

The Bull's-eye Cover Letter

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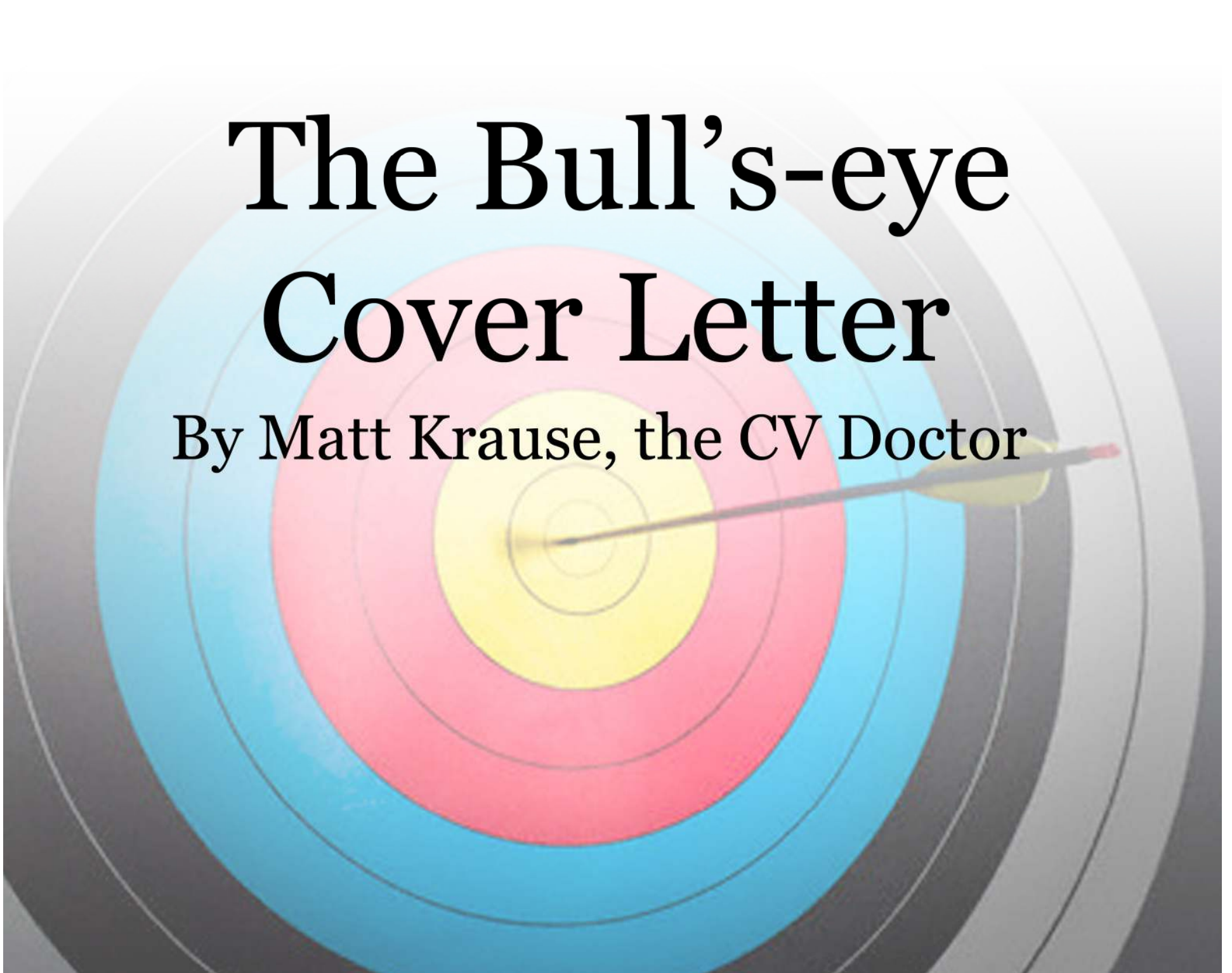


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No one reads your cover letters.

Believe me, I researched it. I asked a ton of hiring managers. Most of them said they don't bother.

They're too busy, and most cover letters are long and boring. Cover letters all sound the same.

So what I say next might sound really strange:

You absolutely, positively, must have a cover letter.

Why?

Almost all hiring managers ask for one, and they expect you to include one. They say if you don't include one, you look lazy, like you don't care.

And it probably won't get read, but if it does get read, it better be good. And preferably short.

Imagine you are the hiring manager. You are tired. It's been a long day, and you want to go home. But your phone is ringing, you have 100 emails waiting for a response, and your boss is calling you into his office.

And, as if that wasn't enough, you also have a stack of 100 CVs on your desk.

70 of them don't have cover letters. If the applicants were too lazy to write cover letters, why should you bother reading their CVs?

20 of them have cover letters, but the cover letters are long. You don't have time for that.

10 of them have short cover letters, and you are happy about that. You hope they are good, and you start by reading those.

That's the environment your cover letter gets read in.

If it doesn't rock, you're out.

So how do you write a good one?

Your cover letter is basically a sales letter. You are the product, and your cover letter and CV are your sales tools.

Since the cover letter is a sales tool, use “AIDA”, one of the most effective sales techniques ever. Salesmen have been using it for hundreds of years. They use it because it works.

What is AIDA?

AIDA stands for "Attention, Interest, Desire, Action". As in:

- Get your reader's attention
- Catch his interest
- Stir his desire
- Call him to action

The key to AIDA is, don't think about your own needs. Think about your reader's needs.

That's important. Remember, it's not about you. It's about the reader. And the reader doesn't care what you want. The reader only cares what he wants.

Let's apply AIDA to your cover letters.

You're going to write a real cover letter, right now. Get a pen, get your BECL workbook, and get a copy of an actual job listing for a job you want to apply for.

Let's start with "Get Attention":

Getting someone's attention is like walking past them with a plate of fresh, warm cookies. Whatever they are doing, they will look up at you (or at least at the cookies).

They'll only look for one second, and then they will go back to whatever they were doing. But for one second, you have their full attention.

In a cover letter, to get the reader's attention like this, begin with a bold statement or a question. Address a specific need the reader hopes the new hire will take care of.

For example, if you are applying for a logistics job, and the job description mentions cross-docking:

"Well-scheduled cross-docking operations can cut warehousing costs 10% or more."

Remember, it's all about the reader, so be careful about how he will perceive your statement or question.

For example, if you are a recent college grad, don't start with a question like, "Do you know that at many businesses, the Marketing department could save a lot of money by increasing the effectiveness of their advertising?"

The reader has more experience than you do, and will probably respond by thinking, "Duh, everyone knows that".

Now that we've got the reader's attention, let's catch his interest...

Catching someone's interest is like turning towards them with the plate of cookies, making eye contact, and holding the plate slightly closer to them, so they think, “Maybe this guy can give me one of those cookies”.

In a cover letter, do this by showing a little bit of knowledge. Make the reader think, “Maybe this guy can help me solve my problem”.

Here's an example:

"At Istanbul University, I studied cross-docking techniques and other aspects of supply chain operations, like (mention something else you know the company does, based on the research you did)."

In this second sentence, you are simply telling the reader you understand his problem. You are making him think, “Maybe this guy can help me”. Do NOT say something like:

“I will help you schedule your logistics operations better, so you can save money.”

Do not solve the problem yet. It’s too early.

Now that we've caught the reader's interest, let's stir his desire...

Stirring desire is like waving your hand over the cookies, so the smell comes closer, then saying, "These cookies are fresh from the oven, would you like one?"

To do that in a cover letter, help the reader imagine what his business would look like if you were there to solve his problems. Paint a picture in his head.

This "Stir Desire" section will vary a lot, depending on the stage of your career, and the job the company is hiring for.

If you are just starting your career, you are probably applying for an entry-level job. The hiring manager is probably looking for an entry-level employee to do the department's day-to-day tasks.

You can't impress him with lots of work experience, but you can tell him you will take care of duties he considers "busywork", so he can focus on the bigger picture.

For example...

"I will help you schedule your logistics operations more efficiently, so the department is freed up to add value in other ways."

If you are more advanced in your career, the company will probably be looking for someone who can solve critical problems.

For example, if you are applying for PR Manager at a food company that was in the newspapers last month for food poisoning that killed 50 children, you might say...

"I know how to manage a company's response to bad press, to minimize the negative impact to the company's reputation, and actually encourage positive consumer opinion that will help the company recover quickly."

Next, call the reader to action...

The call to action is you telling the reader what to do next. Make it short and simple. In the cookie example, you can simply say, "Here, take one".

In a cover letter, you tell the reader to call you.

Make this sentence polite and respectful, but confident.

Try a simple sentence like, "If this sounds good to you, please call me to schedule an interview".

You don't want to sound like an arrogant jerk. You don't want to say, "To get a piece of this awesome sugar, pick up the phone and call me right now."

But, you don't want to sound weak and submissive, either. Don't say, "I'd love to learn more about the position you would like to fill, and I would welcome an opportunity to tell you how my skills could benefit your company. Please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience."

After you've called the reader to action, close your letter (Sincerely, Best regards, etc), and sign your name.

“Brevity is brilliant.”

Keep your letter short. You can do it in just 4 sentences.

I know, that doesn't sound like very much. “Man,” you might be saying, “There's so much more to tell, I'm going to have to leave out so many things.”

And that is absolutely correct. You are going to have to leave out many things. Many, many, many things. But remember, your reader is busy, and short cover letters do him a favor.

You don't need to tell the reader your life story, and you don't need to tell the reader every single cool thing about you. Just hook the reader, and make him want to look at your CV.

Let's look at the cover letter we just wrote:

Dear XXXXX,

Well-scheduled cross-docking operations can cut warehousing costs 10% or more.

At Istanbul University, I studied cross-docking techniques and other aspects of supply chain operations, like (mention something else you know the company does, based on the research you did).

I will help you schedule your logistics operations more efficiently, so the department is freed up to add value in other ways.

If this sounds good to you, please call me to schedule an interview.

Best regards,

ABCABC

By the way, a short 4-sentence cover letter does not mean you get to be lazy. “Short cover letter” does not mean “easy cover letter”.

In fact, writing a good 4-sentence cover letter means you have to work harder than the lazy person who writes a whole page.

You have to choose your words very carefully. You have to think about the psychological effects of the sentences you use.

When can you use the 4-sentence format?

Use the 4-sentence format when you are applying to a job where no one knows you. When your application is going to sit in a stack with hundreds of other applications, and you need a way to stand out, THAT'S when you use only 4 sentences.

Don't use only 4 sentences when you are contacting your uncle, who is a powerful manager at a big company. He's going to read it and think, “Come on, I've known you since you were born, talk to me!”

You can use AIDA in the letter to your uncle. AIDA tells him you understand his problem, and you can help.

But a letter with only 4 sentences is too short. Use AIDA, but talk to your uncle a little more. He knows you, and he wants to hear more from you!

Also, when you are only writing 4 sentences, you don't get to throw a million things onto the page and hope something looks good.

So the 4-sentence format should only be used when you know enough about the company and the hiring manager to directly address their needs.

If you don't know the hiring manager, how do you know what he needs? Read the job description. The job description will tell you a lot.

A generic 4-sentence cover letter that you could use on hundreds of applications would be nice. However, it would also be worthless.

It would sound just like the millions of other generic cover letters people submit. But even worse, it would make you look lazy, because you didn't even bother to write a full-length letter. The hiring manager would think, "This person is not only boring, but lazy too". You don't want that.

Conclusion:

Many people think a cover letter is a summary of your qualifications.

It's not. The top part of your CV is a summary of your qualifications.

A cover letter is a sales letter.

It probably won't get read, especially if it's long.

But you have to have one, and if the hiring manager looks at it, its job is to catch his eye, and make him want to look at your CV.

So instead of writing a long, boring cover letter that wastes the hiring manager's time, why not cut the cover letter down to 4 sentences, use AIDA to catch the hiring manager's eye, and then send him quickly to your CV?

Final words to remember:

Average actions bring average results. And in the hiring process, the average result is rejection.

So if you want to get hired, you need to stand out.

Write cover letters that are unusually short and to the point. The hiring manager will pick up the phone and call you, simply because he's thankful you didn't waste his time.

By the way,

Remember, if you would like to, you can send your cover letter to me. I'll take a look at it, do any obvious corrections and clean-up, and send it back to you.

Just email it to me at mattkrause@mattkrause.com.

Good luck with your job search!