

Drafting an Academic Cover Letter



Formatting Tips:

- Use your institution's letterhead
- Heading: Write the date in the upper left, then a line space, then full mailing address of recipient followed by a line space, then the salutation followed by another line space before commencing the letter
- Use 11- or 12- point type in standard font and one-inch margins
- A junior candidate (ABD, recent PhD) should write a 2-page cover letter
- Save as .pdf file to avoid formatting errors, especially if sending electronically
- Always have someone proofread
- Consult with your advisor(s) about the job market and the positions to which you are applying

Content & Organizational Tips:

- Do not say "Please accept this application...", but be more assertive in your opening line
- Write short, declarative statements
- Show, don't tell – use facts and evidence about your research, publication, and teaching records and avoid extraneous adjectives and adverbs about your work
 - i.e., avoid statements such as, "I am passionate about teaching," "I believe in hands-on learning"
- Avoid adjectives and judgment statements about yourself (e.g., sincere, eager, passionate)
- Present yourself as a colleague, not a graduate student
- Tailor your letter and know the institution for which you are applying.
 - A research-focused institution/position and teaching-focused institution/position require different content, the first emphasizes research and publication, the second emphasizing teaching and pedagogy
- Discuss your dissertation in one paragraph, then in a follow up paragraph, specify which major debates in your field the dissertation intervenes in and how it intervenes – the topic details are less important than the disciplinary importance of the project
- Follow up the two paragraphs on the dissertation and the interventions with a discussion on the work that comes out of it
 - Publications, major conference papers, future publication plans, and how the dissertation affects your teaching
 - If you're in a book field (i.e., History, American Studies), specify your plans for submitting a book manuscript and which publishers you've been in contact with
- Mention the next book/research project – you should have a clear idea of where your work is going and it should show continuity with your current work
- Then write a paragraph on teaching
 - Discuss your methods, name specific courses you taught, name particular teaching outcomes of each course
 - Mention any teaching awards, briefly summarize student evaluations
- Show that you researched the institution, department, faculty
 - Name specific collaborators, emphasize what you can add to their existing curriculum, name particular initiatives or programs to which you'd contribute
 - Address the actual chair of the search committee in the salutation, if possible.

Template for a Research-Focused Job Letter*:

Heading (see above)

Dear Name/Chair of Search Committee:

Paragraph 1: I am applying for job X in Department Y. My Ph.D. is in Z, from the University of Q in the field of R. I am currently S at the University of W. My work broadly speaking focuses on A and B.

Paragraph 2: Discuss primary research project and major sources of support

Paragraph 3: The above project's contributions to the field (2-3 sentences)

Paragraph 4: Publications, past, present, and future related to the above project

Paragraph 5: Second project you have planned, including publications, fellowships/grants, conference papers

Paragraph 6: Teaching paragraph as it relates to the above

Paragraph 7: Optional second teaching paragraph

Paragraph 8: Discuss your specific interest in the job, department, institution to which you are applying

Paragraph 9: I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Signature

Name

Template for a Teaching-Focused Job Letter*:

Adjust the above format to include the following:

Heading (see above)

Paragraph 1: I am applying for job X in Department Y. My Ph.D. is in Z, from the University of Q in the field of R. I am currently S at the University of W. My teaching specializations are A and B, with additional expertise in C.

Paragraph 2: Discuss core teaching philosophy, be specific in naming courses, the goals of each, the methods used in each – respond to the classes desired in the job ad. Also mention courses you are prepared to teach.

Paragraph 3: Discuss teaching awards and evaluations.

Paragraph 4: Additional areas of teaching and discipline-specific pedagogy, experience in study abroad, directing programs, innovative curriculum, etc. Address other pedagogical requirements mentioned in the ad.

Paragraph 5: Research description – dissertation, theoretical/conceptual approach, contribution to the field, etc.

Paragraph 6: Publications

Paragraph 7: Discuss specific interest in the job – courses to develop, faculty collaboration, program potential

Paragraph 8: I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Signature

Name

*Adapted from Karen Kelsky, PhD, *The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into A Job*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2015.