

## Bios & Cover Letters That Don't Suck

Oh, I love this **SMFA Essentials** module so much! No, it's not often that you'll be asked for a bio. No, you aren't doing submissions every day. But it feels so delicious when you *are* asked for a bio, or you do need to do a mailing, if you know—with confidence—that your materials look their on-brand best. So, let's get to it, shall we?

First, some principles that exist no matter which element we're dealing with (bio for a playbill, "about me" statement on social networking site, bio for your professional website, professional summary for a media kit, cover letter for an agent submission, cover letter for a role-specific casting submission, or a general letter of introduction to anyone in the industry).

- These tools are all in service of your brand. If they do not help the recipient GET YOU, they've not effectively done their job (even if they're academically "perfect" otherwise).
- There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all version of these tools. Some key elements will exist in all your marketing tools (Hello! That's branding at work!) but you'll need to adjust your materials for their intended recipients.
- There's a reason mass mailings FEEL *massive* on the receiving end. They're too general to possibly work for all recipients, and while they're "easier" to deal with, they're also ridiculously ineffective.
- Researching your recipients takes time, patience, focus, and discipline. And while that's not at all glamorous, the extra touches you're able to add to your materials based on the research you've done will make a huge difference.
- Knowing your WHY as an artist is a lovely thing. But it doesn't tell the buyer anything about how you're going to help *them* earn commission, solve a casting problem, tell great stories with you, etc. Shift the focus of your materials to the recipient and you'll help them hop on board with brand YOU.
- Shorter is better. No one has ever read a bio or cover letter and thought, "Wow. I sure wish this were LONGER." Trust me.
- Everything you create needs **The Three Ps**. That's personality, professionalism, and proofreading!

Whoa. That's a lot of stuff with only brief explanations. Worry not! Elaboration is on its way. :) Oh, and so is a glorious preflight checklist for your bio and cover letter, to make sure they don't suck before you send 'em out into the world!

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## Your Tools Are All in Service of Your Brand

Just like your headshot, your resumé, your demo reel, your website, and everything else about your marketing package, your bio and cover letter are also a part of teaching us how to *get* you, how to *cast* you. Why go formal when you're clearly casual otherwise? Why use "rules" that you were taught about letter writing when they don't jibe with what the "rules" of your *brand* might be? Be your authentic self! That's who we want to get to know. And if your cover letter starts us off down the wrong path about how to understand you, you're making the already-existing hill steeper than it needs to be.

If you're still not clear on your brand, head back to **Your Bullseye** and refocus your typing words. Also dust off **The Art of Pitching** for added clarity. Because your materials are an extension of your brand, a read of your bio or your cover letter should *\*feel\** like you. If you're not the type of person who would say, "I knew I was born to be an actor from the tender age of five when I first picked up a hairbrush and accepted an Academy Award in the bathroom mirror," to someone in person, keep it off the bio. If you're not the type of person who would say, "It is with great pleasure that I reach out to you today for the potential of collaborating on your upcoming theatrical project," to someone in person, keep it out of your cover letter.

Truly, so very many "sucky" bio and cover letters could suck less with one quick read-through, aloud.

But the number-one most essential favor you can do for yourself is proofreading. Better yet, it's having someone else proofread. Look, a bio, a cover letter, anything you're sending out in front of people with whom you hope to collaborate and make tons of money should not be treated as casually as a blog post or Facebook status update.

It's appalling the number of *intelligent* people out there using the wrong it's or its, using then when they mean than, even creating words like "I's" (trying to be proper, saying "Steve and I's new play..." I suppose). *\*shudder\** I remember being shocked to see a bio in which a top exec at one of the most important companies in this industry used the phrase "segue way" (because I guess this person didn't know that the word segue is pronounced "seg-way") and it seems strange to me that NO ONE mentioned it, despite that bio having been in front of many recipients and certainly a team of assistants over the years. Even if you're absolutely certain you remember everything from grammar school, there's probably something you've forgotten. Because you could potentially turn off otherwise interested agents, managers, casting directors, producers, directors, writers, showrunners, etc., by writing "use to" instead of "used to" or

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"should of" instead of "should have," I strongly recommend you visit four fabulous resources before calling your materials "ready" for the world!

- ⇒ <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com>
- ⇒ <http://wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html>
- ⇒ <http://grammar.yourdictionary.com/spelling-and-word-lists/misspelled.html>
- ⇒ <http://grammarist.com>

Thank you.

A final word (for now, heh heh) about branding and your tools. Y'all know I'm a fan of looking at how "the big guys" handle issues of brand, for inspiration. Take a look at ads for movies and TV shows in magazines. A ton of money is spent on the FEEL of these ads. When you create marketing materials of any kind—even bios and cover letters—you are really doing some advertising (or at the very least, you are confirming your brand in the marketplace). So, you want to have an overall feel to your materials that really communicate what YOU bullseye, in your work.

## Don't Be Afraid To Have Several Versions of These Tools

I have at least four versions of my bio. They vary in length, because sometimes someone wants something shorter than my most frequently used version. They vary in tone, because sometimes I'm going to be speaking at a university... other times I'm going to be a guest on a cheeky latenight BCC talkshow. Now, don't let that last bit make you think one is overly formal and the other is crazy casual! There are slight variances within the same, on-brand message.

If you do a lot of theatre but also want to break into on-camera acting, your website should feature prominently the bio that helps you teach people where you're GOING, but always make available that very specifically tailored one. If you have a huge voiceover career but recently released a single at iTunes, you'll want to create bios that compliment one another, not that conflict with one another. Remember, you don't want to talk us out of being excited about your acting career just because the short you wrote made it to the Sundance Film Festival. You want to focus our attention on the fact that you are a hyphenate who is *\*building\** on success in one area to make a tier-jump into another.

There is even more room for variation when it comes to cover letters, because you're never going to send the same one to a casting director that you would send to, say, an agent. (I say

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that like it's a "no duh" type thing, but I've received countless cover letters that say, "Dear Sirs, I am hopeful to be represented by your company." To which I find my head crashing to the desk with a \*thud\* of disbelief.)

A major reason for having several versions of your tools is because—where cover letters are concerned—mass mailings *feel* like mass mailings. We *know* we're being sold to without any consideration for who we are or what we're working on, what level of actors we represent, etc. For casting, it feels general and sometimes desperate, as if the goal is *getting work* not *letting us know how you solve a problem your research shows you we have*. For representation, it feels, well, general and sometimes desperate, as if the goal is *getting representation* not *laying down roots for a mutually-beneficial relationship that will last decades*.

## Research Your Recipients

Another one that seems like a no-brainer, but you'd be amazed how many creatives send out their materials with unfocused cover letters. Hey, I was one of those actors, back in my early acting days! I would buy the mailing labels and do a mass mailing to every agency in the pack, and that meant my oh-so-clever cover letter detailing my career accomplishments in theatre, industrials, and voiceover would go to agents who repped only, say, writers. Or camera operators. Or athletes. Dear me... what was I thinking?!?

Knowing WHY it is that what \*you\* bullseye is something that should be of value to the recipient of your cover letter is of utmost importance. Explaining to the recipient of your materials exactly how you see a collaboration being a good fit is a ninja move. Because the majority of the packages crossing desks all over this industry will not have such specific focus, yours will stand out—even if your credits are less impressive than you'd like them to be, right now. Does this mean you'll start getting meetings like never before? No. A beautiful cover letter alone will not make all the difference. But it will make \*a\* difference. So, why not get under control as much as we can, before trying to connect with the buyers?

**Ask yourself: "Why does this person need to know I exist right now?"**

Note: That last bit—"right now"—is specifically important because you may decide, after researching your targets (see **Show Targeting** and **Representation Targeting** for that process), that the time is NOT right for making contact. Remember, the ninja way is all about "Lurk Then Lead." If you map out that the intersection between you and this industry professional makes more sense at the next tier, hold on to that chip. Don't cash it in yet. Keep

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collecting data on your targets and choose the moment wisely. That moment will be something beautiful about which to write in your cover letter, AT that time. :)

So, back to the question: "Why does this person need to know I exist right now?"

If the answer is, "Because he's an agent and agents need actors and I'm an actor," DO NOT SEND THAT SUBMISSION. If the answer is, "Because she's a casting director and I need to be cast," DO NOT SEND THAT SUBMISSION. If the answer is, "Because this is my dream and everyone needs to know I exist so I can start living it," DO NOT SEND THAT SUBMISSION.

And if you're coming back to me with, "Aw, it's just an email. It doesn't cost me anything. What could it hurt?" please let me remind you that your goal is not to blanket the town with submissions. You are building a brand and hoping to work for a lifetime. That requires way more care and focus and discipline than flinging a bunch of submissions out into the world.

If you're able to answer the big question with something super specific like, "This agent is one I've researched enough to know represents actors just a tier above where I currently sit. My research also shows that he has clients who regularly book in my target casting offices. He has no one on his roster of my age, type, and credits level. He respects improv training, of which I have a ton. I have booked paid work. I can list relationships I've built with personnel in casting offices. When it's not terribly busy, this agent does try to attend industry showcases, and I happen to be in one next month. This person needs to know I exist right now because he can attend the showcase, see my work, decide if I'm a good fit for his roster based on the on-brand, target-specific performance I'll be doing there, and then—if he would like to meet with me—I am ready to discuss my target casting offices in an eloquent way, and—due to my consistent training—my craft is at a level where I could compete if he were to start sending me out the next day. Further, if I'm not currently a good fit for his roster, he will at least know what it is that I bullseye, and we can begin to lay the foundation for a relationship that will last for decades, potentially."

## The Three Ps

The Three Ps are personality, professionalism, and proofreading. Your personality should come through in your written word. Depending on what type of person you are, your bio and your cover letter will be either light and casual or very serious in tone. These tools should be conversational and should give the recipient a sense of your vibe. Still, everything should be professional. Remember that, although the entertainment industry is unlike any other

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business, it is still a business and you are creating tools that exist in service of your brand-building. I've already covered proofreading, but I'm gonna do it again—and with good reason. Even if you're sure you've got it all right—ESPECIALLY if you're sure you've got it all right—get another set of eyes on your tools.

## Preflight Checklist for Bios & Cover Letters That Don't Suck

Run your goodies through this checklist before letting them out into the world. Remember, these goodies you're spending so much time and energy and care and love creating are going to be representatives of BRAND YOU, out there. Send them out to do a good job, after you've made them strong enough to really do that. :)

- \_\_\_\_\_ Feels like me. Sounds like me. Represents BRAND ME.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Highlights where the recipient and I intersect—or should—and how that benefits the recipient.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Is specific, without getting too dang long. Seriously. You can always lose a sentence or two.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Shows where I'm headed more than where I've been, but uses my history as a foundation for the next tier.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Does not contain any of the following clichés: "from the tender age of," "literally since birth," "born to act," "the stage was calling," "received glowing reviews," "passion for theatre," "Hollywood beckoned," "to name a few (credits)," "projects like (and then a list of credits)," "take my career to new heights," or even, "I'm seeking representation," since—of course—that would be why you're approaching an agent.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Isn't cutesy, precious, formal, overly quirky, or anything else that isn't on-brand for YOU.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Includes contact information—at the very least, that URL where the reader can go for more information.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Contains minimal links, and ideally ONE, which sends folks to a space you control (your website, a URL you redirect to your IMDb page or Actors Access profile, a page highlighting your latest award win, big news, etc.). Since few folks will actually go all over the web to learn more about you, keeping it simple will help you—and them—with brand awareness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ If being emailed (bio, cover letter, anything that starts out in Word or another word-processing form), was generated using "print to PDF" to retain formatting. Further, the file name is "YourNameBio.pdf" so that its description has value when saved on the recipient's computer.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ Minimizes "the name drop" while still including anything really remarkable (an award-winning performance opposite a legend, a hot industry referral).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Is written in either first-person or third-person, but not both. All issues of grammar, voice, consistency, capitalization, spelling, and punctuation are consistent and double-checked by another person.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Comes from your WHY, but doesn't detail your WHY. Instead, it details why aligning with you is a brilliant idea for the reader.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Has been read aloud—multiple times—and still feels both on-brand and like something you would absolutely say, verbatim, in a face-to-face encounter.

All right! Feeling good about your ability to bring together a non-sucky bio and cover letter? Take a stab at it. Right now. Even if you don't need one right now, do it. And remember to continue working on your tools so that they are always better, always better, always better. Yay!

Please submit your questions for our follow-up MP3 immediately, so we can get you covered before the end of this month's interactive module! Send your email to:

[ninjaassistant@cricketfeet.com](mailto:ninjaassistant@cricketfeet.com) and use the subject line: **Bio [or] Cover Letter Question**, so we can easily track it and get you in the queue to help out with your questions, before we head into next month's awesome interactive module in *SMFA Essentials*. Yippee!

Sure hope this process is feeling less tortuous now. We're so excited to get you feeling awesome about your tools—even those you may not use every day. It all comes back to helping the buyers become fans. Let's do this! Next month's interactive module is all about how to **Rock the Meeting in 5 Easy Steps**. Whether it's an agent meeting, a general casting meeting, or a meet-and-greet with a producer, you'll be equipped to master those moments like the ninja you are!

We are ridiculously lucky to have a life in which we get to live our dreams, every day. Being blissed out, confident, and absolutely capable of achieving your every goal along the way is totally do-able. Unless you're SURE it's impossible, folks, every little dream you hear whispering to you is absolutely, totally attainable. The *Self-Management for Actors* principles **work**. Ninja badassery abounds. **Bonnie Gillespie is living her dreams by helping others figure out how to live theirs**. She casts SAG-AFTRA indie feature films and series such as the zombie smash hit *BITE ME*, which made the leap from web to TV with **Lionsgate** in 2012. Bonnie is founder and producer of Hollywood Happy Hour, Somebody's Basement, and Get A-Listed. Her weekly column, **The Actors Voice**, runs at Actors Access and her podcast, **The Work**, is available on iTunes. Her books include *Casting Qs: A Collection of Casting Director Interviews*, *Acting Qs: Conversations with Working Actors*, and *Self-Management for Actors: Getting Down to (Show) Business*, which has been named one of **The Top Ten Best Books on Acting Ever Written** and featured at the Tom Cruise actor resource blog. Bonnie regularly facilitates seminars based on this top-selling book and has traveled internationally—to demystify the casting process and the business side of pursuing an artistic career—as a guest instructor at colleges, universities, actors' unions, and private acting studios. Bonnie has been interviewed on *Good Morning America*, *BBC Breakfast*, UTV-Ireland, CBC Radio One, BBC Radio 5, E! Online, and in the *LA Times*. To hop on Bonnie's mailing list, please visit [BonnieGillespie.com](http://BonnieGillespie.com).



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