in the body of your cover letter. You can use one paragraph or two for this.

3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Finally, you'll create a closing paragraph. What should be included here? (Reiterate your interest in the job, and explain how you'll follow up.)

2. [Allow students 15 minutes to write their cover letters. Place a transparency of **Portfolio page 5**, **Blank Cover Letter Template** on the overhead projector for reference on formatting, structure, etc. If students are working on computers, have them save their cover letters to the desktop as they work. When they are finished, have them print out their cover letters, and save their files to a disk or flash drive before deleting them from the desktops. **NOTE:** Students need to include a final, edited version of their cover letter in their Portfolios.]

IV. Wrap Up: Partner Proofread (10 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** After working hard to highlight your skills, you want to make sure you do not overlook a silly mistake on your cover letter, like misspelling a word or

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forgetting a period. You want to show that you pay careful attention to details, so you do not give the employer a reason to decide you're not the right person for the job. In this final activity, you will proofread your cover letter for correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and for correct business letter format. Then you'll exchange letters with a partner and help him do the same.

2. [Have students open to **Student Handbook pages 71-72, Cover Letter Proofreading Checklist**. Quickly review the elements on the checklist together, reminding students to consider all of these points when proofreading their own cover letters. Then have each student exchange his letter with a partner for additional proofreading.]

   SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Congratulations on writing your cover letter! Take a look at the proofreading notes from your partner and ask him or her any questions you might have about the notes. When you get home, make revisions as suggested by your proof-reader. Then, print out a copy of your cover letter and ask a parent or other adult to proofread it, too. An extra copy of the proofreading checklist has been provided for this purpose.

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Help Wanted: Assistant Manager

You are the manager of a GAP clothing store, and you need to hire an assistant manager. There's a one-page job description posted on the GAP website. These are the job duties that are most important to you:

- Models and encourages good customer service on the sales floor.
- Maintains company standards of neat, clean and organized sales floor, cash wrap, and fitting rooms.
- Provides in-the-moment coaching to sales staff to reward good behavior and redirect when needed.
- Communicates effectively with staff and management, even when under pressure.

1. Read Bethany Carter's cover letter and underline the portions that relate to the job duties listed above.

2. Do you call Bethany in for an interview? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Bethany Carter's Cover Letter

Bethany Carter
2512 Rabbit Run Road
Charleston, WV 25302
(304) 555-1212
bethany.carter@example.com

April 27, 2010

Ms. Lisa McGee
Charleston Mall
2033 Quarrier St
Charleston, WV 25311-2212

Dear Ms. McGee,

I'm a graduating high school senior with a strong work ethic and a flair for fashion. For the past two years, I've worked in the Juniors department at the Charleston Target, where I provided friendly service and maintained a neat and well-organized sales floor and stock room. I was thrilled to see you have an opening for an assistant manager at the GAP, and would love to apply my retail skills in a new environment.

I am particularly interested in the opportunity to coach sales staff who are just beginning their careers. As the assistant editor of my high school newspaper, I was in charge of new reporters. I was part boss and part cheerleader. I made sure deadlines were met and articles formatted correctly. I learned a lot about the importance of consistency and respect in managing employees.

I look forward to a chance to talk to you about the assistant manager position, and will call next week to follow up.

Sincerely,

Bethany Carter

Bethany Carter

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Unique Selling Proposition

Many high school students find it difficult to enthusiastically describe the things they're good at. When looking for a job, you need to be able to say good things about yourself with gusto and certainty. A cover letter is a good place to put this into practice.

Please complete the following statement, which you'll use to create the first paragraph of your cover letter. Note that the quality you choose to highlight should be something your employer needs!

Three samples have been done for you.

Job You're Applying For:

_____

I am a _____, as evidenced by

_____

_____

_____

Job: Personal assistant
I am a good writer, with excellent attention to detail, as evidenced by my work as the secretary of my high school language club.

Job: Day care provider
I am a responsible problem-solver, as evidenced by the fact that I've cared for my younger siblings after school since I was in the eighth grade.

Job: Sales or customer service rep
I am a warm and outgoing person, as evidenced by the fact that I make friends wherever I go.

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Cover Letter Proofreading Checklist

Directions: Proofread your letter for each of the points listed below. Then exchange letters with a partner for additional feedback.

Proofreading Tips

- ❑ Check your spelling and grammar carefully. Use the spell-check and grammar-check on your word processing program, but remember this won't catch every error.
- ❑ Use a printed copy to proofread. It's easier to proofread a printed copy than catch errors on a computer screen.
- ❑ Read your essay aloud to make sure everything makes sense.
- ❑ Have a second person proofread your essay.

Content

- ❑ Addresses a specific person (not Dear Sir or Dear Ma'am)
- ❑ Identifies the position the candidate is applying for
- ❑ First paragraph highlights one or two skills or qualifications directly connected to job requirements
- ❑ Uses specific examples to show connections between candidate's skills and the job requirements
- ❑ States what candidate can do for the employer, not what the employer can do for the candidate
- ❑ Clearly describes achievements
- ❑ Last paragraph includes a proactive statement of when candidate will follow up

Format

- ❑ Includes writer's address and contact information at top
- ❑ Includes today's date following writer's information
- ❑ Employer's address follows date
- ❑ Ends with typed and handwritten signature

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Grammar & Spelling

- ❑ Check for proper capitalization.
  - First word of a sentence
  - Names of people and places (Future Farmers of America, Cornell University)
- ❑ Make sure subjects and verbs agree.
  - Jon runs home every night after work.
  - We run home every night after work.
- ❑ Make sure subjects and possessive pronouns agree.
  - Loren will finish her essay.
  - The students will finish their essays.
- ❑ Use plurals and possessives correctly.
  - Dogs (more than one dog)
  - Dog's leash (the leash of one dog)
  - Dogs' leashes (the leashes of many dogs)
- ❑ Use the following words correctly. (Spell-check won't help you!)
  - There (a place) Please put your essay over there.
  - Their (possessive) The students finished their essays.
  - They're (they are) They're writing the best essays ever written.
  - It's (it is) It's almost time for the bell to ring.
  - Its (possessive) The dog chased its tail.
  - To (a preposition) Send your application to WVU.
  - Too (also) He's applying there, too.
  - Two (the number) Two people from my high school will attend Freshman Orientation next week.
- ❑ Use punctuation to show where your sentences start and end.
  - Wrong: Read each sentence aloud if you think you should stop use a period if you think you should pause use a comma.
  - Right: Read each sentence aloud. If you think you should stop, use a period. If you think you should pause, use a comma.
- ❑ Avoid sentence fragments.
  - Wrong: Seemed like a bad omen.
  - Right: The impending thunderstorm seemed like a bad omen.

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Your Name
Your Street Number and Name
Your City, State Zip Code
Your Phone Number
Your E-Mail Address

Today's Date

Company Name
Company Street Number and Name
City, State Zip Code

Dear _____,

Introductory paragraph here.

Paragraphs 2 and 3 here.

Sincerely,

Your Name

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