

Negotiating Job Offers – Reviewing Academic Job Offer Letters

Whenever you review your offer letter from an academic institution, there are a number of issues that deserve your attention. Some of these are important from a professional perspective, and some will be important to you from a personal one. The table below lists some of the common components of an academic offer letter – **you should not expect to see all of these in your specific letter**. The table also discusses briefly how these various components might be addressed when it comes to negotiating. Taking time to review your letter carefully will allow you to evaluate all of the options within the total package of your job offer to determine what is best for you. A certain degree of negotiating is expected once offers are made, but you will need to think very carefully about which terms of employment you want to negotiate. You can use this basic checklist as a general guideline for evaluating your job offer and to help you with the process of negotiating.

Component of offer	What the offer letter should say	Other considerations
Start date	Does the letter specify the start date for the position?	For renewable positions, the letter should also detail end dates and when decisions should be made for renewal
Compensation	Does the letter provide the specific salary you have been offered, how often you will be paid, and when payment will begin and end? Will you be paid your total salary over 9, 10 or 12 months?	In terms of compensation, what has your research shown you about the salary offered to others with similar academic background and experience? Remember, there are regional differences in salaries, and salary is just one part of the total package you could be offered. Academic institutions can pay monthly or biweekly. Also, you should be able to determine if the total salary is divided up over 9, 10 or 12 months to be able to plan your finances accordingly.
Relocation reimbursement	Does the letter identify whether there will be any relocation assistance?	This issue may have been discussed informally prior to the offer letter being sent. It is a good idea to be clear when this money can be accessed and whether there are any conditions for its use.
Travel reimbursement	Does the offer letter state what money will be made available for professional development or conference travel?	Travel to fieldwork sites will usually involve money from sources other than money for your salary (e.g., grant money), but it is important to make sure that this is the case. Although salary may be non-negotiable in certain cases, there may be more flexibility when it comes to asking for increases in money allotted to research, lab start-up, or travel.

<p>Lab start-up money</p>	<p>Does the letter state what money will be made available to set up your research lab, as well as listing what room, equipment, storage space, and staff resources will be made available?</p>	<p>For your own peace of mind, it is worth making sure that these sorts of details are clearly spelled out in the offer letter if they are important for your research. If these details are not addressed in the offer letter, then the academic institution may not technically be bound by them. Informal discussions of what will be provided may not be enough on their own, especially if whomever you have been talking with is replaced at some point in the future by someone who was not involved in your hiring. Money available for setting up labs often comes from different sources than money available for your salary. If salary is non-negotiable, then asking for a one-time sum of money for the lab may be a useful approach to take.</p>
<p>Equipment/hardware, & other items</p>	<p>Offer letters can also address any other items that are informally discussed or promised after a verbal offer is made, but this is likely to be situation and context specific.</p>	<p>Examples of information that could be highlighted in a letter include whether the academic institution will cover the cost of a new computer or books, whether you might have access to a designated parking space, or whether you need access to certain university resources specific to your research (e.g., library collections, museum access).</p>
<p>Teaching & advising load</p>	<p>Is the teaching or advising load for the first year mentioned in the letter? Does this also include titles, hours and other details about specific courses?</p>	<p>Negotiating for a reduced teaching, advising, or service load for the first year is a common strategy for first-year faculty. If this occurs, an updated offer letter should state what was agreed upon.</p>
<p>Maternity/family leave</p>	<p>Does the letter provide a link to information on maternity or family leave policies?</p>	<p>For tenure-track positions, it is important to know whether the tenure clock can be suspended during maternity (or paternity) leave – this is something that people have successfully negotiated in certain situations.</p>
<p>General benefits</p>	<p>Does the letter describe the benefits package, or provide links to where this information can be viewed? Does this information include information on whether the benefits (e.g., health and dental insurance) cover just you or eligible dependents as well? Is there information on how much of the premium the employer will pay?</p>	<p>General benefits are in most cases non-negotiable – you might choose different plans, but institutions usually have very little flexibility in tailoring policies for each employee. Specific details about these plans are usually not provided in offer letters, but links to this information on the HR webpage often are. It is worth reviewing this information carefully, even though there may be little that can be negotiated.</p>

Vacations & holidays	Some academic offer letters will possibly list the number of paid holidays offered, and describe the vacation policy. This is not as common in academic job offer letters as it is in many non-academic offer letters, so do not be surprised if this information is not specifically listed.	You should be able to find information about vacation policies on the academic institution's website. A common issue related to vacation days is what to do about pre-existing commitments (e.g., you might have already committed to speaking at a conference that is scheduled after you start your new position). If vacation days or personal days cannot be used for the first 3 months (which may be a standard policy), and you have pre-scheduled travel or commitments during this period, this should be discussed as soon as possible. One option might be to take unpaid leave, but other options may also be identified.
Personal & sick days	Information explaining the policy surrounding the number and use of personal days or sick days can sometimes be mentioned in the offer letter, but is more usually not specifically addressed.	Information on when these days can be utilized after starting can often be found on the academic institution's website, and links to the relevant resources are commonly included within the offer letter.
Performance, tenure & salary review	Does the letter specify details about the timing or performance of salary reviews, or detail when tenure will be reviewed?	The letter should state when you would be up for tenure review, and if successful, when tenure would be granted.
Intellectual property	Does the letter provide links to the university's policy on ownership of intellectual property (e.g., patents, copyrights, royalties, etc.)?	Where relevant, it will also be important to identify policies relating to conflict of interest, and the disposition of income generated by consulting and other professional activities.
Title	The offer letter should specifically state what title you will be given.	You will also need to know within what department or school you will be working, and who your direct "supervisor" will be within the department (e.g., the Department Chair).
Visa assistance	If you are an international candidate, does the offer letter specify the type of visa assistance offered by the university?	It might be important to find out whether or not the academic institution will cover the cost of legal fees and documents.
Thesis completion	Does the letter state the date by which completion of a PhD is required? If there is no expectation for you to finish the PhD prior to starting, does the letter state whether your title will be different with or without a PhD (e.g., instructor v. assistant professor)	It is always worth finishing up your thesis prior to starting so that you can start your new position focusing on your new responsibilities and your next research project.

Dual career issues	If formal career-related arrangements for your spouse will be provided, then these should be noted within an offer letter.	In some cases, help for spouses may be of a more informal nature, such as networking and contacts provided by faculty and staff at the hiring institution. Since these are less tangible components, however, they will probably not be listed in a letter.
Decision date	Letters will usually state when your decision is due – the time when you need to sign and return the letter.	The timing of the decision date can also be negotiated, especially if you are waiting to hear back from other institutions. You can request more time to make your decision, or at least begin to negotiate for some of the other components listed above. If an offer letter is updated to reflect the outcomes of your negotiation, there is an expectation that you will promptly sign and return it to the institution.

This list of topics to look for within offer letters is not exhaustive, and there may be other specific topics that are relevant to your subject area or to the academic institution that has offered you the position. **Not all of these components will be relevant your situation.** Remember, once you receive an offer letter, you are at your strongest point for negotiating – and some degree of negotiation is expected. Once you sign and return your acceptance letter, your ability to negotiate is much diminished. When negotiating, focus on what is most important to you, and do not try to negotiate for everything that is listed.