Writing About Your Dissertation/Thesis Project

One of the biggest mistakes first-time cover letter writers make is to spend too much time on the dissertation project. Spend roughly two paragraphs writing about your dissertation project:

**Paragraph One**
- What does your project argue?
- How do you make the argument?
- Use specific examples if appropriate
- Don’t use jargon or obscure language

**Paragraph Two**
- What contribution does your project make?
- How does the argument address existing scholarship in the field?
- Answers the question of “so what?”

Remember that not everyone on the hiring committee will be within your specific sub-field. Hiring committees can be a diverse set of readers and it’s important to use language that can be clearly understood by all of those readers. Your discussion of your research should convince these individuals that they would like to have a further conversation with you.
Writing about Teaching

All institutions value excellence in teaching. The cover letter is an opportunity to tell the hiring committee something specific about your teaching experience and your commitment to pedagogy. It is vital to read the job description closely and ascertain, not just the amount of teaching required, but also what kind of teaching is required. This should inform how you talk about your experience.

Show that you are attentive to the needs of the institutions. It is often important to talk about how you might approach teaching introductory courses in addition to classes that you design based on your research.

Perhaps most importantly: show the hiring committee that you have a commitment to instruction, rather than just telling them. Use a handful of examples about effective moments (or of effective strategies) in your classroom, rather than writing “I am passionate about teaching.” Strong examples of teaching success will serve you much better!

A teaching statement will provide more, but this is a great chance to make an impression.

University Service

Hiring committees are interested in candidates that will make good departmental citizens. Show that you have experience contributing in multiple ways to your program/discipline.

Planning conferences, panels, other events
Committee work (hiring, policies, etc.)
Coordinating workshops
Communicating your work to broader audiences
Mentoring peers and undergraduates

Tailor Your Letter

EACH cover letter must be tailored to EACH specific opportunity. There is usually at least one paragraph dedicated to comments about fit—but the best letters tailor throughout.

Call out specific reasons that you want to work at each institution. Avoid name-dropping faculty, and instead focus on real connections that you have, resources you are excited about, and programs to which you can contribute. Hiring committees want to know that you are excited to be a new colleague.

Formatting Your Letter

1” MARGINS

LETTERHEAD

FULL SNAIL MAIL ADDRESS & FORMAL SALUTATION

BRIEF INTRO

September 1, 2014
University of Undergraduates
Attr: Weights and Measures Department Search Committee
185 College Avenue
University of Jobs, XY 99002

Dear Members of the Search Committee:

I am writing in application to the advertised position of Assistant Professor in the Department of Weights and Measures. I am currently an advanced graduate student in the Department of Standards at the University of Chicago and will defend my dissertation Blah Bingo Bong Blathering Blisters in Binghamton in December of this year.

I’m excited about the prospect of working in the Department of Weights and Measures at the University of Jobs and I look forward to speaking more soon.

Sincerely,

A-J Aronstein
University of Chicago

A SHORT, CONFIDENT (AND SIGNED) CONCLUSION THAT GESTURES TO FUTURE CONVERSATIONS.
Final Best Practices / Common Mistakes:

Language to Avoid:

Although I am not [x] / do not have [y] - Emphasize why you’re the best candidate; don’t apologize for your great credentials!

Here, now, I present you with 5 paragraphs about my path-breaking dissertation, which treats the fourth century chemist Dr. B in conversation with the fourth century philosopher Dr. C in...
- Keep your dissertation description to two paragraphs at most.
- Assume that non-experts will be reading your letter; keep jargon to a minimum

I hope to finish my dissertation in the next decade - The more specific you can be (down to provision of a date!), the better

I would be a great fit at your university - Don’t just say you would be a good fit. Give real reasons why you are excited.
- Use the institution’s name – it’s a small thing, but it helps!

It would be an honor to work with Dr. X - It may feel like an honor, but you need to show that you are ready to be an equal on faculty

I hope to hear from you soon - You don’t need to hope. You look forward to hearing soon!

I am passionate about teaching.
- Show your passion through examples. Don’t assume the reader will take you at your word

I will now list publications 1, and 2, and 3, and 4, and 5.
- You can talk about publications. But your C.V. is a list. Don’t regurgitate it in the letter

I will next revise chapter 5 of my dissertation.
- Think of broader next steps

My last paper rocked the discipline.
- Take the advice of “The Professor is In” here. It didn’t rock the world. And that’s okay.

DO:

1. Expect every reader to read the whole thing as closely as possible
2. Provide examples of how your work contributes to the field broadly
3. Anticipate readers outside your subfield
4. State progress and confidence that you will finish (if you haven’t) your PhD
5. Talk about why you are excited about this particular position
6. Suggest how you are a good fit
7. Pitch them on why you’re going to be a good teacher of diverse courses
8. Chart reasonable next steps for your research beyond the dissertation
9. Confer with advisors about appropriate length for your discipline and each kind of position to which you’re applying
10. Think of yourself as their colleague and not as a graduate student

Always:

- Use department letterhead if you are still a student or postdoc, or are currently teaching at this or another institution. You should be able to get it from the department administrator.
- Keep it to under two pages. Many letters for postdoc positions and some visiting assistant positions may be kept to 1.5 pages.
- Be respectful of the reader’s eyes. Margins should be kept to no thinner than 0.7", and it’s imperative to use a font between sizes 11 and 12 pt.
- Proofread, proofread, proofread. Did we say it enough times? Proofread your cover letters and have others proofread them as well!

Ready for Review?

After reviewing this guide and writing a draft, schedule an appointment with UChicagoGRAD career staff at grad.uchicago.edu. We’re here for you when you feel stuck or need help!