Analyzing Cover Letters & Resumes

Purpose

- *Cover letters.* People write cover letters, or job application letters, to persuade potential employers to read their resumes and contact them for an interview for the job they want. Employers use resumes and cover letters, in part, as screening devices, to help them sift through a large number of applications to a smaller, more manageable number. A cover letter must capture the attention of the person reading it.

- *Resumes.* Resume writers need to demonstrate to potential employers that their experience and skills align with the employer's needs. The resume needs to be organized and worded in a way that persuades an employer to consider the applicant seriously.

Audience

- *Cover letters.* Writers need to take into account several potential readers: the person who will supervise the new hire, a human resources employee, and members of a screening committee made up of supervisors and employees at the hiring organization. Successful cover letters:

  - » *Convey personality.* Readers want to get a sense of the person they may work with. They'll want to know: Will he or she be interesting as a colleague?

  - » *Communicate a strong work ethic.* Readers want to know: Will this person do his or her share of the work?

  - » *Highlight qualifications.* Readers want a quick sense of what the applicant has done that makes him or her a good candidate for the job. What specific experiences connect up with the job in question? What stands out about this person and his or her experience?

  - » *Get to the point.* Writers should keep in mind that their potential employers usually read cover letters *in addition to* their usual workload. That means readers are moving fast; they want to get an immediate sense of whether the applicant may be a good fit.

- *Resumes.* When composing a resume, writers need to keep the same factors in mind as when they write a cover letter (see above). Their readers are busy and want a quick and clear case for how fit the applicant is for the position.

WRITE

Have you ever created different versions of your resume for different jobs? If so, what types of edits did you make? What did you do to tailor your message to a specific audience? Jot down the answers to these questions and then share your responses with a classmate.

Rhetorical Appeals

- *Cover letters.* Writers need to establish ethos by conveying their ethics and professionalism, noting related past successes, experiences, and aptitudes that qualify them for the job, and showing that they're genuinely interested in working for the organization, perhaps by mentioning something specific about it that they especially like. Writers also need to appeal to readers' sense of logos by making logical connections between their resume and the organization's values and the requirements of the position.

- *Resumes.* Resume writers need to develop ethos too. They need to be accurate and ethical in everything listed on their resumes. The stakes are high: You've probably seen news stories about people being fired for lying on their resumes, such as Yahoo CEO Scott Thompson, who was fired in 2012 for listing a degree on his resume that he didn't actually hold.

Modes & media

- *Cover letters.* Cover letters can be sent by e-mail, uploaded to an employment site, and printed out and delivered in person. Traditional cover letters are written documents and rarely contain any visual elements. However, LinkedIn and other career-related networking options are causing standards to change. Talk to people in the industry you're interested in to find out what the standard is for that audience. Creative industries, such as publishing and advertising, may allow more flexibility, while other industries may want a text-only cover letter.

- *Resumes.* As with cover letters, resume standards vary from industry to industry. Social networking sites have made digital resumes that incorporate visuals much more acceptable in some industries. For example, Kevin Burton, who works in disaster recovery, created the visual resume above for the Internet.