

The Cover Letter: Valuable Real Estate for Your Application

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In higher education, crafting a thoughtful cover letter will take your application to the next level. It is widely known that the purpose of a resume or CV is to provide an overview of your experience, but to some, the cover letter is a mystery. I like to think of the cover letter as extra real estate; it is your opportunity to further explain how your experiences align with the priorities of the job for which you are applying, sharing with the reader why you're the right person for the job, and discussing your interest in this specific role. It should pique the interest of a search committee (or hiring authority) to make them eager to learn more about you.

Once again, this is your opportunity to explain how your background matches the job description, so don't sleep on it! Instead of copying and pasting information from your CV, take the time to reflect on your experiences and share the details of your accomplishments – how you implemented the program, changed the policy or advocated for an unpopular decision. Walk the reader through your process in more depth than the bullets on your CV, so use your cover letter to expand on your candidacy as opposed to duplicating your CV.

Every cover letter should be tailored to the specific position under consideration; in other words, when you submit the same cover letter for multiple roles, you reduce your chances of advancing in a search. The search committee can easily identify the difference between a generic cover letter versus a cover letter that is personalized to the position and the institution. They are

taking the time to review your materials, so in turn, you should take the time to submit thoughtful and relevant materials.

- **Start strong** – Your salutation should address the hiring manager by name (if known) and the search committee. Don't forget to do your research and use the correct prefixes. If you do not know the name of the hiring manager, at the very least acknowledge the position in which you are applying for when addressing your letter. Instead of "Dear Hiring Manager" or "Dear Search Committee," try "Dear *Institution Name Job Title Search Committee*." This reiterates the fact that you are personalizing your cover letter to the institution and position and not submitting your materials to every vacancy out there.
- **Follow a proven outline** – Your cover letter should start with an introduction and a brief overview of your interest in the position and institution and then move into an explanation of what you bring to the table and how your experience aligns with the role. Your cover letter should conclude with a compelling statement so that, at the end of the letter, the search committee can easily identify what sets you apart from other applicants.
- **Explain your "why"** – By the end of your letter, the search committee should easily be able to pinpoint why you are interested in the role. It is great that the position aligns with your expertise and values, but

what makes you interested in *this* position and *this* institution, specifically? Make them feel that you are applying for this job, and only this job. If a committee isn't convinced by your why, it may keep you from getting an interview.

- **Use the real estate to your advantage** – As mentioned before, copying and pasting from your CV is not helpful to the committee since this is re-sharing information they already have in their possession. Instead of repeating information, use this as an opportunity to further expand on your CV in a narrative format, without repeating things word for word. Most often, the letter will outline an outcome but committees want to hear what your involvement was in reaching that goal. What was your role? How did you reach out to constituents and collaborate to reach the goal? They want to hear about the process of getting to the end result.
- **Align the priorities of the job with your experience** – Typically, the job description or leadership profile will have a section titled “Opportunities and Expectations” or “Priorities for This Position” or “Responsibilities of This Role.” Print this out so you can glance at it as you are writing your cover letter. As you incorporate each component into your cover letter, cross them off. For example, if one of the priorities says “provide leadership in diversity and inclusive excellence”, your cover letter should address this point and clearly explain: a) the work you've done in this area (including your specific role), b) the impact of your work, and c) how you would translate this work to the job and institution for which you are applying. The search committee is usually heavily involved in the creation of the leadership profile, so you can assume they've defined these priorities and will be looking for candidates who have explained how they are prepared to take these initiatives on.
- **Address the elephant in the room** – Sometimes things don't go according to plan. If you had a shorter stint at an institution or experienced multiple transitions in a short amount of time, take ownership of

these transitions. By clearly explaining a short tenure or a gap on your CV, you are proactively sharing the truth, as opposed to providing the committee with the space to make assumptions. It is inevitable that there will be questions from the committee about transitions between jobs, so address these head-on from the start so the ball is in your court.

- **Get into detail (but not too much)** – Writing a cover letter is an art, not a science. A general rule of thumb I give when asked about the length of a cover letter is that for an administrative position, two to three pages is the sweet spot and for an academic position your letter should be no more than four pages. As a reminder, the goal of submitting your materials is to entice the committee to meet you and learn more about you. It is impossible to include every detail about your experience in your materials and, truthfully, the committee isn't interested in reading a novel on your background. Therefore, accept the fact that your materials are just a glimpse into you as a leader and human being and are not all-encompassing. The next stages in the process are when you get to share your experiences beyond your written submission.
- **Submitting materials** – When you submit your CV and cover letter, always submit them as two separate PDF documents (unless there are instructions otherwise). This ensures that the formatting doesn't shift when someone else opens up your documents. Also, the titles of each document should mirror each other. For example, GSmithCV and GSmithCoverLetter. It is helpful to have your name in the title of the documents since search committee members will likely be downloading a number of documents all at once.

The following is a checklist for drafting a cover letter. Did you:

- Clearly state your interest in the role and institution?
- Describe how your background aligns with the priorities?
- Explain what you bring to the table?

- Ensure that your letter addresses the impact you would have on their specific campus?
- Make note of what sets you apart from other candidates?
- Adhere to a reasonable page limit?

If you check off all of the above, you will have positioned yourself with strong materials, establishing your experience and interest in the role and institution. You will have marketed yourself and your experience effectively and with great clarity, strengthening your candidacy.

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