

The Musician's Cover Letter Handbook

Abridged version for DePaul University School of Music

**SCOTT STEVENS
ROBERT BORDEN**

Office of Careers and Professional Development
Institute for Music Leadership at the Eastman School of Music
26 Gibbs Street
Rochester, NY 14604
Ph. (585) 274-1210 Fax (585) 274-1047
Office Location: 1st Floor Miller Center, 25 Gibbs St.
careers@esm.rochester.edu www.esm.rochester.edu/careers

updated Nov-11

© 2011 Office of Careers and Professional Development at the Eastman School of Music

*This document may not be copied or distributed without written permission.

WHAT A COVER LETTER IS AND IS NOT

Mention "cover letter" to several people and you will find each person has a different opinion of what a cover letter is. A cover sheet for your résumé or an explanation of everything in your résumé are two likely answers. So what *is* a cover letter? And what is it supposed to do?

Simply put, a cover letter is a 1-2 page document usually sent with your résumé or CV to a prospective employer. **The primary purpose of a cover letter is to introduce yourself as a person, and highlight information that you feel is *relevant to the position* for which you are applying. Your main goal is to explain specifically why you are applying, and how your experience and qualifications make you ideally suited for the job.** The cover letter does other things as well: it demonstrates your writing and organizational skills, and it speaks volumes about your work habits and professional demeanor. A good candidate may not always have a good letter, but a good letter almost always represents an excellent candidate.

The cover letter is also the place for **full disclosure** of all information that is relevant to hiring you particularly. For example, if you are applying to start a position before you are completed all your degree requirements, this needs to be explained in detail here. This would not necessarily disqualify you for a job, but it does show that you are thinking of the employer's concerns and that you have a plan for completing your degree in a timely manner. Or, if you are leaving one job where you seem to be fairly well-established for one that would bring you in at a lower level, you would want to explain why you are considering such a move. Otherwise, the lack of explanation might make you a ~~risky~~ candidate to interview, and leave you at the bottom of the pile.

Sometimes the terminology surrounding cover letters can be confusing. Some job listings do not mention a cover letter while some call for a ***letter of application*** or a ***letter of introduction***. This is not as confusing as it sounds. These different names have come to mean virtually the same thing, though there are slight variations. For all practical purposes, a ***cover letter*** and a ***letter of application*** are exactly the same and are what we refer to by the general term *cover letter*. Regardless of the name of the letter you are writing, the purpose is this: to win you an interview and, ultimately, a job offer. Therefore, the features of any successful letter---concreteness, directness, economy, and active language---will be more alike than different.

A cover letter is not simply a formality. It is the employer's first impression of you, and it is often the deciding factor between getting an interview or receiving a form letter rejection. Of course, your experience and expertise are by far the most important assets you bring to a job search, but any number of qualified candidates is likely to be applying for each job. Your ability to make yourself stand out among a talented group will win you the job you desire.

SEVEN CLASSIC COVER LETTER MYTHS

Every facet of the job search, from résumé writing to interviewing, comes with a basic set of conventions. Unfortunately, misconceptions are more widespread than these rules of the game. Below are seven common myths about cover letters. Like all myths, there are grains of truth in them, but they represent good ideas gone bad.

MYTH #1: You can use the same cover letter for every job.

TRUTH: Cover letter writing is a time consuming process, so any opportunity to make it more efficient is welcome; however, not every job you apply for will have the same requirements. The more you can tailor your letter to the specific job, the better your chances for an interview. For tips on this, see —Cannibalizing in the section entitled The Cover Letter Factory.

MYTH #2: Your résumé is more important than the accompanying letter.

TRUTH: Your résumé may not be read if your cover letter is poor. True, the skills and experience listed on your résumé are what qualify you for the job, but your cover letter often dictates how your résumé will be viewed. A good cover letter has been known to earn an applicant an interview, and even a good résumé will not make up for a bad cover letter.

MYTH #3: All you need to do is write about your own experience.

TRUTH: As with your résumé, your experience is the right place to begin your cover letter, but the job requirements dictate the contents of the letter. Experience that is not relevant to the job is not helpful. Be selective.

MYTH #4: You have to explain everything on your résumé.

TRUTH: The main purpose of your cover letter is to highlight the information on your résumé that is relevant to the job. Use your letter to explain only those parts of your résumé that make you qualified for the job—these are the parts that you want your prospective employer to pay special attention to.

MYTH #5: They will not read it if it's more than one page.

TRUTH: Employers are busy people. Some jobs now attract over 300 applications, so don't waste an employer's time with a long, rambling letter. It should be concise, minimizing repetition, and saying everything that needs to be said in as few words as possible.

MYTH #6: Use language that makes you sound important and sophisticated.

TRUTH: All of us want to appear intelligent to prospective employers, but it is more important that the employer see *you* at your level-headed best. A cover letter is no time for heroics. Trying to impress someone by using language unfamiliar to you has the opposite effect: it makes you look inexperienced. Be yourself.

MYTH #7: Your enthusiasm will make up for any lack of experience.

TRUTH: Don't sell yourself as a —high-energy person! Accomplishments show energy. Let your experience and skill speak for itself. You will impress an employer more with confidence about your qualifications. Above all, be yourself.

STANDARD COVER LETTER FORMAT

Your current address
City, State, ZIP
Phone (opt)
E-mail (opt)

Date of Writing

Full Name of Individual, Title
Organization
Street Address
City, State, ZIP

Dear Ms., Mr. or Dr. [Name indicated on job description]:

Opening Paragraph: The idea here is to directly state your application for the position. State the exact name of the position and the institution or musical organization to which you are applying. Mention how you heard of the opening why you are interested in the job and/or the location or school. If you want to leave your current job for this one, tell the employer why you are interested in doing this.

Main Paragraphs: The objective for the central part of your letter is to develop the reader's interest in you, leading the employer to look at you more closely through an interview or audition.

The main body of your letter is where you highlight the experience on your résumé relevant to the job. It is also where you discuss how your experience makes you interested and qualified for the position. Discuss your qualifications and experiences as they apply to the job description and qualities of a likely candidate. Cite specific examples in your experience to illustrate your qualifications. If you have no directly related experience, use this section to point out your skills and explain how these apply to the job requirements. If you can show you understand the nature of the position and can do the work, you may offset your lack of experience. The key here is learning to narrate what appears in condensed form on your résumé. Somewhere, whether at the beginning or near the end of this section, it is a good idea to explain how what it is about the job that attracts you, commenting not only on what you can do for the organization, but also on how the position is advantageous for you.

Full disclosure of any particular about your situation should be mentioned here as well: your actual date of graduation (diploma-in-hand, dissertation successfully defended, etc), or timeline thereunto, extenuating circumstances about leaving present job, etc.

Closing Paragraph (s): Reiterate your interest in the position and state who will take the next action. Tell them that you look forward to hearing from them or that you will call on a specific date. Reassert your confidence in your ability to meet the demands of the position. Finally, indicate that you would be interested in speaking with them further about the position and that you will provide more materials (tapes, reviews, work samples, letters of recommendation, etc.) upon request.

Sincerely,

(Your Signature)

Your name, typed

TAILORING LETTERS FOR SPECIFIC JOBS

Getting Started

If you're like most people, one of the hardest parts of beginning a job search is generating a list of all your marketable skills and experiences. However, once you finish your résumé, most of the initial discovery work for your cover letter is done, yet not everything listed on your résumé is equally significant for the job you want. Your challenge, after taking stock of what you offer an employer by way of experience and professional skills, is to match what you can offer with the responsibilities of the job you want.

Reading the Job Announcement

Even before you begin actively seeking work, it is a good idea to look at recent job offerings. A good place to start is listings on NEC's Bridge Music Connection. You can obtain login information by emailing the Music Career Services Office.

PLEASANT SYMPHONY

Edward Jacobowski, director

PRINCIPAL BASSOON

50 Performances Sept-May beginning Sept 08

Optional 3-week summer employment

Auditions July 22, 2008 **Tapes may be required**

Send résumé to Barbara Kvet, Personnel Manager,

133 S. University, Pleasant, OH 49076

CAMDEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CAMDEN NY

POSITION: Elementary General Music **QUALIFS:**

NYS certification **CONTACT:** send ltr of appl, res, transcripts and credentials to Edwin Snellmann, Superintendent; Camden Public Schools, 1 School Dr., Camden NY 11605 **DEADLINE:** 7/21/08

These descriptions give minimal information, and this lack of specificity underscores your primary responsibility—to *anticipate and relate*. That is, you must anticipate the responsibilities of the position and relate your qualifications to them.

Most graduates apply primarily for three types of music related positions: teaching jobs, performance jobs, and arts administration jobs. As you might imagine, each type of position has responsibilities that are specific to it and your letter will reveal to the employer not only whether or not you have the necessary qualifications, but also if you understand the demands of the job. The quickest way to convince an employer that you are not a suitable candidate is to show a poor or mistaken conception of the job and its responsibilities. Below is a quick synopsis of the kinds of experience relevant to each type of job. This overview is by no means exhaustive. You should continue to consult with a professional in the field and make an appointment with the Music Career Services Office.

Teaching

For any teaching position, the obvious things apply: your experience as an instructor, your relationship with students, the range and variety of your teaching, your knowledge and ability in the subject matter, and your success. There are, however, subtle differences between teaching requirements at different levels. If you are applying for any educational position, make sure you have consulted with someone who can inform you about the type of information for which your prospective employers are looking. Since most institutions interested in you will request your dossier, the main purpose of this letter is to create a desire in the hiring committee to look further.

K-12: what matters most here is your previous teaching experience, your knowledge and ability in the subject matter, and your ability to work with the age group in question. Explaining what you have done goes much farther than announcing your love for children. Specifics that will establish you as a professional here include a discussion of your general teaching style, any particular pedagogical methods you are conversant with (i.e. Jump Right In, Suzuki, etc.), and your success as a teacher. Your educational background should supplement any teaching experience you have. In cases where experience is minimal, use your educational preparation to show your readiness to step into the role of teacher. Performance achievements may help, but teaching experience and training are most important.

College and University: Positions at the post-secondary level vary in their primary responsibilities. Some college and university positions emphasize teaching; others emphasize your experience and potential as a scholar/performer. Consult with someone knowledgeable about the position for which you are applying. For any post-secondary position, understand what your degree has prepared you to do. A PhD and a DMA may represent different sets of skills, but in a tight job market you may have to sell yourself as a generalist. Once you know the specifics of the position, the obvious things apply here too: area of concentration, previous teaching experience, performance history, publishing history, and collegiality.

Performance

For most performance jobs, a performer's résumé is all that is sent (see the *Music Performance Résumé Handbook* for examples of these). Selection committees will base any decision to hear you play or to interview you on what is included on that performance history and your accompanying tapes, if required. The depth of your professional network may play a significant role here. Any recommendation or personal contact in support of your application can only help.

Arts Administration

Any arts administration opening is basically a business position and should be treated accordingly. Though they may be cultural organizations, orchestras, symphonies, museums, and foundations are businesses that need professional, business minded people. For positions of this sort, research is warranted because you want to be able to address the specific requirements of the job in your cover letter.

As with any business related position, your organizational skills, work history, and supervisory or management experience are fundamentally important. In some ways, these are the most challenging jobs to apply for because you are applying for a non-specialized position. Be wary of parading non-specific qualifications like good communication skills. Your demonstrated ability to take on projects and see them through completion, as well as any collaborative or committee work illustrating your ability to work with people are your best assets here. In the absence of any directly related experience, you need to be able to generalize the qualities necessary to fulfill the responsibilities of the position, and then relate specific experiences that reveal those qualities in you.

STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

The hardest part of writing cover letters after finishing your résumé is finding your way back to normal language. The language of the résumé helps prepare you to find active verbs to describe your experience, but the résumé style is so compressed that it can be difficult to translate your experience into narrative form. Since the main work of the cover letter is the relation of your experience to the job requirements, you need to find an active, personable style to represent you.

Activate your Language

In trying to narrate your experience and describe its relevance to a job, it is important that you find active verbs that show your initiative and skill. —did is out, —designed is in. Similarly, concrete nouns and positive modifiers help establish the qualities you offer much better than vague assertions about having —high energy. Search out the words that convey precisely who you are and what you offer.

Below is a brief list of words useful for relating experience in cover letters.

Action Verbs

accelerated	demonstrated	improved	performed	scheduled
accomplished	designed	initiated	planned	simplified
achieved	directed	instructed	pinpointed	set up
adapted	effected	interpreted	programmed	solved
administered	eliminated	launched	proposed	structured
analyzed	established	led	proved	streamlined
approved	evaluated	lectured	provided	supervised
coordinated	expanded	maintained	proficient in	supported
conceived	expedited	managed	recommended	taught
conducted	facilitated	mastered	reduced	trained
completed	found	motivated	reinforced	translated
controlled	generated	operated	reorganized	utilized
created	increased	originated	revamped	won
delegated	influenced	organized	revised	
developed	implemented	participated	reviewed	

Concrete Nouns and Positive Modifiers

ability	competent	effectiveness	qualified	technical
actively	competence	pertinent	resourceful	versatile
capacity	consistent	professional	substantially	vigorous
careful	dynamic	proficient	significant	vital

adapted from Southworth Company's "Résumé Guide," 1990

Be Concrete and Specific

Employers will not guess whether or not your experience is valuable to them. The best cover letters leave no doubt as to what the writer has accomplished and what she will bring to the job as a result. Even if your experience is not directly applicable to the job, you should write specifically about the experience you have and the desirable qualities it has given you. Instead of general descriptions of your experience such as in college, I worked on the school's audition process, make your experience speak for itself by explaining specifically what you have accomplished. For example, while working in the Office of Admissions during my senior year, I streamlined the audition process by improving communication between the Dean of Admissions' office and the facility reservation staff of the Registrar.¶

Cut the Fat

Cover letters must be concise and to the point. Nothing ruins the representation of your experience faster than a letter choked to death on thats and whiches and ofs. Usually, these are the signs of a writer trying too hard to sound intelligent and sophisticated when plain language would better convey their substance and experience. Look specifically for these words and find any way possible to reduce them to a minimum. To clarify your writing, ask yourself how you can make it simpler and more direct.

No Heroics, No Experiments

The last place you want to conduct a rhetorical experiment is in a cover letter. Some applicants will try to distinguish themselves by adopting a style they assume will make them stand out. Such a strategy nearly always results in a swift rejection. This applies to grammar and punctuation as well. Be aggressive in your confidence that you can do the job, but be conservative in your writing style. Just be direct and professional.

Proofread with Someone Else

You would never send out a tape with obvious wrong notes. Everything must be perfect in your résumé and cover letter, too, which is why proofreading is an essential final step. But it's hard to get critical distance on something you have just completed. You should ALWAYS have someone else, preferably a professional, read your letter. Often only a "cold" can catch the grammatical error and typos. Make use of the services available Music Career Services Office or the Career Center, or Writing Center on campus, or have a trusted advisor or professor help. Don't rely solely on your own eyes.

THE COVER LETTER FACTORY

Next to being offered a job, there's no more satisfying feeling than dropping several completed cover letter/résumé packets in the local mailbox. Even applying for jobs brings a certain sense of accomplishment. However, there is a danger in wanting to sit back and wait for the job offers to roll in.

As the Office of Career Careers and Professional Development points out, you will often get only one interview for every twenty applications you mail out. In the today's economy, the ratio is often much higher. When the reality sets in that job searching is full-time work, the accomplishment of just sending out letters wears thin. You should still feel proud every time you mail an application, but you should immediately begin searching for more jobs.

The best and most successful job hunters establish a process that amounts to setting up a cover letter factory. Everyone has dozens of professionally reproduced résumés. But without the ability to quickly generate letters to accompany them, your résumés often end up as scratch paper. What follows are some suggestions to help you turn out quality cover letters as fast as you hear about new jobs.

Cannibalizing

We said before that you should try whenever possible to tailor each letter to the specifications of each job. But the more extensive your job search, the more you will find yourself running out of new ways to discuss your qualifications. This is one reason to save copies of all the letters you send out. After you have applied for several types of jobs, you'll have written about your qualifications in ways you may wish to use again. Learn to borrow, or cannibalize, parts of old letters that are relevant to new jobs. If you have a computer, you may want to save whole paragraphs for use at a later date. One word of caution: **you do not want these assembled letters to read like form letters. Take time to edit them for continuity.** Do your best to make them fresh and job specific.

Permanent Job Files

Make your job search as systematic as possible; do not just keep a pile of —job search stuff. Set up several different files for different types of jobs. In each of these folders, distinguish between those jobs you are applying for and those that merely interest you. Keep a running log of application deadlines and dates letters were sent out, and attach a copy of the cover letter sent to the job notice.

This systematic organization has long-term benefits as well. When you're looking for your first job, it's hard to believe you'll be looking again soon. However, the perpetual job search is becoming a part of professional life. You should periodically update this file with descriptions of new achievements and new skills you have developed.

Reproducing your Cover Letters

There are a few basic rules which, when followed, allow the content of your letter to come through unhindered by the distractions of printing irregularities:

- Use a professional and readable type font. The selection of highly stylized computer fonts leads people to use them to make a statement. Again, play it conservatively. Times New Roman, Garamond, and Times are acceptable. Make sure you use a 10-12 point font: anything smaller is difficult to read, and anything larger looks unprofessional.
- Your cover letter paper should match the paper of your résumé. Avoid brightly colored paper and graphic designs. Résumé kits are sold with conservative gray or off-white paper.
- Likewise, the letterhead you use at the top of your cover letter should match all of your other documents: C.V./résumé, list of references, etc. This creates a professional appearance, and a visual continuity among all your materials.
- Proof your letter before you print. Since you are probably going to buy that nice paper, don't waste it. Print on regular paper and have someone reliable proofread it to make sure there are no errors before you risk the expensive paper.
- If you plan to email your resume and cover letter, be sure to save them both as PDF's so you don't risk the chance that your fonts or spacing will look different when a potential employer opens your files.

Coping with Silence

The waiting is the hardest part. As you send off your applications, you should remember that it is not uncommon to wait for more than two months without so much as an acknowledgment of your application. If you simply wait to hear from your ideal job, you'll go crazy from the silence. It makes sense to check with the employer 2-3 weeks after the application deadline has passed. Sometimes you can learn more about how quickly they plan to complete the search. Simply call and tell them you are —checking on the status of your application or that you want to make sure your application is complete and that all materials have been received. However, the best response to an empty mailbox and answering machine is to send out more applications.

A job search is a full-time job in itself. There simply is no time for just waiting. Consult the job-search checklist from the Office of Careers and Professional Development included at the end of this handbook. Here you'll find a good description of an on-going job search. It's best to keep researching new openings, but even if you run out of leads you can still practice interviewing, refine your audition tape, or cultivate your network of contacts. Your job search will test your resourcefulness above all. There is always something else to try.

SAMPLE LETTERS---DOS AND DON'TS

Just as in learning to play an instrument it is necessary to hear how others render the music, so too in job searching it is helpful to see what others like you have done in pursuit of a job. It is simply too difficult to imagine what a good résumé or cover letter should look like without seeing one.

The final section of the *Musician's Cover Letter Handbook* presents nine sample cover letters with corresponding commentary on what is good or what needs improvement in each letter. Most of these are actual letters written by students in situations similar to yours. The purpose of including these here is to let you examine a range of letters so that the principles discussed in the preceding pages have some concrete representation.

The collection of cover letters offered here is intended to be representative of the kinds of jobs for which Eastman graduates are likely to apply. Therefore, there are several music education letters (elementary and collegiate) and several miscellaneous letters, which address everything from performance to administrative positions. The first two of these sample letters might be classified as illustrations of the don'ts of cover letter writing, because together they violate nearly every principle of effective writing. The remaining letters succeed to varying degrees because they more closely apply the principles this handbook presents. The letters here are arranged mostly by genre (not necessarily from worst to best), yet you will no doubt notice that often, the letters improve as the experience of the author increases. This does not mean that a person starting out has nothing to say. Often, it simply means that those more experienced job seekers know how to write more comprehensively about their work history.

Use these samples as a guide to your cover letter writing, but guard against wholesale borrowing. You're trying to show your prospective employer something about you. Let the writing begin there.

Current Address
University of Michigan
Phelps Hall, Box 846
Ann Arbor, MI 58369

Permanent Address
P.O. Box 000
Morninglawn Drive
Steuben, OH 43826

Dear Dr. Franklin,

I would like to be considered for the position of Teaching Assistant, Level I for the 2003 – 04 academic year. Next fall, I will be enrolled in the Graduate School of Music, in the DMA program. My course will be in piano performance and music theory. I intend to pursue a career as a performer or teacher. For these reasons, I look at this opportunity as a chance to gain valuable experience with the college population. I also hope to apply the methods I learned in my music education courses to a position such as that of Music TA.

While I have not been a TA during my undergraduate years, I feel I have adequate experience which I will be able to apply to this position. Through participation in student activities, I have acquired organizational skills. My experience as a YMCA camp counselor this summer enabled me to exercise my compassion and understanding in a semi-professional setting. Also, the four years I have been in the undergraduate music program has allowed for me to learn a great deal about the system.

Please give me your consideration for this position. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Enclosure: Resume

.....

Commentary: *The writer of this letter is clearly applying to a job that seems well within his professional interest. But if he has any experience that qualifies him for this position, it certainly isn't obvious in this letter. In fact, this letter is so misguided with respect to basic cover letter protocol that it is hard to see that there is potential here.*

Obviously, the unusual format of this letter doesn't make the writer appear professional. More importantly, the writer makes a fundamental mistake in selling himself short ("adequate experience") and focusing on what the job can do for him. When you apply for a position, your primary goal is to communicate what you can do for the employer. There is also the problem of vagueness: if this person does possess "organizational skills," we have no idea how or where he developed them. This applicant may actually have some valuable experience to draw on having been a student in the music program for four years, but he has done nothing to communicate what this experience enables him to do on the job.

The primary lesson we can learn from this letter is the importance of sitting down with an experienced job searcher. Had this person spent time at the Office of Careers and Professional Development or the Writing & Study Skills Center, there's a good chance he would have come across with a much more professional demeanor and demonstrated real qualifications.

1122 Genesee Park
Rochester, NY 14619

April 5, 2008

Human Resources
Pacific Newspaper Group
P.O. Box 2222
Everett, WA 98254

To Whom It May Concern:

I recently spoke with Ms. Carolyn Simpson last week regarding employment opportunities with the *Pacific Newspaper Group*. I am inquiring about a position with your reporting staff as a music critic. I will be graduating this May from the Eastman School of Music with a Bachelor's Degree in Violin and a minor in English. I became interested in working in Seattle after visiting my grandparents who currently reside in the area.

One medium of communication I was exposed to this semester was radio. My work at the Public Broadcasting Station of WXXI in Rochester gave me the opportunity to work productively and creatively with various broadcast professionals and to plan my time in order to complete projects under deadlines. Concurrently, I am student teaching at a public high school where my internship not only includes tutoring but also anthropological fieldwork dealing with behavioral patterns within the school. Through teaching I have acquired the ability to instill confidence among the students who have had little to begin with. It has been a valuable experience in learning about myself the public school system. Last fall, I was an intern with the Rochester Philharmonic and still volunteer with them today. As an integral member of the RPO, I helped organize and carry out the items on the concert program while understanding the workings of event planning.

I look forward to meeting you and becoming a vital member of your organization. I can be reached at _____ to schedule an interview at a convenient time. I have enclosed my résumé and writing samples for you to review. Thank you.

Sincerely,

.....

Commentary: *Here, another poor letter fails to do justice to the significant amount of experience this student has acquired. The form of the letter is right, but almost nothing in it works toward the job desired.*

This writer has failed to anticipate the requirements of a job as a music critic and consequently cannot relate her experience to the job. Why would a music critic need these qualifications? The first mistake is in describing her interest in working for the company as an accident of geography. A far greater problem is the discussion of random experience with little or no bearing on the job the writer is applying for. How do any of these experiences make her qualified to be a music critic? Presumably, she has many salient qualifications, but none are applied to the job she seeks.

Like the writer of the previous letter, this writer needed a session with the Office of Careers and Professional Development to make this information relevant. Remember, even if your experience is not an exact match, you can usually make the experience you have applicable to the job you want.

424 University Avenue
Box 14
Rochester, NY 14607

May 20, 2008

Reverend James Callan
Corpus Cristi Church
80 Prince Street
Rochester, NY 14607

Dear Reverend Callan:

I am looking forward to interviewing with you and the selection committee for the position of organist/choir direct at Corpus Christi Church. I have already spoke to Charles Rus extensively about the position as well as about the parish community. I am sure that your history of exemplary music would provide me with a challenge that I am eager to meet.

Corpus Christi has appealed to me since I first came to Rochester as a freshman at the Eastman School of Music because of its strong sense of spirituality amidst a diverse parish community. I feel that my background as a Catholic church musician for four years at Our Lady of Angels Parish I would be particularly suitable for your parish's needs. At Our Lady of Angels I was exposed to a broad range of worship music from early polyphonic motets to more contemporary folk music. This background along with my studies of Contemporary Catholicism with Dr Joseph Kelly would enable me to work effectively in all aspects of the position.

It is my strong belief that music in worship is essential for communicating our experience of God. A concept as profound as our creator cannot be fully realized through the use of words alone. Music is an essential means by which we may share and nourish our spiritual beings. It is my endeavor to enhance our ability to impart our belief in God through the use of music.

I have enclosed a copy of my résumé along with references. I hope my application will merit your serious consideration.

Sincerely,

Enclosure

.....

Commentary: *Most performance jobs will not treat the cover letter with the same importance as a non-performance position. Still, you may have to write to introduce yourself and summarize your experience, so many of the principles regarding the need to relate your skills to the position apply here as well.*

This writer clearly has significant church-music experience on which to draw. But instead he tries too hard to sell the importance of music, rather than his own experience. When writing to symphonies, orchestras, churches, etc., you do not have to convince them of their work; you have to convince them of your ability to do that work. The brevity of this letter works to its favor, as does the writer's familiarity with the institution. The complimentary tone of the first part of this letter is easy to over do, but this particular letter never really gets out of hand. Remember, talk about your background and performance history. Save the rest for the interview.

100 Gibbs Street, Box
Rochester, NY 14605

March 28, 2008

Mr. Wilmer Gutman
Director of Music
Greatneck School District
12573 Sand Dune Road
Greatneck, NY 11582

Dear Mr. Gutman:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me several weeks ago regarding the instrumental music vacancy in the Greatneck Unified School District. As a result of our conversation, my interest and enthusiasm for this position have further increased.

As Stephanie Feldhaus may have mentioned to you at the N.Y.S.S.M.A. convention in Albany, this would be an ideal career situation for me. I find the prospect of establishing a new secondary music program to be both challenging and exciting. I realize that this kind of situation can be particularly demanding regarding time and patience; however, I feel that I possess the flexibility and high energy level required to be successful in such a situation. The location of Greatneck is also of significant interest to me: although I have no desire to live direct in New York City, I do wish to have easy access to it.

As a result of my own positive student teaching experience with Constance Fisher in Batavia, NY, I feel that a career in secondary music education would be an extremely rewarding one for me. While in Batavia, I observed and participated in the daily workings of both a successful secondary and elementary program. I thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of motivating students at each of these levels. My preference for secondary teaching originates from personal experience: a dynamic, insightful high school band director gave me the inspiration and motivation to pursue music as a career. I have great confidence in my ability to reach high school students and inspire them as I have been. I look forward to the opportunity to do so.

I will be in the New York area on Friday, April 12, 2004 and would enjoy the opportunity to speak with you in more detail regarding this position. I will call next week to arrange an appointment if this date is convenient.

Sincerely,

Enclosure

.....

Commentary: *Like most letters, this one could use some editing, but it's not far from being quite good. As a follow-up letter, this ought to be much more specific than it is. More importantly, the writer not only gives some sense that he knows what the position requires, but he also relates relevant teaching experience to those responsibilities. It would be nice if he included a bit more concrete detail about what his student teaching prepared him to do. His heavy reliance on the magic of "inspiration" makes him appear a bit young, but there is much here to recommend. The writer uses his contacts well, and he also closes on a very assertive tone, making sure there can be no mistake as to who will make the next move.*

100 Gibbs Street
Box 000
Rochester, NY 14605

April 2, 2008

Dr. Harold Green
Saratoga Central School District
555 Clinton Street
Saratoga, NY 14286

Dear Dr. Green:

I am currently seeking employment as a music educator. Although I am unaware of any current openings, I am very interested in teaching instrumental music in the Saratoga Central School District. In May, I will graduate from the Eastman School of Music with a double major in music education (instrumental concentration) and euphonium performance. I believe my experience at Eastman, summer work with children, leadership in MENC, and student teaching in the Greece and Pittsford, New York, public schools have all prepared me to be an excellent band director.

During my time at Eastman, I have taken advantage of many opportunities to develop my teaching abilities. I have assumed a leadership role in MENC, becoming President of both the Eastman school chapter and the New York Student Music Educator's Association. I have also augmented my teaching-related experiences by working with children and directing music at the Silver Bay YMCA Conference Center for the past three summers. Finally, my performance experience gained at Eastman on euphonium and trombone will be an asset in the classroom. I have participated in numerous performing ensembles, including extensive experience with the Eastman Wind Ensemble.

Please place my résumé in your files and notify me of any openings in instrumental music at any level. While I have the skills to teach some vocal or general music if needed, my career objective is to teach instrumental music.

Upon graduating, I will have completed all the requirements for New York State certification in music. Therefore, I am eager to begin teaching this fall and I am looking forward to the possibility of working in Saratoga.

Sincerely,

Enclosure

.....

Commentary: *If this letter has any major flaws, most of them are related to the letter's function as a letter of inquiry. Because this letter is designed to locate available positions, it does tend to read a bit like a form letter. Without an identified opening to respond to, it is hard to tailor the particulars of your experience to the job. This letter "works" in the sense that it relates the writers experience with a basic understanding of what the desired job would entail.*

You will notice that this writer's description of his experience is rather thin. The "elaboration" of the second paragraph is no more specific than the sentence closing out the first paragraph. It really says nothing about what this applicant is capable of doing and why. Still, as a basic letter of inquiry it will suffice. For a specific job, the experience needs to be expanded.

Ms. Sharon Fitzpatrick
Fayetteville School District
Fayetteville, NC 30267

Rochester, NY 14612
March 26, 2008

Dear Ms. Fitzpatrick:

I am writing in response to your advertisement for a General Music Teacher, elementary level, advertised in *Eastern Region Music Educator's Bulletin*. In May 2004, I will complete my student teaching requirement at the Eastman School of Music, earning my Bachelor's degree in music education and violin performance. At the present time, I am seeking an elementary school music education position. Professor Marcus Nylan suggested I write directly to you as he thought I was ideally suited to your position.

In the past four years, I have received extensive training and varied teaching experience. In addition to the required courses in string pedagogy, I have done supplementary work on cello and will be attending the National String Workshop in Wisconsin this summer. For over three years, I have been an assistant to the Rochester Youth Orchestra's junior high group where I have been responsible for helping students develop individually, leading sectionals, and rehearsing and conducting several works. For the past two summers, I have directed a choir of high school students. Being responsible for musical preparation for a group of sixty students and all aspects of production has been a challenge, but the experience has helped me develop my skills coordinating large groups of young people and focusing their energies on a common goal.

During my senior year at the Eastman School of Music, I worked as a long term substitute in Music Education at the School for the Performing Arts. My responsibilities in this position entail the preparation and daily operation of classes for string and wind players grades 6 - 10, and the management of the extracurricular String Ensemble. Though the school served a self-selected population, the skills I gained in student motivation and curricula planning will enable me to make the transition to a general public school.

Please find enclosed a copy of my résumé. I am very excited about the opportunities your opening presents and hope you will find me a candidate worth interviewing. I am confident that I have the professional skills to meet the demands of your General Music Teacher position. As noted on my résumé, my credential file is available on request from the Office of Career Services at the Eastman School of Music. Feel free to contact me at your convenience if I can offer any additional information. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

.....

Commentary: *Nearly everything about this letter says, "Professional." Overall, what is impressive is the tone and the attention to specific experience. The remarkable thing about this letter is that the writer does not possess unusually extensive experience; her level of preparation is fairly common. But because this writer is not hesitant to discuss her experience, the reader of this letter senses the applicant's confidence and preparation. The writer appears knowledgeable about what her experience enables her to do. This is essentially what letter #3 was lacking.*

There are parts, particularly paragraph 2, where the focus is a bit unclear and the organization appears slightly random. The writer might have made the letter even stronger by using the second and third paragraphs to establish her qualifications as a generalist as well as her leadership and instructional experience. But everything an employer needs to know is included here.

111 East Avenue
Apartment 29

February 25, 2008

Professor Gordon Macpherson
Dean, School of Music
Brandon University
Brandon, Manitoba
CANADA R7A 6A9

Dear Professor Macpherson:

I am writing to apply for the announced vacancy for a Professor of Violin and Instrumental Conducting, as it appears in the Eastman Employment Bulletin of February 14. I have recently completed my Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Performance and Literature at the Eastman School of Music, and I am fully qualified in all the areas which your position requires. These credentials are further enhanced by special features which make me extraordinarily well-suited to your particular circumstances.

Your position demands a wide range of abilities, but they are areas in which I have accumulated considerable expertise. I have been an active conductor of large instrumental groups such as Symphony Orchestra and Wind Ensemble, as well as chamber, jazz, and percussion ensembles. My qualifications in instrumental teaching are also solid and include every level from Grade 3 through University. AS a percussionist, my experience encompasses performance and teaching of all instruments and musical styles. In these areas combined, I have almost 10 years of full-time professional experience earned through a variety of short-term and full-time positions. In all these positions, I have consistently enjoyed excellent relations with employers, colleagues, and students.

In addition to these credentials, I possess other merits which further enhance my suitability for your position. Recently I concluded a rather successful term as a sabbatical replacement at Griffin University. This opportunity has provided me with many insights to the particular demands of such a situation. I now feel confident in my ability to adapt smoothly to a new position while injecting a strong personal component in making an effective and lasting contribution. Moreover, I happen to be Canadian and am therefore well-versed in the public, private and high education systems in Canada. Living both in and out of Canada has provided a perspective on our system which enables me to effectively address its strengths and weaknesses.

I will forward any supporting documents at your request. In the interim, the enclosed résumé will provide an outline of my career and accomplishments. As a teacher, however, I am keenly aware of the importance of direct communication and strength of character in conveying information, skills and attitudes. I look forward to an interview at your convenience when I may demonstrate my competence in these areas and my suitability for this position.

Sincerely,

Enclosure

.....

Commentary: *Writing for a position demanding as much skill and experience as a university professorship is difficult because you have to leave the impression that you are a consummate professional. Most people applying for this type of job have plenty of experience about which to write. The problem becomes one of concretely relating as much of that experience as possible without trying too hard to sound like Einstein.*

This writer clearly has extensive experience and writes with an initially impressive tone. But there seems to be an air of over-statement that runs throughout the letter. His claim to be “extraordinarily well-suited” and familiar with “all instruments and musical styles” verges on arrogance. If you look further you can see why this likely happens.

All of the particulars of this candidate’s experience are left out. The second paragraph has an excellent beginning, but the writer compresses all the important information as if this were a résumé. Paragraph 3 tries to establish the writer’s familiarity with the university environment, but the applicant only succeeds in generalizing about “the particular demands of such a situation.” As with many cover letters, the potential is there. But if the writer was really “keenly aware of the importance of direct communication,” this letter wouldn’t be so inflated and vacuous. Trust your experience.

222 Griffin Drive
Rochester, NY 14602
29 February 2008

Mr. Winifred Babbington
Director of Personnel
Cheyenne Community College
1001 East West Road
Cheyenne, OH 44035

Dear Mr. Brown:

I would like to apply for the position of Music Instructor at Cheyenne Community College. I sincerely appreciated the opportunity to speak with you recently regarding the announced vacancy. My education has been primarily in the area of jazz studies, but I believe the breadth of my experience and related aspects of my education qualify me for the position.

Cheyenne holds a special attraction for me, being close to Casper which, as you know, is my permanent home, and where I spent four years pursuing an undergraduate degree at Casper College. I also have fond memories of Lowman Center, where at your invitation in 1989 and 1990, I performed at your Service Recognition Awards function. I completed all academic work towards the masters degree prior to May, 1993, and that degree from the Eastman School of Music is being awarded this year, due to a postponement of my graduate recital. That performance has since taken place.

I have had a variety of teaching experiences beginning in Omaha where for four years I was jazz piano teacher at the Nebraska School of Music. Since then I have held assistantships at Casper College and the Eastman School of Music in functional keyboard, improvisation and jazz theory. I also have had private piano students from time to time. My present employment at the community College of Western New York in Seneca, New York, has allowed me to gain insight into the musical development/aptitude of students of varying degrees of interest and ability. My responsibilities there include teaching aural labs and functional keyboard with a focus on the direct application of these skills to the understanding of traditional music theory. My ability at the piano further enables me to be particularly sensitive to the problems often encountered by the non-pianist in a given class situation. Last semester, Fall 2003, I taught a course in music appreciation when class enrollment determined the need for two sections. That experience, new to me, was a challenge and has helped further enrich my interest in all styles of music. Other interests in teaching include, but are not necessarily limited to piano, improvisation and instructing ensembles.

I have enclosed with my résumé the names, addresses and telephone numbers of three work-related references as requested. If additional references are needed please let me know.

I am enthusiastic about the possibility of speaking with you further about the position and would welcome the opportunity of an interview. Should you have any questions or desire any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at your convenience. Thanks for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Enclosure

.....

Commentary: *This is the sort of letter that wouldn't take much to polish but could be disastrous if sent as is. The key components are all here: the experience, the education, the personal connection, etc. But this letter demonstrates the principle that small errors can limit your chances.*

Like many graduates, this writer has sent many letters, often just changing the name and address. But here she forgot to change the name at the start of the letter. An employer won't read further. Smaller mistakes include the "Thanks for your consideration"—a lapse in formal diction that sounds unprofessional for this context. A more subtle miscue comes in the form of explaining that this writer had the opportunity to teach "when class enrollment determined the need." If the reason she got the class wasn't flattering, she shouldn't have included it. The same can be said for mentioning the postponement of her graduate recital.

But this letter does do several things right. It uses a personal connection well to distinguish the writer from other applicants. More importantly, it recognizes and addresses potential limitations of a specialized course of study, and it ties the writer's experience to the teacherly skills she gained as a result. With some tightening to sharpen the focus of this letter, it could be quite good.

9876 Finster Circle
Highland, KY 35270

July 27, 2008

Ms. Francis Muele
Dean of Students
Midwest School of Music
University of Kansas
315 Williams Boulevard
Lawrence, KS 63901

Dear Dean Muele:

I sincerely appreciated the opportunity to meet with both you and Karen Fredricks this past Friday concerning the Assistant Dean of Students position. From our conversation, I feel I have a fairly clear idea of what the job requires and what I would need to do in order to be effective in the role of Assistant Dean of Students. After much serious thought and consideration, I am still very excited about the position. I am enthusiastic about and encouraged by what I see as the wealth of personal and professional opportunity the position has to offer both myself and the students I would be serving.

As we discussed, I have been able to gain insight into student development and high education administration through my employment at Smithson University in Columbus, Ohio, over the past six years. Prior to coming to Smithson, I was a serious student of music, performing extensively and teaching from 1977 – 1984.

In addition to my music background, I have worked in the position of Head Resident Advisor as both a graduate student and full-time professional, and I have had the opportunity to utilize and develop my counseling skills. Over the course of four years, I served as a front-line crisis counselor to undergraduates in residence halls. I have successfully counseled students in a number of areas including stress, relationships, suicide, and depression. I know from my conversations with both you and Karen Fredricks that these problems are not atypical of the concerns of MSM students. My own experiences have greatly improved my communication and listening skills, and I feel I could carry out the counseling responsibilities of the position effectively.

My experience as the Honors Program Advising Coordinator enabled me to gain an extensive amount of experience in assisting talented students in career development and exploration. Through my work with the Honors Program, I developed a deep commitment to helping students identify and apply for opportunities outside the university. My work included successfully helping students apply for and obtain scholarships, jobs, and internships. I found this part of my work to be particularly rewarding.

As the Program Coordinator for the Office of Continuing Education, I spend the bulk of my time administering the non-credit course program. In addition to program organization, development, and evaluation, I promote non-credit course opportunities throughout the university and local communities, serving as the main spokesperson for the program. The coordination and promotion of the program has enabled me to effectively utilize and develop my organizational and communication skills. I feel that I possess the communication and leadership skills necessary to assist you in your role as Dean as well as to administer the responsibilities of the Assistant Dean.

I have enclosed with my résumé the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the three references I promised you. I have informed them all that you might be contacting them. If you need any additional references, please let me know.

I understand the timeline that you are working under and know that you are hoping to be finished with the selection process by the end of August. I would welcome the opportunity of an additional interview if you need one, and should you have any questions or desire any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at your convenience. I would welcome the opportunity to talk with you again. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Enclosure

.....

Commentary: *First off, this letter isn't that much longer than the previous letters we have examined. But it is vastly superior to the previous examples. What makes this letter especially good is its economy: the amount of specific information presented to the reader is enormous. One gets the sense that there is hardly a wasted word in this letter.*

Though this writer is applying for a high-level position, notice how the language isn't forced. Everything is said directly and naturally, letting the experience speak for itself. The first impression this letter sends is not only one of professionalism but one of direction. Each paragraph has a clearly defined purpose and follows logically from the one preceding it. Notice that in discussing his experience, this writer adheres to a one-paragraph-per-job policy. This ensures that the responsibilities of his previous positions are fully explained and related to the job he is applying for. At every moment this writer is asking, "what should someone in this position be able to do?" Above all, this writer isn't afraid to write specifically about his experience and qualifications.
