

Jen's Ten on Cover Letters

- 1. Begin with the basic structure.** Don't worry about getting too fancy with the first draft. The basic paragraph flow: 1) who you are, what you want, how you learned about opportunity 2) show off what you know about studio/clients/field 3) graceful transition to you, relate experiences and perspective that have relevance 4) the valediction should end on a positive, graceful note. Resist the temptation to be too unconventional, as you risk coming across as silly and professionally immature at best, irreverent and disrespectful, at worst.
- 2. Three is the magic number.** Chant this mantra when composing your cover letter: *clarity, brevity, specificity*. The document needs to be compelling to read at a glance, so you must maximize every word and be direct in asking what you want. Three is also a good number of paragraphs to target (four is the limit).
- 3. Nix To Whom it May Concern.** You will soon discover a letter addressed this way concerns no one at all. If a contact is not specified in the job listing, smile and dial (pick up the phone and call the switchboard/receptionist/studio). You will find that using the phone is an amazingly efficient technique in gathering critical information.
- 4. Focus on the organization's need, not yours.** Of course the organization knows that you will benefit from a summer working in their studio, that it will sharpen your skills and provide you with invaluable contacts. However, rare are the firms, organizations, companies or institutions that put a higher priority on strengthening your skills than client work. Walk the fine line between confidence and modesty as you gracefully suggest a way or two that you could contribute to the fine work that they do (at this point in your career, this is primarily enthusiasm and energy).
- 5. Be a shameless and relentless name dropper.** Provide the recipient with some sort of frame of reference: "So-and-so suggested I contact you" OR "I enjoyed the lecture you gave recently at..." Use sparingly (not more than once per letter) as there does exist a fine line of providing context vs. being obnoxious as it relates to this skill. Remember, no one likes an insufferable kiss-up.
- 6. Demonstrate that you are a student of the field, not just the discipline.** This is what distinguishes the "maybe" to the "must interview" stack – professionals always are impressed that students manage to read the trades and stay on top of industry scuttlebutt in addition to pursuing their studies. Be sure to reference the media properly (*Art in America* not "Art in the U.S.A.")
- 7. Spell check. Grammar check. Edit Check. And check again.** Your goal here? 100% perfection. Don't give someone a reason to toss your materials because of something avoidable.
- 8. Read aloud.** Most of us have a tendency to sound like Elizabethans when peppering a document with a lot of "therefores" and "thuses" with the intention of adding a grown-up, formal tone. You should be professional, but inviting and engaging. Reading aloud (or to a buddy) also is a great technique to catch editing errors, typos and other general goof-ups.
- 9. Create and commit to the Brand Called You.** All of your materials – from your resume to cover letter to text accompanying or introducing writing samples – need to jibe (structure, typeface).
- 10. Okay, kiss up a little.** From our good friend Adrian Shaughnessy of *How to be a graphic designer without losing your soul*: State that you are aware of Studio X's marvelous work for Client X, and that you have found it inspirational. Don't lay it on too thick, but designers are vain and will respond with Pavlovian slavering to a bit of mild, but honest, praise.