

UChicagoGRAD Academic Job Market Cover Letter Guide

Cover letters for the academic job market are a candidate's prose introduction to a hiring committee. They are a kind of professional writing sample, adding context to a C.V. and giving applicants the opportunity to provide a narrative form to their experience. They do not re-list what is found in the C.V. Typically, they include commentary on the state and direction of one's research project (a dissertation for most graduate student job candidates or postdocs applying to a first tenure-track job); examples of teaching experience and ideas about teaching philosophy, a summary of service, and specific ideas about fitness to the hiring institution.

These documents are significantly different than cover letters for positions in most industry, nonprofit, and government jobs. They also can differ based on discipline, institution type, and the specific requirements of any position.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE: Notwithstanding differences among cover letters that attend to accepted disciplinary or departmental practices, this guide points to several best practices that can be helpful across fields. As with the UChicagoGRAD C.V. Guide, it presents conventions—**not laws**. There are exceptions to *every* rule. UChicagoGRAD recommends consulting this guide (and the advice of career development staff) to make sure that your faculty member's first read-through is as productive for you as possible. Follow these guidelines to help ensure that your advisor is reading your letter and providing discipline-specific advice on your project.

What can a strong cover letter actually do?

- Serve as a sample of **professional writing**
- Give **narrative shape** to your C.V.
- Demonstrate your **FIT** to an institution
- Help you get an **interview**
- Present you as a future **colleague** and not as a graduate student
- Project **confidence** in your credentials

What **CAN'T** a cover letter do? (almost no matter what).

- Get you a **job** (it can only help get an interview)
- Stand in for genuine **interest** in an institution
- Mask a lack of **attention to detail** (be sure to proofread!)
- Tell the entire story of your dissertation's evolution
- Go onto a **third page**

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**



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

University of Chicago
Department of Standards
5801 South Ellis Avenue, Suite 223
Chicago, IL 60637

← **LETTERHEAD**

September 1, 2014

University of Undergraduates
Attn: Weights and Measures Department Search Committee
185 College Avenue
University of Jobs, XY 99902

Dear Members of the Search Committee:

**BRIEF
INTRO**

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 *Blab Bingo Biz: Blatbering Blisters in Binghamton* in December of this year.

**FULL SNAIL MAIL
ADDRESS &
FORMAL SALUTATION**

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!