

Get More Interviews With a T-Letter

by Tom Murrell

Consider this: If you want a job, what you need is an interview. I don't know of anyone who has ever submitted a resume and gotten a job offer as a result. The very best you can hope for is that you'll get that call asking you to come in for an interview. It's in the interview that you get the job, not in the resume.

So, your first objective is to land an interview. A simple tool, called a *T-letter*, can help you do just that. The traditional approach has you developing a standard resume and writing a cover letter to accompany it for every job situation. A T-letter is like a cover letter, except that it doesn't "cover" anything. After an introductory paragraph, the T-letter includes two columns. In the left column, you list the prospective employer's job requirements; in the right column, you list your qualifications as they match the job requirements. The T-letter focuses on what the initial screening person needs to know to qualify you for the next step: The interview.

Does the T-letter approach work? My experience with this approach does not make a statistical universe, nor have I gotten interviews 100 percent of the time when using a T-letter. But my interview "hit rate" has tripled since using the T-letter. Others who have tried this approach, especially the skeptics, have called me back to tell me that they have had the same results. The T-letter gets interviews, and if you don't get an interview, you can't get the job. In this article, you'll see how to develop and implement a T-letter, and find answers to questions you may have about using this non-traditional approach.

Developing a T-Letter

Developing a T-letter is pretty straight-forward: Essentially, all you need to do is condense a company's job requirements into a bulleted list, develop a companion list of your qualifications that matches their requirements, and then add a short introduction and conclusion. Let's take a look....

Start with the job ad

To begin, start by examining the job advertisement. The example I've used is a fairly entry-level position, but the principle works for any type of job:

We're looking for a Technical Writer to develop both printed and online documentation. You will assist in the gathering of technical information by conducting in-depth analysis of subject matter and researching existing documentation including specifications, drawings, requirements, design documents, and code. Training or experience in Help Authoring Tools, Word Processors/Desk Top Publishing Packages, HTML development and publishing are required. You will be expected to develop written material that maximizes productivity and knowledge of users of our systems and processes. You need to be able to interview programmers, analysts, operators, and other technical and support personnel to gain knowledge of the subject matter. You will be expected to familiarize yourself with existing formats, templates, and style guides and conform to them scrupulously. Two or more years of experience producing technical documentation in PC and mainframe environments a plus. You will be expected to demonstrate excellent interpersonal, organizational, and communication skills. Bachelors' Degree in Technical Writing, Journalism, English, Computer Science, or Business, or equivalent experience.

Determine the company's requirements for the position

In examining the job description, determine the relevant requirements for the position, and then list those requirements as a bulleted list. Doing so involves some judgment on your part; not every sentence in their description of the job is really a requirement. In the example, the first two sentences can be summarized to say that they're looking for a Technical Writer. You already

know that, of course, and so do they, we hope, so you're not looking to simply turn every sentence into a bullet.

Here's the bulleted list I came up with for this job. You may have a different list, and that's fine.

Requirements

- Bachelor's Degree in Technical Writing, Journalism, English, Computer Science, or Business, or equivalent experience.
- Two or more years of experience producing technical documentation in PC and mainframe environments a plus.
- Training or experience in Help Authoring Tools, Word Processors/Desk Top Publishing Packages, HTML development, and publishing are required.
- Ability to interview programmers, analysts, operators, and other technical and support personnel to gain knowledge of the subject matter.
- Ability to familiarize yourself with existing formats, templates, and style guides and conform to them scrupulously.

In this example, notice that I didn't limit myself to following the order in which they've described what they're looking for. Rearrange the order of the requirements so that they flow from most important--in terms of your strengths--to least important at the bottom. Yes, this is a judgment call, but consider that whoever reads your T-letter likely won't have the job ad in front of them; they probably won't even know what the ad said.

Create a companion list of qualifications

Once you've developed the bulleted list of their requirements, your next step is to create a companion set of bullets that you title "Qualifications." You are going to set these bullets across from "Requirements" as shown on the next page:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor's Degree in Technical Writing, Journalism, English, Computer Science, or Business, or equivalent experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor's Degree in Technical Communications from Very Good University.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two or more years of experience producing technical documentation in PC and mainframe environments a plus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interned one year with Startup Telecommunications Corporation writing hardware installation and troubleshooting documents. Interned six months with Mammoth Software, Inc. writing user manuals and tutorials.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training or experience in Help Authoring Tools, Word Processors/Desktop Publishing Packages, HTML development, and publishing are required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarity with Microsoft Word, RoboHelp, Microsoft FrontPage.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to interview programmers, analysts, operators, and other technical and support personnel to gain knowledge of the subject matter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporter for VGU Student Paper. Interviewed athletes, coaches, physics professors, and administrators for weekly columns.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to familiarize yourself with existing formats, templates, and style guides and conform to them scrupulously. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In both my jobs and my school work, I learned to use the existing templates and style guides. I also contributed to an ongoing effort at Mammoth Software to update documentation templates to meet expanding information needs.

Develop an introduction and conclusion

The final step of this process is to write an opening and a closing paragraph for your T-letter. The opening paragraph should identify where you saw the position advertised and the position title. It should also lead into the description of the body of your letter, which will be the side-by-side comparison you developed. An introduction for this example T-letter might look like this:

In the July 23, 2001 *Podunk Courier-Journal*, I saw your advertisement for a Technical Writer. I am very interested in discussing this position with you further. I have listed the key requirements you are looking for below, along with my qualifications for the position.

The closing paragraph is even simpler:

As you can see, I have the requisite qualifications for the position you are advertising. I look forward to discussing the position with you at your earliest convenience. You can reach me at name@example.com or at 555-555-5555.

Put it all together

When you put the whole letter together, it looks like this. (Note: I have omitted header and signature elements for convenience of the article. You should include these in your letter, as you normally would in any business correspondence.)

Requirements

- Bachelor's Degree in Technical Writing, Journalism, English, Computer Science, or Business, or equivalent experience.
- Two or more years of experience producing technical documentation in PC and mainframe environments a plus.
- Training or experience in Help Authoring Tools, Word Processors/Desk Top Publishing Packages, HTML development, and publishing are required.
- Ability to interview programmers, analysts, operators, and other technical and support personnel to gain knowledge of the subject matter.
- Ability to familiarize yourself with existing formats, templates, and style guides and conform to them scrupulously.

Qualifications

- Bachelor's Degree in Technical Communications from Very Good University.
- Interned one year with Startup Telecommunications Corporation writing hardware installation and troubleshooting documents. Interned six months with Mammoth Software, Inc. writing user manuals and tutorials.
- Familiarity with Microsoft Word, RoboHelp, Microsoft FrontPage.
- Reporter for VGU Student Paper. Interviewed athletes, coaches, physics professors, and administrators for weekly columns.
- In both my jobs and my school work, I learned to use the existing templates and style guides. I also contributed to an ongoing effort at Mammoth Software to update documentation templates to meet expanding information needs.

Now, mail it to the company. You have demonstrated that you meet or exceed the requirements of the position being advertised. In fact, you've made it very difficult for those screening applicants not to include you in the interview pool because you've done their work for them.

Implementing a T-Letter: Some Questions Answered

Using a T-letter can be an effective tool for landing interviews. At the very least, whether you get an interview or not, you know--*you know!*--that you're qualified for the position. It's right there on the page in black and white, and that can help give you the needed confidence for your job search. Plus, the T-letter can help demonstrate skills in assessing needs, summarizing information, and packaging it in a format that meets readers' needs.

But what about my resume?

Use the T-letter as your cover letter. The T-letter will still do the screeners' jobs for them, because it lists an employer's requirements and shows you meeting every one. How can they not call someone in for an interview who meets every requirement?

What if I don't meet every requirement?

That's another good question, because it is not uncommon that you will be well qualified for a position, except that they want "experience with BogusHelp Authoring Tool," for example. Perhaps you've never even heard of that help authoring tool, but you have worked with others. So what do you do?

You've got at least three choices. First, simply drop the requirement from the T-letter. The screener may not know or remember that a particular tool is a requirement. It often happens that some tool is listed as a requirement for no better reason than that it's the only tool the job description writer knows about. The screener probably won't know what the full scope of the requirements are. On the other hand, that may be a key requirement that you don't want to miss. So consider your second choice....

The second choice is to reword the requirement to describe what qualification you do have. Change the requirement to read "experience with one or more Help Authoring Tools," then describe how you're qualified because you know "PrettyGood Help" and "SimplyMarvelous Help Tool." Is this lying or unethical? I don't think so, because they probably did not intend to be so restrictive or wouldn't necessarily disqualify an applicant if they have other skills needed. Of course, if they did mean to require that you be an expert with that tool, you probably won't get an interview anyway. Or if you do, you will quickly discover that the tool issue is a deal killer, and the interview will be over. My point is, you won't know until you try. Besides, what do you have to lose if the job is otherwise a good fit for you?

The third choice is not one I recommend often because it is the riskiest: You could say you "are familiar" with that particular tool even though you know you aren't. If you try this approach, I recommend that as soon as you mail the T-letter, you immediately take a crash course in using the tool so that you can talk intelligently about it. Go to the nearest software store or online supplier and buy a copy of the tool, tutorials, or training materials. That way, by the time you interview you are familiar with it, as you had indicated you were.

What about those job descriptions that don't tell you what the true requirements are?

Well, there's no substitute for doing a little research, so if you can contact someone in the hiring organization and find out what they *really* want, you can cast your T-letter with the real requirements in mind. But, it's hard to cold call into an organization with the hope of finding someone who can give you that information. Even if you find the right person, he may not provide the information you seek.

When they haven't given you any real requirements to hook your qualifications onto, make what they have given you fit your strengths. Let's say the job ad states that "experience with Desk Top Publishing (DTP) tools" is needed. That's a pretty vague requirement. Are they talking about Interleaf, Pagemaker, FrameMaker, Microsoft Word, Word Perfect, or something else? It's impossible to know. But you can list those word processing and DTP tools with which you are familiar. Alternatively, you can say that you have "worked with X-number of DTP tools," thus showing that you have some breadth of tool knowledge without eliminating yourself because you failed to mention the one tool they're really interested in.

Conclusion

The first goal of job hunting is getting an interview, as it's the interview--not the resume--that will ultimately land you the job. As you saw in this article, developing a T-letter can help you accomplish this goal by summarizing a company's requirements and then matching your qualifications to those requirements. What's more, developing a T-letter is straight-forward, drawing on information that's already provided to you and showcasing some of the skills required

for technical writers. Although you may still not get interviews 100 percent of the time, I have found that using the T-letter has tripled the number of calls for interviews I've received, and I have heard from technical writing colleagues that they've found the T-letter to be successful, too. The T-letter gets interviews, and if you don't get an interview, you can't get the job.

Tom has worked in Technical Communications for 12 years in a variety of industries: Process Control, Telecommunications, and Retail Credit Processing and Financial activities. Before he became a Technical Writer, Tom was a computer programmer. He has a BA in Business Administration, and both a BA and an MA in English. Tom currently resides in Columbus, Ohio and works as the Lead Technical Writer for Alliance Data Systems, Inc.
