APPLICATION LETTERS AND RÉSUMÉS: SOME PRACTICAL TIPS

Employers say they want to hire people who can communicate well, work independently as well as in groups, and analyse complex situations. Your letter of application and résumé give you a chance to demonstrate all of these qualities. Here are some tips on producing documents that will make an impression on readers:

- **Keep the reader's interests in mind.** Your message is "you need me," not "I want a job." Know enough about the organization or company to recognize what it wants and needs. Then the focus of your documents will be where you fit and what you can contribute. This principle will also determine your choice of emphasis and even your wording (not "I have had four years experience" but "My experience will help me do X and Y").

- **Balance facts and claims.** Your documents will be boring and meaningless if they're just bare lists of facts. They will be empty and unbelievable if they're just grand claims about yourself. Use each of the two or three paragraphs in the body of your letter to make a few key interpretive statements ("I can sell aggressively"). Back up each one with some examples. Then use your résumé to follow through with further specifications (e.g. "achieved highest sales figure among 10 employees for first 3 months of 2000").

- **Write concisely.** Save space by referring to points in your résumé rather than repeating every detail in your letter ("As my résumé shows, I have been promoted in each of my summer jobs"). There's no space available for word-spinning. Prune your style by following any good writing guide or the U of T online handout "Wordiness: Danger Signals and Ways to React."

Specific points about application letters

1. Write a letter for each application, tailored for the specific situation. Even if the ad calls only for a résumé or a form to be filled out, send a brief covering letter or email anyway. The letter makes a first impression, and it can direct the reader to notice key points of the résumé.
2. Use standard letter format, with internal addresses (spell names correctly!) and salutations. Use specific names or at least position titles whenever possible (call the company or check its Website). Avoid the dated "Dear Sir or Madam" and "To whom it may concern." You can use an Attention line or a Subject line instead of a salutation if you have to.
3. Most application letters for entry-level jobs are one or two pages or screens in length, short enough to take in quickly but with room for some real substance.
4. Start strong and clear. For an advertised position, name the job and say where you saw the ad. For a speculative letter, name a specific function you can offer and relate it to something you know about the organization.
5. Use paragraph structure to lead your reader from one interpretive point to another. Refer to specific information in terms of examples for the points you're making, and mention that your résumé gives further evidence.
6. End strongly by requesting an interview. It is now common to say that you will call soon to set a time. Phrases like "thank you for your time" are unnecessary.

Specific points about résumés (in academic life usually called *curriculum vitae* or *c.v.*)

7. Have more than one on hand, emphasizing different aspects of your qualifications or aims. Then you can update and revise them quickly when opportunities arise.
8. Make them easy to read by using headings, point form, and lots of white space. Look at a few current books of advice to see the range of page formats available. Create one that suits your situation rather than following a standard one rigidly. Beware using a fancy page design from a software package. Too many others will also use it.
9. The basic choice is between the **traditional chronological** organization (with the main sections Education and Experience) and the **functional** one (where sections name types of experience or qualities of character). You can get some of the benefits of both by creating a one- or two-line introductory section called *Profile* or *Objective* to sum up your main unifying point. You may also use *Achievement* subsections to emphasize your most important qualifications. These may include a horizontal list of keywords in noun form to serve in electronic scanning for information.
10. List facts in reverse chronological order, with the most recent ones first. Shorten some lists by combining related entries (e.g. part-time jobs). In general, omit details of high-school achievements. You also don't have to include personal details or full information for people you're listing as references. But don't try to save space by relying on acronyms for programs or subjects: they aren't always recognizable by readers or electronic searches, so spell out the full titles.

RESOURCES FOR APPLICATION-WRITING

Besides providing workshops and individual consultations, university Career Centres usually have bookshelves of relevant books and handouts of good advice. Their websites are another source of targeted advice: e.g., U of T Career Centres offer a collection of e-books and online videos; University of Waterloo Centre for Career Action gives links for useful advice files.

Public libraries and bookstores also stock a great deal of material, but little of it is Canadian, and it may not be suitable for the start of a career. Look for advice and encouragement for self-analysis, not examples to copy from. Some classic books for university graduates:

R. Bolles, *What Colour is Your Parachute.* Analysing your choices and creating job-search strategies.
M. Munschauer, *Jobs for English Majors and Other Smart People.* Is that you in the title?