

# MAKING YOUR RESUME SHINE Handout 3



## Cover Letters for High School Students

High school students have a very particular concern when composing their cover letters: how can the content of your letter compare to that of a seasoned professional or a soon-to-be college graduate? Fortunately, there is much more to professionalism than work experience and a college degree. Whether you are seeking exposure to the finance industry, a high school internship with your local government, a volunteer opportunity at a non-profit, or even a job at a library, the goal is to submit a professional document. By following the strategies below, you'll do just that, crafting a letter every bit as convincing as those of more experience.

### What To Write

Although the presentation of a cover letter is important, the more vexing aspect for many high school students is the content — after all, won't your paltry work experience pale in comparison? Not necessarily: it is quite possible to develop marketable skills outside the workplace or the university. If you are applying for a job as a research assistant, talk about the project you did for your history class, which required library research, internet research, and perhaps even primary document research, followed by the synthesis of all that information into a coherent essay. If you want to work in a lab, talk about the titrations you performed and the microscopic analysis you conducted for your chemistry class.

Extracurricular activities are helpful too; as treasurer of the student senate, for example, you'd become quite proficient financially. It is natural for some employers to assume that high school students lack practical experiences, but you can prove them wrong by demonstrating the transferability to the workplace of the experiences you *have* had.

A second consideration is that you can develop certain skills — foreign language fluency, computer programming knowledge, and trade skills — entirely outside the classroom or office. If an employer is looking for somebody who can speak Spanish, your fluency in the language may well compensate for your lack of higher education. Always emphasize these marketable skills on your cover letter (as long as they are relevant to the targeted position).

Yet you need not be not be experienced in C++ or on a carburetor to qualify in this regard. Some "soft skills," such as a powerful work ethic or organizational abilities, are just as prevalent among high school students as in any other segment of the population. Once again, however, employers might not consider that until you tell them: explain that, for example, your simultaneous coursework, extracurricular activity, and part-time job have given you the ability to balance multiple priorities and work long hours.

Whatever you do, *never* include false information in an attempt to make yourself sound more qualified than you are. An employer will not believe that a junior in high school has two years of experience in tax accounting or is extremely well-versed in maritime law. Excessive exaggeration will only get your application tossed out with the trash. Note: this is not to say that you should omit impressive *true* information — sure make sure that you back up your claims with specific details of your achievements

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and experiences, and be prepared to elaborate in an interview.

## **How to Write It**

After you have determined what content to include in your cover letter, you are ready for its composition. In preparing for this stage, remember that a letter is actually the ideal medium for a less experienced job applicant. Your resume makes it clear that you have less education, and an interview will reveal your youth. A well-crafted, professional cover letter, on the other hand, can put you on par with (or ahead of) everybody else.

Avoid colloquial language, but don't use deliberately elevated vocabulary: the most compelling professional writing is precise and succinct. This advice holds true for any job applicant, of course, but it is most important for high school students; while a hiring manager expects solid business writing from older applicants (and therefore is not particularly impressed by it), she may anticipate undeveloped prose from a high school student and be blown away by your maturity. Just be sure to proofread it thoroughly and ask others to do the same: your English teacher will be able to correct the grammar and provide stylistic suggestions, but have someone with business or management experience edit the letter as well to evaluate its professional tone.

Professional writing must also be confident — you wouldn't want to receive an important letter that began, "I'm not sure if I should be writing this, but..." Don't hesitate to argue that, no matter how old you are, you have developed marketable skills and a professional attitude. Never begin a paragraph by writing, "I know I am probably not qualified for this job, but..." The prospective employer knows that you are young, and you won't convince him to hire you by agreeing with his concerns.

Finally, don't be afraid to target positions not expressly available to high school students — at worst, you'll receive a letter or phone call explaining the policy (or you just won't hear back at all), but you will have marked yourself as ambitious, planted the seed for future contact with the company, and practiced your cover letter writing skills to boot. At best, your well-constructed cover letter and impressively professional attitude just might cause an employer to reconsider. Even if you face difficulties initially and choose to apply only for positions advertised to high school students, with persistence you'll eventually convince an employer that he can put you to good use. A professional cover letter can open that door by demonstrating your potential value.

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