So much has changed in the job application process over the years. Take the tried and true cover letter. It was once such an important part of expressing your interest in a job. Today, a cover letter isn’t even accepted by many large employers.

Many large companies today forego the cover letter and instead send résumés through automated systems to screen for key words that connect to their job descriptions. That said, many other employers still want cover letters to help them better understand a candidate’s unique qualifications.

Check the details of job postings to see if you can include a cover letter. If there are no guidelines, then take the opportunity to include one. This is your chance to sell yourself!

A cover letter is particularly important if you want to elaborate on your work history. For example, maybe you took some time out of the paid workforce to provide family care. Or perhaps you’ve chosen to apply for a position with considerably less responsibility than in your previous jobs.

Your cover letter should address why you are best suited for the position. Take time to think about your “personal brand”—the unique skills and strengths that make you attractive to an employer. Convey your brand in your letters. See our tip sheet on creating a personal brand at www.aarp.org/WorkResources. Follow these tips for what to include and what to avoid:

**What to Include**

In your cover letter, be sure to:

» Address it to a specific person, not just a title or department.

» Refer to the exact job you are applying for, including a reference code if there is one.

» Employ the active voice. For example, say “I won an award,” not, “I was awarded.”

» Describe why you’re uniquely qualified. Cite relevant skills, experience and accomplishments, but don’t simply repeat your résumé. This is a chance to sell yourself!

» Tell the employer something about yourself that might not be clear from your résumé.

» Use keywords from the job posting in your cover letter (as you should do in your résumé).

Proofread your cover letter several times for correct spelling and grammar. Also, consider sharing it with someone who can proofread and give you his or her honest opinion. Does your letter make the reader want to know more about you? If not, revise it, highlighting the things that make you the best candidate for the job.

**What to Avoid**

Here’s what not to include in your cover letter:

» Too much information! Three to four paragraphs is plenty.
» Generic language. Tailor your letter to the specific position.

» Unnecessary words, such as, “I am writing to…” or “Let me introduce myself…” Get right to your point.

» Clear references to your age. Rather than talk about your 30 or 40 years of experience, focus on your skills, how they were applied, and the outcomes as they relate to the position you are seeking.

» Salary requirements; save this discussion for the interview.

Take Action!

❑ Head over to AARP’s www.LifeReimagined.org/Work for tips on today’s job market.

❑ Write a cover letter that enhances – not repeats – your résumé.

❑ Use your cover letter to add context to your résumé and to sell yourself!

❑ Create a personal brand with help from AARP’s tip sheet on the subject at www.aarp.org/WorkResources and convey it in your letters.

❑ Make sure to carefully proofread your résumé and consider getting feedback from a trusted source.