



Cover Letter Best Practices

Academic Job Market Summer Camp

July 10, 2018

grad.uchicago.edu

UCHICAGOGRAD



Agenda

1. Form and Formatting
2. Sample Documents
3. Content that Works
4. Tailoring Exercise
5. Final Thoughts



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Mastering the Genre

- What **CAN** a strong cover letter do?
 - Give **dimension** to your C.V.
 - Demonstrate your **fit** to an institution
 - Show you've done your homework
 - Present you as a **future colleague**
 - Project confidence
 - Get you an **interview**
- What **CAN'T** a cover letter do?
 - Get you a job
 - Stand in for genuine **interest** in a position
 - Obscure a lack of **attention to detail**
 - Tell the **entire** story of your research
 - Neglect the **future**
 - Go onto a third page



Fonts to Avoid

Arial

Times New Roman

Calibri

Cambria

Comic Sans



Better Fonts

Serifs: Garamond
Georgia
Palatino Linotype

Sans Gotham Light/**Bold**
Serifs: Helvetica Neue Light
Century Gothic
Trebuchet MS

Size: 11 – 12



Formatting

1"
MARGINS



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

FULL SNAIL MAIL
ADDRESS &
FORMAL SALUTATION

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: 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 handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A-J Aronstein'.

A-J Aronstein
University of Chicago

A SHORT, CONFIDENT (AND SIGNED)
CONCLUSION THAT GESTURES TO
FUTURE CONVERSATIONS.



Structure and Flexibility

HUM/SS/DIV

Like your CV, your letter works in sections:

- Introduction

- Dissertation overview
- Critical conversation, publications, and future work

- Teaching approach and experience
- Plans for teaching at the hiring institution

- Service to and fit with the hiring institution

- Formal sign-off



Structure and Flexibility

STEM and Lab-based SS

Like your CV, your cover letter works in sections:

- Introduction

- PhD research overview
- Postdoc research overview
- Future research projects

- Teaching***
- Service to the department/institute

- Well-researched comments about institution
- Formal sign-off



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Sample Document Activity



Analyze Sample Letters

- **Carefully review the sample letters**
 - STEM & lab-based SS - letters #1 and #2
 - HUM, DIV, and SS - letters #3 and #4
- **Take notes on what you see**
 - Why do you think this letter was effective?
 - What are some best practices that you can borrow?
- **Discuss your findings with 2-3 neighbors and develop a list of best practices to share**

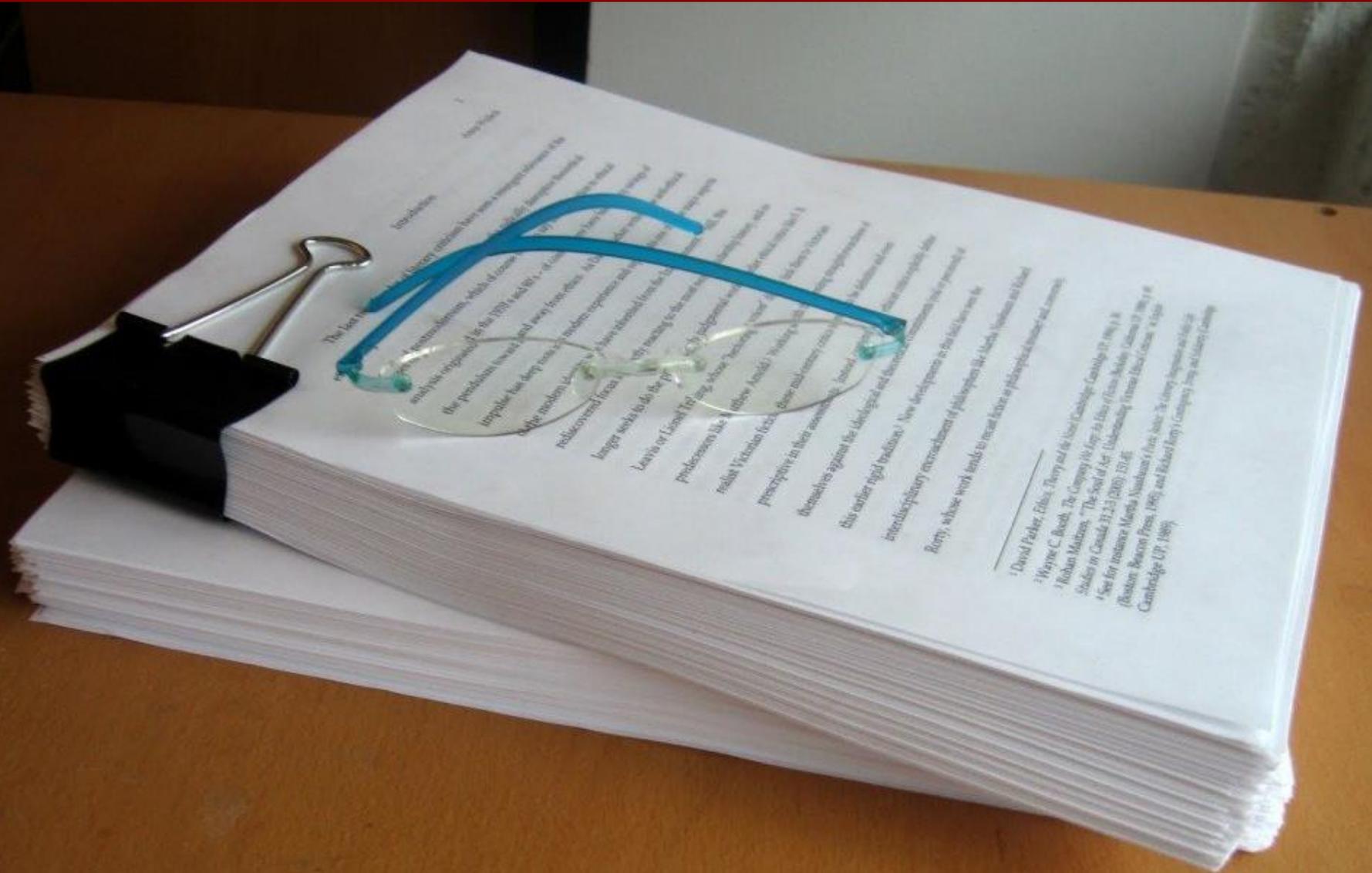


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Discussing Your Research



Discussing Your Research

STEM

- Paragraphs on doctoral, postdoc, & future work
- Focus on **outcomes** and **impact**
- Save details for the research statement

HUM & SS

- Usually 2 paragraphs
- ¶ 1 gives the dissertation argument
- ¶ 2 gives the dissertation interventions and next steps

- Make sure that your description can be **understood** by someone outside your subfield
- Mention major **fellowships** and **grants**
- Communicate efficiently and as a **colleague**
- Gesture toward the **publications** and the **next projects** that will grow out of current work



Discussing Your Teaching



Discussing Your Teaching

- **1 paragraph** on teaching for research-oriented jobs (*or even less for a STEM R1 position*)
- **2+ paragraphs** for liberal arts or teaching-intensive jobs
- **Tailor** to each institution's needs, including courses listed in the job ad
- **Potential Topics**
 - Summary of past teaching/mentoring experience
 - Summary of teaching philosophy
 - Short, distinct examples of your approach
 - Specific plans for teaching at the hiring institution
 - Teaching awards, prize lectureships, CCT fellowships



Show, Don't Tell

- **Telling** (weak)
 - “Teaching is something I value . . .”
- **Showing** (better)
 - “In ‘Introduction to Islam,’ I made it a goal to demonstrate research methods by integrating materials from our library’s Special Collections Department into my course. For instance, I assigned an essay on . . .”



Communicating Fit

YOU ARE HERE

YOU SHOULD BE HERE



Communicating Fit

- Express **real familiarity** with the work of one or more faculty members (do not simply name drop)
- Mention **previous collaborations** or conversations with faculty from the department (if appropriate)
- Name **required classes** that you will have to teach how you might teach them
- Suggest ways to make use of **local resources** in your teaching, research, and mentoring
- Speak to your **interest** in university institutes, working groups, or interdisciplinary programs
- **Arrange** the contents of your letter to reflect the institution's priorities



Do Your Homework

- Effective tailoring requires **homework**
- Talk to contacts with knowledge of the institution
- Carefully study the profiles of current faculty members
- Review course offerings
- Explore relevant institutes, centers, and affiliated depts.
- Read departmental, divisional, and institutional missions



Williams

SEARCH Q MENU

AMERICAN STUDIES
Williams + American Studies

Our courses use interdisciplinary approaches to develop students' understanding of the complexity of culture(s) usually labeled "American."

Created in 1940, the American Studies Program at Williams College is one of the oldest American Studies programs in the country. Our courses use interdisciplinary

The Major +

Faculty & Staff +

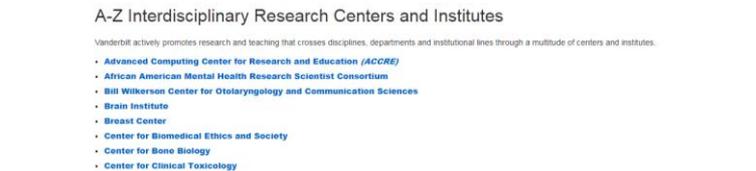
Courses +



VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

research @Vanderbilt

RESEARCH AT VANDERBILT COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS RESOURCES FOR RESEARCHERS INITIATIVES RESEARCH NEWS



A-Z Interdisciplinary Research Centers and Institutes

Vanderbilt actively promotes research and teaching that crosses disciplines, departments and institutional lines through a multitude of centers and institutes.

- [Advanced Computing Center for Research and Education \(ACCREE\)](#)
- [African American Mental Health Research Scientist Consortium](#)
- [Bill Wilkerson Center for Otolaryngology and Communication Sciences](#)
- [Brain Institute](#)
- [Breast Center](#)
- [Center for Biomedical Ethics and Society](#)
- [Center for Bone Biology](#)
- [Center for Clinical Toxicology](#)



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CHANCELLOR BLUMENTHAL

Biography Communications Vision On the Job Contact Quick Start

Vision

Home / Vision

Chancellor's Vision for UC Santa Cruz

CAMPUS MISSION

UC Santa Cruz is a leading research university with a tradition of innovation in the education of students—built on values of social and environmental responsibility.

UCSC VISION

UCSC will be internationally recognized for our scholars and students who work in and across disciplines to create knowledge and transform paradigms.

"We will do important things together as we build upon UCSC's legacy of achievement and excellence. We will do important things together as we continue, even accelerate, our upward trajectory. We will do important things together as UCSC strives to serve California as a top-ranked research university and the leading institution for the education of students. A place that fosters a culture of excellence, inquiry, creativity, diversity, and public service."



Language to Avoid

- “I would be thrilled . . .”
 - Don’t use verbiage that you wouldn’t say **aloud**
- “I was honored to be given the opportunity to . . .”
 - Cast yourself as an **agent**, and use strong verbs
- “I hope to speak to you soon . . .”
 - Hope springs eternal and conveys uncertainty
- “It would be a dream to teach with Dr. Smith.”
 - Even dream jobs are **jobs**
- “My paper shocked the discipline and won me enemies in the field.”
 - Don’t be conspiratorial, and don’t be a diva



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Tailoring Activity



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Top 10 Cover Letter Do's

- 1. Expect** everyone to read the whole thing
- 2. Provide** examples of how your work contributes to the field
- 3. Anticipate** readers outside your subfield
- 4. State** your progress and confidence of completion
- 5. Talk** about why you want to be there
- 6. Suggest** collaborations
- 7. Pitch** them on why you're going to be a good teacher of the required courses
- 8. Chart** reasonable next steps for your work
- 9. Confer** with advisors about appropriate length
- 10. Think** of yourself as their colleague



Final Steps for Job Docs

- **Share** documents with advisors and mentors
- Revise for **clarity** and **concision**
- Use a consistent **font** throughout your materials
- Convert all documents to **PDF** format
- **Proofread** using a text-to-speech function



Next Steps

- **Write** a cover letter in sections
 - Don't worry about length at first
 - But be prepared to cut
- **Share** your letter with someone outside your field and at UChicagoGRAD to see how it communicates
- **Compose** a few paragraphs (for yourself) about the process of getting your dissertation done
- **Read** job descriptions with a highlighter, identifying key words that you should mention in a letter
- **Research** institutions in an organized way—keeping spreadsheets about opportunities
- **Throughout, be honest** about your priorities as an applicant, a scholar/researcher, and a person



Questions?

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