

# ACADEMIC JOB SEARCH: THE COVER LETTER

*Demonstrating why you will be a successful faculty member*

In this tipsheet, you will find information on writing cover letters for academic positions. The cover letter is your opportunity to help the search committee imagine you as a faculty member. While cover letters for academia are like cover letters used to apply to industry roles, there are some key differences.

## What is an academic cover letter?



The academic cover letter is your opportunity to introduce yourself to the hiring committee as an academic. Often, this document provides an overview of your application, and it is the first document committee members will review. In your cover letter, you can draw attention to key parts of your application and create a narrative about yourself as a teacher, researcher, or both.

## What makes a strong cover letter?



Strong cover letters detail your accomplishments and show the reader why you will be a successful hire and be a great addition to the faculty. Consider incorporating your values, interests, and priorities as a scholar and how these make you a compelling candidate. It is also important for you to introduce the reader to your subfield of research and to make clear why your work is significant.

## Tips for formatting the cover letter



- Include your mailing address at the top of the page. You can use the address of the institution you are currently associated with instead of your personal address.
- Enter the full mailing address of the department or faculty (left justified).
- Include the date of writing (or submission).
- Address your letter to the name of the person listed in the posting (if known).
- Format all paragraphs justified to the left (no indent for the first line).
- Use 11-point font size or larger.
- Format the document to have 1-inch margins.

## Cover letter sections and content

It can be difficult to know what information to put in your cover letter and where it should appear. The following outlines some considerations for different paragraphs and what information they can include.

### *Introduction*

In the introduction you will want to outline

- What role you are applying to and where you saw it advertised
- Who you are and what you do or your current status (i.e., when you are defending your thesis)
- Why you are applying or what you would like the reader to know about you

### *Research Experience*

Sometimes this section is divided into two paragraphs: one that focuses on your dissertation and another that focuses on your research vision and contributions. If the position you are applying for is more teaching than research focused, you may want to highlight your teaching experience first (see below), and then include a section on your research experience.

#### *Current research*

- Include details about your current research projects (likely your dissertation) and what they contribute to your field.
- Highlight any grants or awards you have received for your research.
- Situate your research within your discipline and explain any pertinent publications.
- Emphasize aspects of your dissertation or research program that match the role and/or department you are applying to.
- Name methods and/or methodologies if those are important to your field.

#### *Future Research*

- Outline what you plan to study and why over the next 5-6 years (likely inspired by questions that have emerged in your doctoral research).
- Consider writing this section as a description of how you will get tenure.
- Keep in mind that some applications require a separate document that outlines your future research plans. Consider the depth and length of this section in relation to the other documents you are submitting in your application package.

### *Teaching Experience*

This section outlines your teaching experience and describes your teaching philosophy. If you do not have teaching experience, but are applying for a teaching-focused position, make sure to explain your interest in teaching, how you would approach teaching, and any student-mentorship experience. When writing about your teaching experience, keep the following suggestions in mind.

- Avoid a chronological approach to describing your teaching experience. Instead, focus on what you have taught and how as opposed to when and where.
- Highlight what students take away from your classroom.

- Describe your suitability for teaching any courses listed in the posting (i.e., relevant experience or how you will approach teaching them).
- Explain why you feel confident in your ability to teach courses described in the job ad, even if you do not have any directly related teaching experience.
- Research the teaching practices at the institution you are applying to. What kind of teaching takes place there? What are their teaching goals? Tailoring your teaching section to these practices can help you stand out.
- Spotlight any teaching awards you have won in this section.
- Draw attention to any course design experience.

### *Service Experience*

While a section on your service work is not seen in all cover letters, depending on the focus of the institution you are applying to, your experience as part of different committees or roles could be helpful to highlight.

- Show what kind of colleague you will be, by highlighting your service work roles.
- Describe the relevance of any service work you choose to highlight in your cover letter.
- Avoid listing roles without any pertinent context or significance.

### *Conclusion*

- Reiterate your strengths as a candidate for the position, your interest in the role, and your enthusiasm for joining the department.
- Let the committee know how they can reach you.

### *Sign off*

- A typical sign off includes the following elements:
  - “Sincerely” or “Kind regards”
  - Your signature
  - Your full name, typed

## **Additional comments on structure and content**

The following comments can be helpful for making decisions about unique experiences and editing your cover letter.

- Consider whether to include professional experience that is relevant to research or teaching experience in the respective paragraph.
- Evaluate the length and detail of your teaching and/or research paragraphs based on whether you are also submitting a teaching dossier, research prospectus, teaching interests, or research plan. For example, if a teaching dossier is part of the application, you may consider giving a brief overview of your teaching experience and approach but leave the bulk of this information for the dossier
- Write strong and specific opening sentences that outline your claim.
- Keep your letter clear and concise by considering what are the most important things you want your reader to know about you.
- Check with your supervisor or mentor about the expected length of a cover letter for your field or discipline.

## Helpful hints and tips for writing your cover letter

- *Is the job posting teaching or research oriented?* This orientation will inform the focus of your cover letter.
- *Are you addressing the preferred qualifications?* Be sure to address as many qualifications outlined in the letter as possible. Also spend some time researching the institution, department, and role you are applying to, to customize your letter.
- *Do you highlight any similarities between your research and/or teaching philosophy and that of the department?* This is a great way to describe why you are a good match for the role.
- *Are you positioning yourself as a faculty member?* Show how you will be a contributing faculty member and/or what you have done to prepare for this role.
- *Do you have any personal connections to the institution?* Consider highlighting any relevant, personal connections (i.e., family in the area or completed your undergraduate degree at a similar institution).
- *Is there evidence of your voice or personality?* The cover letter is an opportunity to share these attributes. Communicate your character through your priorities, interests, and word choice.
- *Do you describe what you did and why you did it?* There can be a tendency to list different experiences but remember that it is important to communicate their relevance to the role.
- *Are you using jargon?* Make sure your letter is accessible to everyone. Remember that there is likely to be at least one committee member who is not in your specialty. Consider writing your letter to the lowest common denominator (likely a master's degree level).
- *Are you choosing words carefully?* Because your cover letter may not be read in its entirety, you may want to use keywords and phrases from the job posting to catch the reviewer's attention. You may also consider carefully choosing the verbs that describe what you do. Consider this list from LinkedIn: <https://ca.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-cover-letters/resume-action-words>
- *Have you proofread?* Make sure you proofread and consider having your application reviewed by mentors and supervisors. You may also want to have someone outside your field review your cover letter.
- *Is it clear why your research is significant?* Do not assume that the reader will immediately understand why what you do is important. If you decide to highlight specific journals you have published in, be sure to explain their relevance or significance.
- *What is the tone of your cover letter?* It is normal to write many drafts of your cover letter. It is an important part of the application, and you will want to make sure you are striking the right tone and highlighting important achievements and experiences.

## **Additional Resources**

### **The Professor Is In**

This website blog is a helpful resource for learning more about academic applications.

<https://theprofessorisin.com/>

### **Creating your cover letter for academic positions**

The University of Toronto's booklet for masters and PhD students includes additional tips for writing cover letters as well as examples of cover letters from different disciplines.

<https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/Academic-Cover-Letter.pdf>

### **Academic job search – The cover letter**

The University of California, Berkley series on academic jobs, includes a specific page on CVs. This page provides tips for formatting CVs and suggestions for making the document as readable as possible.

<https://career.berkeley.edu/start-exploring/career-essentials/>

### **University Affairs**

University Affairs is a digital Canadian publication where you can find articles with suggestions on writing cover letters in the Careers Café section. Consider starting with the article below.

<https://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/careers-cafe/treating-cover-letter-work-plan/>