

Get It Done:  
Write a Cover Letter

Jeremy Schifeling

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## DEDICATION

To everyone who wants more from life than just another job.



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Teach For America Corps Members  
Echoing Green Fellows  
iMentor Mentees  
University of Michigan Classmates

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## INTRODUCTION

AKA

### THE ONLY PAGE OF MUMBO-JUMBO IN THIS BOOK

Everybody loves advice. Our web forums teem with "expertise." Our bookshelves heave with the weight of self-help books. And our conversational cups runneth over with free advice.

*But you know what everyone loves even more than advice?*

#### **Getting stuff done.**

I.e., actually being able to lose weight, repair a leaky faucet, or plan a vacation. Not just talking about it.

So, in a world with so much advice, why does so little ever really get done?

The answer has to do with the way all this advice is handed out. Think about the last time you got something done really quickly - say, vacuuming your house.

Did you have to think through a plan of attack? Did you have to cobble together vacuuming tips from friends and family?

Heck, no.

You followed a clear list of instructions:

1. Plug the vacuum in.
2. Turn it on.
3. Vacuum.

So why does all of the advice in our lives look like this?

1. Read a 500-page book on vacuuming theory.
2. Try to sort out good vacuuming advice from bad vacuuming advice.
3. Waste a lot of time not actually vacuuming anything and then give up and hire a maid.

Because, believe it or not, it's often easier to fill up a 500-page book with lots of vague ideas than to figure out exactly what needs to be done.

And yet, that's exactly what this series does - it tells you what to do. No more, no less.

So there. That's the only page of mumbo-jumbo in this book.

**Now let's get down to getting stuff done.**





## 1) USE THE BOOK – DON'T READ IT

This book walks you through every step in writing an awesome cover letter - from staring at the blinking cursor on a blank Word document to jumping out of your chair when you find out you got the interview!

*All I ask is this one small favor: **Don't read each step. Do each step.***

In other words, don't think of this like your typical self-help book where you read through everything front to end, think to yourself, "Wow, what a good idea," and then put it back on the shelf, never having accomplished anything.

Instead, after you look through a step, go out and do it. No single step will take more than 30 minutes. And then, when you get to the end, you'll have an amazing cover letter. Not just some vague idea of how to write one. Promise.

## 2) FIND OUT: DO YOU NEED A COVER LETTER?

Before you write a single word though, find out whether you even need a cover letter at all.

Seriously.

While a great cover letter in the right situation can be the difference between getting an interview or not, the best cover letter in the wrong situation isn't worth the words you put on paper.

There are two times when you don't need a cover letter:

1. Cover letters aren't accepted.
2. Cover letters won't actually be read.

### **1) Cover letters aren't accepted.**

First of all, find out how you're expected to submit your application - email, web form, carrier pigeon, etc. If you need to submit your application online, check out what the submission form looks like ahead of time. If there's no space to submit a cover letter - great, you're done! The company is telling you cover letters aren't valued - so no need to write one.

Unfortunately, it's not always that clear...

### **2) Cover letters won't actually be read.**

Many companies that don't value cover letters won't come out and tell you

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that. Often, if you're expected to email your application, the instructions may say something like: "Send your resume to [recruiting@acme.com](mailto:recruiting@acme.com)" - with no mention of cover letters one way or another.

While it's tempting, in these situations, just to submit a cover letter anyway, my philosophy is that the only cover letter worth submitting is a great one. And great cover letters take time. Thus, it's worth your while to find out beforehand whether companies actually want cover letters. That way, you don't waste time on an amazing cover letter that never gets read.

How do you find this out?

Believe it or not, the best way is to ask. If you know someone at the company, by all means have them ask for you. If not, don't hesitate to write to a recruiter or hiring manager directly. It's in their interest to get the best applications so, if you ask nicely, you're likely to get a response. Here's how to do it:

*Dear Ms. Smith,*

*I'm interested in applying for the Sales VP role at Acme Inc. Before I do, I'd like to be certain that I prepare the materials that will best help you make your hiring decision. As such, would you like me to furnish a cover letter along with my resume?*

*Thank you for any information you can share!*

*All the best,  
Jane Doe*

If you don't hear back and you're truly passionate about the job, the best advice is to still submit a cover letter. That way, no matter the company's policy, you'll be covered.

But by doing a little research ahead of time, you can often save lots of time down the road!

### 3) FIND OUT: WHO'S YOUR AUDIENCE?

OK, so you've discovered that you have to submit a cover letter. And you're raring to get started. But, like any great writer, you first have to know *whom* you're writing for. So here are three important points about your audience:

1. It could be a recruiter (i.e, someone whose job is finding great candidates but who wouldn't have much contact with you, once you're hired) or a hiring manager (i.e., someone whose main job isn't finding candidates but who would be your boss or teammate, once hired). In many companies, it will be both. But the nice thing about cover letters is that it doesn't really matter. Because each will be facing the same situation...
2. Picture this scene: It's 6 PM on a Friday evening. The office is empty - except for one glowing cube. Here, the lonely recruiter or hiring manager sits, toiling away in search of the perfect candidate. In front of him or her is anywhere from 50-500 cover letters and resumes. Suddenly, the weekend seems very far away... As grim as this story sounds, it's the reality for many roles. And it's the reason why your cover letter has to be awesome: it simply needs to stand out!
3. Now imagine this: It's two weeks later and interviews are starting for the job. In comes a candidate who doesn't seem qualified at all. How does the cover letter reader feel? Humiliated. And what do they do about? Next time, they only offer interviews to the candidates with the best, most obvious qualifications.



The key takeaway here is that **cover letter readers are both in a hurry but also cautious in picking candidates to interview**. So start to put yourself in their shoes as you begin to write. Think, "How can I both catch their attention but also convince them I'm a safe bet?" Given that 90% of your competition will inevitably submit generic cover letters and/or fail to demonstrate substantial qualifications, recognizing this single insight will already put you in elite company.

#### 4) FIND OUT: WHY WRITE A COVER LETTER?

One last question to ponder before we start writing: *What's the point of the cover letter anyway?*

Especially given all the applications recruiters and hiring managers have to get through, why would they ever ask for more material? After all, every cover letter they receive doubles the amount of reading they have to do per candidate (compared to just looking at resumes).

The answer actually has everything to do with that crippling workload. Because as painful as reading hundreds of cover letters is, doing hundreds of interviews is worse. And yet, without the cover letter, that's exactly what recruiters would have to do!

It all starts with the resume.

You see, resumes are a great idea in theory. They take really different, hard-to-compare candidates and they boil them down to one-page summaries that can be contrasted, side-by-side. This makes the recruiter's life easier initially. But the dark side of resumes is that, because they're so short and regimented, it's hard to really get a feel for each unique candidate. Plus, candidates can create one resume for 1,000 different jobs, so a recruiter has no idea how committed the candidate is to his/her particular company. As a result, resumes and candidates all begin to seem the same after a while - necessitating lots of interviews to sort candidates apart.

But what if there was a companion to the resume? A similarly short document but one that actually helped to distinguish good candidates from bad ones, committed job-seekers from those who could care less?

Enter the cover letter.

The cover letter has three important advantages over resumes:

1. **It can give recruiters a better feel for the real candidate.** Instead of hiding beyond bullet points, candidates can fully express themselves and show off their personalities.
2. **It can signal how passionate a candidate is about the job.** Because good cover letters must be personalized to the company and role, it's impossible to put together good cover letters for thousands of jobs like you can with a single resume.
3. **It can separate the wheat from the chaff.** Since each cover letter will be relatively unique, it's easier to choose between applicants than with resumes - where each applicant seems similar.

So now you know why many recruiters require cover letters. And instead of seeing the cover letter as yet another hassle that must be endured, you can start to see it as an opportunity. A chance to stand out, show off your personality and passion, and get ahead of candidates with similar resumes.

## 5) CHOOSE A FORMAT

At this point, you've laid all the groundwork for a successful cover letter:

1. You've determined that you actually need to write one.
2. You understand whom you're writing for.
3. You know why you're writing.

So let's get down to it, starting with selecting a format.

This can be one of the most fun steps in the cover letter development process - but don't overthink it! Unless you're applying for a design job (in which case the format represents your sense of style), your words still trump your design.

Open up Word (or your word processor of choice) and you'll likely be confronted with a variety of templates - including a handful of cover letters. Choose the template that best matches your desired company's style - Modern for a quirky startup, Traditional for a 100 year-old law firm.

If you don't have access to templates though, no worries! We'll walk through the entire process of designing your own in the following steps.

## 6) ENTER YOUR ADDRESS

Believe it or not, many cover letters go awry at the very top. The reason for this is that cover letter-writers list an address that gets them disqualified right off the bat.

Specifically, they do one of two things:

1. **They list an out-of-town address.** For some companies, this is a deal-breaker. They just don't want to bother with flying candidates in from elsewhere. But if you're prepared to fly in yourself, then don't let them rule you out! If you're getting ready to move to a city, list your future address (even if it's just a friend's place where you plan to crash). And if you don't have a place but would be willing to move, then don't list any mailing address at all. Why give them an excuse to kick you out of the process if you're willing to do what it takes to stay in?
2. **They list an inappropriate email address.** Have you been checking your messages at `sexymama85@yahoo.com` since high school? Then guess what? It's time for a new address! Either use an alumni address (e.g., `jdoe@alum.ucla.edu`) or a professional-sounding personal address (e.g., `jane.doe@gmail.com`) - and be sure to check it regularly. Stay away from work email since you don't want your current boss seeing your correspondence with your future boss!

In addition to avoiding these deadly cover letter sins, write your name and contact info in the upper right-hand corner of the page, just like this:

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Jane Doe  
123 Main St., Anywhere, AL 12345  
jane.doe@gmail.com | 123.456.7890

Note that centering this information and putting the mailing address and email/phone details on single lines will allow you to save a few lines. And remember, every line counts - your cover letter is being read to next to hundreds of others, so you can't afford to waste the reader's limited attention.

## 7) SELECT A RECIPIENT

Do you prefer receiving junk mail sent to everyone or personal letters meant only for you? Well, people who review cover letters feel the same way - they're much happier to get a personalized cover letter that speaks to them specifically than a generic letter that could go to any company. And one of the ways you deliver personalization is by choosing a person to send it to!

I know this sounds crazy, but most cover letters aren't really directed to anyone in particular. Instead, they're designed to be as generic as possible. Have you ever thought to yourself, "I need to send a bunch of cover letters so I'll write a general one and then use Find/Replace to change the company's name?" If so, the result has likely started "Dear Sir or Madam..."

Unfortunately, nothing says you could care less than not listing an actual name. This is especially true when the job listing has a name attached to it. But it's even true when no name is listed. That's because someone always reads the letter - and finding their name's not that hard.

Here's how to do it:

1. **Ask a friend.** If you know someone who's working at the company, ask them to find the Recruiter or Hiring Manager for the role.
2. **Find it online.** Do a Google search for the name of the company + the team + "manager." For instance, if you're applying for a job with the Global Accounting group at Granger, search *Granger Global Accounting manager*. Chances are you'll find a LinkedIn result

or another similar page. Note, this is better than searching on LinkedIn directly, since you often won't be able to see the manager's name unless they're in your network.

3. **Ask the company.** Send an email to the firm's general address (usually `info@domain.com`) or call the main line. Just tell them that you're looking to get in touch with someone on the team that's hiring and want to see who's in charge.

If you still can't find a name, you can always fall back on Dear Hiring Manager, which at least sounds more specific!

Also, unless you're applying to a very traditional firm, don't bother listing the company's address. It just wastes a lot of space on the page and you really don't want to go beyond a single page - again, out of the respect for the reader's time and limited attention. Chances are, any company that would ding you for not reminding them of their own address, is one that you wouldn't want to work for anyway!

Thus, including today's date, your cover letter should now look like the following:

<p>Jane Doe 123 Main St., Anywhere, AL 12345 jane.doe@gmail.com   123.456.7890</p>
<p>January 1, 2012</p> <p>Jill Smith Hiring Manager, Acme Inc.</p> <p>Dear Ms. Smith,</p>

Note that you should address the recipient formally, even at less traditional firms. It's just a professional courtesy and no one will ever judge you negatively for doing so. The only exception is if you know the recipient personally, in which case you can address as them you normally do.



## 8) GET THEIR ATTENTION

There are three key goals of any cover letter:

1. **Get the reader's attention.** As we've noted before, it's possible that they're reading your letter after hundreds of other ones. So you need to work hard to stand out.
2. **Get them to like you.** People first and foremost hire people they want to work with. Your colleagues are going to spend more time with you than their families! So it's no wonder that many managers would rather hire a good, likable candidate than a great, unlikable candidate.
3. **Convince them you can do the job.** As critical as likability is to the hiring process, you've got to be able to get the job done. And if you're coming from a different industry or function, it's doubly important to nail this part.

OK, but before you get to that, you've got to get their attention in the first place. If you don't catch their eye right away, they'll never appreciate any of your other points.

So how to catch a busy reader's attention? Simply put, start with something *surprising*.

Most cover letters start with: "I would like to apply for the X job at Y company. Blah, blah, blah..."

While this is straightforward, it's also a recipe for getting lost in a sea of

identical cover letters.

So instead, try this format: Surprising Fact -> which leads to the reason you'd like to apply.

Here are three categories of Surprising Fact openers:

1. *Early adopter of the company* - I still remember the first Google search I did in 1999. Even though no one had heard of it at my school, I knew right away that this would change everything. And so when I saw the Google Product Manager role listed online, I couldn't resist the opportunity to be a part of the next product that changes everything.
2. *Story about the company making a difference in your life* - I'll never forget my bright red Nike Airs. Lining up on that cold, November morning with all the best X-country runners from around the county, I was so nervous. But looking down at that "Swoosh" on my shoe, I just knew I could win. And I'm just as confident today that I can help Nike win as it moves into the Latin American market.
3. *Why the company or job excites you* - I've always been an engineer at heart. Whether it was tinkering with our broken toaster as a child or helping Target fix its supply chain issues system by system, I love making things work. So, it's with great passion, that I submit my application for the Data Engineering role at Fidelity.

Note that in each of these cases, the Surprising Fact includes lots of juicy human details that the reader can sink their teeth into. Whether it's painting a vivid scene ("cold, November morning") or calling out a specific experience ("tinkering with our broken toaster"), these little details make your story come alive and get the reader to pay attention.

However, as you can see, the Surprising Fact isn't just something unique about you (being one of Google's first users) but something unique that draws a natural connection to the company (being one of Google's first users makes you a natural to help them launch new products).

That's because as soon as you've grabbed their attention, you want to start making the case about your fit with the company...

But first, here's how our sample cover letter is looking:

Jane Doe  
123 Main St., Anywhere, AL 12345  
jane.doe@gmail.com | 123.456.7890

January 1, 2012

Jill Smith  
Hiring Manager, Acme Inc.

Dear Ms. Smith,

December 14, 1985 was the day I first realized how I wanted to spend the rest of my life. Going door to door, selling cookies for my local Girl Scout troop, I realized that I'd never been as passionate about anything as making the sale. Although my friends had long since gone home to drink cocoa, I kept trudging through the snow until I had knocked on every door. And from that day forward, starting as a sales professional with P&G and later as a regional manager for General Mills, I knew that sales was my life. So it gives me great pleasure to apply to serve as Acme's next VP of Sales.

## 9) GET THEM TO LIKE YOU

So you have their attention - now what?

Use it to get them to like you. Because, at the end of the day, *people want to hire people they like.*

Now, as we've discussed, the secret power of the cover letter is that it can illustrate your personality as well as your qualifications. The only catch is that, in your rush to show off your sterling personality, you may come off as having a terrible personality! After all, who likes a candidate who just brags about himself?

Thus, while you want them to like to you - you need to earn their appreciation carefully. Here are three methods:

1. **Humility** - Start by admitting that you're not perfect or completely unique. For example: "As passionate as I am, I realize I'm just one of millions of Disney fans out there."
2. **Culture** - Specify that you're not a great fit for every company, but for this one in particular. And, if possible, draw upon a reference at the company to help give you more credibility: "But the one thing I know is that I'd fit right in with Disney's collaborative culture. After talking with Joe Smith in marketing, I'm truly excited about the possibility of working in such a team-driven environment."
3. **Testimonial** - If you're going to brag, let someone else do it for you. You could draw a quote from a LinkedIn recommendation or even an old performance evaluation: "As my former manager at

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Warner Bros. said, I 'excel in fast-paced team settings.' So I'm confident that Disney is the right place for me."

If you can blend these different elements together smoothly, you can create a compelling portrait of yourself. One that's both a good fit for the company and eminently likable.

See another example in our sample letter:

Jane Doe  
123 Main St., Anywhere, AL 12345  
jane.doe@gmail.com | 123.456.7890

January 1, 2012

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I know, however, that there are even more talented sales people out there. So I think my greatest qualification for the role is my strong fit with Acme's culture. From talking to Jim Dell, I've learned that the salesforce is extremely ambitious - and that's exactly what I'm looking for. As my first boss at P&G said about me, "Jane is never happy with an easy goal, she always shoots for the moon." So I'd love to aim high with Acme's enterprising team.

## 10) SHOW THEM WHAT YOU CAN DO

Now that you've hooked the reader's attention and gotten them to start liking you, you've got to seal the deal. In other words, you've got to blast away any lingering doubts about your ability to do the job. Because no matter how much they like you, they don't want to be embarrassed by bringing in someone who's unqualified.

Here, the best tactic is to systematically take down any objection they may have. You do this by going back to the words the reader loves best - the ones they wrote! Specifically, take the requirements from the job description, put them in the first column of a two-column table, and start knocking them down one by one in the second column. Not only does this make it easy for you to structure your qualifications but the unique format will catch the reader's eye - as always, a critical feat when competing against hundreds of other similar-looking applications.

Here are some examples:

<b>Job Requirement</b>	<b>My Qualification</b>
<i>Proficiency using Microsoft applications</i>	Deep expertise with Office suite, taught colleagues to use advanced Excel functions
<i>Excellent communication skills</i>	Wrote marketing copy for ad seen by 2MM readers, presented to 500 attendees at annual conference

<i>Team player</i>	Collaborated with team of designers and engineers to build a new iPhone app, leading to \$500K in new revenue
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There are a couple of characteristics that define a good response here:

1. **Unique stories** - It's one thing to say you have Office experience. It's another to say you've trained teammates on it. By adding a quick story to each point, you gain significant credibility and keep the reader's attention.
2. **Quantification** - Another way to demonstrate skill is to attach a number to your work. Again, anyone can write ad copy. But only someone with serious qualifications will have the chance to reach two million people!
3. **Clear impact** - You're being hired to move the needle, not just do stuff. So wherever possible, try to show the impact of your work. Whether it's the revenue your app generated or the positive buzz your press release caused, see if you can illustrate the outcomes you created.

Now, since this approach is so unconventional, two questions inevitably arise:

*1) Isn't this the same as the resume?*

While it's true that some of the points you call out in your defense may also sit on your resume, it's also likely true that application reviewers missed them. This is because the standard way to review a resume is to glance at the titles (the companies you worked for and the schools you attended) and skim over the details. There's just not enough time to look at the specific points. However, cover letters need to be read more closely since their format is less easily digestible. And thus, your awesome accomplishments are more likely to get viewed on the cover letter.

This is especially important if you're trying to change functions or industries. In these situations, reviewers won't find any familiar headlines on your resume when they do their quick scan. For example, if they're hiring for an Accountant and all your titles say Project Manager, they're likely to

toss you out (remember that reviewers tend to be risk averse!). But if you're able to catch their attention with a powerful cover letter, they may actually take the time to see all the transferrable skills you've built up in Project Management (organization, detail orientation) that could serve you well as an Accountant.

*2) Do I have to list all of the requirements?*

Nope! In fact, it's better to just list the five key requirements that are critical to the role. This keeps the cover letter on one page (remember the importance of speed for the reviewer) and leaves you more room to describe your most important qualifications.

How to determine the key requirements? Just think about what would be essential to performing the job. In the case of the Accounting job, bookkeeping experience and expertise with QuickBooks would probably count as key. Whereas the generic requirement of being a "hard worker" isn't always worth responding to.

See how it all comes together in our sample cover letter:

Jane Doe  
123 Main St., Anywhere, AL 12345  
jane.doe@gmail.com | 123.456.7890

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Finally, in addition to my passion and fit, I want you to know that I have what it takes to deliver huge results for Acme. So here are how my qualifications stack up to the role:

<b>Job Requirement</b>	<b>My Qualification</b>
<i>Experience leading a sales team</i>	As a regional sales manager for General Mills, I managed a team of 25 sales professionals, achieving 25% growth in revenue over four years
<i>Ability to participate in executive decision-making</i>	I worked with my VP at GM to craft a new sales strategy for the whole company, presenting in front of the CEO and board at the firm's quarterly meeting
<i>Skilled at entering new markets</i>	In my first sales role at P&G, I saw an opportunity to sell cleaning products to college students to build brand loyalty. Despite doubt within the company, this segment has now become a \$50MM/year business.
<i>Good at operating in ambiguous situations</i>	While serving on the board of a local children's charity with many different programs, I helped the organization define its mission statement to focus its resources on teaching 10,000 kids to read each year

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<p><i>Amazing multitasking abilities</i></p>	<p>In the midst of earning GM's "Southeast Sales Professional of the Year" Award, I got my pilot's license by organizing my time effectively and making the most of training opportunities throughout the region I was covering.</p>
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## 11) SET THE STAGE FOR FOLLOW-UP

If you put nothing in your cover letter from this book except for one sentence, *make it this one*: **"I will contact you next week to discuss the possibility of an interview."**

This is because, as powerful as the cover letter is at getting your candidacy noticed, being noticed isn't always enough. Not when there are so many candidates vying for just one spot.

No, the only sure-fire way to get the job is to get interviewed. And getting interviewed often requires follow-up.

Thus, let the last line of your cover letter set the stage for you to follow-up soon. This way, if you don't hear back from the company, you've got a written pledge to follow-up. And who are you to break a promise?

Here's how it looks in our sample letter:

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<i>Skilled at entering new markets</i>	In my first sales role at P&G, I saw an opportunity to sell cleaning products to college students to build brand loyalty. Despite doubt within the company, this segment has now become a \$50MM/year

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<i>Amazing multitasking abilities</i>	In the midst of earning GM's "Southeast Sales Professional of the Year" Award, I got my pilot's license by organizing my time effectively and making the most of training opportunities throughout the region I was covering.

I am eager to speak with you about the value that I can bring to Acme and the clients you serve. As such, I will contact you next week to discuss the possibility of an interview.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jane Doe

## 12) FOLLOW-UP!

So you sent out your amazing cover letter? Great. But there's still one final step to land an interview:

1. Put a reminder on your calendar to follow-up in one week.
2. If you don't hear back from the company within a week, send a follow-up note. It doesn't matter when the deadline for applications is - companies can and do hire at any time. So don't sit around waiting to hear back while they're busy hiring someone else!
3. Let them know that you're still very interested in the role and that, given your perfect fit, you'd be happy to answer any questions they might have.

Ideally, you've done your homework and know who's reviewing applications, so you can send a personal note like this:

*Dear Ms. Smith,*

*As promised in my cover letter from last week, I just wanted to follow-up on my candidacy for the Sales VP role.*

*As a veteran sales leader with a deep passion for setting and achieving bold goals, I'm confident that I can help Acme take its sales development to the next level.*

*Thus, please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions about my candidacy. I'm happy to share any additional information that would help with your search.*

*Thanks so much,  
Jane*

You can also reach out to contacts at the company to advocate for you and send an additional follow-up the next week. However, between your powerful cover letter and your follow-up, you've given yourself the best shot possible at getting an interview and, ultimately, a great job.





## AN OFFER

As a new author, I'd love to get your feedback on this book. Just submit your review on Amazon - and be honest, I want to know what's working and what's not.

As a small thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts, I'd be happy to review a cover letter for you. Just send it to [coverletters@outlook.com](mailto:coverletters@outlook.com) and, depending on the volume I receive, I'll try to offer feedback within a few days.

Thanks for reading and good luck out there!  
-Jeremy



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a former recruiter at Teach For America and someone who's reviewed applications at top companies like LinkedIn, Jeremy has seen his fair share of cover letters. But as a former teacher, what he loves more than reviewing applications is helping others put them together. So Jeremy's written this book to share his experience with others, in the hopes that they can put their best foot forward and land their dream jobs!