Cover Letter Best Practices
Academic Job Market Summer Camp
July 10, 2018

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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

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Serifs</th>
<th>Sans</th>
<th>Serifs</th>
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### Size

11 – 12
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:

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 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-J Aronstein
University of Chicago
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
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
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

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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

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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
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

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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?

Briana Konnick
bkonnick@uchicago.edu

Courtney Wiersema
cwiersema@uchicago.edu

Appointments:
gradcareers.uchicago.edu

grad.uchicago.edu