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Essay on the cover letter for academic jobs

Submitted by Cheryl E. Ball on November 4, 2013 - 3:00am

Recently, on a listserv in my field known for being welcoming to outsiders and newcomers but also for being rife with discussions that quickly turn ridiculous, a thread on cover letters followed the usual pattern: A new grad student asks what seems to be an innocuous question, a few professors offer semi-helpful responses without getting too sucked into the time-sink, the rogue academic contributes some tongue-in-cheek humor, a few more grad students take the jokes seriously and panic, the list erupts in false information and rumors. (See, e.g., the incident in writing studies that will henceforth be known as Godwin's [1] Eternal [2] Bedbugs).

The job application letter, or the cover letter, is the most important part of your application. It's the first thing a search committee member sees. Typically, a search committee member will read your materials in the following order: cover letter, C.V., letters of recommendation, writing sample or other additional materials. Depending on the individual committee member and how large the candidate pool is, your materials may get as long as 30 minutes or as short as 5 minutes. Less if it's obvious from your cover letter that you're absolutely not qualified for the job (see "Fit" column [3]). If you are a fit for the job ad's basic qualifications, it's not unusual for readers to spend the most time on your cover letter, as it should be the narrative that explains the rest of your materials and, frankly, your academic life.

This document is, next to the teaching philosophy (fodder for another column), the most difficult for students to write because it sums up, usually before the student has finished their degree, their Ph.D. trajectory and so it is like writing a proposal for employment. You have to pretend (if you're not already defended, or close to it) that you know exactly how your research will turn out and be able to state it confidently and articulately to a group of non-experts. I say non-experts because, unless you're applying to a research-intensive university or a school that has a Ph.D. program in your exact area of study, and that has an extremely large faculty of experts in and around your field already, you're more likely to be applying to a college where you're intended to be one of a handful, or maybe the *only* one in your field who will research in your specific area. In those cases, it's unlikely that the search committee will comprise researchers who understand your confined set of academic jargon. This does not mean you should dumb things down, but that you should fully explain yourself, defining any specific terms you need to use and giving examples from your research and teaching.

The academic cover letter generally follows very strict genre conventions. It should be no more than two pages, but definitely more than one and a half. No glaring amounts of white space, because this means you don't have enough qualifications to talk about yourself.

The tone of the letter is crucial. It must be thoroughly formal and professional; remember that you are speaking as a potential colleague, not as a (desperate) graduate student. Your cover letter should not repeat items from your C.V. without including some context for their inclusion here. While it's true that few faculty will read all of your documents with care, just listing items to repeat them in multiple locations doesn't tell the search committee why these C.V. lines are important to your own research and teaching trajectories, nor why these items should matter for the position at hand. This is why your cover letter should narrate your experiences and persuade the committee that your qualifications meet the needs of the job qualifications posted.

Two pages is a short amount of space to work within, which is another reason why this genre is difficult for students to write successfully. Most Ph.D. students I've worked with over the years write at least seven drafts of their letter before it is workable. And then they often write another three or four drafts to perfect it for *one* job.

I recommend students pick out a "dream" job posting early on (or from the previous year, perhaps) and write their letter toward that job. Doing this will get you in the right frame of mind to convince a committee that you're the right person for the job, and then you will have a standard draft to work from and create alternate cover letters for each job you apply to. And you must tailor each cover letter to fit each job ad, which is why being on the market is so damned time-consuming. (In case no one has told you yet, you will not -- no matter how good a student and researcher you are -- have time to work on your dissertation while you're on the job market. I've never met a student who isn't so totally distracted by the job search that they can refocus on their dissertations in between sending letters out.)

Job letters typically follow a five-paragraph format, with the order of paragraphs switched depending upon the focus of the department (research or teaching):

1. The Introduction

The tradition for including the full name and position number, if there is one, and location where you discovered the job posting feels odd, but it's a standard opening line to your letter. Also in this paragraph, you should state what your current status is (ABD, defending in April, assistant professor, etc.). If you have not finished your degree yet, be very specific about when you defend (not *will* defend: be more definitive than that) and make sure your adviser agrees with you, or she might write a different timeline in her letter of recommendation, which will make the search committee assume you have unrealistic expectations. It's also common to include a sentence or two about why you are applying for this particular position. Sometimes these statements can come across as empty. Don't BS, and don't write it just to have filler; be honest and sincere. For instance, a colleague wanting to make the switch from a tenure-track position at an R2 (teaching-intensive institution with some Ph.D. programs) to a tenure-track position at an all-male, teaching-intensive SLAC (small liberal arts college) explained why -- in terms of leadership-based teaching that was part of the school's mission -- in her introductory paragraph.

2. The Dissertation Paragraph

This is one of the hardest paragraphs to write for most students, because (at least in my field) it's typical that people go on the job market before they've finished their dissertations. Many students start crafting their cover letters at the same time they start writing their dissertations, so they have a really hard time writing in the future abstract. But once students are able to craft their dissertation paragraph, I've found that it actually clarifies their understanding of their own dissertations and helps them move forward. So I'd recommend starting your draft by writing this paragraph. One paragraph should be enough, and it can be structured similarly to the organization of your whole dissertation: one sentence for each chapter, roughly. In four to six sentences you must show what your dissertation contributes to your field of research -- the "So what?" factor -- by explaining how it is situated within your field's disciplinary conversations (but you don't have to cite scholarship), why your topic is important and necessary, and what your outcomes are.

If methodologies and methods are an important part of your research and field, include them. If archival or corpus-based work is an important part of your research, name them. People from outside your specialty will be reading this description, so don't assume everyone on the planet has read *Frankenstein* and would know why you're writing yet another dissertation about it. Make sure you emphasize the aspects of the dissertation that fit the particular job ad. Finally, in some fields it is acceptable to include an added, longer (one- or two-page) dissertation abstract with your materials. With the increased use of online submission websites for job ads, which mandate what you can upload, I suspect we will begin to see less and less of this inclusion from job candidates. Do yourself a favor and make your diss paragraph awesome so you don't have to include another document.

3. Related/Future Research

This paragraph is often about your research agenda; that is, what articles or books you have plans to work on after the dissertation is completed. Students early in their dissertation writing often panic at the thought of having to plan out their research trajectory for the next six years, but if you want a job with *any* research involved, you will need to have some idea of how you will get tenure, and the research agenda is that document. Indeed, you might start this paragraph as a separate research agenda document and then summarize it in your cover letter. Research-intensive schools may ask for the separate, longer document, which should include names of projects, brief outlines, journals or presses or funding agencies they will be submitted to, and your work plan for completing them before tenure.

If you're stuck thinking of what your future projects might be, consider all of the threads of interesting or related findings you discovered as part of your diss research; each one of those might become an article or, if several are related, your next book or research project. Finally, other things you might mention in this paragraph -- as they relate to the job ad -- include previous articles you've published, grants you've received, and conference presentations you've given. The purpose of this paragraph is to show that you have a coherent research trajectory and that you are productive. It is most useful for applying to research-intensive universities, to convince them that you can work independently and will get tenure. If you're applying to a teaching-intensive university, consider making this paragraph about undergraduate research, if you have any involvement (or want to) in that area of mentoring.

4. Teaching Paragraph(s)

This paragraph seems to be the most difficult for students to write, and I think it's because it is such an unusual academic genre. Unless you're applying for a research-only position that you are absolutely sure includes zero teaching, you're going to have to include this paragraph, so start practicing. Like the dissertation paragraph, I recommend students start by writing a full, two-page teaching philosophy (coming soon to a column near you!) and then summarizing it in your cover letter. This paragraph — you can have one or two — typically begins by explaining your teaching philosophy in one or two sentences. If your teaching relates to your research, definitely make that connection here. Then you give a broad overview of how you bring your teaching philosophy to your classrooms. This might include discussing what teaching values and learning goals you use in your classes.

For instance, my teaching philosophy is called an editorial pedagogy, so I need to define this term, relate it to my research in digital publishing, explain that my goal is to professionalize students as designers and editors (given the kinds of classes I teach), and say that I do this by mentoring them through in-progress feedback on their client-based projects. This is a very short example. Yours might be 1-2 sentences longer, but hopefully it gives you a sense of the big-picture nature of these opening sentences. After that introduction, get specific. Tell the search committee the name of a class you've taught using this pedagogical approach, what the assignments are (and/or texts you assigned), and how you set students up to achieve the learning outcomes of the assignment. Make sure that you relate this description back to how it enacts your teaching philosophy.

If you haven't yet taught but that's part of the job you're applying for, suggest that this is the way you'd like to approach teaching and, perhaps, describe a training or mentoring situation that was similar to teaching and what you learned (as a potential teacher) from it.

Include a second paragraph only if the job ad lists a bunch of different classes you might teach and two kinds are different enough from each other than you need to describe your approach in each.

Some advisers recommend students include information about the kinds of courses you hope to teach in the future, pulled from the course catalog of the institution you're applying to. I have mixed feelings about this because, like the "Here's why I'm applying to your department" sentence of the introductory paragraph, it can come across as cloying. So approach the "Here's what I can teach" section with care, and if you have two teaching paragraphs already, they'll get the idea without your help, unless what they want you to teach is not adequately represented by the kinds of classes you've described. In which case, make that connection for them by showing how what you've taught relates to what they'd want you to teach. In addition, for teaching-focused colleges, this paragraph will go before your dissertation paragraph, and you will have two paragraphs on teaching, to show your dedication to it and to undergraduate mentoring or advising. Talk specifically about any examples you may have advising undergraduates in teaching, clubs, etc.

5. Service Paragraph

Some folks' strategy here is to list all their service work, to show what a good colleague they can be. The point of this paragraph is to show that you are a hard-working, collaborative colleague, not just some holier-than-thou star who will only sit in her office and never contribute to the

department. But listing all your service is for your C.V. This paragraph should be about giving a story to your service work so that the work you highlight here portrays your service as connected to your research and teaching and contributes to the department or field.

Service work will be especially important to teaching-intensive colleges where the faculties are smaller (and thus have to pitch in more to departmental administration) and where undergraduate student mentoring and advising is expected. As with all paragraphs in this letter, make sure you draw on key words from the job ad itself (but not in an obnoxious way) to persuade the committee that you're the right fit for the job. Keep in mind that if you're applying to alt-ac jobs or other types of administrative positions such as a program director, this paragraph may actually go after the introductory paragraph and will be much lengthier. In that case, it should include your specific qualifications for running the program, what your vision is for it over the next five (or 10) years, and (if a required part of the job) how you plan to creatively finance it.

6. Conclusion.

Because you're not done yet. This paragraph, though, is rather perfunctory. You're simply telling the committee how your dossier (your letters of recommendation, C.V., writing sample, and any other job materials) will arrive, if separate from your cover letter.

Or include your web address, if you have an online portfolio. If the job doesn't require recommendation letters up front, you can list who your recommenders are, but it's not required. In some fields, it is expected that you indicate your availability and contact information for an interview. But that's about it. Do not, under any circumstances, make it seem like they're doing you a favor and that you have nothing to give in return.

Other quick T\tips:

- Do your research on each college, but don't go overboard. Thirty minutes is enough research. I spend two to three hours writing each cover letter, but I'm fairly slow.
- Use letterhead from your current institution, if you're allowed. If not, use a memo or letter template in your word-processing program.
- Many people follow the formatting of a business letter and include the receiver's address at the top. I don't, and I don't think it's ever been counted against me. But ask around in your field. You might could use that extra six lines of space.
- Don't push the margins out farther than one inch, and don't use a typeface smaller than 11 point. Single space. Readability is as important as quality.

These conventions differ depending on what field you are in, so while a national, cover-your-bases advice column like this can serve as a starting point, you're still going to have to do some research into how people in *your* field write cover letters (and organize their C.V.s, etc.), and -- most obviously -- review drafts of your letter with your adviser. One of the best pieces of advice I got my first time on the job market was from a faculty member outside my disciplinary specialty, whom I had asked to read a draft of my cover letter. She was notorious for being rather to-the-point, so I was expecting some harsh criticism, even though I'd already revised the letter a dozen times. I made an appointment to meet with her; she read the letter and simply said to me: It sounds like you're a graduate student who wants a job, not a colleague who wants to join their faculty. It was the perfect bit of advice I needed to rewrite the cover letter yet again and frame my

work as one of a future colleague rather than as an immature graduate student not yet finished with her Ph.D. It is that mindset that a cover letter needs to have to be convincing. Have multiple faculty members, including those outside your specialty, read a final draft, and then expect to revise more.

Not everyone will have excellent advice, but the more that advice begins to resonate across readers, the more you should pay attention to it and make some corrections. Because if your cover letter bombs on the market, no one will ever get past that to see how awesome your C.V. or writing sample is. You have roughly 30 seconds to sell someone on your entire academic career, so make it count.

Links:
[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godwin%27s_law
[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eternal_September
[3] https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/09/23/essay-issues-fit-academic-job-searches

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