Academic Job Applications
by PhD Students and Graduates:
Letters and Personal Statements

INTRODUCTION

If a CV is the skeleton, the cover letter or application statement is the flesh and ligaments and muscles on the bones. It is the themes that connect together the facts and the choices you have made. It is the next level of detail that adds to the basic information you give on the CV.

The key principles of all application letters are the same, whether you are applying for academic or non-academic jobs:

- Put yourself in the reader’s shoes
- Give evidence of your suitability and relevant experience
- How you write is as important as what you write

And a good way to think about what categories the content should fall into, can be answered by these three core questions:

- Why me? (What in my background has brought me to this point of applying for this job?)
- Why this role? (What are my relevant skills and experience that make me good at this job?)
- Why your company/organisation? (What do I know about what you do that means we would be a good fit for each other?)

There is no perfect template for a cover letter. The letter should be personal to you, and a precise reflection of the job you’re applying for. So try to avoid just copy-and-pasting your cover letters from one application to another. The reader will be able to sense that it’s not a bespoke, tailored application, because they know the job description at least as well as you do, and know what they are looking for.

ACADEMIC APPLICATIONS

So what makes academic job application letters different?

For all the reasons above, they often aren’t very different to any other cover letter, and that’s often a good way to think about it at the start. There are going to be some extra types of content that you might want to include because it’s an academic job, but ultimately you have the responsibility to demonstrate that you have actually thought about what the job involves, read the job description and person specification carefully, and communicated what you have to offer. You should never assume you know what an academic job involves, and you should always reflect the research that you do about the courses, the department and the staff community you are joining.

Academic letters will though always include content on your teaching experience and your research experience. Even if you are applying for a role that is principally one or the other, it is important to mention both, because it shows breadth and a good understanding of the importance of research context to teaching, and communication skills to research. There are sections below that outline what you should put in about your teaching and research experience, and also on writing extra statements.
GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT GOOD LETTERS

PUT YOURSELF IN THE READER’S SHOES

One of the hardest things to do when writing a cover letter is to see yourself through someone else’s eyes. It is obvious to you why you want the job and what you bring to it, but it is not obvious to anyone but you where your skills and experience actually match what the recruiter is asking for. At the other extreme, it is also not enough just to go through the job specification matching what you have done to every bullet point.

Here are some ways that you can show you have thought like the person recruiting for the job.

- The order in which you present information will influence what they remember about you – if you talk about your PhD first they will think that is the most important thing you want them to remember. But is it? Is that the most important thing they need to know about you and your ability to do the job?
- Make it as easy as you can for them to see your strengths – use clear language and clear examples.
- Try to find themes in your background that reflect themes in the job – say, one or two key skills in combination with one or two highly relevant areas of expertise. That will help you group information together within or across paragraphs and make the letter less like a list beginning ‘I am good at…’
- Think about what the job will be like on a day-to-day basis. Will it involve regularly communicating with large numbers of people in and outside the department? Will you be left to work on your own a lot? Try to create a letter that enables the reader to imagine easily what it will be like having you in the room with them, working at the next desk.
- Remember too, that there may be people from outside your academic discipline, and from HR or other support departments reading your application, so don’t assume you have a completely knowledgeable audience about your teaching or research area.
- Also, don’t assume that just because you have a PhD (or are getting a PhD) the recruiter will assume you will be a good academic. They won’t assume that. You have to show them.

GIVE EVIDENCE OF YOUR SUITABILITY AND RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

Giving evidence is absolutely crucial. What you put in the letter not only provides the basis for the sifting out of you as a candidate they want to interview, but it then provides the basis for questions asked in the interview. It also enables the reader to see that you are able to engage with key aspects of the job without having to be taught what to do first.

- Don’t just say things like ‘I am a good teacher.’ Give examples of when you had to deliver a complex idea in your discipline to students who didn’t have a specialised background, or show how you have innovated use of technology or case study material to engage students. Always choose examples that show you understand what each skill means in the context of this job.
- Do establish your credentials, so don’t just assume that having a PhD is enough – make sure you show why your particular PhD and the context in which your research
exists makes you a good match for both the teaching and the research profiles of the department. If you have worked with people from the department or given papers at high-profile conferences, then say so. Again, it establishes your credentials in a way that other people can use.

- Do talk about why you want the job, but try to be specific about what it offers you than just saying ‘this is a great opportunity for me’. Does it consolidate a broad range of other experiences you have had? Does it offer you the chance to make your academic research relevant to new academic audiences? Does it offer you the chance to develop your research in new interdisciplinary contexts? Again don’t just say what, say why and how.
- Make your examples as relevant as you can to the reader and make it as easy as you can for the reader to understand why you have told them particular details about yourself.

**HOW YOU WRITE IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT YOU WRITE**

Letters for academic jobs will naturally include discussion of your research, and will possibly include highly technical language, but do remember that while your supervisor and other specialists in your immediate field will probably be familiar with the context, other scholars in the same discipline may not. Part of disseminating your research both within academia and beyond is being able to sell the ideas and their value to different audiences with different levels of specialism, and increasingly in the current climate, academic employers want to assess how their staff can attract attention (and funding) from the non-academic world. So you must do more than say you are a good communicator, you must write your letter clearly and precisely to show that you can express yourself well. Always get someone else to read it through!

**APPLICATION FORMS**

Many universities will now ask for an application to be made through an application form template, either as a Word document or an online template. This can sometimes be a frustrating document to fill in, as it may not exactly match the way your CV is laid out. There will though usually be either the option to upload a cover letter or associated documents as separate attachments, or a box where they ask you for ‘Relevant Information’ to your application. This is where you would put cover letter type content.

**FINAL DETAILS**

In all the focus on content, it can be easy to forget the obvious stuff, so have you:

- [✓] Named the job you are applying for and where it was advertised?
- [✓] Made a note at the end of the letter of any dates you are not available for interview?
- [✓] Made sure your contact details are on the letter somewhere in case it gets separated from your CV?
SPECIFIC CONTENT FOR ACADEMIC JOBS

One of the most difficult experiences for late-stage PhDs or recent PhD graduates is to make the transition out of the insular bubble of doing the PhD to knowing where they stand in the academic continuum. So you need to be able to evaluate your work and your contribution from the outside, using other people’s frames of reference too. You are used to justifying why your work is important from your own point of view, but now you have to account for yourself against departmental research agendas, funding, disciplinary teaching perspectives etc. So it is crucial that you show that you know how you fit in with what else is going on in your field.

The difference between letter content and statement content is that the letter is more of a snapshot and summary, while the statement will give space for much more detail. The statement is to flesh out at a further level the key information that shows your suitability, and at a far greater level of detail than would be reasonable in a letter.

**Academic job applications will require some or all of the following:**
- CV (see the academic CV example)
- Letter or application statement on the form
- Research statement
- Teaching statement
- Samples of writing/articles/publications/thesis chapters

**Length:**
- The letter should be no longer than 2 pages
- The letter should contain at least one paragraph each on teaching and on research, plus additional paras on either depending on whether the job is principally teaching or research
- Don’t include your abstract of your thesis in your letter
- Freestanding research and teaching statements should be no more than 2-3 pages long each. If you include them in your application, make sure you refer to their inclusion in your letter

**Teaching Paragraphs and Teaching Statements:**
- Give evidence of teaching experience but don’t itemise it course by course, especially if that is already on your CV; find a way to talk about themes across your teaching experience.
- Mention class sizes, teaching modes, online student learning environments (e.g. moodle), dissertation supervision, and any innovative practices you developed.
- If you have received any training or mentoring (e.g. PG Cert or Graduate Teaching Assistant training) then say so, as this is very important for UK jobs.
- If you are applying for or have received HEA Fellowship status, then note that in the letter.
- Identify and mention existing courses from their syllabus you could teach at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- Suggest new courses at UG and PG level you could offer if the job is a permanent position or lasts longer than 2 years.
- In a separate teaching statement you can also:
  - Flesh out the letter content further
Help them imagine what it will be like having you teaching in their department, by showing how your experience and approach resonates with theirs.

Explore your philosophy for teaching your subject, e.g. inter- or multi-disciplinary, importance of case studies, strategies for introducing complex ideas to students who may be studying the subject for the first time.

Research Paragraphs and Research Statements:
This is often the more difficult area to get the balance right between letter and statement.

- Don’t insert your thesis abstract straight into the letter or statement – it is usually too long and will stick out stylistically. You will always need to find different ways to talk about your thesis so create a more concise version for job applications. It should also not be the only thing you are writing about in the letter.
- Do draw attention to what is original about your thesis and your research activity, and how it contributes to the field. People who don’t know about your work yet will need a quick way to locate you and your work among other scholars in the department and in the field.
- Don’t use up too much space writing about your thesis itself. If you have innovated a methodology or theoretical model then you can briefly refer to it in the letter, but then flesh out further in the research statement.
- The letter is also your opportunity to show your research potential, so describe future research plans, including new streams of research alongside your thesis field and new related areas.
- Always refer to existing and proposed publications and other dissemination (conferences, networks, journal activity etc.).
- Do indicate publications that are in progress as well as under review, as this is the main means of assessing research quality in most academic markets. There is a list in your CV, so you don’t need to spell them all out in the letter though you can indicate further detail in the statement.
- Mention any experience you have of working on funded projects or securing external research funding.
- Do describe any new research networks or communities you are setting up, perhaps through your PhD or related activity.
- A separate research statement will give you the chance to write in much more detail than in the letter allows, so if they don’t ask for one you can include one anyway or add it as an appendix to your CV.