

Graduate Career Services

The Graduate School and Division of Student Affairs

Academic Cover Letters

Included as part of your job application materials, a cover letter is essential for introducing yourself to the search committee and conveying the experience and expertise that make you the best fit for the open position. Take into account the characteristics of the department and institution in order to identify the most relevant aspects of your teaching, research, and service, and show great enthusiasm for joining their community. Will the position focus primarily on teaching (e.g. a 4-4 class load) with some research requirements, or will the main emphasis be on research with a reduced teaching load (e.g. 2-2)? Does the University have a Catholic identity like Notre Dame, a mission to provide educational access to underrepresented groups of students, or some other feature that can guide your message? Showing that you have the experience, background, and desire to grow the department's faculty composition in meaningful ways will help catch the committee's attention.



HOT TIPS

- Customize your cover letter to the needs of the school, department, and position.
- Catch the reader's attention with a unique opening line.
- Focus on your teaching, research, and interests.
- Present information in order of importance to the position.

There are three main sections to most cover letters: introduction, body, and conclusion.

Here's what to include in each:

Introduction Section

The initial paragraph of the letter should identify the position you are applying for by name, how you learned of the opportunity (e.g. posted on the Chronicle website or your professional organization), what you study, and when you will graduate if A.B.D. (All But Dissertation).

In order to attract the reader's interest, avoid opening your letter with the phrase "I am writing to apply for ____." Because the phrase is commonly seen, it does not help you make a positive impression on the search committee. Consider these options as alternatives:

- "Having graduated with a Ph.D. in [your field] from the University of Notre Dame, I am writing to apply for the [position rank/title and field]."
- "My interest in the [position rank/title and field] position can be traced to the [course name] course I taught last Spring as a Ph.D. candidate in [your field] at the University of Notre Dame."
- "Researching [your broad topic] with [your advisor's name] has generated a deep interest that I will bring to the [position rank/title and field] position."

Graduate Career Services

The Graduate School and Division of Student Affairs

Body Section

While the CV offers a record of your past accomplishments, the cover letter describes how those experiences will help you serve the department and institution in the future. Unlike the body of cover letters used in business, industry, government, or non-profit, which include only 1-2 paragraphs focusing on the two main skills or experiences that qualify you for the position; academic cover letters are broader and can include significant detail on the following areas:

Teaching

Start by identifying the courses you have already taught, in order to show your experience. Describe the effective and engaging pedagogy skills you incorporated into the classroom, especially if a separate Teaching Philosophy statement is not required for the application. For your Teaching Assistant (TA) positions, discuss the nature of your contributions to the success of the class and your direct involvement with students or course development. If you have been awarded or nominated for any teaching accolades, or if you have high Course Instructor Feedback (CIF) scores, be sure to include that information to show your success. In a separate paragraph, identify the additional classes you are capable of teaching, mentioning the specific names of courses currently offered by the institution as well as new, innovative ones you would offer.

Research

Begin with an overview of your general research interests, and show how they are incorporated into your dissertation project. Acknowledge a track record of scholarly success by including any noteworthy publications, and close with a description of your future research goals. Connect your research background to the goals and needs of the department, if possible.

Interests

Use a portion of the cover letter to demonstrate your fit with the department and institution. For large universities, does your research complement the area of a current member of their department? For small colleges, does their mission spark your interest in particular ways? Do you have a particular desire for working with their specific type of student population? Customizing your letter in these ways for each position can help differentiate your experience and goals from other applicants.

The above information should be presented in order of importance for the position to which you are applying. Lead with your teaching experience for positions with high teaching loads, but present your research background first when applying to positions that emphasize research.



Graduate Career Services

The Graduate School and Division of Student Affairs

Conclusion Section

List the enclosed documents that were requested in the application requirements, and indicate your interest in further discussing how your background fits the department and role (i.e. an interview). Provide personal closing comments and observations to personalize the letter in some way, showing a connection to the institution. Provide your phone and e-mail address for their convenience, and thank the reader for the consideration.

Additional Tips

- Print your cover letter on department letterhead if permitted.
- Your cover letter represents a sample of your writing, and therefore must be well written and free from all spelling and grammatical errors. Ask multiple people to proofread it before you apply. Your Graduate Career Consultant can be another set of eyes as well.
- Cover letters in STEM tend to be shorter (one page) than those in Arts and Letters (two full pages). Check with your advisor to learn cultural norms in your field.
- Address your letter to the search committee chair by name, including appropriate titles. When the chair is unknown, the letter can be addressed to the search committee.
- If you plan to attend the annual conference for the primary professional organization of your field (e.g. AHA for scholars in History), and it is customary for organizations to conduct interviews at that conference, mention that you will be available for interviews there.

