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How to Write Appealing Cover Letters

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CAREER TALK

Practical
guidance for
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Question: I'm applying for faculty positions. My C.V., letters of recommendation, and teaching-philosophy statement are all strong. However, I am a little dubious about the cover letter. I wrote one and have used it, with some changes, for each application. My question: How should one tailor the cover letter to the specific institution? I feel that I am being false or artificial if I openly state what the advertisement wants me to say. What is the fine line between tailoring the letter to the specific requests of any given college and pushing it too far?

Mary: I'd say that honesty defines the boundary. If something is true, and you believe it would incline a search committee to want to interview you, don't hesitate to stress it, as directly and persuasively as possible. If something isn't true, don't say it.

Julie: For years we have had programs where faculty members from various institutions talk about the academic job search. They all state, in one way or another, that they like to see cover letters that indicate that the writer knows something about the institution and is writing to apply for their specific job, not for any and every job.

Mary: A letter written for a particular job, and even a particular advertisement, not only shows that you are qualified for and interested in the position but is also easier to read. If the ad mentions that four things are desired, and your letter explicitly makes reference to all four, even someone who is skimming job materials can quickly flag your application for further consideration.

Julie: Keep in mind that while you have one letter per position to write, members of search committees usually have several hundred letters (as well as vitas and other accompanying material) to read. Yours needs to stand out and should not sound formulaic and impersonal. There's no excuse for not writing a cover letter that shows how your education, experience, and interests fit with what the institution is seeking.

Mary: In addition to showing how your qualifications match the position requirements, the cover letter shows how well you can write and gives a hint as to what it might be like to meet you. Make sure that it's clearly organized and well-written. As a general rule, you should be able to read your cover letters out loud to someone and not be embarrassed. Not only is there no need to apply superlative adjectives to yourself, but doing so probably doesn't help your case.

Julie: Let's talk about the elements of the letter. After your address and that of the person or persons to

whom you're writing is the salutation. If you're responding to an announcement that asks for materials to be sent to "Dr. Jane Q. Smith, Chair, Department of Finance," the salutation should be "Dear Dr. Smith." If the announcement asks that materials go to "Staffing Representative/Chemistry Faculty Search" or to "Philosophy Program Search Committee" it is acceptable to write "Dear Committee Members." If a contact name is given without a title, it is easy to use the Internet to determine whether the person is in fact a Ph.D. And, as a fallback you can always call a department secretary for the correct title.

Mary: Next comes one of your most important decisions: how you're going to begin the letter. In many cases, the simplest, clearest thing is to state what you're applying for and where you heard of it. For example, "I'm writing to apply for the Assistant Professor position currently posted in the Modern Language Association job listings." However, if you can truthfully begin with something more specific, do so. For example, "I'm writing to follow up on yesterday's conversation in which you encouraged me to apply for the, etc."

Julie: Additionally, if someone on your dissertation committee encourages you to apply for a specific position and knows someone on the search committee, you can begin your letter with something like, "Dr. Eduardo Romero suggested I apply for the position of ..."

Mary: Of course, don't mention a name without having first checked with that person. Whether or not you're lucky enough to have an inside contact, you can organize the rest of the first paragraph in a way that makes it clear to the reader that you'll make life simple for him or her. Include some kind of summary sentence in the first paragraph that shows where the letter is going. "I'm interested in this position because it draws on my study of x, my research in y, and my extensive experience in z." Sometimes you can draw the structure of this summary from the structure of the ad."

Julie: The middle paragraphs are the heart of your letter. Here you will describe your research and teaching experience as well as your future plans, all the while framing your remarks so that there is a match with what the institution is seeking. For example, if you are applying for a position that is described as "50 percent Director of Writing Assessment; 50 percent Teaching of Composition/Rhetoric," you should be sure to talk about your experience teaching composition as well your experience working in the writing center.

Mary: As you write, keep in mind that you're writing for someone who may need to read a few hundred letters. Try as hard as you can to make your letter interesting. Usually, you can do this best by being specific. Notice the difference between, "I use a variety of media in my teaching" and "the course culminated in a final project in which students collaborated in producing a *Hamlet* Web site including links to critical documents, their own final papers, and a virtual tour of the castle."

Julie: These middle paragraphs are also the opportunity to show the "fit" between you, the institution, the specific job, and the selection criteria. If you are writing to a liberal-arts college and you attended one, say so. If you're applying for an interdisciplinary position and your academic training is interdisciplinary, say so. If your work could be an especially good fit with that of the current faculty, say so. And if you are applying to colleges in a specific geographic area that is not generally popular, but appeals to you, let the committee know that you want to work there.

Mary: Then we come to the question of how you make a graceful exit from your letter. If you want to give a one-sentence summary of your interests and your qualifications, that's fine. People commonly

offer to provide additional materials. This offer is rarely taken up, however, except for candidates who make the first cut.

More useful perhaps is anything you have to say about your availability for interviews that might save the institution travel money. For example, if you will be attending a national conference, or are already planning a trip to the area where the institution is located, it's very helpful to say so. Then thank the committee for its consideration and sign off.

Julie: Before you sign the letter and enclose it with your C.V. and any other written materials requested in the job announcement, it is crucial that you read the letter over. This might sound obvious but it is surprising how often we hear from faculty members on search committees that they received letters with typographical errors, misspellings and -- believe it or not -- letters addressed to or referring to the wrong institution. The latter mistakes come easily if you've created a template letter on your computer. So, when you finish the letter, sit down and read it with great care and make sure it's perfect.

Mary: Is it okay to e-mail an application if the job ad gives that as an option?

Some employers may prefer e-mail applications, but the e-mailed documents don't always look terrific when printed. You can both apply by e-mail and mention in the message that you're also forwarding paper materials. However, if the ad asks only that you apply by e-mail (rather than giving it as an option), I'd leave it at the electronic version.

You can include your letter and C.V. in the text of the e-mail for people who don't like attachments, but mention that you're also enclosing attachments, should they want them. Make your name part of the file name for the attachment. I can't tell you how many people send me résumés to critique as documents titled "résumé" or even "doc," making them almost impossible to distinguish in a directory of received attachments.

Julie: Now that we've covered the basics, let's look at some specific letters, taken from *The Academic Job Search Handbook*. The first letter, from [T.L. Candidate](#), could easily be a terrific letter were it slightly more customized. It covers the candidate's dissertation, teaching, research plans, and university service. However, it never makes any overt reference to the position, the institution, or the department, even though it would probably only take a few more sentences to do so.

Mary: The second, from [Alice Applicant](#), does a good job of customizing, but gives a more cursory discussion of the candidate's research. This is appropriate for the letter's purpose, which is to help obtain an interview for a one-year position stressing teaching.

Julie: And the third, from [Mehri Aspirant](#), is a good example of a letter to follow up on a phone call made by a candidate who's taken the initiative to try to locate unadvertised openings. As you see, it begins by reminding the recipient that the letter comes not from a total stranger but from someone he or she spoke with a few days ago.

Mary: While all of these letters are very good, each could probably be improved in some way, and, even if endlessly edited, would probably get a new suggestion from the next person who critiqued it. If you're seriously job-hunting, you'll write a lot of letters. With practice, they'll become easier to write. Always balance the time required to write the "perfect" letter against the other tasks involved in an extensive and effective search.