

Cover Letters, Distinguishing Yourself, and Sentences Nobody Else Can Write

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“I’ve always asked my students to focus on the stories only they can tell.”

—Alexander Chee¹

A cover letter should not simply take the same information that can be found on a résumé and organize it into paragraphs. New, humanizing details are needed. So is background information, narrative flow, and an at once lively and professional tone. The best ones also include what I consider the gold standard for distinguishing yourself: sentences nobody else can write.

A. A Show of Hands

The basic idea behind the “sentences nobody else can write” test is that when you are competing for a job, applying to school, or in some other way trying to positively stand out, it usually helps not to sound like everybody else. “Generic” is not typically a compliment when used by hiring managers to describe the materials a law student or lateral has submitted. Nor is “dry,” “formulaic,” “boring,” or “cookie-cutter.” If a bunch of other people can include the same statements and examples that you’ve included, your accomplishments and ambitions lose a good deal of

¹ The Cut, *So You Want to Write?* (July 21, 2020) <https://www.thecut.com/article/writing-advice.html> (last visited Nov. 1, 2023).

force. It's not really a unique value proposition if all your peers can make the very same claim.

In the courses I teach, my students and I operationalize the “sentences nobody else can write” test by having someone read their cover letter out loud. After each sentence, I ask the other students in the room to raise their hand if they could put (or may even already have put) a similar sentence in their own letter. If a bunch of hands shoot into the air, the student has just gotten some helpful feedback: to distinguish themselves better, they might want to revise the sentence with something more powerfully personal.

If, however, only one or two hands shoot up—or even better, none at all—that's helpful feedback too. The student can now be a lot more confident that they have written a sentence that is compellingly authentic and specific.

B. Reality Testing

When I'm working with students (or practicing attorneys) one-on-one, I don't have the benefit of a room full of raised hands as a feedback tool. But I still apply the “sentences nobody else can write” test. We start by going through the document line by line. The person reads each sentence aloud, and I listen for spots that seem a bit too empty and commonplace. When I find one, I'll then ask them, “How many other people applying for the position could have written that same sentence?” Or more pointedly, “How many other people applying for the position probably *did* write that same sentence?”

The goal is to push the person to dig deeper and more strategically into their collection of skills, interests, and experiences. To help, I'll sometimes encourage them to tell me the name of someone who knows them well and is rooting for them to succeed. Their best friend from high school, perhaps. Or maybe a teacher, boss, or relative who has seen what they can accomplish and really believes in their potential.

I then try to get the person to think of a story or detail that this cheerleader might bring up if asked to advocate on the person's behalf. What's something that the person has achieved, endured, or attempted that their cheerleader would likely point to as the reason why they deserve careful consideration? What, in other words, have they done to earn such a devoted fan?

The mental shift required to imagine the evidence someone you like and respect might use to make a case for you can be helpful, particularly for people who have been struggling with the twin bandits of self-doubt and impostor syndrome. The process is similar to the “reality testing” often used in cognitive behavioral therapy. You try to separate someone's internal feelings of inadequacy from a clear set of external facts about their actual performance and abilities.

The exercise isn't always easy. But one thing that seems to help is when I tell the person that I think they're a much more interesting and impressive candidate than the version of themselves the cover letter describes. I'm never lying when I offer this feedback. Yes, I will frequently tone down and in other ways revise individual boasts people make in their letters. Puffery, I sometimes remind them, is rarely persuasive—especially from somebody still in their 20s.

But the most common problem I see is typically not overselling. It's underselling. Bland, overused generalities take up valuable real estate. The “sentences nobody else can write” test is designed to reallocate that space to more convincingly specific material. Don't, however, interpret it as a license to be gimmicky or senselessly provocative. You don't pass the “sentences nobody else can write” test by writing sentences nobody *should* write.

C. Conversation Starters

Cover letters are by no means the only type of document that can benefit from the “sentences nobody else can write” test.

Feedback on everything from research papers, to sales pitches, to grant proposals can be fruitfully framed in similar terms. In a wide variety of contexts, it can be helpful to let someone know—caringly and with plenty of time for them to revise—when the materials they’ve put together aren’t meaningfully distinguishable from the competition.

So consider trying the “sentences nobody else can write” test in the next bit of feedback you deliver, particularly if you are helping someone apply for a job, publish a piece of scholarship, or launch a new product, service, or program. Here are some possible questions to guide those conversations:

- **Finding a Job:** What’s something that you’ve done in the last year that probably isn’t true of the candidates you are competing against? How about the last two years? The last five years? The last decade?
- **Publishing a Piece of Scholarship:** What’s an insight, perspective, finding, or methodology that distinguishes your paper from all the other papers submitted to this journal? Why does your specific expertise or set of personal experiences make you especially well-suited to tackle this topic?
- **Launching a Product:** What’s stopping your competitors from launching a similar product, program, or service for around the same price? What would be hard for other people to replicate about your particular team, process, or design?