III — Formatting

There is no one "official" format, but here are some basic rules to keep in mind when composing a cover letter:

• **A three line block** in the top right hand or left hand corner of the page containing: your home street address; city, state and ZIP code; and the date. (The date may be separated from the block by one line.)

• **Another three line block**, flush left, one space below the date and one space above the greeting. This block contains the addressee's full name and address, including city, state and ZIP code.

• **Use a colon** after the greeting, not a comma. The greeting should address a specific person in a formal manner. "Dear Ms. Harper:" is perfect; "Dear Jennifer:" is not.

• **Use a personalized salutation** (not, for example, "To Whom It May Concern"). Make an effort to find out who will be receiving your letter. If necessary, telephone the company and ask. If you do not find a specific name, address the letter to "Hiring Manager," "Human Resources Manager," or simply "Manager."

• **Paragraphs should be separated** by a line of space; indentation is not necessary.

• **You may use bullets and bold print** in the body of your cover letter to organize and highlight information, and make it easier to read. If you do decide to use them, do so conservatively.

• **The closing should read "Sincerely,"** followed by your signature underneath, then your full name in print underneath that. Always leave enough room for your signature between the closing and your name when you print your cover letter.

IV — Writing Tips

How you write your cover letter is as important as the message it delivers. Your letter is an example of how well you communicate, and no employer wants to hire people who can't do so effectively. With that in mind, here are some tips on making your cover letter look and sound professional:

• **Personalize the letter.** Whenever possible, address your cover to the individual responsible for filling the position. A generic salutation sends the message that you aren't familiar with the company; such an impression won't convince the reader that you're enthusiastic about the job.

Likewise, "To whom it may concern" will probably concern no one. And "Dear Sir" or "Dear Madam" are ill advised - don't risk alienating or offending your reader.

• **If necessary, make a phone call**, visit the library or use the Internet to find out the name and title of the person who does the hiring. Then make sure to get the spellings correct. Remember, the hiring manager will be looking for people who set themselves apart. Take the time to find out who's in charge and you may be that person.

• **Be natural.** Use simple, uncomplicat-

ed language and sentence structure. Don't try to sound like someone else, particularly if that means using unnaturally formal language, convoluted sentences and words you've never used before (perhaps misusing them in the process). You may mean to impress, but you'll often sound awkward. Write as you would speak. Be formal, but don't be a stiff. Say things in a simple, straightforward way, and don't rely on a thesaurus. As with your resume, use action words to create dynamic sentences.

• **Be specific and get to the point.** Your cover letter must be intriguing enough

IV — Writing Tips, continued

to get the reader to look at the resume, but should be only an introduction to the resume, not a repeat of it. Make sure you answer the question, "Why should I hire this person?"

● **Avoid using clichés,** like "I've taken the liberty of enclosing my resume," or "I'm a people person." It's difficult to sell yourself as unique if your letter reads like every other one in the pile.

● **Be positive.** Don't complain about your boss or describe your present or previous work experience as "boring." Nobody wants to hire somebody with an attitude. Above all, don't sound like you're begging for a job. A hiring manager may wonder why you're so desperate.

● **Be confident, but not arrogant.** Don't be negative or too humble. Tell them you're qualified for the job, but don't demand it. Don't profess to know more about the company than you really do. Explain why you find the company attractive (there must be some reason or you shouldn't be writing) and leave it at that.

● **Be polite and professional.** You may be a comedian with your friends, but a potential employer should be treated with respect.

● **Be efficient.** Don't waste space (and the reader's time) on unnecessary

details. Respect the employer's time - make sure every sentence has something to do with explaining your interest in the company, illustrating how you'll fill the company's needs, and how you'll contact the company in the near future.

● **Type your letter,** but beware of the dangers of word processing. If you send a similar letter to several companies, make sure that you change all customized statements accordingly; no company wants to read how much you'd like to work for their competitor. Carefully read each letter before you sign it.

● **Be available.** Remember to tell the employer how to reach you. Give a phone number which will be reliably answered by either a person or an answering machine. If possible, include an e-mail address.

● **Do not leave the ball in the employer's court.** Indicate what reaction you expect from your letter and how you will follow up. For example, don't end with "I look forward to hearing from you soon."

● **Proofread.** Check carefully for grammar and spelling mistakes, then check again. Typos and grammatical errors say a lot about the kind of work you do. Don't depend entirely on the spell-check function of your word proces-

sor; if you use "there" for "their," for example, spell-check won't notice. Keep a dictionary handy for proper word usage and consult a style manual for grammar questions.

● **Sign it.** If you forget this, the employer may feel like you've sent a form letter.

● **Package it nicely.** Print your resume and cover letter on the same paper stock; the uniformity will look professional. Use only printers that produce neat, readable text with no stray marks or smudges. If possible, avoid using a dot-matrix printer or a manual type writer.

● **Keep one for yourself.** Make a copy of each letter sent, and keep it for future reference.

III & IV — Activity

1. Using the information under "Formatting," create a template for your cover letter. This can be done on a computer or, if necessary, by hand. Just block out the appropriate spaces on notebook paper. Gather any information you will need for your cover letter, e.g., the addressee's name, address, etc.

2. Read the section entitled "Writing Tips." With the tips in mind, take a stab at composing your own cover letter. Remember, keep your letter short; it should be two, or at most, three paragraphs. Make every sentence count. Then, type or rewrite your draft so that it will be easy for others to read.

3. Find three or four other people with whom you would like to work. Assign each group member two or three of the following "Writing Tips": Be natural; Be specific and get to the point; Avoid cliches; Be positive; Be confident but not arrogant; Be polite and professional; Be efficient; Don't leave the ball in the employer's court; and Proofread (i.e., spelling, grammar, punctuation). Each person in your group will read and check the cover letters of all group members only for the particular items he or she has been assigned. In other words, if you are checking letters for efficiency and confidence, don't look for spelling errors. Do, however, write your comments and suggestions neatly on each letter. (Make sure you reread the "Writing Tips" for which you are responsible, before beginning the proofing process.)

4. After all the letters of each group member have made the rounds, read the comments on your own letter. Then, begin to edit and rewrite your cover letter.

5. When your final draft is complete and typed, print it out on nice paper, and grace it with your John Hancock. View the final copies of your groupmates' letters. As a group, select the letter that you think would make the best impression on a potential employer and share it with your other classmates.