

UChicagoGRAD Non-Academic Cover Letters Guide

Cover letters for non-academic jobs give job candidates the space to provide employers with clear evidence of interest in, knowledge about, and passion for the company, institution, or organization to which they are applying. They are brief (no more than a page long). Industry/Non-profit/Government cover letters provide specific and compelling reasons why a candidate is a strong **fit** for a position or role.

Cover letters also serve as succinct writing samples. It can be helpful to think of them as short **argumentative essays**. To this end, well-written cover letters should have a **main claim** about your fit to a particular position and should provide the reader with reasonable **evidence** to support this claim throughout. They create a narrative context for the information found in a candidate's resume, fleshing out the list of qualifications and experiences that hiring managers will find there.

Finally, cover letters work **in tandem with** the resume. Hiring managers will not *necessarily* read the cover letter *first* and then move onto the resume. It's likelier that a hiring manager will move back and forth between resume and cover letter.

Some Initial Best Practices

- Write to a **real person** whenever possible (use "To Whom it May Concern" as an alternative):
 - Find out the hiring manager's name and address the letter to him or her
 - If you can't find it in the job description, try to figure it out by looking on LinkedIn
- Tell the reader what's **exciting** about this job in the first paragraph
 - Answer the question: "Why are you interested in / excited about *this position*"
 - Mention *substantive* conversations or connections with current employees
- Move **quickly** into specifics about what skills or experience you would **bring** to the job
 - Remember that it's not just about what you will get out of the job
 - It's about how you will make **the kind of contribution that they need**
- Give **narrative shape** to resume or CV, using specific examples in each paragraph
 - Don't repeat your resume in list form!
- **No more than one page.** Be sure to include an actual signature

Write LESS About Research:

Research skills will likely be highly valued by employers, but it's not necessary to go into extensive detail about your dissertation, thesis project, or research interests—**unless** the content of the job matches perfectly with your graduate work.

Take cues from the job description. Ask whether the job *requires* knowledge of methods or research areas in which you have expertise. If it doesn't, then consider writing about your research *skills*.

Don't FORGET About Them:

- **Too often, students and postdocs are in a hurry to explain their skills and experience.** Hiring managers care far more about the fact that candidates have taken the time to learn about their company or organization. Answer the question "why do you want to work for *us*?"
- **How many times does the company's name appear?:** The name of the organization should be in every paragraph. Make it easy for the hiring manager to discern that you've tailored the document to them.

Common Questions:

- **Do I need to include my address?** No. Your address is on your resume. Don't waste space!
- **Does graduate experience still count as experience?** Yes. Your graduate degree and/or postdoctoral can stand in for some years of experience *but you have to make a sound argument as to why this is the case.* The cover letter is the perfect place to describe in detail why your research skills and experience constitute *work* experience.
- **Should I include references in the letter?** No.
- **How should I end the letter?** Tell the reader that you "would look forward to talking more about this position in person."

Don't Apologize!:

Too often, graduate students and postdocs will include sentences that begin, "Although I don't have exactly the experience you're looking for [...]."

Avoid this construction! Instead, talk confidently about how your experience as a graduate student will fit directly into the position. Graduate career advisors at UChicagoGRAD can help you make this case.

Don't FORGET Format:

Your Resume and Cover Letter should both be in the same font (UChicagoGRAD prefers Garamond, Century Gothic, Palatino Linotype, and a few others).

Don't shrink your font or margins just to make the page limit. Show that you care about the hiring manager's time and keep your letter concise.

There's no need to include your full address *in addition* to the employer's address. You will most likely be submitting materials via email! Don't waste valuable space in your documents.

Areas of Skepticism:

Think about some of the areas where hiring managers might have skepticism about graduate students or postdocs.

- **Are you able to work in teams?** Use examples in your cover letter that show you working with others to solve problems.
- **Can you work quickly, efficiently, and accurately?** Don't let the reader worry that you work "academically" - i.e. slowly and methodically. Show them that you have a record of achievement!
- **Do you have to be the smartest person in the room?** Hiring managers might see a graduate degree and worry that you do not effectively deliver or receive critical feedback. Show them that you've worked with others and that you thrive on collaborative input.
- **What kind of practical experience do you have?** If you have applicable professional experience outside graduate school, be sure to talk about it. But if you have been only in school, think about the activities that you have done outside the classroom. Have you managed a lab? Planned a conference? Served on committees? Talk about these activities.

Checklist:

Before meeting with UChicagoGRAD career advisors, it's helpful to have thought of and done some of the following things. This work can really improve the efficiency of our conversations with you!

- Your letter is 1 or 1.5 pages (we can help cut)
- It uses 0.7" to 1" margins and a standard font
- It has specific references to why you want to work at the company
- The company's name is in each paragraph
- It uses 1 - 2 examples of your work experience or skills in each paragraph
- It does not **just** list what's in the resume
- It is signed