



## Writing a Successful Cover Letter

A cover letter is your first chance to make a strong impression on a search committee. It allows you to begin a personal dialogue with the members of the committee. It is one of your best opportunities to frame your candidacy: to explain why you would be an especially attractive hire.

A well written letter will:

- demonstrate the fit between your background and the advertised position;
- single you out as a particularly promising scholar and teacher;
- reveal something about the quality of your mind; and
- differentiate you from other candidates in the pool.

A cover letter isn't simply a job application: it's lays out your scholarly agenda and your teaching qualifications; it's also a writing sample.

A cover letter needs to set you apart from other applicants. It should highlight your accomplishments, qualifications, skills, areas of expertise, and potential.

### **How to Write a Letter that Says: "I Don't Want this Job."**

1. Use Dear Sir or Madam as your Salutation. Address the letter to a specific person, if possible.
2. Fail to state which position you are applying for. Remember, departments are often conducting multiple searches simultaneously.
3. Allow careless errors to creep into your letter. Search committees consider a shoddy, slipshod, or slapdash letter, replete with typos, a sign of a deeper problem.
4. Sound arrogant or overconfident.

### **Cover Letters from Hell**

It's easy to tell an effective cover letter from one that is disastrous. A bad cover letter:

1. Is presumptuous: It explicitly tells a department the ways you could contribute.
2. Is excessively formulaic: It is not tailored to the job you are applying for.
3. Rambles.
4. Is aggressive or pushy in tone.
5. Uses "wimpy" language: It includes phrases like "I feel" or "I believe."
6. Embellishes the applicant's qualifications.

7. Is sloppy in appearance and contains typos or grammatical mistakes.

## Cover Letter Do's and Don't's

Your cover letter—along with your c.v. and your letters of recommendation—will determine whether a search committee will pursue your candidacy. As many as half the applicants for a particular job are rejected after the search committee looks at the cover letter. The committee members may conclude that the candidate is not qualified for the job or that the applicant's work is not engaging. In other words, it is crucial that your letter grab the committee's interest.

Avoid common cover letter gaffes and blunders:

DO address the letter to a specific individual.

DO be succinct. This is not the place for an overly lengthy discussion of your dissertation.

DO be attentive to the difference between research and teaching oriented institutions—though even liberal arts institutions expect you to be engaged in scholarship.

Thus, for a liberal arts institution you need to recognize the importance of small classes, interactive discussion, mentored research projects, and the value of getting to know students personally.

DON'T be too lengthy. Generally two pages is sufficient.

DON'T use hyperbole. Be professional in tone.

## Nuts and Bolts

**Length:** Generally no more than two pages.

**Tone:** Confidently professional. You want to come across as serious, interesting, collegial, and productive.

**Elements:** A cover letter is

- part intellectual autobiography
- part academic transcript
- part a listing of accomplishments
- part an analytical discussion of ideas

## Format

Most cover letters follow a common format. But the execution varies significantly. Don't be generic. Identify those skills and areas of expertise and accomplishment that set you apart from others.

**Paragraph 1: Identify the position you are applying for.**

"I would like to be considered for your assistant professorship in...."

Also in **Paragraph 1: Identify yourself.**

Take advantage of the fact that you are at Columbia and have studied with recognized faculty mentors.

"I am currently a doctoral student in the Department of ... at Columbia University, where I studied under the direction of .... and expect to receive my Ph.D. in May 2009."

**Paragraphs 2 and 3: Describe your dissertation -- and underscore its significance.**

My dissertation, a study of ...,

- Explain why your dissertation is special: How it addresses a previously neglected topic; how it contributes to a significant scholarly debate; how it employs untapped evidence.
- Describe the validation your dissertation has received: “With support from \_\_\_\_\_, I \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Briefly describe any publications or conference presentations that have grown out of your dissertation research.

**Paragraph 4: Describe the breadth of your expertise and experience.**

"In addition to my expertise in ..., I also have extensive experience in ..."

**Paragraph 5: Describe your teaching experience and the range of courses that you can offer.**

- Explain that you have taught diverse students in a wide range of courses.
- Identify any other courses that you are prepared to offer.
- You might also briefly describe your pedagogical approach (e.g., engaging students in hands-on research).

**Paragraph 6: Elaborate on your distinctive qualifications and strengths.**

Describe any honors you have received or skills and experiences that set you apart from other candidates. Have you organized any lectures or conferences? Have you taken part in an interdisciplinary seminar? Have you assisted with a study abroad program?

**Paragraph 7: Address the issue of fit.**

- If you attended a similar institution, this is the place to mention that.
- If you might contribute to the department's strength, you might mention that.

**Paragraph 8: Closure**

Describe the items you have enclosed.

Offer to provide any additional materials the department might wish.

Once again, provide your telephone number and email address.

## Sample Cover Letters

### Example 1: English

I am writing to apply for the assistant professorship in British literature of the Victorian period announced in the MLA Job Information List. I am currently completing a Ph.D. at Stanford University in nineteenth- and twentieth-century English literature. My dissertation is entitled "Immense Debtorship: Originality, Literary Property, and Deficit Poetics in British Letters, 1840-1940."

The dissertation investigates the twin discourses of aesthetic and economic value in post-Romantic Britain. My inquiry focuses on originality and imitation--terms that have traditionally belonged to a purely literary domain--in order to implicate them in extra-literary discourses. I illustrate how the modern notion of originality not only appears, but evolves in relation to market forces, economic theory, and the legal developments they underwrite. After linking the cardinal Romantic virtue of originality to classical economic labor theories of value, I trace the nineteenth-century transition from classical political economy to the "marginalist" economics that flourished during the 1870's. This shift from the social scene of production to the individual scene of consumption, I claim, sponsors a concurrent aesthetic shift away from the productivist literary value of originality, with its attendant notions of inspiration, spontaneity, individual genius.

The result is a growing willingness at late-century to imitate, borrow, and even plagiarize--a kind of latter-day neoclassicism that culminates in the canny appropriations of the high modernists. This growth-industry in literary debt, furthermore, is licensed by the gradual decriminalizing of financial insolvency and the institutionalizing of consumer credit during the late nineteenth century: deficit economics begets a "deficit poetics." Many Victorian writers paired debtorship with vampirism, on the grounds that both constituted a necessary pact with evil; my chapter on Eliot's poetry and George Viereck's 1907 novel *The House of the Vampire* explores the theme and practice of deficit poetics in light of this pairing. Profligate literary debtorship also operates, I argue, as a counter-tradition to the copyright laws solidifying during the period. And for two of the principle figures in this counter-tradition--the Irishmen Oscar Wilde and James Joyce--deficit poetics works as a colonial and post-colonial retort to

the British tradition of private annexation embodied in copyright. Contrary to many formalist views, then, there is a politics of intertextuality. By concluding with a look at some late-twentieth-century intellectual property questions (copyright extension bills, electronic media laws, the power of patents to protect corporate appropriations from developing nations), I suggest that mythologies of originality still have considerable ethical and political repercussions in the present. Having written three out of five chapters, I expect to submit the finished thesis in June of 1997.

My scholarly interests range widely, from the history of law and economics to turn-of-the-century sexology to Irish literature and ethnography. In a subsequent project, I plan to research Victorian ideas of order--in both artistic genres and ethnographic taxonomies like Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*--and how they inform a little-theorized aspect of certain modernist texts: the inventory. In addition, I hope to carry my interests in both Victorian and modernist literature into the classroom. The conventional divide between the two periods too often results in oversimplifications--imputing, say, a gritty materialism to Victorian fiction and a serene formalism to modernist writing. I believe I can help students see not only the ruptures, but the continuities between nineteenth- and twentieth-century literatures and cultures.

My teaching philosophy reflects my interests in collaborative authorship. Instead of the "full frontal teaching" method of large lectures or autocratic seminars, I prefer student-centered teaching that encourages learning by both students and teachers. I favor classroom dynamics that permit dialogue and foster a degree of student input as to curricula and grading criteria. And I like students to think about the class as a community. This means that in both composition and literature classes, I have students spend a fair amount of time in smaller groups in which they not only talk and think together, but write together. In keeping with this emphasis on process, I have used the portfolio grading method in my writing courses, and have been pleased by enthusiastic student reactions. I would be happy to send class syllabi and student evaluations on request.

I have enclosed a copy of my curriculum vitae and a writing sample excerpted from my chapter on the politics of literary property in Wilde. My dossier will arrive under separate cover from the Stanford Career Planning and Placement Center. I will gladly provide any other supporting materials upon request. I plan to attend the MLA convention in Washington D.C. this December, and would be pleased to meet with you there or elsewhere at your convenience. I look forward to hearing from you.

## **Example 2: Music**

I am writing in response to your advertisement for the Assistant Professor of Music History position at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, as advertised in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. I am currently a Ph.D. student in Musicology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and will complete my degree in May 2004. I respectfully submit this letter of application, for I believe my experiences and commitment to teaching make me well qualified to meet the needs of IUP's dynamic program.

As a teaching assistant at the University of Illinois, I have gained valuable experience leading undergraduate discussion sections for both music majors and non-majors. In addition to classroom instruction, I have advised students on appropriate research topics and edited and evaluated their work. Based on student evaluations, I have earned the Graduate Teaching Award for every semester that I have taught and have been listed four times among the top ten percent of teachers rated at the University of Illinois. I also co-created a public Music Appreciation course entitled *Music for All*, which attracted the interest of concertgoers of all ages and backgrounds. I am firmly dedicated to the education of music students as well as general audiences and eagerly welcome an opportunity to develop similar programs at IUP.

My course work has covered a wide range of topics in the various musical eras. My research, comparing Beethoven's symphonies with the more modern compositions of late-twentieth century American composers, has provided me with the opportunity to draw connections between the different periods and to communicate difficult concepts clearly to students of all levels. I am committed to an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship and teaching, and all of my courses are structured with this in mind. Rather than simply lecturing to a class, I strive to cultivate an interactive environment in which students can express themselves freely while learning to engage with the past in meaningful ways. I emphasize critical thinking and the need to

consider music within its larger social, historical, and intellectual contexts. IUP takes great pride in its training of young scholars, and I feel that it is my responsibility to uphold these standards and to encourage and challenge students to work up to their potential, in hopes that their experiences in my classes will teach them far more than the history of music.

In addition to the standard period surveys, I am fully prepared to develop courses on opera history, Lieder, music and rhetoric (with special emphasis on the Baroque period), Twentieth century music, Romanticism, and music and the visual arts.

I welcome an opportunity to discuss my teaching and future research projects with you. I have enclosed my CV, and you will be receiving my letters of recommendation under separate cover. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

### **Example 3: Engineering**

I am writing to apply for the position of Assistant Professor in Structural Engineering beginning Fall 2004, as advertised on your department website. I am currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and fully expect to complete my PhD degree requirements by May 2004. I am extremely interested in obtaining a faculty position at the University of Texas, as its engineering research programs have a stellar reputation that is known worldwide.

I believe that my academic training and my six years of experience working as a structural engineer prepare me to be an effective researcher and instructor in your department. My doctoral dissertation was conducted under the direction of Prof. Mark Daniels, and looks at the use of a relatively new methodology for the design of joints, walls, footings, and other portions of reinforced or prestressed concrete structures. In my research, I developed an integrated design and analysis environment for this methodology in which both strength and serviceability requirements are explicitly satisfied. This was delivered in a computer-based program that is freely available to the community and has been downloaded by more than 2500 people. Although my dissertation focuses on a single topic, other areas that interest me for my future research stem from my goal of developing improved analytical models and methods for design, evaluation, and upgrade of concrete structures subjected to monotonic and reversed loading and structures equipped with passive systems. One of the studies that I have started is the development of a performance-based seismic design method for ductile reinforced concrete wall structures based on yield displacement. I have also worked on evaluation and improvement of accuracy of nonlinear static analysis for seismic design under the auspices of a project from the Applied Technology Committee, a national organization.

During my graduate training, I have been fortunate enough to also serve as a teaching assistant and occasionally instruct for an intermediate level course on reinforced concrete design. My five years of professional experience as an engineer have provided me with a broad view that is useful in assisting students with projects and assignments. Through my participation as a teaching assistant, I have developed confidence and an interest in teaching and look forward to the opportunity to both teach assigned classes and to develop my own classes.

I would enjoy discussing this position with you in the weeks to come. In the meantime, I am enclosing my Curriculum Vitae and statement of teaching and research interests. Letters of recommendation will arrive under separate cover. If you require any additional materials or information, I am happy to supply it. Thank you very much for your consideration.

### **Example 4: Biology**

I am writing to apply for the assistant professor position beginning September 2003, as advertised in the October 11 issue of Science. I completed my PhD in Molecular Genetics and Cell Biology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in October 2003. As an alumnus of a small liberal arts college, I

know and value the excellent education that smaller institutions provide to undergraduate students. I would be honored to join the Amherst community as an assistant professor.

My research and teaching interests have been fostered by several years of undergraduate teaching and mentoring at Illinois. I have taught discussion and laboratory sections for both introductory molecular and cellular biology and for introductory genetics for three semesters each. In addition, I also taught a section of a summer school laboratory course on the principles and techniques of molecular biology and supervised the undergraduate research of several students here at Illinois.

My research has focused upon elucidating the mechanisms of the P element insertion in *Drosophila melanogaster*. My dissertation research on molecular evolution and population genetics of transposable elements in natural *Drosophila* populations built upon this topic. This research and the projects that will stem from it can be adapted to provide undergraduates with research opportunities for their Senior Honors projects at Amherst and would also complement the existing strengths of the department.

My graduate school experiences have reinforced my appreciation for the liberal arts college environment. I have missed the small classes, active learning opportunities, and interdisciplinary students motivated by curiosity and love of learning. I look forward to once again becoming part of a liberal arts community and I can think of no better environment than the Amherst Biology Department in which to grow as an educator and scientist.

I am enclosing my CV and statement of teaching philosophy. Letters of recommendation are being mailed under separate cover. Thank you very much for your consideration.

### **Example 5: Classics**

I am writing to apply for the Assistant Professor of Classics position, as advertised in the APA Positions list. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and I will complete degree requirements by May 2004.

Teaching has been an important part of my training at the University of Illinois, and I believe my background would be useful in your department. I have had considerable undergraduate teaching experience in several types of courses, including first- and second-year Latin classes and discussion sections of the Classical Mythology class. The latter experience introduced me to the pleasures of leading class discussion and the challenges of transforming new material – some of it unfamiliar to me – into useful discussion sections each week.

I have been equally devoted to the research side of my graduate training. My dissertation, directed by Dr. Robert Palmer, is entitled “Model Behavior: Generic Construction in Roman Satire.” This study investigates the metaphorical language used to describe satire, and its implications for the poets’ self-presentation. With this research, I have been working to secure a place for myself in the scholarly community. In the past two years, I have delivered papers at regional meetings such as the Classical Association of Atlantic States, and at national meetings, including the American Philological Association. My most recent conference paper was a collaborative effort; I helped to organize a panel on the satiric persona for the APA meeting in December. Although my dissertation focuses on a single genre, it reflects interests that I expect to resurface in teaching contexts in the future. One area that fascinates me is the place of ancient comic genres in the literary canon and cultural contexts of Classical antiquity. Comedy, satire, and related genres make excellent material for courses on ancient culture, and I eagerly welcome the opportunity to develop such a course at some point. Another special interest of mine is ancient literary criticism, which I studied intensively for a PhD exam on the ancient reception of Homer. Moreover, while both of these areas interest me, I believe that I can also parlay them into general civilization courses such as Iowa’s Freshman Humanities courses.

I would enjoy discussing this position with you in the weeks to come. In the meantime, I am enclosing my Curriculum Vitae; letters of recommendation will arrive under separate cover. If you require any additional materials or information, I would be happy to supply it. Thank you for your consideration.