Chapter 3

Job application letter and résumé

3.1 Goals—audience assessment and letter writing

This assignment has two major goals: learning to assess your audience, and learning to write and format an effective job application letter and résumé. Most of this assignment sheet describes the correct content and style for an effective application letter and résumé.

In preparation for this assignment, read Chapter 3 (Identifying Audiences and Purposes) and Chapter 10 (Résumés and Job Letters) in Huckin and Olsen [HO91]. This assignment is an exercise in assessing your audience, and finding the appropriate means to address it. These chapters are the background for the lecture and discussion related to this assignment, so read them, even if you think you already know how to do this kind of thing.

The point is not just a good letter and résumé, but, much more importantly, how to write to the right audience. The letter and résumé you will write are simply a practical exercise for learning something about the general problem of audience assessment.

Select a standard letter format that seems appropriate to you from the examples in Huckin and Olsen, keeping in mind the criteria and range of possibilities they suggest. The letter must be pleasing to the eye—not cramped and crowded-looking. It must be easy and quick to read.

Format is even more important in a résumé, because it has to present a lot of information in a easy-to-read form, leave the reader feeling good about the writer, and fit on one page. Again, Huckin and Olsen offer a range of examples here, designed for particular situations. Bear in mind that there is no standard formula, but a range of problems and possibilities, depending on the job you are applying for and your own background and experience.

3.2 Audience assessment

3.2.1 Mass-mailed résumés versus tailored job letters

Originally, a résumé was meant to be directed to no particular employer, unlike the job letter. However, as time has gone by, résumés have been designed more and more to persuade a particular employer. The basic principle is as follows: if you are sending your résumé with a job letter in application for a particular job which you know you really want and have a good chance for, then by all means design your résumé to appeal to that particular prospective employer.

There is another use for résumés: sending one with a letter of inquiry (an all-purpose job application letter), when you are writing to many companies in hopes of locating a job possibility. The rate of response in an operation like this is about like that of most direct mail solicitation: about 1%–3%, if you have a properly selected mailing list. Consequently, it is important not to invest very much time in sending out résumés blind, since the rate of return is very low.

The simplest solution to the low return rate (and in part the cause of it) is word-processing. With a computer, it is very simple to maintain a full, well-written résumé, and a nice, well-written letter of inquiry, and whenever you want to send a batch of résumés out, print what you need and send them. This doesn't involve much investment in time, except for the initial writing.

Once the full résumé is written you may do something else with it: make a copy and then edit and modify it to suit an application for a *particular* job. When applying for a particular job, always write a new job application letter, perhaps after consulting copies of old ones for ideas.

3.2.2 Finding an employment possibility

First, find an actual employment advertisement for a job that interests you and for which you are qualified (or will be when you graduate, if you are graduating this year) from the newspaper, a recruitment notice at the Career Planning Center, or other source.

- You must turn in a copy of the ad or notice with your letter.

3.2.3 Doing the background research

Next, find out something about the company. Significant data include the size, product or service offered, future plans, and so forth. Use personal contacts if you know someone who works for the company: otherwise use reference materials in the library. McHenry Library has directories that give information about local employers. Ask at the reference desk. Don't be shy about this! You may show them this assignment sheet if you don't know what to ask.

You may also call the Personnel Office of the company you are interested in and ask for information. Sometimes this works, and sometimes it doesn't (the company may be too small to have a Personnel Office), but it is often worth trying. Know what you want to ask before you call—write out questions if that will help you remember when you're nervous. Base your first questions on the job advertisement, and follow up with more general questions. Keep notes of what you found out, and where you found it.

- You must turn these notes in, too.

3.3 Writing process—letter writing

3.3.1 Getting started

Now you are in a position to start a draft of the letter. You might begin by making two short lists that answer the following questions:

- What do I have to offer them?

- What do they have to offer me?

Don't be alarmed if all you have to offer is a moderately good grade-point average from a decent university in the right major, and all they have to offer is a reasonable salary and a short commute—but try to pick a job that offers you more than that: experience in an area of your field that you are interested in. And even a short commute can be transformed into "wanting to work in your own community for a company that you already know and respect."

First, the general résumé: get together the necessary information. This includes dates, names and locations of companies you have worked for, organizations you have belonged to, colleges and universities you have attended, special honors or scholarships for academic achievement or merit, and so forth. You may want to include other categories, but if you do, don't call them "Other"—that makes them sound unimportant. You can call the category "Skills" or the like.

Having this information all together in a general résumé will be handy for you in the future; it is surprising how easy it is to forget or lose information of this kind. For those of you who will be needing security clearances from the government in the future, probably about half of you, it is important to keep a file containing every address you have ever lived at, as well as the particulars of all previous employment.

3.3.2 Doing this assignment

Consequently, for this assignment, you will actually be writing two résumés: the first one a full, general one that has everything in it that normally appears in résumés—education, job history, and so on—and the second one tailored to the specific job you are writing the job letter for.

3.3.3   Doing the working draft

Keeping in mind what you learned in class about writing job letters, try writing a draft of your letter. Be as specific and detailed, in relevant areas, as possible. Use your lists as a rough outline.

If it helps you to get organized, you may turn your lists into a more formal outline. Remember that you needn't tell your whole life story in the letter—the people who read these read many, many of them, and they appreciate people who stick to the point and only write about relevant topics. Unless they relate directly to the job, your hobbies are best left out. "I love sports . . . " is not of interest to most employers you will be applying to.

Remember that in a job letter you are asking for an interview, not for a job. Normally no one will hire you sight unseen, on the basis of a letter and résumé.

When you've completed this working draft, set it aside for a few hours and do something else—leaving it overnight is best, if possible. The next day, look it over. You will probably find some things you want to change; perhaps you may have thought of things you want to add. Make these changes and additions right on your working draft. When typed, your letter should fit comfortably on one page. This is your *first draft*.

3.3.4   Experimenting with formatting

Use the writing of the general résumé as a chance to experiment with formatting: we will not be concerned with grading your general résumé so far as formatting goes. We are mostly concerned that it be a complete record of any information you might need to write any other résumé. Do organize it in reverse chronological order, the standard format for any résumé, since otherwise it will be difficult for you to use it to construct the résumé to go with your job letter. Educational history goes into reverse chronological order, as well as job history. If you are working on a word processor, print out a version of this résumé to look at.

3.3.5   Tailoring your résumé

This next step is the core of the résumé assignment. In this assignment, what matters is tailoring the information you have available for the particular job you are applying for. Refer to Chapter 10 in Huckin and Olsen [HO91] for further guidance in tailoring.

When you have a working draft of the tailored version, either print out a copy, if you're using a word processor, or else type it to see what it looks like, and modify it if necessary. Formatting is very important in this version. A well-done résumé should get you a job when it's upside-down. That means it should look sharp, as well as containing the relevant information. This version is the first draft of your résumé.

Do not use many fonts or particularly unusual ones. A well-tailored résumé is like a well-tailored business suit, it is subtly elegant, not garish.

3.3.6   Preparing for peer editing

Read *Testing and Revising* in the text [HO91, Chapter 7].

Before turning in your first draft, bring your first draft of your letter, your tailored résumé, and your general résumé to class, so your classmates may read them.

BE SURE TO BRING THE JOB ADVERTISEMENT AND THE INFORMATION YOU COLLECTED.

We will do some looking at general and tailored résumés in class, to get you prepared for the peer-editing you will do online. After you turn in your first draft, you should request a copy of someone else's draft to edit. After you have checked out the PDF file from the web site, use Acrobat (available on the instructional computing lab machines) to add mark up the text, adding comments to help the author improve without rewriting the text for them.

3.4   Things to keep in mind for editing

Your letter, along with your résumé, is meant to persuade your prospective employer to grant you an interview. These are the main points your letter should conform to:

1. It should be neat.

2. It should contain specific information about you.

3. It should show that you know something about the company and the job.

4. It should sound confident, but not arrogant.

The first three generally give no problems if you have done your background research and are applying for a job suited to your education and experience. Point 4 is about tone. How do you set a confident tone in your writing? Briefly, give information about yourself in a brisk, straightforward way, without a lot of qualification: that is, do say things like, "I believe my education and experience suit me for the position," **not** "I feel I probably meet the qualifications for the position," and **not**, "I am the one and only candidate for the job."

3.4.1 Understanding *confidence* in its cultural context

There is another issue involved in writing a *confident* job letter, one of importance to students who have learned to write letters in other languages in their culture of origin. Displaying confidence in writing is largely a traditional American virtue, originally mostly a male virtue. It is linked with other virtues and values, such as ambition, mobility, and individuality. Other cultures and societies value different virtues in this context: explicitly mentioned sincerity and respect in many Asian cultures, for instance.

There is also a contrast between cultures in how these valued virtues are conveyed in writing. In many cultures, it is expected that one will say in so many words, for instance, "I am a sincere person and very hard working," because if you don't say it, your prospective employer will wonder if you know what you are getting into, and also if you were brought up properly. American culture, on the other hand, is very indirect and circumspect in a situation such as a job letter: one does not say right out something like "I am a very confident person." Rather, one is supposed to write something that will, through the tone of the writing, encourage the reader to conclude that you are confident.

3.4.2 Including a statement of an objective or goal

This is a purely optional item. If you use it, it serves as the first line of the résumé (after your name and address). State your future aspirations that might be seen as a reasonable progression from the position you are applying for. Keep this short—one sentence at most. Be specific and accurate; this is why it matters to know something about the job you are applying for and what it can lead to.

3.4.3 Including other categories

Hobbies, sports, and other extraneous activities: be very careful of this category—it is often irrelevant, and therefore a waste of the reader's time. When is a recreational pastime relevant? Suppose you are applying for a job at a firm in Colorado, and you are a dedicated mountain climber and hiker. Then it is relevant, because it will mean to your prospective employer that you will be happy in the area and likely to stay with the company. Don't, however, make it sound like your interest in climbing is the only reason that you are interested in the job.

3.5 The final draft

Rewrite your letter, making any changes you see as necessary, and incorporating any suggestions your classmates made which you feel work. Don't be afraid to make major changes. Editing is a vital part of writing. Editing may be major reconstructive surgery, or minor cosmetic changes. Make your letter the best it can be by making as many changes as you think it needs.

The final draft must be typed perfectly, just as you would prepare an actual letter to send for a real job application. You are selling yourself to this company, and this letter is your product packaging. Check your spelling carefully! (*Ad* is not the same as *add*, *greater than* is not the same as *greater then*, ...) Typos or any other sloppiness are a sign that you have not proofread carefully, giving the impression that you are careless. No one wants careless employees.

3.5.1 Deciding about length

One page is appropriate for your tailored résumé, unless you have already had a substantial career (10 or 20 years in the industry), and even then, try to keep it as short as possible. One exception is academic jobs—the academic CV (curriculum vitæ) is expected to be a cumulative list of all your publications and all your teaching or research employment. It may run for 10 or 20 pages.

3.5.2 Neatness counts

THERE SHOULD NOT BE A SINGLE TYPO IN YOUR LETTER OR YOUR RÉSUMÉ. It should be neat, have nice margins, and be printed on clean white or off-white paper (pink, blue, orange and so forth do draw attention—generally negative attention). We will accept résumés printed on a dot matrix printer; however be aware that employers strongly prefer to see letter-quality printing in a résumé, because it's so much easier to read.

There is no need to type the word *résumé* at the top—it's obvious from the format what it is—just start with your name.

3.5.3 Hints

Does the résumé list languages spoken besides English? With the current emphasis on global markets, knowledge of other languages can be a significant asset.

Does the application letter mention which issue of the newspaper or journal contained the advertisement being answered? Mis-understandings about what position you're applying for can cost you a job interview.

Professionals should probably **not** include typing speed on their résumés, to avoid being stereotyped as typists. Typing speed should only be included in résumés for jobs in which keyboard skills are important.

Are addresses in standard format for the United States (or for the country mentioned in the address)? In this country the standard format is

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Personal Name
Company name
mail-stop
number street
city, ST  zip code
USA
```

It is customary to put two or three spaces before the zip code, to make it easier for mail sorters to find, and to use the official two-letter Post Office abbreviations for state names.

Phone number formats are different in different parts of the world—try to be clear when applying for a job at an international company by including the country code in your phone number. Luckily for US residents, our country code is very simple, just the number 1. I prefer a format that includes the full phone number that works from anywhere in the world: 1-831-459-4250. (Note: you have to dial an international access code in most countries before the country code, but that is specific to the local phone system, so should not be included in your résumé.)

Be consistent in your level of formality. *Thank you* is a neutral level, *Thank you very much* is more formal, *Thanks* is informal. If you mix them up, you get *Thanks very much*, which sounds insulting.

Watch the word choices! Change *utilize* to *use* and *due to* to *because*. Try to reduce the number of "noise" words in your writing—phrases like *the fact that* are immediately suspect. Most UNIX systems have a program called `diction` that checks for some commonly mis-used phrases. Similar programs exist for most personal computers.

One trap for both native and non-native speakers is the tendency for some verb-particle pairs to be separate when used as verbs, but combined when used as nouns. For example, you can *lay out* a *layout* or *set up* a *setup*. Try not to mix up the nouns and verbs (the mixup would be embarrassing).

Watch out for the suffix *-type* used as a separate word. You can't have an *IBM type PC*, but you can have an *IBM-type PC*. Even if you get the hyphenation right, the suffix *-type* is grossly overused—try to replace it (*IBM-compatible PC*). The word *type* is also over-used—you can often remove it without loss. For example, you can replace *what type of skills* by *what skills*.

Watch out for noun clusters! (See http://www.soe.ucsc.edu/~karplus/185/noun-cluster.html for examples.) You can often make a an ugly string of nouns much more readable by grouping words together with hyphens. Huckin and

Olsen mention this on page 659 (second edition), but do not give a good heuristic for determining when to insert the hyphens. The simplest rule is to fully hyphenate any noun phrase that is used like an adjective as a modifier inside another noun phrase. For example, *computers with eight bits* are *8-bit computers*, *part-time workers* work *part time*, and *just-in-time delivery* is not a moment too soon. If you have more than one level of nesting, there is no way to make the noun phrase clear without extra information. For example, is *just-in-time inventory control* talking about technique for managing inventory so that it arrives at the right time or a control system that was finally delivered?

Watch the commas and semicolons! When you make a list of three or more items, separate them with commas, including a comma before the last conjunction. (Note: the British style for punctuation does not have a comma before the conjunction, but the American style is more consistent and allows conjunctions within list items, and so we prefer it.) If your list items include commas, you may have to switch to semicolons as list separators.

Here's a tiny bit of typographic lore that will help out those of you who are obsessed with details. There are four different symbols that are commonly typed with the - key of a typewriter.[1]

1. Most computer people think first of the *minus-sign*, used for indicating subtraction or negation (for example, $x - y$ or -1). This is conventionally typed with a single -.

2. The second most common symbol is the *hyphen*, used to join compound words together, and to indicate that a word continues across a line break. If you use a word processor, you should never type a hyphen to fix a bad line break, as subsequent editing or reformatting may move that hyphen to the middle of a line.

3. Somewhat longer than a hyphen is an *en-dash* (–), used to indicate ranges (for example, 1988–89 or pages 1–100). En-dashes are usually typed with one -, but most systems that let you change fonts support a separate en-dash. For example, in TeX [Knu84], you use -- and in most Macintosh fonts you can use option--.

4. The longest dash is the *em-dash*, which is used as punctuation between clauses of a sentence, to indicate sudden changes of thought. These dashes are usually typed as -- with no surrounding spaces, but in TeX you use --- and in Macintosh fonts you can use shift-option--. Be careful not to use too many dashes—they make it look like you can't keep to one subject for very long.

See Section A.5.1 for more information about hyphens and dashes.

Even capitalization can make a difference. If you are applying for a job at Apple Computer, make sure you know the difference between a Macintosh (the computer) and a MacIntosh (a Scotsman from a particular family).

3.6   What to turn in

Turn in

- the announcement of job you are applying for,

- the notes you took in researching the job,

- the final draft of job application letter,

- the final draft of tailored résumé,

- a readable draft of general résumé,

- the first draft of job application letter, and

- the first draft of tailored résumé.

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[1] This section looks fine in the PDF output, but terrible in HTML, since HTML does not support the different types of dashes.