



Creating your cover letter for academic positions

For Masters and PhDs

The cover letter

Creating your academic cover letter

As the first document to be read by the search committee, the academic cover letter plays a significant role in whether or not you will be invited for an academic interview. While the curriculum vitae includes all the relevant information about your academic qualifications and achievements, the cover letter links your interests and qualifications to the position requirements in a more direct and personal way. A good academic cover letter is generally one and a half to two pages in length and should be tailored to showcase your understanding of the mission and focus of the hiring institution, department and position, and how your research, teaching and/or professional experiences and interests make you a suitable candidate for the role.

With the emphasis being on creating a cover letter that is unique reflecting your distinctive experiences and qualifications, it is important to include the following four key components in your letter:

The opening paragraph

This introductory paragraph should clearly and simply communicate to the reader the position you are applying for and how you learned about the position. If, for example, you discovered the position through a job posting, be sure to specifically state the position title (and position number if specified) as it appears in the posting followed by the source of the posting (such as a university/department website or an advertisement in a journal). It is equally important to mention if you learned about the opening through a supervisor, faculty member or other contacts. This paragraph should also include a statement of your relevant experience and qualifications, the details of which will be discussed in the remainder of your letter. Finally, you may choose to briefly explain your interest in and motivation for applying to the position. Typically, this paragraph is no more than 3-4 sentences in length.

Research experience

The opening paragraph is often followed by an elaboration of your thesis and research experience and its relevancy to the position. Begin by elaborating on the subject area, focus and major findings of your dissertation as well as an indication of its expected completion and related publications. If you have several years of relevant post-doctoral or other current research experience, you may choose to focus on this in addition to or instead of your dissertation. Provide a description that highlights aspects that are relevant to the position rather than a technical report of your thesis or research experience; a more detailed account can be provided in an abstract and/or research statement. Conclude this section by summarizing how your research experience is relevant to the position and the department. For positions that emphasize research work, it is important to demonstrate how your current research and future research plan links to the needs of the position and/or to the research direction of the department. To demonstrate the relevancy of your research experience for positions that require more teaching responsibilities, include a statement that links the pertinent themes and subject areas of your research to the curriculum topics and content of the courses being taught.

Teaching experience

If you are applying to a position that is primarily teaching-focused, you may decide to change the structure of your letter so that this section precedes the research experience component. A description of your teaching experience should highlight courses taught, level of responsibility and class sizes. You may also

choose to describe your teaching style as well as any positive student and/or supervisor feedback though the level of detail for these aspects may depend on whether you will be including a teaching dossier or a statement of teaching philosophy in your application. Conclude by demonstrating how your experience has prepared you for the teaching responsibilities and for teaching specific courses identified in the position.

The concluding paragraph

The final paragraph of your letter provides a brief reiteration of your interest in and fit with the position. This is also an opportunity for you to capture specific aspects of the department and institution that appeal to you, such as the mission statement and values, future departmental goals, and the campus environment. End your letter on a positive note by offering to provide any additional information that the committee may require as well as by indicating your interest in meeting with the committee for an interview.

Some exceptions

There are a few exceptions to the four-part format outlined above. If, for example, you have professional or industry experience that can further enhance your teaching approach and qualifications, this information can be incorporated into the teaching experience paragraph of your letter. Similarly, if your professional or industry experience is more research based, and can be connected to the current research focus of the university/department or to your future research ideas, this experience can be woven into the research experience paragraph of your letter. If your professional or industry experience does not directly relate to the teaching or research requirements of the role, but enhances your overall qualifications, this information may be presented in a separate paragraph within your letter. If you are required to submit separate documents as part of your application package such as: a research prospectus, a teaching dossier and/or a statement of research/teaching interests, the research and teaching paragraphs of your cover letter may not be as detailed and your letter will likely be shorter in length.

The academic cover letter is also considered a writing sample. In addition to ensuring that it is free of all grammatical and spelling errors, it is important to be aware of and follow the conventional hiring practices that govern your divisional area as these conventions change within and across disciplines. For example, cover letters in the humanities and social sciences are typically longer, with a more descriptive focus on teaching and research qualifications than letters in the sciences where research experience and publications are typically emphasized more than teaching experience. It is recommended that you speak with your supervisor or committee members who will be able to guide you in the right direction and confirm discipline and divisional practices.

Cover Letter Sample 1

This letter was created by a PhD candidate focusing on a position where the largest component revolves around research.

Knox College, Box 39, 59 St. George Street, Toronto ON M5S 2E6

416-921-5478

21 April 2010

Professor Douglas Whitnell
Chairperson, Department of History
University of the West
Grand Junction AB E4T 2W6

Dear Professor Whitnell,

I am excited to read of the opening for an assistant professor in the Department of History at the University of the West, as advertised in University Review, March 2010. As a military history scholar, I have all the qualifications you require, and therefore would complement your department's expertise in modern European history. I have enclosed my curriculum vitae for your review.

A substantial portion of my work at the graduate level has involved researching and teaching on military affairs and international relations issues. Recently, I finished my PhD thesis in which I conducted a full literature search, researched and analyzed original documents, synthesized my research, and wrote on French military policy during the Algerian War of Independence (1952–62). The thesis focused on the ranch settler society, which comprised approximately one million people or 10 per cent of Algeria's population during the Algerian War. They were privileged within Algeria in political, economic, and cultural status.

Moreover, they were opposed to Algerian independence during the conflict, because that would lead to a loss of their privileges. During my PhD studies, I also conducted a project on the evolution of British armour doctrine and theory during the inter-war period. This gave me greater expertise in assessing the ways in which military policy is formulated. This diverse background would allow me to continue researching and teaching on several interrelated themes relevant to your department's expertise in European history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

My MA thesis at the University of Toronto examined Anglo-American defence relations after World War One. During the inter-war era, Great Britain maintained a distrustful stance towards the United States, regarding the United States as erratic and unreliable in its foreign

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policy. My thesis examined the sources of this attitude and emphasized the fact that the United States and Great Britain did not have a “special relationship” before World War Two. This project provided me with expertise in analyzing security problems and dilemmas at the international level. In addition, I researched and wrote a term paper analyzing Italian military policy during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–39.

My teaching experience includes four courses over two years as a teaching assistant at the University of Toronto, where I was able to establish an easy rapport with undergraduate students and engage their interest in European international relations history. My teaching evaluations showed that students appreciated my enthusiasm and knowledge of my topic, as well as my ability to lead tutorial discussions in an inclusive manner.

I am keenly interested in joining the Department of History at the University of the West, as my expertise in European defence doctrine would complement that of the current faculty members, as I discovered in conversation with Professor Skopic. Your reputation as a university where undergraduate students receive a more personalized, high-quality education, while still enjoying student life, is exactly the kind of setting in which I would like to continue my academic career.

I look forward to the opportunity to meet with the members of the Search Committee to demonstrate further how I could contribute to teaching and research at your department.

Yours sincerely,

Juanita Duarte

Juanita Duarte

Cover Letter Sample 2

This letter was created by a PhD candidate focusing on a position where the largest component revolves around research.

May 18, 2010

Dr. E. Driscoll, Chair
Queen's University
Department Electrical and Computer Engineering
Walter Light Hall
19 Union Street
Kingston ON K7L 3N6

Dear Dr. Driscoll,

I am writing to apply for a tenure-track faculty position in the department of electrical and computer engineering. Given that Queen's University has identified my research area as a strategic priority for growth in the faculty, I believe that my skills and experience present an excellent fit for this position.

My research interests include the design and implementation of communication algorithms for wired and wireless optical channels. My PhD thesis extends current modem design techniques to the case of wireless optical channels. Although detection is done in electrical domain on these channels, the optical domain imposes constraints on the class of signals which can be transmitted. My thesis presents a signal space model to represent modulation schemes and defines lattice codes for optical intensity channels under a variety of constraints. Capacity bounds are also derived for the channel and the role of modulation in achieving high-spectral efficiencies is formally described.

My thesis also presents results of some experimental work on the design of a pixelated transmitter/imaging receiver wireless optical link. Channel measurements are made to justify a channel model and some candidate spatial modulation schemes are proposed and tested. This multiple — input/multiple-output (MIMO) channel offers significant gains in spectral efficiency for future wireless optical links. In addition to my academic research, in my professional experience I have worked in private industry. This is of benefit to your department in view of your close ties with the private as well as the public sector.

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My teaching experience includes teaching a variety of class sizes (from 40 to 225 students), supervising labs and coordinating other teaching assistants. I supervised undergraduate students in their major research projects, under the direction of the course instructor. Through this experience I have developed excellent communication, problem solving, and organizational skills. My skills in teaching would be beneficial, as Queen's University Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering continues its expected growth, with the development of new programs at the undergraduate and graduate level.

Please find enclosed my curriculum vitae, a list of references, a statement of teaching, and a statement of research. Please contact me if there are any further questions regarding my application. Contact by e-mail is preferred.

Sincerely,

Monir El Halaby
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University of Toronto
10 King's College Road, Toronto ON M5S 3G4 CANADA
Telephone: 416-978-3321
E-mail: monir@comm.utoronto.ca

Cover Letter Sample 3

This letter was created by a Master level candidate focusing on a position which is a research role in government or outside academia

January 24, 2011

Dear Mr. Green,

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with me last week and discuss the contract position of Research Officer with the Department of Canadian Heritage. I appreciated your advice and the opportunity to discuss how my experience in educational research can contribute to your department. The preservation of French language across Canada has been a longstanding interest of mine, and I believe that the combination of my graduate education from OISE, over 4 years' experience in research and teaching will make a great addition to your research and policy team.

My educational journey has provided an excellent foundation for gaining both qualitative and quantitative research skills through interviews with 250 French immersion students regarding their educational challenges when moving to an English educational setting. My work, informed by sociocultural theoretical perspectives, also examines the issue of identity resulting from changes in the language of the classroom. As well, I bring knowledge and experience in online education, through work at McGill University, by researching the best tools and methods to create e-learning courses for students. As online education is your team's area of current focus, my expertise will be most beneficial.

In addition to my research experience, my strong presentation skills have been developed through many years of instruction in a variety of settings -- university and high school. Through my experience, I have learned effective ways of engaging my audience in the content being shared. As well, having also presented to large audiences at conferences and in classes in both French and English will be an additional asset when presenting briefings to the department stakeholders.

I am very excited to be part of your departments' vision of educating our youth and my vision of how to support educational initiatives fits with the vision of the Department of Canadian Heritage. Thank you for your consideration and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Leslie Winters
416-223-0987
leslie.winters@utoronto.ca

Resources

All of these resources can be found in the Career Resource Library located in the Career Centre, St. George campus. In addition to the resources below, the Career Resource Library contains samples of curriculum vitae and videos of past panels on creating a dossier, academic job search, and job-searching outside of academia.

- Barnes, S. (2007). *On the Market: Strategies for a Successful Academic Job Search*. The United States of America: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Chandler, C., Wolfe, L. & Promislow, E.L. (2007). *The Chicago guide to Landing a Job in Academic Biology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Goldsmith, J. A., Komlos, J., & Gold, P. (2001). *The Chicago Guide to Your Academic Career: A Portable Mentor for Scholars from Graduate School through Tenure*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hall, D. (2002). *The Academic Self: An Owner's Manual*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- Hannah, E., Paul, L. & Vethamany-Globus, S. (2002). *Women in the Canadian Academic Tundra: Challenging the Chill*. Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Heiberger, M. & Vick, J. (2008). *The Academic Job Search Handbook*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hume, K. (2005). *Surviving your Academic Job Hunt: Advice for Humanities PhDs*. The United States of America: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jackson, A., & Geckeis, C. (2003). *How To Prepare Your Curriculum Vitae*. The United States of America: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.
- Keahey, D., & Schnitzer (2003). *The Madwoman in the Academy: 43 Women Boldly Take on the Ivory Tower*. Alberta: University of Calgary Press.
- Krannich, R. and C. (2004). *No One Will Hire Me!: Avoid 15 Mistakes and Win the Job*. Virginia: Impact Publications.
- Lang, J. (2005). *Life on the Tenure Track: Lessons from the First Year*. Maryland: John Hopkins University Press.

Websites

- ▶ Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (www.aucc.ca)
This site lists academic opportunities at Canadian universities and provides information on higher education in Canada, and directories and links to Canadian universities.
- ▶ Canadian Association of University Teachers (www.caaut.ca)
CAUT is the national voice of teachers, librarians, researchers, and other academic professionals. They produce a handbook (found under services) that is a step-by-step instruction on negotiating salaries.
- ▶ The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com/jobs/>)
Academic opportunities at U.S. universities as well as articles on topics related to academic employment, including advice on cv's and cover letters and salary information.
- ▶ Preparing Teaching Portfolios (http://ctd.ucsd.edu/resources/teaching_tips/index.htm)
Teaching tips and techniques for grad students/TA's from UCSD's Center for Teaching Development, including guidelines for preparing teaching portfolios and packaging your teaching experience and successes.
- ▶ Writing Academic Cover Letters (<http://career.berkeley.edu/PhDs/PhDcover.stm>)Comprehensive guide to writing cover letters for academic positions.