

Tune Up Your Cover Letters

Make a Compelling Case for Your Candidacy with a T-Letter

By Chip Hartman

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For those in transition, let me ask a delicate question: How's your interview "hit rate" these days? Are you getting the interviews you're shooting for or are you temporarily spinning your wheels? If your career transition engine is stuck in *sluggish mode* – or perhaps stalled out completely – it might be time for a cover letter tune-up.

1. Overview

The perfect pairing of an exceptional cover letter with a targeted resume must always be a primary objective for individuals in transition. Each of these documents by itself can make or break the overall perception of a candidate's paperwork submission, so it makes sense that a tight integration of the two punches up the odds of getting an interview (or getting called back for an additional interview).

Cover letters do more than just announce an individual's interest in a particular position. Their true value lies in providing a clear rationale, or "case," for an individual's suitability regarding the advertised position's core requirements.

An *executive summary* is a special kind of cover letter. Known traditionally as a "T-Letter," it stands apart from other cover letters because it displays a prominent, two-column chart correlating a specific position's top requirements with the candidate's top qualifications – and it does so with point-by-point precision (as shown below).

POSITION REQUIREMENTS	MY QUALIFICATIONS
• Position Requirement # 1	• Candidate Qualification # 1
• Position Requirement # 2	• Candidate Qualification # 2
• Position Requirement # 3, etc...	• Candidate Qualification # 3, etc...

T-Letters become powerful adjuncts to targeted resumes when they provide a strong, compelling case for a candidate's qualifications. Developing effective T-Letters is challenging because they require a special blend of clarity and cut-to-the-chase, no-nonsense writing in order to convince weary screeners that a particular candidate is someone who not only stands out from the pack, but does so *with distinction* – and is thus worthy of further consideration.

2. Why Bother With a T-Letter?

A resume alone does not get you a job. If you want a job, you need an interview first. A great deal of career transition research has shown that more people get called for interviews when they present

an exceptionally well-written T-Letter as part of their submission paperwork. And why not? By providing this kind of cover letter, a candidate has just eliminated much of the filtering, probing, and detective work screeners typically must perform to isolate the ideal individual from a sea of competitors.

A well-crafted T-Letter allows you to make your case for the position you seek. More importantly, it gives you the chance to build a compelling case for your *unique suitability*, a case so strong that it can't possibly be ignored by a hiring manager. As you'll soon see, you can spend time crafting a "passable" T-Letter or you can ratchet up the extra energy required to deliver a product that can't possibly be overlooked – because you've made it an absolute masterpiece. The choice is yours.

3. Basic Structure of a T-Letter

In the highly simplified illustrative T-Letter shown below, the document structure consists of: 1) an appropriate header and introduction, 2) a "T" display block (side by side comparison block), and 3) an appropriate closing.

Mr. David S. Jones
Workplace Industrials
775 Central Ave.
Anywhere, PA, 14522

Jennifer T. Smith
225 Main Street
Anytown, NJ, 08822
Tel (908)555-5555

Dear Mr. Jones:

I am interested in the position of Administrative Assistant listed in the Eastern PA Gazette on January 31, 2008. I believe my skills and qualifications are an exact match for the stated requirements for this position.

YOUR REQUIREMENTS

- Detail oriented, experienced administrative assistant
- Assist customer relations manager
- Corporate experience with major clients a must
- PC software knowledge a plus

MY QUALIFICATIONS

- Four years administrative assistant experience with responsibility for numerous detailed reports
- Substituted for customer relations manager for two years
- Regularly served purchasing agents at Fortune 500 companies
- Hands-on experience with Microsoft Office

Enclosed is my resume for your review and consideration. I believe I am an excellent candidate for this position and look forward to meeting with you to discuss the matter further.

Very truly yours,

Jennifer T. Smith

4. Decision Time: Passable or Powerful?

If your goal is to develop an “average” T-Letter, then the preceding example, if properly tweaked for the specifics of the position you seek, might be sufficient to accomplish that. Theoretically, you’ve just reached your goal of creating a T-Letter and you’ve done it with minimal effort on your part.

But “minimal effort” invites all kinds of problems. In the first place, a T-Letter that demonstrates weak linkages between the qualifications and requirements speaks volumes about the candidate’s failure to grasp the reason for submitting the document in the first place.

There’s another price you pay for taking shortcuts to a “minimal-effort” T-Letter. Other candidates for the same position, apparently hungrier for the position than you are, will pull out all the stops in getting their letters seen by decision-makers. They will toil over them diligently, aggressively seek advice on writing them, and perhaps rewrite them several times before they’re satisfied with the results. Just think of these individuals as people with extraordinary mental toughness, the kind of people who would gladly run the roughest Marine Corps obstacle course at Parris Island **backward and blindfolded** during a raging hurricane just to attain that coveted “top-spot-in-the-pile” on the interviewer’s desk. These are the folks who add new meaning to the expression “fierce competitor.”

It all comes down to the *Principle of All or Nothing* when deciding to write a T-Letter: *If you’ve made the decision to write a T-Letter for your next job submission, make sure you commit to writing a powerful one. Writing anything less will be a waste of time.*

5. Developing a Powerful T-Letter Takes Time and Patience

It’s very important to understand that there’s a huge difference between a “passable” T-Letter and one that truly showcases your qualifications so powerfully that an interviewer sits there looking at it — and you — totally agog. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind to help you develop an effective T-Letter:

- Since this will be a tool used by the screeners to narrow the field of qualified candidates, clarity and brevity work powerfully to your advantage. A clumsily-worded or rambling T-Letter will turn off a decision-maker just as much as sloppy appearance. Bottom line: *Time invested in finessing the words is time extremely well-spent.*
- On the left hand side of the “T,” list about 4 to 7 core skills required for the position.
 - When reviewing the job description, read it as if you are the author/manager of the job description – do not review it from *your* point of view; assume the manager’s point of view.
 - If you are not familiar with the terms in the job description, don’t waste time; move on to the next opening.
 - List no less than 4 and no more than 7 core skills required and put them in priority order.

- For each specific job requirement listed on the left side of the “T” display block, supply a companion bullet point that **nails** your qualification for that requirement — and remember that there cannot be one speck of ambiguity about its truthfulness or relevance. Each “qualification bullet” you list needs to address:
 1. What did you do (i.e., what was the accomplishment)?
 2. Where did you do it (i.e., with what company or organization)?
 3. What was the impact (i.e., relevance, measure of success, etc...)?

Taking the time to painstakingly craft the precise words that capture this kind of *what/where/impact* construct gives the reader a chance to sense some genuine excitement about you as the most qualified candidate, especially if each of your subsequent bullet points is given the same thorough treatment.

- The intended visual effect of the T-Letter is not to present the candidate as an item-for-item match on the listed requirements; it’s to present the candidate as an item-for-item perfect match on the listed requirements, the only possible match on the listed requirements, the match that would be impossible for the company to ignore on the listed requirements. If your bullet points truly capture this perfect pairing of requirement with qualification, the only possible course of action you’ve now handed the decision-maker is to request an interview and/or recommend you as the most desirable candidate.
- Completing an effective “T” display block is without a doubt the single most challenging part of writing a powerful T-Letter. But the document isn’t complete until you develop an effective introduction and a conclusion, placed before and after the “T,” respectively. Many individuals who have written high-impact T-Letters suggest writing the introduction and conclusion only after the “T” display block has been perfectly constructed.
- One final quality check — observe the *Principle of Perfect Pairing* in two different ways:
 - a. Within the T-Letter itself, make sure each of your qualification bullets is perfectly matched with each of the job ad’s requirement bullets; *but also ...*
 - b. Make sure the completed T-Letter constitutes a perfect match with the targeted resume and that the language, tone and writing style are consistent.

6. Why Powerful Executive Summaries Make Such A Difference

Powerful T-Letters get results for the following reasons:

- They condense the most important aspect of a candidate’s submission – his or her suitability for the particular position – into one tightly worded, high-impact document. Most decision-makers depend on their ability to scan large volumes of information quickly to extract relevant information. With a streamlined yet powerful T-Letter, they can generally tell at a glance whether the candidate is worthy of an interview. From that perspective, you’ve just made their job a lot easier. That certainly won’t work against you.
- The very act of supplying a powerful T-Letter sends the message, “*Look, I am taking the time to lay out a compelling case for my candidacy using your very own criteria ... how can you*

possibly deny me the opportunity for an interview?” The powerful T-Letter makes the statement, “This is how I powerfully differentiate myself from my competitors.”

- Powerful T-Letters leave no “wobble room” for faking, fudging, or stretching the truth. A candidate either “has the goods or doesn’t have the goods.”

7. Add The Personal Touch

Powerful T-Letters can make a huge difference. Ready for one more tip that lies outside the boundaries of crafting the document itself? *Use the personal touch.* One young woman recently did this during an interview by referring to her T-Letter as a “cheat sheet.” It was a bold and gutsy step, but she trusted her instincts. The screener smiled and mentioned that he was impressed with her candor. She was called back for a follow-up interview the following week.

In Conclusion

If you’re serious about securing every possible advantage in pursuing a particular job opportunity, consider spending the extra time it will take to craft a well-written T-Letter. You can’t reasonably expect to walk into an interview wearing brightly lit neon signs advertising your unique qualities, differentiated benefits, and absolute suitability for the position.

Thankfully, you don’t need to. Your tuned up T-Letter will do it for you.

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