



COVER LETTERS FOR ACADEMIC JOB APPLICATIONS

A cover letter must accompany any application you submit for an academic job. The purpose of a cover letter, also sometimes called a *letter of application*, is to introduce yourself and to demonstrate the fit between your background and the advertised position. Use your cover letter to guide the employer's attention to the most significant portions of CV, to explain how your particular experiences have provided you with the skills you need to be successful in the position, and to convey enthusiasm for the position for which you are applying.

Content and Structure of an Academic Cover Letter

Although most cover letters follow a similar structure, you should tailor each one for the job to which you are applying. If you are applying to dozens of positions, this might not be feasible, but do at least customize the letter for the type of institution and position. Carefully read the job posting and fashion your letter based upon the information gleaned from the ad; the university and departmental Web sites may also provide valuable background information.

Prepare your opening paragraph with great care, since it sets the tone for the rest of the letter. Introduce yourself, mentioning the degree you are pursuing and the university you attend. Refer to the specific position for which you are applying, and indicate how you learned about the position or organization. If you have not yet finished your degree, you should state when you expect to receive your degree or defend your dissertation. You may also want to briefly mention what attracted you to the university to which you are submitting your application (i.e., strong undergraduate programs, commitment to research and development, excellent faculty).

The body of your letter should consist of one or two paragraphs that highlight your interest in the position, your strongest attributes and your strong qualifications. This is your opportunity to "sell" yourself. Use this opportunity to elaborate upon the distinctive strengths and qualifications you would bring to the position and attempt to persuade the search committee that you are a highly qualified candidate deserving additional consideration. Many people find this type of self-promotion difficult, and are concerned that such comments sound arrogant. Modesty is not rewarded in the job search, and you may be the only voice articulating your qualifications to the search committee. Sometimes, taking a bit of risk is necessary to demonstrate your enthusiasm. Who you are comes across when you personalize your letters by including relevant personal details.

If you are applying to a major research institution, it is also important to stress your interest in conducting research, possibly elaborating upon your current research or dissertation topic. For liberal arts or teaching colleges, it is appropriate to express your interest in teaching and in undergraduate education. Consider the specialization(s) that the job ads calls for, and draw as many parallels as possible between your area of specialization and the position. Address any other requirements that the job posting requests, as well as any other qualifications or experiences that you possess. If any information on your CV is confusing or may cause questions among the search committee, address these topics in the cover letter.

Conclude your letter by reinforcing your interest in the position and in obtaining an interview. Indicate the other materials you are enclosing in your application packet and whether any other

materials are being sent under separate cover. Offer to provide extra materials or additional information if necessary, and thank the reader for his or her consideration.

Technical Aspects of Academic Cover Letters

Cover Letter Salutation

Use a formal title in the opening of your letter, such as “Dr.” or “Professor.” If possible, direct your letter to a specific individual. This is not always possible, and if no individual is named in the job posting or you are instructed to respond to the search committee, it is acceptable to address begin your letter with “Dear Committee Members” or “Dear Members of the Search Committee.”

Length and Format

Letters in the sciences and social sciences should be approximately one page long; letters in the humanities may be longer (up to two pages). It is customary to single space text and double space between paragraphs. Use high-quality paper (at least 24-pound) that matches your CV. Some individuals use a consistent heading on the cover letter and CV, and this can help unify the two documents.

Writing Style

Write as concisely and effectively as possible, but don’t abandon complex sentence structures in favor of bulleted phrases. Hiring committees consider cover letters to be a sample of a candidate’s writing ability, so your letter must be well written. Have at least one other person proofread your letter. Seek advice and feedback from your adviser or another faculty member from your department, since they are familiar with your area of study.

Sample Academic Cover Letters

502 W. Main Street #221
Urbana, IL 61801

October 20, 2003

Music History Search Committee
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
422 South 11th Street
Indiana, PA 15705

Dear Members of the Search Committee:

I am writing in response to your advertisement for the Assistant Professor of Music History position at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, as advertised in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. I am currently a Ph.D. student in Musicology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and will complete my degree in May 2004. I respectfully submit this letter of application, for I believe my experiences and commitment to teaching make me well qualified to meet the needs of IUP's dynamic program.

As a teaching assistant at the University of Illinois, I have gained valuable experience leading undergraduate discussion sections for both music majors and non-majors. In addition to classroom instruction, I have advised students on appropriate research topics and edited and evaluated their work. Based on student evaluations, I have earned the Graduate Teaching Award for every semester that I have taught and have been listed four times among the top ten percent of teachers rated at the University of Illinois. I also co-created a public Music Appreciation course entitled *Music for All*, which attracted the interest of concertgoers of all ages and backgrounds. I am firmly dedicated to the education of music students as well as general audiences and eagerly welcome an opportunity to develop similar programs at IUP.

My course work has covered a wide range of topics in the various musical eras. My research, comparing Beethoven's symphonies with the more modern compositions of late-twentieth century American composers, has provided me with the opportunity to draw connections between the different periods and to communicate difficult concepts clearly to students of all levels. I am committed to an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship and teaching, and all of my courses are structured with this in mind. Rather than simply lecturing to a class, I strive to cultivate an interactive environment in which students can express themselves freely while learning to engage with the past in meaningful ways. I emphasize critical thinking and the need to consider music within its larger social, historical, and intellectual contexts. IUP takes great pride in its training of young scholars, and I feel that it is my responsibility to uphold these standards and to encourage and challenge students to work up to their potential, in hopes that their experiences in my classes will teach them far more than the history of music.

In addition to the standard period surveys, I am fully prepared to develop courses on opera history, Lieder, music and rhetoric (with special emphasis on the Baroque period), Twentieth century music, Romanticism, and music and the visual arts.

I welcome an opportunity to discuss my teaching and future research projects with you. I have enclosed my CV, and you will be receiving my letters of recommendation under separate cover. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Mary Blake

502 W. Main Street #221
Urbana, IL 61801

November 30, 2003

Dr. John Matthews
Civil Engineering
University of Texas at Austin
Box 19308
Austin, TX 76019-0308

Dear Dr. Matthews,

I am writing to apply for the position of Assistant Professor in Structural Engineering beginning Fall 2004, as advertised on your department website. I am currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and fully expect to complete my PhD degree requirements by May 2004. I am extremely interested in obtaining a faculty position at the University of Texas, as its engineering research programs have a stellar reputation that is known worldwide.

I believe that my academic training and my six years of experience working as a structural engineer prepare me to be an effective researcher and instructor in your department. My doctoral dissertation was conducted under the direction of Prof. Mark Daniels, and looks at the use of a relatively new methodology for the design of joints, walls, footings, and other portions of reinforced or prestressed concrete structures. In my research, I developed an integrated design and analysis environment for this methodology in which both strength and serviceability requirements are explicitly satisfied. This was delivered in a computer-based program that is freely available to the community and has been downloaded by more than 2500 people.

Although my dissertation focuses on a single topic, other areas that interest me for my future research stem from my goal of developing improved analytical models and methods for design, evaluation, and upgrade of concrete structures subjected to monotonic and reversed loading and structures equipped with passive systems. One of the studies that I have started is the development of a performance-based seismic design method for ductile reinforced concrete wall structures based on yield displacement. I have also worked on evaluation and improvement of accuracy of nonlinear static analysis for seismic design under the auspices of a project from the Applied Technology Committee, a national organization.

During my graduate training, I have been fortunate enough to also serve as a teaching assistant and occasionally instruct for an intermediate level course on reinforced concrete design. My five years of professional experience as an engineer have provided me with a broad view that is useful in assisting students with projects and assignments. Through my participation as a teaching assistant, I have developed confidence and an interest in teaching and look forward to the opportunity to both teach assigned classes and to develop my own classes.

I would enjoy discussing this position with you in the weeks to come. In the meantime, I am enclosing my Curriculum Vitae and statement of teaching and research interests. Letters of recommendation will arrive under separate cover. If you require any additional materials or information, I am happy to supply it. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Alexander Carrols

502 W. Main Street #221
Urbana, IL 61801

August 13, 2003

Professor Michael Smith
Chair, Classics Search Committee
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa 52240

Dear Professor Smith,

I am writing to apply for the Assistant Professor of Classics position, as advertised in the APA Positions list. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and I will complete degree requirements by May 2004.

Teaching has been an important part of my training at the University of Illinois, and I believe my background would be useful in your department. I have had considerable undergraduate teaching experience in several types of courses, including first- and second-year Latin classes and discussion sections of the Classical Mythology class. The latter experience introduced me to the pleasures of leading class discussion and the challenges of transforming new material – some of it unfamiliar to me – into useful discussion sections each week.

I have been equally devoted to the research side of my graduate training. My dissertation, directed by Dr. Robert Palmer, is entitled “Model Behavior: Generic Construction in Roman Satire.” This study investigates the metaphorical language used to describe satire, and its implications for the poets’ self-presentation. With this research, I have been working to secure a place for myself in the scholarly community. In the past two years, I have delivered papers at regional meetings such as the Classical Association of Atlantic States, and at national meetings, including the American Philological Association. My most recent conference paper was a collaborative effort; I helped to organize a panel on the satiric persona for the APA meeting in December.

Although my dissertation focuses on a single genre, it reflects interests that I expect to resurface in teaching contexts in the future. One area that fascinates me is the place of ancient comic genres in the literary canon and cultural contexts of Classical antiquity. Comedy, satire, and related genres make excellent material for courses on ancient culture, and I eagerly welcome the opportunity to develop such a course at some point. Another special interest of mine is ancient literary criticism, which I studied intensively for a PhD exam on the ancient reception of Homer. Moreover, while both of these areas interest me, I believe that I can also parlay them into general civilization courses such as Iowa’s Freshman Humanities courses.

I would enjoy discussing this position with you in the weeks to come. In the meantime, I am enclosing my Curriculum Vitae; letters of recommendation will arrive under separate cover. If you require any additional materials or information, I would be happy to supply it. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Coulter

502 W. Main Street #221
Urbana, IL 61801

November 5, 2002

Cell Biology and Genetics Search
Biology Department
Amherst College
Amherst, MA 01002

Dear Committee Members:

I am writing to apply for the assistant professor position beginning September 2003, as advertised in the October 11 issue of *Science*. I completed my PhD in Molecular Genetics and Cell Biology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in October 2003. As an alumnus of a small liberal arts college, I know and value the excellent education that smaller institutions provide to undergraduate students. I would be honored to join the Amherst community as an assistant professor.

My research and teaching interests have been fostered by several years of undergraduate teaching and mentoring at Illinois. I have taught discussion and laboratory sections for both introductory molecular and cellular biology and for introductory genetics for three semesters each. In addition, I also taught a section of a summer school laboratory course on the principles and techniques of molecular biology and supervised the undergraduate research of several students here at Illinois.

My research has focused upon elucidating the mechanisms of the *P* element insertion in *Drosophila melanogaster*. My dissertation research on molecular evolution and population genetics of transposable elements in natural *Drosophila* populations built upon this topic. This research and the projects that will stem from it can be adapted to provide undergraduates with research opportunities for their Senior Honors projects at Amherst and would also complement the existing strengths of the department.

My graduate school experiences have reinforced my appreciation for the liberal arts college environment. I have missed the small classes, active learning opportunities, and interdisciplinary students motivated by curiosity and love of learning. I look forward to once again becoming part of a liberal arts community and I can think of no better environment than the Amherst Biology Department in which to grow as an educator and scientist.

I am enclosing my CV and statement of teaching philosophy. Letters of recommendation are being mailed under separate cover. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ann Morton