

Writing an Academic Cover Letter

Purpose: A cover letter is your first opportunity to persuade a hiring committee that you are a candidate worth further consideration. It briefly yet vividly demonstrates your qualifications and connects them to the requirements of the position. It also showcases your writing ability.

General Guidelines:

- Follow standard business letter etiquette. If you are affiliated with a university (i.e. a doctoral candidate), write your letter on university letterhead. If you are not using letterhead, include your name and mailing address in the top left corner of the letter.
- Letters should *never* exceed two pages, or about 5-8 concise paragraphs. Some science and engineering sources suggest keeping your letter to one page of 3-4 paragraphs. There is no single “right way” to format your letter. The best approach is to talk to your advisor, consult a variety of sources in your field, and decide what seems best for your situation.
- Always address your letter to a person. If it is not already provided, you may be able to find the name of the search committee chair by calling the institution’s main phone number.
- This is critical: present yourself as a colleague, not a student. For example, do not refer to faculty as “professor so and so”—prefer full names instead (e.g. “Jane Doe”).
- Avoid phrases that include “privilege to,” “honor to,” etc. Don’t appear submissive.
- Refer to and expand upon other job documents (e.g. CV and teaching statement). Don’t simply re-iterate your CV in prose; instead, provide vivid details to highlight experiences listed there.
- Be direct and brief, showing that you value the reader’s time:
 - Use active voice: Instead of “My paper was about” say “I argued.”
 - Avoid complex, overly long sentences and excessive jargon.
 - Be concrete: Instead of “My teaching evaluations were positive” say “My students nominated me for the ‘Best Undergraduate Teaching Award’ which I won in 2011.”
 - Strive for a personal, warm and professional tone; they’re hiring a colleague after all.
- Tailor your letter to the position for which you are applying, emphasizing different strengths and experiences based on the advertised requirements. Research the institution to get a sense of what their needs and aims are and how you can help meet them.
- Do not make the letter all about your own interests. Be clear and specific about how you will channel your expertise to help meet the department’s research and teaching needs.
- Do not attempt to discuss every publication and conference presentation you’ve completed. Prioritize based on significance and relevance. You can include:
 - A brief, accessible discussion of dissertation framework and methodology.
 - A concise description of high-status peer-reviewed publications.
 - Brief mentions of presentations at major national conferences in your field.
 - Concrete examples of your teaching.
- If applicable, identify yourself as a diversity hire. Show how your background is an asset to your work in terms of your research, teaching, and/or service.

Additional Resources

- The Professor Is In: theprofessorisin.com
- The Purdue OWL: owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/
- The Chronicle of Higher Education: chronicle.com/
- University of Pennsylvania: www.vpul.upenn.edu/careerservices/writtenmaterials/coverletters

ACADEMIC COVER LETTER TEMPLATE
FOR RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

Date

Name [ideally, full name and title of the search committee chair]

Title

Organization

Street Address or PO Box No.

City, State, Zip Code

Dear Dr. _____:

Opening Paragraph: Introduction. Identify the position for which you are applying and how you learned about it. Identify your current position, PhD granting institution, general field, and subfield areas of specialization. If you are working on your dissertation, name your committee chair, state of progress, and expected completion date. Make a claim about yourself that you will support throughout the letter: why are you a good candidate for this position? Pique your reader's interest.

Body Paragraph: Your Research. This may take up to two paragraphs. First, outline the basics of your primary (or dissertation) research project and achievements that have arisen from it, such as publications, conference papers, grants, etc. Second, outline your project's larger contributions to the field. How does it push boundaries, engage in new debates, or enlarge the discipline?

Body Paragraph: Your Second Project. Outline your second project like you did your first. Demonstrate that you have new research in the works, and show its relation to your first project.

Body Paragraph: Teaching. Focus on what and how you teach, not where and when you've taught. Instead of "I am passionate about teaching," write, "I worked one-on-one with students on individual research projects leading to published articles. Several students later nominated me for our campus's 'Best Undergraduate Teacher' award, which I won in 2011." Demonstrate connections between your research and teaching: what values within your discipline do you bring out or emphasize in both?

Body Paragraph: Tailoring. What is your specific interest in this job and department? Mention specific specializations or emphases within the department and faculty by name, then show how you will fit as a colleague in the department. Identify programs, initiatives, centers, etc. with which you would plan to be involved. How might you participate in and contribute to interdisciplinary initiatives? Show yourself as a good potential colleague who is willing to adjust teaching needs to the department as well as represent the department and its interests in cross-campus venues.

Closing Paragraph: State what other materials are included in your application. Offer to provide additional materials upon request. State when are you available to meet for an interview and how you can be reached. Thank your readers for their time and consideration, and express that you look forward to hearing from them.

Sincerely,

Your Name Typed