



A Dozen Sentences That Should Appear In Your (Academic) Job Application Letter

by Professor Philip N. Howard

When you apply for an academic job, your cover letter helps a hiring committee interpret your curriculum vitae and conveys your excitement about and dedication to your work.

Your mission is to land an academic job. The immediate goal is to use the cover letter to get you on two shortlists—the shortlist of a dozen people who will be invited to submit more writing samples and have references checked, followed by the shortlist of three or four people who will be invited to visit the hiring department.

Cover letters should include 12 pieces of information that hiring committees are seeking:

1. I would like to be considered for the position of [title copied from job ad] in [exact department name from job ad] at the [exact institution name from job ad]. I am an advanced doctoral candidate in [your department].

This opening should be short and can certainly vary. The odds are that you will submit for many jobs, be shortlisted for a few, and be offered one or two. In all the cutting and pasting, make sure these letters are correctly addressed to the chair of the search committee or the chair of the department.

2. My doctoral project is a study of [cocktail party description]. Much of the research on this topic suggests that [characterize the literature as woefully inadequate]. But I [demonstrate, reveal, discover] that contrary to received wisdom, [your punch line].

This is the key statement about your doctoral project. Demonstrate how you will contribute to an intellectual conversation that is larger than your project-- but unable to advance without your findings. The next paragraph should detail your research with one sentence on each chapter in your manuscript.

3. To complete this research I have spent [X years] doing [fieldwork / lab work / archival work / statistical analysis]. I have travelled to [these cities or libraries], interviewed [X number of experts], created [original datasets/original compositions/original artwork].

This sentence should be followed by a paragraph with the story of your research process. Overwhelm the committee with the volume of artifacts you've studied, people you've talked to, time you have dedicated or places you've been.

4. I have completed [X] of [Y] chapters of my dissertation, and I have included two substantive chapters as part of my writing sample.

Many hiring committees expect their top candidates to be almost finished with the doctoral project, since the dissertation is a test of commitment to a research trajectory. Ideally, the review committee will be excited by your original research and beg you for more once you are on a short list. Your mentors should confirm this information in their letters.

5. I have well-developed drafts of several other chapters, and expect to defend in [month, year]. OR Having defended in [month, year], I plan to [turn it into a book-length manuscript for a major scholarly press / select key chapters for publication in disciplinary journals].

Your advisors will also confirm these things. Committees want to know that your defense will not take place while you are working on their coin. If any of your committee members are unwilling to commit to even a season of the year for your defense date, or you don't have two substantive chapters to submit to the hiring committee, it's too early for you to be on the academic job market.

6. Although my primary area of research is [disciplinary keyword here], I have additional expertise in [another disciplinary keyword here] and am eager to teach in both areas. I have [taught/served as a teaching assistant] in courses about [A, B and C]. In the next few years, I hope to develop courses in [X and Y].

Departments love hiring people who can teach several topics. Look up the courses offered in the department to which you are applying, and use their keywords. Although the hiring committee will take research fit as most important, teaching skills and interests will be taken seriously. Specify courses in which you served as a teaching assistant and those in which you were the instructor of record.

7. For the most part, my approach to research is through [social science or humanistic method keyword here], and I would be interested in developing a methods class on this approach to research.

Many departments struggle to find faculty who will teach methods classes, and signaling your interest likely will put you ahead. Job candidates are particularly valuable if they demonstrate how they cross methodological boundaries, appreciate diverse approaches to inquiry, and can contribute to advancing knowledge with different analytical frames.

8. Although I have been focused on my graduate research for several years, I have been actively involved in conversations with [scholars in the department you are applying to, or scholars at other universities/professional associations/conferences/other disciplines].

This can be the one paragraph about service, highlighting conferences you've attended, workshops you've organized, and other ways you've supported your discipline. If you are applying for work in a department that is different from the one that trained you, demonstrate how you already have affinities for the new discipline, such as showing that you are familiar with faculty interests.

9. In the next few years, I hope to be able to investigate [reasonably related problems or questions].

Address your research trajectory over the next five years. The department will be investing in the person they hire, so the hiring committee will look for the direction your research will take. Communicate future research possibilities eloquently; don't leave the committee to assume you will be doing more of the same.

10. I am interested in this post for a variety of reasons: [something about the character of the department/university/community/city].

The committee will be happy that you know something about the place you want to work. This may be particularly true for colleges and universities with distinct liberal arts traditions or unique community programs, or are not located in major urban areas. A committee might not interview you if the members believe you would not seriously consider a job offer.

11. Because of my graduate training, my doctoral research, and my teaching [experience/interests], I am uniquely qualified for this job.

Within a few sentences address your general focus and course work, and point to your experience teaching in the domains mentioned in the job description. Write a brief statement on why you are uniquely qualified for the job.

12. In the next few months, I will be attending the [conference A] and [conference B]. If you or your colleagues are also planning to attend, I would be happy to meet for an informal conversation.

Many departments make their first short list phone interviews or informal conference visits. Alert the committee if you are giving a paper so they can see you in action.

These sentences are in roughly the order they should appear in for applications to jobs at research schools. Most of the content should be about research, followed by one or two paragraphs about teaching and perhaps one paragraph about service. If the job is mostly about teaching, expand the amount of space dedicated to that topic.

Shoot for two and a half pages of content: less than that and you might not seem like an advanced doctoral candidate well immersed in a project; more than that and committee members may stop reading. As you write, drop in the names of granting agencies that have supported you, or the journals that are publishing or reviewing your work. Ideally several faculty members will write letters on your behalf. If possible, at least one letter writer can come from a university other than yours. Hiring committees love reference letters on different university letterheads; it shows that you have social capital beyond your home department.

Address your letter to the person heading the search or the department head. A greeting such as “Dear Committee Members” shows you haven’t done enough research. Ask a friend proofread your document for grammar and spelling.

Finally, follow up with the department. Hiring committees do not always tell candidates whether they are on the short list. If you finish another dissertation chapter, or get an article published, a few weeks after submitting your letter, submit an update by e-mail and ask that this example be added to your file and where the committee is in the hiring process.