Cover Letters

The cover letter, also known as the letter of application, is uniformly requested in academic job postings and is an important document. You should spend ample time writing and proofreading targeted letters for each job. As with all of your materials, have a faculty member in your department look over your letters before you send them.

PURPOSES

- The cover letter is your chance to express enthusiasm for the position, department, and university.
- Your letter of application is your first opportunity to describe the congruence between your experiences and the requirements of the open position.
- The cover letter is an effective way to demonstrate your writing skills.

LENGTH

- Cover letters for academic positions can be up to two pages.
- Brevity is still encouraged, but a second page might be appropriate if:
  - You are applying for a position that is not a direct match with your previous experiences.
  - The job description does not request separate research or teaching statements.
  - The institution to which you are applying is significantly different from the type of institution from which you are graduating.
  - You have unusual circumstances or career paths.

OPENING PARAGRAPH

- Indicate the position for which you are applying and mention how you heard about the position.
- Briefly introduce your background (degree, university, expected completion status, etc.).
- Begin expressing enthusiasm about the position and demonstrating the ways in which you will be able to contribute to the department.

MIDDLE PARAGRAPHS

- Applicants typically discuss their teaching experience in one paragraph and their research experience in another paragraph. The order of these paragraphs will depend on the job description, your personal strengths, and how the paragraph flows from your introductory paragraph. You might consider using an additional paragraph to discuss other relevant skills or experiences that help demonstrate your value to prospective departments, but doing so is not necessary.
- Teaching:
  - Including a teaching paragraph is especially important if you are applying to a teaching school or if the institution has not requested a separate teaching statement.
  - Describe the courses you have taught and your associated responsibilities. Go beyond logistics. Describe how you teach.
  - Discuss your teaching strengths, using concrete examples.
  - Explain what you like about teaching.
Mention any teaching awards you have earned.
Consider indicating the courses you are interested in teaching and feel competent to teach based on your qualifications.
If you have ideas about new courses you could offer in the department, share them: but, make clear that you are excited about teaching the department’s core courses as well.

• Research:
  - The research paragraph is particularly important when you are applying to a research-focused position and when the job description does not ask for a research statement.
  - Include information about your research experience to date. Be sure to discuss the context for your work and the way in which your work contributes to the field because members of the search committee may not be familiar with your area of expertise.
  - Mention publications, presentations, grants, and awards associated with your research.
  - Discuss your short term and long term research plans so members of the search committee will know that you are forward-thinking, passionate about your work, and interested in research.

• Service:
  - If the job description emphasizes service as a job responsibility or the institution has a strong service mission, consider discussing your academic, community, or professional service activities.

• Other:
  - If you have other work experiences that significantly contribute to your worth as a future faculty member, describe these experiences and their relevance to the job description.

CLOSING PARAGRAPH
• Summarize the strengths you will bring to the position.
• Mention your enclosures.
• Express appreciation for the search committee’s consideration.
• If you will be attending conferences in the near future, you may indicate interest in meeting with department faculty members at these events.
• Indicate the best method of contacting you.
• Be sure to sign your letter.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
• University of California at Berkeley - http://career.berkeley.edu/PhDs/PhDAcademic.stm
• University of Chicago - https://caps.uchicago.edu/resourcecenter/academic.html

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
• Thanks to Dr. Ana Mari Cauce, Dean of Arts & Sciences, UW, for reviewing this handout.

SAMPLES
• Biology – pages 3-4; Psychology – pages 5-6
August 2, 2006

Pat Maloney
Applicant Address
Applicant City, State Zip

XX Search Committee
Department of XX
University of XX
City, State Zip

Cell Biology Search Committee:

I am writing to apply for the assistant professor position in cell biology beginning August 2007. Dr. Peter Hardy encouraged me to apply after learning of my qualifications from my advisor, Sam Wyman, at a recent conference. I am currently a doctoral student in cell biology at the University of Washington. I have already completed three chapters of my dissertation and should complete all requirements for my degree by June 2007. I believe my qualifications are an excellent fit with your department.

As indicated on my enclosed curriculum vitae, I received my undergraduate degree in biology from a small liberal arts college. Having spent the last seven years in a large research institution, I feel confident about my desire to return to the small college environment. I value the education, mentorship, and outside learning opportunities provided to students at liberal arts colleges and I would be honored to be part of the XX community.

I thoroughly enjoy teaching and have developed a diverse teaching record. I have taught both undergraduate and graduate courses. I have taught lab sections as small as 11 students and lecture sections as large as 250. The courses I have most enjoyed teaching are introductory undergraduate courses of approximately 25 students. My favorite part of teaching is helping a struggling student learn challenging material by altering my approach to meet his/her needs. I take joy in creating new instructional strategies to convey material – games, debates, guest speakers, and television shows are among my favorite techniques. I am interested in teaching introductory cell biology, introductory genetics, and graduate-level courses in those areas.

My passion for cell biology is due, in part, to my involvement in research at the undergraduate level. I look forward to supervising students interested in the research process. I have mentored several undergraduate research assistants at the University of Washington. Our research team, consisting of faculty and students at all degree levels, has published two peer-reviewed journal articles regarding XX. We also have two projects underway. As our research area is broad, I plan to narrow my focus to XX and develop a number of projects that could provide undergraduate and graduate students at XX the opportunity to get involved in research.
In addition to teaching and research, I enjoy campus service activities. An important part of postsecondary education is the learning that takes place outside the classroom. I am interested in serving as a faculty sponsor for student organizations such as the Biology Club and being a member of the Campus Cares committee promoting healthy choices. Additionally, I look forward to sitting on thesis and tenure-review committees.

My background in liberal arts education, passion for teaching, interest in collaborative research, and commitment to campus service would be an asset to the cell biology program at XX. I look forward to continuing my career in academia, yet moving from a research-focused university to a smaller liberal arts college. I believe the environment at XX and in the community of XX will enable me to flourish professionally and personally. I look forward to visiting with you about this opportunity in more detail. Please contact me if you have questions. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Pat Maloney
August 2, 2006

Bailey Kemp
Applicant Address
Applicant City, State Zip

XX Search Committee
c/o XX
Department of XX
University of XX
City, State Zip

Clinical Psychology Search Committee:

I would appreciate your consideration for the Clinical Psychology faculty position recently advertised in The Chronicle of Higher Education. I will complete my doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Washington in June 2007. I feel my strengths, experiences, and interests make me a strong candidate for an assistant professor position in your department. In particular, my sound research record, solid teaching background, clinical experience with adults in prison settings, and commitment to professional service would be an asset to your department.

I have a demonstrated commitment to research, principally in the area of criminal behavior. My primary research interest concerns the interface among family of origin factors and criminal behavior in middle adulthood. My ultimate goal is to understand the family relational variables that influence criminal behavior starting after age 35. My dissertation on this topic should be completed by March 2007. I have published seven manuscripts – in peer-reviewed journals, books, and professional web magazines. I have presented my work at national and regional conferences. Additionally, I have received two research awards and I was interviewed by the public affairs office of the American Psychological Association about my research at the 2003 annual convention. I enjoy collaborating with faculty, students, and practitioners in diverse departments at different institutions to produce quality research.

In addition to my sound research background, I have a solid teaching record. I am currently teaching a course called Working with Offenders in the clinical psychology graduate program at the University of Washington (UW). I have taught the course twice and will teach it two more times during the 2006-2007 academic year. Previously, I served as a teaching assistant for an undergraduate class called The Psychology of Criminals at the UW. Upon completing my fourth quarter as a teaching assistant for the course, I received a departmental teaching assistant award. I enjoy teaching; I especially take pleasure in creating lesson plans, facilitating group activities, and mentoring students. Getting students excited about the study of psychology through field trips, class discussions, popular movies, and individual relationships has been a highlight of my graduate career. If I am hired, I would like to teach criminal psychology, abnormal psychology, and other core courses within your program. I am also interested in discussing the possibility of developing an elective course on the topic of sexual-based crimes.
While my abilities as a researcher and educator would be valuable to your department, I believe my clinical experiences would be a unique asset. I have worked with adults in many types of correctional facilities: men’s prisons, women’s prisons, state prisons, and federal penitentiaries. This breadth of experience has provided me with insights into many different types of criminals and would greatly contribute to my teaching and research efforts in this area. My clinical experiences in correctional facilities would also enable me to serve as a clinical supervisor for students completing practicum experiences in prisons.

Finally, I feel my commitment to professional service fits well with your department’s mission. During the course of my graduate studies, I have participated in numerous committees – on campus, in the local community, and in national organizations. I enjoy using my knowledge of psychology and natural leadership ability to organize events, coordinate speakers, and enhance the well-being of individuals and groups. I am interested in continuing your department’s affiliation with the Heritage Project and City Rehabilitation Board.

As discussed, my sound research record, solid teaching background, clinical experience with adults, and commitment to service make me an excellent candidate for an assistant professor position in the Clinical Psychology program at the XX. I would appreciate the opportunity to further discuss the ways in which my skills and experiences would be an asset to your program. Please feel free to contact me by mail at the address listed above, by phone at XX, or by email at XX. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Bailey Kemp

Enclosures: Curriculum vita with references and five publications