

ment thing again.

Here's some good newsletter copy.

Welcome to this month's newsletter. In this edition, we meet our new Chief Executive Officer Jane Smiley, discover what the team in IT have been cooking up to make your life easier, and conclude our three-part series on how to write more effectively at work.

Where newsletters are distributed electronically, as is so often the case these days, the same rules apply as for website copy. Perhaps a topical photo can be used up-front, highlighting a recent event or achievement, followed by an enticing list of contents.

## 9 Job applications and resumés

If an employer spends a minute-and-a-half looking over your resumé, consider yourself lucky. Job applications, on the whole, are about as much fun to read as they are to write. So make yours stand out fast—make it elegant, particular, brilliant even. Not crazy, unless you are, and you think they'll want that—just more than merely bland.

The purpose of the application and resumé—or whatever particular combination of documents the job ad asks for—is to get you an interview. It's to get you a ticket to the dance. With luck, you'll have the right moves from there.

Showing you can read and address a set of specifications will be a good start; using some of the key words they're looking for will be helpful, too. (Frighteningly, many employers now use search engines to scan applications for the key words they think distinguish the people they're looking for.) But so far, you're probably still back in the peloton. To get to the front, you need to take a risk; you need to show your colours. (Of course, they may not like your colours, but the sooner you both find that

out, the better.) There's not much point in blending in; it's crowded back in the pack, and there can only be one winner. You need to find some language and a strategy that make you sound like you—a *you* who can do the job, for sure, but above all a distinctive, accomplished individual.

As with so much else, writing a job application is a positioning challenge. They want someone—but not just anyone; not just someone who sounds like everyone else and who managed to address the selection criteria—who can do the job, even bringing new ideas and talents to the organisation, and who looks likely to be a fit. You want the job, or you wouldn't be applying; but you want them to recruit the real you, not a person they think you are.

So, here's the most important tip for writing job applications: don't conform. Cover the bases, of course, in a reasonably conventional manner, but don't write the same way, and say the same things, everyone else does. Playing it safe is the riskier course.

Tell the story of who you are, and why you fit the bill, and how, better than anyone, you'd thrive in the role.

Most private sector jobs want a cover letter and a resumé (*curriculum vitae*—CV, for short—is another name for the same thing); most public sector jobs want a statement addressing the selection criteria, plus a resumé. So, first some tips on resumés; then some on the statement on the selection criteria; then the cover letter.

### RESUMÉ

Everyone knows roughly how a resumé goes, right?

Keep it to three or four pages, and structure it like this.

- Contact and personal details (including your age and marital status, if you like, but not if you think it won't help).
- A (short and compelling) summary of who you are and what you've achieved, and what you want to do with your working life from here;

where your strengths lie; the talents, skillsets, and personal qualities that set you apart.

- Your work experience, starting with a one-paragraph career overview, followed by a list of your employment history, starting with the most recent job. The entry for each job describes the employer's line of work, what you were responsible for in your role, and what you achieved. Briefly.

At Fremantle Arts Centre Press, a small specialist publisher, I developed a list of picture books for young readers, which produced a 35% increase in sales revenue over two years.

- Your education and training, leading with your most advanced degree and working back to school graduation. List professional development, skills-based training and short courses separately.
- A list of your clients, if you've been self-employed.
- Professional memberships.
- Your interests, social and cultural activities, if you want.
- Referees.

### Tips

- Although a lot of resumés are made of sentence fragments because the writer is shy of 'I', the first person is the neatest and most natural way to refer to yourself in a resumé, just as it is anywhere else. Another option is to write about yourself in the third person: 'Anna Swir is an award-winning copywriter and editor. She has worked freelance and for organisations in many parts of the world.' In dot points listing your responsibilities, you could drop 'I', but in general, avoid this kind of thing: 'managed a team of twenty-five reps', 'reporting to the managing director, responsible for the conception, design, build

and operational delivery of ABC's IT system', 'have driven change programs related to organisational change'.

- Write sentences, even in your dot points. We live in times cursed by the tyranny of the dot point; tell a story, instead.
- Use dot points, by all means, but not too many, and certainly not exclusively. Applications made entirely of dot points will tell a truncated and generic story. Use them, instead, to break up your sentences and to highlight key achievements; you don't want to get too text-heavy.
- Avoid abstract, lofty, airy statements, even when you think they're hitting some of the requisite notes. How is something like this meant to distinguish you and make it sound like you have some clear and original thoughts in your head?

My mission is to utilise my skills in a professional environment for the mutual benefit of my employer and myself.

I am committed to adding value by applying my extensive knowledge, skills and experience to the challenges confronting the organisation.

The experience I have gained in a range of roles will enable me to leverage business opportunities in a proactive way.

Write as concretely as you can, even in your summaries.

Reporting to the Managing Director, I ran the HR function; additionally I had responsibility for ISO implementation and accreditation. In this role, I also managed the phasing out of WordPerfect and the introduction of Novell.

Over the past three years, Ericsson UK has been through rapid business transformation, as the company has retained and redeployed 2000 people from mobile operators H3G, T-Mobile, Vodafone and O2, acquired by Ericsson [or whatever]. Reporting to the Director of

Business Operations, I built and led a team that delivered organisational change management services on each of these transformation programs; my team provided thought leadership and established best practice approaches to complex IT transformations and global cultural change.

#### STATEMENT ADDRESSING THE SELECTION CRITERIA

Some jobs, especially in education and the public sector, ask you to write a statement explaining how you and your experience meet the selection criteria (often vague, sometimes quite specific) outlined in the duty statement. In addition, you may want to, or you may be asked to, submit your resumé. (In which case, take the chance to update it to address the nature and particulars of the job on offer.) But it's the statement addressing the selection criteria that will likely win or lose you the interview.

There's scope to be more discursive in your response than in the resumé and cover letter; and don't miss the opportunity to write in a manner that distinguishes you—a matter of writing, as ever, with grace, care and simplicity, while rationing the bureaucratese, including the language of the duty statement, you use in your responses. On the other hand, each of your responses must engage, from start to finish, with the particular criterion it concerns, making the case for how you fulfil it.

But be warned, as if you didn't know already: writing such statements can bring on a sudden and severe attack of boredom; just make sure your response does not, itself, induce sleep in its readers. The trick is to stay fiercely focused on the criteria without parroting the language they're phrased in. Think hard about what they want to hear, but sound like yourself in saying it.

It's often a good idea, before you start writing, to pick up the phone and talk with the contact person. It's uncanny how often the real job doesn't quite find its way into either the job description or the selection criteria. Talking to someone can give you some of the slender particulars, some of the texture, of the job itself and of the human environment in

which it will be performed. A little conversation can reify a job—a thing that helps most people write an application with more confidence and voice. It's probably sensible to hop onto the organisation's website and get a handle, through its mission, values, philosophy and strategy statements, on what it's really about. You'll want your statement to demonstrate, in subtle ways, that you have such an understanding—and you're not likely to get it from the package they send you.

Start your response with a brief overview of your work life and personal strengths and how they recommend you for the position. Include your interpretation of what the position entails and demands and how and why you think you can perform it beautifully. Keep this to a paragraph—three sentences at most. But don't miss this chance to fly free of the criteria and sound a little like yourself.

I should begin, as I encourage other writers of such documents to begin, with a deft summary. Here are some of the reasons you might think of for appointing me to this role.

- I am the author of one of the leading guides for creative writers, *The Little Red Writing Book* and its companion *The Little Green Grammar Book*.
- Those books arose out of nearly fifteen years of teaching creative and functional writing to a wide range of aspiring writers.
- I am a poet and essayist and the author of six books, most recently *The Blue Plateau*, with two volumes of poetry forthcoming, two books under contract, and other essays, poems and books in the works.
- I have a PhD in literature, a publishing track record as a literary critic, and experience teaching writing and mentoring writers at university level.
- Before I started writing, I spent ten years as a book editor and publisher, which makes me, I guess, an industry insider, as well as a mature and productive writer and engaging writing teacher.

So, let me flesh that out a bit.

After that, make a heading of each criterion and respond to it, starting in each case with a sentence summarising your experience and training in the area alluded to by the criterion. Then include one or two instances from your work experience that support your case.

Something like this, though you should be able to muster a little more pizzazz:

**Experience in staff supervision and training.** As a result of many years' experience in staff supervision, I have developed expertise in assessing the strengths of various members and supporting them to achieve their potential. [Follow with the examples.]

Structure your examples in the format of a short report, advises Deborah Barit, in an article in *The Australian*.

In other words, something like this.

When I was appointed to lead the publishing team at NAQ, I inherited a team of twenty-five staff, whom I had to lead through a process of adjustment to the outsourcing of the print function. This meant sourcing, designing and introducing training programs, guiding some staff through redundancy and recruiting new staff ... Employing mentoring and coaching techniques and leadership skills I studied in my Harvard MBA, and working with outsourcing and training consultants as required, I reduced staff numbers to fifteen over twelve months and increased the department's productivity by 50 per cent—halving its costs and doubling the speed of production of reports against the levels of the previous year.

Close your response by asserting, quietly, that your experience meets the criterion and will allow you to perform this aspect of the job.

Deborah Barit advises writing your response to each criterion as a separate piece of writing. This will help you bring freshness to each entry; it's an antidote to repetitiveness—a good thing to ration, but impossible

to avoid completely, since most duty statements include overlapping categories. Although there's some scope for cross-referencing another answer, you should try to make each section stand alone.

When you think you're finished, stand back. You're probably not there yet. Let a little time pass, if there's any left to leave. Reread all your responses and edit out undue repetition in your language and content. Edit the whole thing carefully, and more than once, to make it trim and lean, and to weed out typos, grammar gaffes and awkwardness.

### Tips

- How long is a good statement? Five pages would be a good upper limit. But the length of your whole statement and each section within it will depend on how many criteria there are and how much experience you have to talk about. There's no perfect length. But you want it to feel trim. Place a limit of three paragraphs on each response, and see how that works. Take another if you need it. Just make sure that if you add length, you add value.
- Focus on the criterion from the very first sentence; don't just open your mouth and start talking around the point. We've said this above, but it bears repeating. Start with a summary sentence; follow with an example or two; use a structure for spelling out those examples; close with a summary that makes the case for how your examples demonstrate your fulfillment of the criterion in question.
- Rather than repeat abstract and unfocused language from a criterion, and to make sure you say something meaningful yourself, start by saying what it means to you in the context of the department's mission and the job description.
- Avoid or find variations for 'In this role I had responsibility for' and 'extensive experience'. Try instead, 'I headed', 'I managed' or even simply 'I was responsible for', and 'I have worked in this field for ten

years' or 'The decade I have spent'.

- Vary your language, about similar things, generally: 'I managed the implementation ...'; 'I put in place ...'; 'I oversaw the ...'; 'Under my management ...'; 'My staff were successful in ...'; 'My most significant achievement ...'

#### COVER LETTER

Keep your cover letter to a page, if you can, and use it to highlight why you'd be the best person for the job.

Start with something catchy, but not too cheesy. This is a snazzy beginning to a cover letter to the publishers HarperCollins (who published the book the applicant refers to in her opening).

Like Henry the bookkeeping boy, I love books; like him, I no longer devour them. Which makes me the perfect candidate for the position of distribution centre manager you advertised in the *Mass Kale Times* last weekend. I have, in addition, ten years' experience as a bookseller and ten further years as the mother of book-devouring boys, one of them in fact named Henry.

Allude to discussions you've had about the job, if you've had them, or comment on why you came to apply—particularly if someone of note suggested it. Fry not to sound too desperate, on the one hand, or pompous, on the other. Write with confidence (see 'Assertiveness 101' in chapter 2). Refer to your resumé, but try not to repeat too much of it.

Here's a whole cover letter that came our way recently:

After talking with you the other day at the suggestion of Professor Beckett, I'm delighted to apply for this position, which I'd be interested in taking on fulltime.

As my resumé outlines, I've taught (through ANU's extension program mostly) and written for journals and newspapers in financial planning

for a dozen years and more, after a decade as an accountant with PwC, and a brief time as a lawyer before that. I'm also the author of a couple of key books on auditing and performance management, *The Audit Book* and *The Performing Flea*. A few years ago I wrote a doctoral dissertation praised for its lucidness of expression and its academic rigour—soon after published, with little change, as a book (*The Performing Flea*).

Though I move happily in accounting, business and government environments, universities, as I may have said when we spoke, are my native habitat. I look forward to the chance to work in one, especially the one at which I gained my MBA.

I look forward to talking with you and your colleagues very soon about the position.

## 10 Proposals

The proposal is a business staple. Most of us get more chances to write them than we'd probably like. On the one hand, they're such an inclusive category, it's hard to say much of relevance to every proposal writer. On the other hand, the idea is always much the same, so there are lessons everyone can apply in any situation.

Whenever one writes, especially in business and the wider fields of organisational and professional prose, one is trying to persuade. You have a thought, a product, a service, a diagnosis, some advice, a thesis ... and you'd like the reader to share it; you have a story, and you'd like them to join it. But the proposal is out and out persuasion; its function is to put a proposition, and with luck close the deal on it.

Proposals are either solicited or unsolicited.

*Solicited proposals* (of which a job application is one variety) respond to invitations—to express interest, to apply for a gig or to bid for some project. Someone lets a tender or publishes an invitation for proposals (sometimes called a request for proposal, or RFP)—to run a course, to