

# Mark Baker

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00:15

My name is Mark Baker, I am the author of standard cover letters. And I'm delighted to be participating in this festival with everybody. And really excited to be sharing my views and my approach to writing cover letters cover letters that stand out. This approach has served me very well in my career. And it's helped lots of other people. And it's still helping lots of people write cover letters that are noticed by employers. Now, of course, when I wrote the book, I didn't just write it with college grads in mind. The principal, however, can be applied to anybody who's writing a cover letter, including college grads. And so I will be showing you a little bit as I talk about my points today, how you specifically can use the information that I'm going to share with you. Also, one thing is I am going to give you three free tools at the end of my presentation. And these are amazing tools that will be able to help you craft an standout cover letter of your very own. So look out for that link that I will pass on to you right at the very end. So let's get started with what I'm going to be covering today. The first thing is, I want to tell you how and why you must position yourself as a problem solver. So you see the mistake that a lot of people make is they position themselves as a job applicant. Now those two even sounds very different. You want to position yourself as a problem solver, even if you are a job applicant. The next thing is taking your problem solving abilities, and presenting that to an employer in your cover letter. And the best thing to do is to use a proven eight step cover letter writing method and template which I will share with you today. Now, I will also give that template to you. That's one of the freebies that I'll give you at the end. So you don't need to be taking notes about what those steps are all about. And lastly, I'm going to cover some critical cover letter writing mistakes. Now I actually don't have time to cover all 15. But I've identified 15 very common errors that actually stand in the way of people's cover letters even being read. So what I will do today is I will cover one of those, but I'm going to give you the rest in a handout as well. So let's have a look at first of all, why you in this position

yourself as a problem solver. Now, this is something that I discovered quite early in my career, I went to my boss one day, and I presented him with a problem and sat back and waited for him to give me the solution. Of course, he leaned forward and said, You know what, you're just like everybody else, all you do is present me with problems. You never come to me with a solution. Well, that was a smack in the face for me. And I sat back and thought about it. And it was advice that I've used for the rest of my career. Because I realized then that that was something that was probably going to make me stand out as a job employee as an employee. And I immediately started looking for opportunities to present solutions to problems that I had identified in my actual job situation. Now, of course, I got a lot better at doing this with practice. And so when you when you do this is when you become conscious and aware of problem and analyze those problems. And then think about solutions that you can present to somebody who can, who has, you know, the power to make a decision about whether they can implement those or not. That's when you start to actually stand out. Now, of course, not all my ideas were great. Not all of them were accepted. But it definitely is something that helped me to stand out as an employee and helps me to stand out as an employee for anybody that I do work with. So the reason why you must position yourself as a problem solver is because that is what employers are looking for. When you have been able to solve problems in your career, and you're able to present those and that information to future employers. It makes you A very valuable asset for them to actually take on board.



05:05

So how do you position yourself as a problem solver? Because, as I said, most people see themselves as a job applicant when they're applying for a job. Well, Socrates, who is a philosopher and educator from way, way back, and so of course, you know, had great advice, Know thyself. This is all about knowing what you're good at, just as a whole person, you can't separate yourself from a person who does a job from a person in the rest of your life. You know, what's your thing? What do you really, really good at? What do you like doing? And where, and how have you demonstrated this? So if I think about myself, at this point, of course, I regard my strength as being a problem solver. And the reason why is because I've had a lot of experience doing that. And so I always present myself as a an overall problem solver to any employer that is looking at perhaps taking me on board. For you, for example, you know, you may have leadership qualities. And you may be saying to me, Well, you know, I haven't had a lot of job experience. So how do I actually prove that I have leadership in the workplace, or you don't need to have done that, you may have shown leadership qualities in your church, or in a college club that you've actually been part of, or in a sporting team, or in volunteering work that you've done, may have been at school, even where you have actually demonstrated leadership quality. So it's about looking at what you enjoy doing and what you're good at actually doing in terms of

helping other people, you have to view yourself as someone who can add value. Now, you'll see there that I've said, use my workbook, the workbook is something I'm going to give you as one of the tools. And in there is a process right at the beginning, that takes you through doing a self inventory to actually help you with this very exercise. So you know now why it's important to be a problem solver, we know that that you must know how to position yourself, it's about knowing what you can actually add. The next thing you have to do is know how to identify employer problems. Now, the more specific your problem that you can identify, the better is going to be for you. And this is not an easy thing to do. But you'll see there that I've said company specific. But first of all, is it the right job, because you're going to spend some time actually trying to determine and identify problems that perhaps you can fall for an employer, you need to know that it's going to be the right job for you, though, before you actually even go down this road and put all this effort into it. Now, I'm also going to give you a free tool that will help you to work that out as well. So that'll be part of the three tools that I give you. Now, you may know people who already work for this company. And so they may have given you some insight information and some insight into problems that the company is having. But these days, of course, there's plenty of information online using websites like glassdoor.com, and indeed calm, you'll be able to find out a lot of information about what past employees have said about the companies that they work for. One of my favorite ways of doing this is networking. And LinkedIn is a great place to do this. Simply because this is where a lot of career focused individuals have got profiles. And if you can link up with somebody who works for the company, it's always a good idea if they've probably one step above from the position you might be applying for. and have a chat to them and, you know, connect with them and find out what is the number one challenge or the number one problem facing the department that you're thinking of joining. And people I've always found are very willing to actually chat to you in order to help you to know what they're actually looking for and whether you'll be able to add value there. Of course, there could be industry specific problems as well. And these are things that you may just know about from having been in college and know what is actually globally being worked on in terms of problems and issues. And you may need to do a little bit of research there to find out what problems are facing industries at the exact time that you're actually applying for a job.



09:51

There are also workplace generic type problems. And these are things that face all companies and all positions. You know, they may have a problem with leadership, they may have a problem with team players, which is quite the opposite, or engagement. Now, of course, you may not be able to solve all of these, you may not even want to solve all of these. But it's just another source another way of finding problems that perhaps you can

actually contribute to as an employee. The last one is job specific. And this is probably the easiest one to do. If you just have a look at the job advertisement, or you have a look at the job description, whatever it is that they've stated as a requirement, well turn it around, you know, if they are looking for committed dedicated professionals, well, a problem would be to have somebody who was the exact opposite of that. And so whatever they stated, they're looking for, the opposite of all of those things would be problems that they wouldn't actually want to actually be having in the company. And you could use any of those to actually highlight the problem that you can contribute to. Now, once you've actually found the biggest problem, or the problem that you've identified, you want to highlight your cover letter, you now are ready to actually market yourself as a solution, or as part of the solution for the problem. So your cover letter when it is not so much a cover letter, but a marketing proposal of how you can actually assist them. The very first thing that you should do is state the problem that you've identified, you know, so for example, if you were applying for an automotive sales position, you know, you may and you know, for example, that this company has a sales team that perhaps fall into pieces, and they fail the declining, you could say something like, you know, in today's your auto sales market, if you don't have an extraordinary sales team in place, you're bound to experience, you know, falling sales, failed targets and a declining business, you've actually now given them the problem that you're actually positioning yourself as a solution to assist with. The second one is a statement, you know, proposing that you can help solvers, that's really the reason for your application. So you'll be able to say something like, finding the right person who fits in with your team is able to exist, or service existing needs, and increased business is not always easy to find. But you know, Allow me to demonstrate why I believe I'm somebody who could actually assist you with it. The third step is establishing your credibility, why should they trust you. So this is a lot easier. Of course, if you've had a lot of work experience, because you can fight you know, that you've had six years or however many years experience, it is that you've had to actually help you with the job ahead. But what happens, you know, what do you say, if you don't have that sort of experience, if you're brand new? Well, it's still possible to actually present information about why you are trustworthy, just in your situation. You know, even as a college grad, you know, what is your interest in the company or is expressing your interest and a genuine interest in knowing about the company's problems and how you can help them is enough waiting for employers to actually trust that you have taken or made an effort to actually find out what's going on in their company and how you can actually help them. Number four, is take the benefits of employing you remember, what's in it for them, that's really what they're after, you know, so if you say something like, you know, I am very results driven? Well, that's great. What does that mean for them? what it means for them is I'm going to be able to achieve and exceed all my personal sales targets. And that's obviously going to increase your sales, all saying, you know, I have great, exceptional customer service skills was great, but what does this mean for them? Well, what that mean for you is, I'm going to

be generating an endless chain of repeat business and referrals. And that's going to increase your business. such that, you know, provide proof that you're a stand out achiever, if you presenting yourself as a standout person. Why, what makes you stand out now, once again, fine if you've had a lot of experience in your, you know, in your work history, but what happens if you haven't? Well, you can relate your standout achievements from other areas, you know, you may be in a stand out academic, you may have been a standout person in lots of other areas of your life, you know, at church, or, as I said, in clubs that you've been a part of,



14:43

as long as you can actually make the connection between those things. And that that is your, your approach to life. That is what you actually do. And that's why you will be able to apply that same attitude to the job that you're actually applying for. The sixth step is to make a promise attached to your number work value. So the last thing you want to do, you know, he's tell them that you're going to be increasing the sales by whatever percentage do you have no idea whether you can actually do that. I think it's always a good idea to start this part with, I believe, I believe, for example, in contributing to learning and growing as an employee whereby I work, and I promise that this will be my top priority when I work for you. Something like that. Number seven, is to warn them that you're on the market. Really, this is just something that is used in marketing proposals and sales letters all the time, the same kind of thing, like I realize you probably have many applications to consider and the process to follow, I'd like you to know that I'm actively marketing myself right now. So that I can finalize my career move as soon as possible. It lets them know that you're taking your career seriously, and you want them to take you seriously as well. And then, of course, a call to action, what do you want them to do? In order to be an absolute pleasure to meet with you, please call me at your earliest convenience. And perhaps saying something like, please note that, you know, this opportunity is important to me, I will also be following up with you in a few days, to see where we are in the process, once again, showing that you're proactive taking initiative, showing them that this is a very important aspect to your career. So that is the cover letter, the cover letter steps that I follow. And if you just follow those steps, and you plug in the information as you go, then you will be able to come up with a letter that is very different to sort of normal cover letters that one sees these days, what you really want is a marketing proposal. Once again, in my workbook, I'm going to give you all the steps that you need to actually follow to actually make this happen for yourself. So now coming to number three, and that is the critical cover letter writing mistakes. Like I said, I'm going to cover one of these with you today. But all 16 of these are mistakes and errors that I in my position as a manager I have seen very often. And they are things that do definitely stand in the way of you achieving your objective with a cover letter. The first one or the one that

I want to cover with you today is not making your letter ATF compliant. Now, ATF, of course, is the automatic tracking software that a lot of large companies use these days, in order to sift through the hundreds and sometimes 1000s of applications that they get. You know, if this software is not able to read your application, your cover letter and even the resume, it will pick it out and you won't even you know, reach the shortlist at all. And there are a few things that you can do to make sure that you get your letter or your resume are seen. The first thing is to keep your fonts and formatting simple. I see a lot of interesting templates that people use for resumes that are really fancy with colors and graphics. I stay away from those because a lot of automatic tracking software is not actually able to read them. Use a text document like a Word doc or even the online docs format, not a PDF, because a lot of automatic tracking software is not able to read PDF documents. And use standard terminology, you know things that are being used in your industry and in your environment at the time words like skills and work experience and education, and then change still into something like capabilities because you think it sounds great or interesting, because it's likely that the automatic tracking software is not going to be able to pick up on that word. And lastly, include targeted keywords. So these are keywords that are related to your industry. And words from the actual job advertisement as well use words from that because very often that automatic tracking software is set up to look for those words and using the job advertisement is a very good starting place to actually include keywords and targeted sort of words that relate to your industry and to their actual job.



19:40

Like I said, I will give you my 15 to tender as part of the three free tools at the end. So lastly, what I really want to be telling you to do is position yourself at the problem for the when you're going to write your cover letter, not a job applicant, then identify the biggest problem, you know, you can help solve. And it's really important, of course, to believe that you can help solve that problem. And you must want to be able to solve that problem. Now good actually presenting yourself as somebody who can solve something, and then you can't do it, or you don't actually end up doing it, because then you're actually just going to be shooting yourself in the foot. And lastly, of course, is to present yourself as a possible contributory solution. And that is what you want to do in your cover letter, not to say, please employ me on a job applicant know, what you're actually saying is, Hey, I identified this is a problem, this is something that I think I can fold. This is why and how I think you should consider me. Now, I love this same by Thomas Edison, the successful person makes a habit of doing what the failing person doesn't like to do. And when it comes to cover letters, you know, you can do what everybody else is doing and write your cover letter like everybody else, but you'll be treated like everybody else. And very often, you know, your cover letter or your resume probably won't even be seen, it takes a bit of

work. To write a cover letter in the way that I've actually explained to you today, you need to do a bit of thinking, you need to do a little bit of digging to actually make it work. But it's worth it because your cover letter will stand out compared to all the other cover letters that employers get. But you will need to actually do things differently, my challenge to you is to actually do it, give it a try, it takes some practice to get it right. But the more you do it, the easier you actually become. And it becomes quite exciting and interesting way of creative way of writing a cover letter, if you give yourself a chance to actually do that. I also said of course that I was going to give you three free tools. And here is the link on the screen. This way, probably to connect with me is the standard way.com. And if you go to that website, the standard way.com forward slash grad there, you will be able to download the three tools that I'm going to give to you and which will definitely help you to to write a cover letter in the way that I've spoken about. Obviously, if you need a lot more information, going to my book will give you that as well. And that is available on on Amazon. So I think I've pretty much covered everything that I wanted to. I'll probably hand it back to you now and find out whether there any questions if that's right,



22:47

Mark, these are really good points. I love your focus on problem solving your eight step process on making a cover letter readable and excitable? terrific, terrific ideas and number of questions are standing out. First off is how can we begin to identify what problem we're going to solve for a company after we've had an interview with with an individual and in that department?



23:19

How Sorry, what was the question again? How would you actually go about solving it?



23:24

So how can we find out what problem to solve? I'm being interviewed by you? And how can I dig in to find out what problem you have? So that I can come back to you to say this is the problem I'm going to solve? And here's how I'm going to do it. Maybe in a follow up letter also?



23:45

Yeah, look, I, in my experience, the very easiest way to do this is to actually be quite

upfront and actually ask, you know, when you have an interest in a company, and you start asking them about, you know, what, what are the things? What are the challenges, and I think it's probably the best way is to always Express at challenges and not problems when you're actually face to face with somebody in an interview situation is, you know, what are the challenges? Or what are the areas where you hope to actually make the biggest progress and growth forward? You know, and what, and then perhaps the follow up with the question of well, what are the barriers? Or what do you think, what are the things that are actually going to stop you from actually, from that actually happening? And I find that when you open up to people in interviews and ask those questions, it shows that you're actually thinking about how you can make a difference. And employers are very, in my experience will come up and will give you you know, some of that information, which makes it a lot easier then for you to go away and think about what they said. And then when you follow up with a proposal of how, you know, going back to them and saying you know, I really thought About what you said, and this is how I would approach it. What you know, what do you think of my sort of idea? That something that's always worked for me?



25:10

Really great advice. And that certainly gets you standing out from others to be a problem solver from the beginning, because I loved your story, in your moment of realization that you've got to solve problems for your boss, otherwise, your boss doesn't really need to.



25:27

That's right. Absolutely. Absolutely.



25:30

So a quick question related to the length of a cover letter? Is there any recommended number of paragraphs? Should I bold some of the words should I underline some? How, how creative Should we get with the typography of a cover letter?



25:49

Yeah, I think bolding some words, key words are important, you know, those words that you perhaps also want, tracking software to pick up is a good idea and even underlining some, but not overdoing it. Because if it starts to just look, you know, too crowded, I think,



definitely doing that with with some of the words that are in the letter. I always say that, and in my in my experience, a page is probably long enough for for a letter, people are very busy. You know, recruiters and managers are busy, don't have a lot of time. However, you know, if you've written a really great cover letter, I've read one or two that have been really amazing, that have been three pages long. And I've read all of all of what the person's had to say. So I get it. There's no real rule about this. But except to say that people are busy and being able to actually write a cover letter in as little space as you possibly can. And a page is probably I would say, you know, a good standard to actually aim for.



26:57

Make sense? So does it? Is it important to maybe rework a cover letter, if I'm going in for an interview with someone to personalize it a little bit more?



27:11

Absolutely, if you know who the person is, that's going to be interviewing you, that makes a huge difference. Definitely, always use the name of the person that is going to be interviewing you. If you know what that is, I think the very one of the biggest sort of mistakes you can make is is not personalizing it, or not putting in the effort to find out who is the person that is going to be interviewing you if you can, it's not always easy to find the sort of information out, but I think you'll at least have to, you know, give it a go in terms of finding out who that person might be.



27:48

Excellent. Here's a question related to the promise of does making a promise help? How does making a promise help you stand out from others?



28:00

Well, I think what it does is, it's something that is not seen in cover letters, and it makes you stand out because you're actually committing yourself to them. But in a way that's not going to compromise you if you know, if you you're not making a promise that you definitely are not going to be able to honor and that's why I say you know, don't make them a promise in terms of I'm going to increase your sales, but 100%, you have no idea if you're going to be able to do this, you have no idea when you actually get into the job.

The promise is about what you can deliver. And it has to do with your values. It's what is your number one value in the workplace, what's most important to you. And if that is important to you, then you will be upholding that no matter what job you go into. And if you can promise to actually do that. It's a statement of commitment. It's a statement of intent. And that makes you stand out as somebody who's very different to people who are sort of not wanting to commit to, you know, to making a difference.



29:07

Mark, there's some questions about infographic resumes. And the use of those Do you have any opinions on when to use an infographic resume?



29:20

Look, integrated, I have come across the partnership version. Some of them are great. I think, you know, if it serves a purpose, it depends on the actual job itself. Some of them present information in a very succinct way, graphically in a good way as well. But the other thing is, is that sometimes automatic tracking software is not able to read that information either. Especially if it's presented or saved as an image as a JPEG or something like that. Well I know for instance, that companies I've worked for automatic tracking software, just kick that out. So You know, if it's not going to be seen or bought by their software will sort of human eyes never going to get to see it. I think in certain areas where you it warrants the the the graphic skills, you know, if you were applying for a job that I guess, in graphics or in a artistic field and it might be a good idea to show, you know what you can actually do graphically. But I generally find that it's better to actually just keep the very plain way of presenting information that is probably going to be able to be easily read by software as well as human eyes.



30:39

Yeah, it seems to be a specialty item for at least now, a couple more questions. spelling is a major problem for all of us when we either create a resumes or create letters, I found using a tool called Grammarly, to me a really easy way to check my spelling or have a automated way to check my spelling. Or I guess there's two questions coming up here. One, is there an automated tool that helps you create cover letters and do you recommend it and two other ideas on how to check your spelling and grammar?



31:22

Grammarly is a fantastic tool, and it's one that I use myself. I've never used any automated cover letter writing software. I guess the reason for that is I think if you have a template that you can follow, sometimes with I think automated software is it can just become a little too templated it starts to just become a little stayed. But I mean, from a personal point of view, as I say I've never used it, I'm not saying that it's not worthwhile or that one shouldn't investigate it. But personally, myself, I've not used it in terms of spelling. You know, I, I use Grammarly myself, I also use spellcheck on whatever program I'm using, you know, whether that's word, or whatever. And it was a good idea to get somebody else to actually read over your letter. Because very often, of course, spellcheck don't pick up things. And because you're sort of so close to your letter, you don't even see these things yourself. So I think one of the best things to do is to give you a letter to somebody else to have a read, and they you know, and ask them what they actually think about the letter at home. But what you really wanting them to do is pick up on those errors with fresh eyes.



32:46

That's great advice. And easily with the internet, one can send an email to a friend, colleague or family member to get some whoever's available at that emergency. ism, quick overview. So here's a question that's coming up quite a bit. In today's internet driven world where employers may spend seconds to look at a resume. Does it make sense? What's the argument to to still work on? A very cool cover letter?



33:20

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. You know, and there's a there's a lot of, I guess, I guess there's a lot of questions about whether one should even bother with a cover letter. And, you know, is anybody going to read it? and cover letters for a lot of people and take a lot of time, and people stress over them? And you know, is it actually worth actually putting all that effort into that? My view on that, as somebody who's, of course, employed a lot of people as well is, you know, why take the risk of not including a cover letter, because you have no idea whether somebody is going to see it, or read it, but the same actually goes to your resume, you don't really have any idea of what happens once you actually present whether you know what's going to happen on the other side. But what I find myself is that when I'm looking at resumes and cover letters, I will look, I will glance over the cover letter within seconds. In fact, second, I will be able to tell if it's just a cover letter that everybody writes, that's just the usual for the thing. I don't read those. But if I see a cover letter that

has a really interesting opening line, that just looks very different, then I will read the cover letter. So I think it's still worth putting the effort in because you have no idea of whether somebody is going to see their cover letter, but I think you do need to make a difference. You do need to make it stand out. If it just sounds and looks like everybody else's cover letter, that's when no one reads them. But I think as a marketing tool, you know, resume is it's quite limited in terms So what, how you can market yourself, but you can put a lot of personality into your cover letter. And that's where you should be doing. I see far too many cover letters that are quite staid. And you know, they're not exciting, you know, put your personality in that way you can actually do that. And the other thing, of course, is, I firmly believe that you should keep your cover letter and your resume together, don't separate them as document. Because if you separate them as documents, there's a much greater chance, then someone's not even going to look at the cover letter. They're just going to read your resume, to keep them together and the first page, it's right there for them to look at. Even in three seconds. Hopefully, you're going to get their attention, and they'll want to read all of it.



35:44

Well, I love your approach it and personalizing it and selling it from that angle makes a lot of sense. You know, Mark, unfortunately, we're running out of time. And we'd love to hear you give us a little more detail on the tools that you're offering us at the stand out ways.com slash grade, can you just re emphasize what we should be doing tomorrow by working on those free tools?



36:13

Yeah, absolutely. So the first thing to do is to go to that website. Like I said, it's actually a very new website. But if you download those tools, you're going to be getting three things. The first is the workbook that actually goes together with my book, stand out cover letters. But in the very first thing you can do, the very first part of that workbook is an inventory that helps you to get to know yourself better, we're very often we think that we understand the value that we bring, but until you actually write some of this information and consider some of the question you don't really know. So, work through that process. First of all, you know, get a good idea of what makes you stand out. And we all do stand out, we just need to identify what it is. And the process in there will actually help you to do that. I also suggest in that workbook, you know, consulting with a few other people and find out what other people's ideas are about you and what value you bring. Because that was a very interesting exercise. I whenever I do that, I'm always quite surprised at what people view as values that I have that I didn't even identify for myself. The workbook also

will give you the template for writing the letter. And it's good to practice writing that letter, you know, find the job advertisement, and, and give it a garden practice writing a letter in the way that I've actually explained. And as I say the template will be in the workbook for you to follow. The two that is about checking whether a job is the right job for you, is a really great tool, it's a very easy tool to go through, it asks you about 10 questions. And once you work through that will give you an idea of whether the job is actually worth even looking at whether you there's something that you need to actually work on before you actually apply for the job. For that it's a very valuable tool for any job that you're considering. And then of course, the arrows. You know, if you can prevent and you can learn from other people's mistakes first so that you don't make those errors. That's obviously the best thing to do for the document where I talk about the 15 most common and critical areas that you want to avoid is definitely something worth looking at and making sure that when you write a cover letter that you're not making fun of those areas, yourself.