

2. The letter

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2.1 STAR in a letter

The application letter is your first contact with an employer. The art lies in presenting yourself within the strict confines of the application letter. The emphasis is on 'yourself': an application letter is successful if you manage to convey a spark of your personality (something of the unique feel of your p-cv) in the letter. Remember: the primary aim of the application letter is not to be invited for an interview, but to introduce yourself as yourself. If the employer reads the letter, has a picture of you and knows that you are not a good fit for the organisation, then your letter has done its job.

You do this by applying the **STAR** technique: Situation Task Action Result. STAR examples have the advantage that they always reveal something of your experience, personality and skills. They are strictly personal and are the way to show something of yourself. At the same time, they ensure that you phrase things actively and personally. After all, qualities can mean something slightly different to everyone (just as with the profession of professional footballer). For example: an employer is looking for an executive secretary who is flexible. Now an applicant could write in his letter: 'I am flexible'. The requirement has been met, but no one is any the wiser! Compare this with an example in which the applicant writes according to STAR: 'During a business trip, my boss was stranded at an airport one evening. I immediately booked a replacement flight for him privately, so that he was back at the office on time the next day.' With this story the applicant shows what he understands by flexible, demonstrates his commitment to his work and gives an insight into what his current duties involve.

The STAR theory explained step by step:

Situation: First describe the situation: what it is about. (boss was stranded)

Task: What was your task? (getting the boss to his appointment on time.)

Actions: What did you do to fulfil your task? (searching online from home, booking a ticket with your own credit card)

Result: What was the result? (boss at the appointment on time)

Exercises: STAR in a letter

1. Look at the top 5 positions in your p-cv and identify the 5 most frequently requested qualities. (e.g. commercially minded, results-oriented, able to work both in a team and independently, resilient under pressure, communicative, etc.)
2. Write a STAR for one of these qualities. Start by writing out the situation, the task, the actions and the result in detail. Then edit this to arrive at an active, positive and clear STAR.
Positive phrasing means saying what you can do without using double negatives. For example: not 'I am not careless', but 'I am accurate'. Active phrasing means writing in the present tense with an active verb. Not: 'I took care of the coordination', but 'I coordinate'. 
3. Write at least one STAR for each quality, and ten in total. Before you begin, take the time to call situations to mind. If you can't find any inspiration, put it aside and start again later. Do write ten of them: it may take time to write the STARs down, but it will also give you a great deal in return. Think: per aspera ad astra!
4. Look at your STARs again after three days. Make the odd adjustment where necessary and pick the best three. Ask someone to read them and ask how your STAR comes across to the reader, and ask for any comments and remarks they have while reading it. Have you achieved your aim? Incorporate any improvements.
5. Add all the STARs you have written to the folder containing your p-cv.

2.2 The straitjacket of the letter

A covering letter follows a strict format that you need to stick to. Check carefully whether you are using the usual layout, and double-check for spelling and style errors. In short, a summary of the most important points in terms of content/structure and style:

- Structure:
 - Sender
 - Place and Date
 - Addressee (Employer)
 - Salutation
 - Opening paragraph
 - Motivation
 - Qualities, suitability
 - Closing and sign-off
 - Signature

- Reference to enclosure(s)
- Make sure you know who you are writing the letter to. (Not 'Dear Sir/Madam', but 'Dear Mrs de Jong')
- Opening paragraph: state the source (newspaper, internet) that published the vacancy, state the date and indicate which position you are applying for.
- Use no more than one paragraph of five sentences for your motivation. This is the most important passage in your letter! Make use of the knowledge from your personal CV.
- Also use no more than one paragraph for your qualities and the reasons why you are suitable
- Sign the letter with a blue pen
- Enclose your CV as an attachment
- Use short sentences
- No longer than 1 A4 page, on white paper
- Wide margins
- Only 1 topic per paragraph
- Do not use line breaks within a paragraph
- Align the text to the left
- Make sure the structure is logical
- Write in a businesslike, positive and active style
- No summary of your CV in the letter
- Separating the main points from the side issues

Exercises: The straitjacket of the letter:

1. Do not rely solely on Word's spellchecker. Make sure you have access to a 'spelling guide'; either in the form of the book 'Spelwijzer', or in the form of an acquaintance who knows everything about spelling and is willing to check your work.
2. Make sure you have examples of standard application letters. Also ask whether you can have a look at the application letters written by your family and friends.

Two sample letters 

2.3 Tailored CV

A CV (curriculum vitae, literally the course of one's life) is a concise overview of your personal details, your education and your work experience. Your CV is your calling card and, together with your letter, determines whether you are invited for an

interview. The CV reflects what you can do and who you are. It is important to write a separate CV for each application, so that your experience and education come across well for that particular position. A CV should convey consistency. So it is not simply a list of everything you have ever done!

It is easiest to create a basic CV containing all the courses, jobs, side jobs, achievements and qualifications you have. For each application you then create a tailored CV based on this basic CV. Use reverse chronology, so put what you did most recently at the top and work back from there. That way your current work stands out most. Ideally, this tailored CV should be no longer than 1 A4 page!

The most important points regarding content and form in brief:

- A CV consists of at least the following sections: personal details, education, work experience. In addition, you may mention interests and/or references.
- The CV shows at a glance who you are and what you have to offer.
- It clearly demonstrates your knowledge and skills in relation to the position.
- It mentions your strongest points first. In one case that will be your education, in another your work experience.
- It contains only information that is relevant to the employer.
- Reverse chronology
- Express measurable achievements in concrete results: 30% increase in turnover, 100 keystrokes per minute, 200% overscore.
- In a CV you use telegram style in an active way, without finite verbs. Not: I was responsible for handling the coordination. But: Responsible for coordination.
- Don't use abbreviations or jargon that is incomprehensible to a layperson.
- Don't lie!
- Form:
 - Use a word processor on the PC.
 - Use a neutral font in a legible size
 - Use subheadings
 - Consistent structure
 - Generous margins, plenty of white space
 - Use bullet points
 - Faultless spelling and a correct writing style

Exercises: Tailored CV

1. Make sure you know the rules for a CV. Look at CV examples online and from friends and acquaintances. Example 

2. Create a basic CV and save it on your computer under a clearly recognisable name (e.g. 'basiccv september 2007'). Print one copy and add it to your p-cv folder.

Final exercises:

1. Choose one advertisement from the exercise in 1.4 'where do I start?'. Write a covering letter for this advertisement, with a CV tailored to that position. Show the complete letter to at least three people and ask for their comments. Incorporate any comments and send off your application.
2. Apply for as many jobs as possible, without losing sight of your goal. You want a job that suits you, but you don't want to put all your eggs in one basket. Sometimes that one company turns out to be disappointing and the job that didn't look all that appealing turns out to be great. Don't be too critical, or you will miss opportunities. Stay active, stay positive and apply, apply, apply!
3. Put a copy of all your application letters in your p-cv.