

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. A letter of introduction is your opportunity to make a first impression. For best results, be yourself and be prepared to make sure you are putting your best foot forward. It takes only a few seconds for someone to form an impression of you. Yet it can take years to change an incorrect first impression.

The purpose of a cover letter or introductory email or similar document is, at its core, sales -- selling yourself. Sales is often associated with shady characters like the "used-car salesman" reference. So you might be uncomfortable with the idea of having to 'sell yourself'. However, in reality, we all need sales skills and we use them regularly. Sales is about advocating for an outcome. People with strong sales skills will be able to influence an outcome better than those with undeveloped sales skills. When you want a job / grad school admission / club membership / whatever, you will be able to positively influence the outcome if you take the time to work on and develop strong sales skills.

We were given one mouth and two ears. Use them in that proportion. It surprises most people to learn that sales is not about talking a lot. Great sales means asking great questions then listening intently and actively. First, learn about the person. Then uncover their needs. Once you know the person and their needs / goals, you can help them with the solution. Perhaps you are not part of the solution. If so, move on. If you can be part of the solution, your excellent sales (questions and listening) skills will make it highly likely that the other person will listen to how you can help them.

People are far more likely to buy from people they like. Human nature is to like people when they smile at us, when they talk positively about us and when they listen to us talking about ourselves. So, in addition to talking half as much as we listen, when we do talk, we should talk about the other person -- not ourselves. It is counter-intuitive but true that we shouldn't talk about ourselves when we are trying to sell ourselves.

I receive a lot of letters / emails of introduction for Harvard, Harvard Golf, my company, clubs, etc. I estimate that the average amount of time I spend reading them is 15 seconds. Those that start with "what I want is . . ." get a lot less time. Those that start with "Here is what I know about you / your organization and here is what I admire about it" get a lot more time and attention. Even though I know that is a great sales technique and that is what I teach people to do, I will get pulled in by it each and every time as long as it looks and feels genuine. Does it show that the person actually took the time to learn something beyond the surface? Do they show real interest and caring about me / my organization? When I get to the parts that restate resume facts, I gloss over it at best.

The most important things I want to see in a cover letter, in order are:

- 1) Personalize it. Try to make as personal a connection as you can to the person you are writing. Do you know someone else that they might know? Were you referred by

someone? Do you know this person or did you meet them before? Smile at the person in writing and write positively about them in a specific and genuine way.

2) Demonstrate that you took the time to find out about the person / company / organization -- goals, mission, culture. Find one or two things that you can say that you know about the company that you admire or that attracts you to them. Something that goes beyond the surface. "Harvard is one of the best universities in the world" doesn't get my attention. "I admire the Harvard Golf team value of 'be positive inwardly and outwardly' because the best teams and performers act this way" would make me want to read more about this person.

3) Tell them a little bit about what you can do to help them accomplish their goals. Of course, this means you need to know what their goals are. This requires digging.

4) Very last and definitely not required -- Is there anything in your resume that deserves an explanation? If you have to search to find something, don't add it. If there is an 'elephant in the room', talk about it here and help the reader understand that you know about it and how they can view the situation.

And a few final cautions . . .

Do NOT write things in the cover letter that are a restatement of your resume.

Shorter is always better. More than one page is too much. The best cover letter is a paragraph or two that catches my attention, makes me feel positively about you (see above) and makes me want to learn more.

Mis-spelling and poor grammar in resumes and cover letters will result in a quick rejection. Take the time to proof these documents thoroughly and carefully.

Quick deletes will happen when the person's name is incorrect or mis-spelled. When applying for something, you will usually be applying to more than one place. I regularly receive introductions addressed to another coach or company. People also regularly spell my name incorrectly. They now have made the hill a lot taller and more difficult to climb.

Homework . . . Maybe the best book to read about this that I recommend everyone reads at some point is Dale Carnegie's "How To Win Friends and Influence People".