

ADVICE

Writing a Good Letter

By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong | JULY 12, 2006

Question: I am planning to do an extensive job search this fall, and am excited because there are several positions in my field. Although I've spent most of my time (undergraduate and graduate) at large research institutions, I am really open to working at any type of institution. A friend from my department finished a few years ago and is working at Large State University. She has offered to lend me her applications materials, so that I can save time by using her cover letter and CV as templates. Is that a bad idea?

I'm a bit overwhelmed by the amount of time my search is going to take, so I've drafted a letter that I'm planning to use to apply to all of the openings. What do you think of that approach?

Jenny: Sample job materials can certainly help with the daunting task of preparing for the academic job market. For example, taking a look at the CV's of people in your field can give you a good idea of what you'll need to include on your own. However, cover letters are a bit different.

A CV is a list of your accomplishments and areas of expertise, while a cover letter is an extended discussion of your own unique career goals. I would recommend that you start work on your own letters before looking too closely at your friend's. You should also note that your friend found a position at a large university. Her research-focused letter to that university would probably not attract the attention of hiring committees at small teaching-focused colleges.

Julie: I always tell job seekers that I think of the CV as the document that shows who you are up to the present but the letter is your opportunity to put yourself into the future and demonstrate why you are a great fit for the position at hand. A Career Talk column from April of 2000 outlined the nuts and bolts of writing cover letters, and its advice is still sound today. We would advise you to reread that column but we also have some additional advice.

In answer to your second question, I would say that one letter does not fit all positions. You cannot just insert the name of the institution and send off another copy. If you do that, your enthusiasm for the particular institution and position won't show through.

Jenny: Your letter does bring up an issue that concerns many of our readers -- the amount of time it takes to prepare job applications, especially when you're applying to a large number of institutions, and trying to teach, write a dissertation, run experiments, or get published at

the same time. You may know, intuitively, that writing individual cover letters for each institution is the best way to conduct a job search. But you may feel you just don't have the time to do that.

Julie: We often tell graduate students and postdocs to apply only to those positions that are truly of interest to them. At the same time, we understand that in some fields, job candidates are willing to keep an open mind about the types and locations of the institutions to which they apply. Finding any position is their main goal. With that in mind, we offer a few suggestions for those spending time this summer drafting their letters.

Jenny: Start writing those letters well before you send out applications. That may reduce the panic you may feel as the deadlines approach.

Even if jobs in your field have not yet been posted, take some time this summer to write concise descriptions of your teaching and your research that you might include in your letters. If your aim is to work in a teaching-focused college, take the time to compose a fairly in-depth discussion of your teaching. If a position in a research institution is your goal, develop a brief description of your research that emphasizes its significance. If your research is interdisciplinary, and you might find yourself applying to many different types of positions, make sure your letters reflect that.

Julie: Drafting descriptions of your research and teaching is the first step in the process of learning to talk about yourself. You might find that those descriptions make their way into your cover letters, or become part of other documents you might need, like a research statement or a statement of your teaching philosophy.

The language you find to describe what you have achieved, so far, will also be useful in your future job interviews. Talking about yourself, your research, and your teaching is rarely easy. It's something that takes practice. Writing it all down can be an excellent first step.

Jenny: As you begin writing, put aside any sample materials you might have received from others, and concentrate on making the content of your letters unique. Use specific examples when describing your teaching. Avoid vague sentences that seem as if they could describe anyone in your field. Once you have composed a few drafts, then take a look at some samples, which might help you refine your letter in places where you have doubts.

Julie: Take the general descriptions you have written about your teaching and research, and tailor them to produce cover letters that demonstrate your enthusiasm for a particular institution. At this point, we would again refer you to our earlier column for advice on writing the actual letter.

Keep in mind that a search committee may have to read hundreds of cover letters. Yours should show that you understand the position and institution to which you are applying, and that you want the job.

Jenny: We will close with a sample cover letter that we think is a very good example because it is tailored to a specific position at the renamed University of X. Note how in the second paragraph the writer refers specifically to the position announcement. In the second, third,

and fifth paragraphs, the writer specifically mentions the department's research goals and course offerings. The writer also seamlessly integrates brief descriptions of the candidate's own research into the letter, linking that work to the department's needs. A letter like this is much more compelling than one that provides no context for the candidate's teaching and research.

Office of Population Research
Building Name Y University City,
State, Zip code Date

Chair, Search Committee Department of Sociology and Anthropology University of X City,
State Zip code

Dear [Chair],

I am writing regarding the tenure-track position of assistant professor of sociology. I learned about the position through Professor A at Y University, where I am currently completing a doctoral program in demography with the support of a Mellon fellowship. I expect to fulfill all the degree requirements by August XXXX.

In the description of the position, you indicate that you are seeking a specialist in social demography with the ability to teach social statistics at the graduate level. My training as a researcher on international migration from Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States under the direction of Professor B would contribute to the research agenda of your department. In addition, my experience as a teaching assistant for quantitative research methods under the direction of Professors C and D has provided me with the knowledge and familiarity to teach graduate courses on research methods in the social sciences.

I am aware that research-methods courses are required in the Comparative Sociology M.A. and Ph.D. programs offered by your department. As a social statistics teacher, I will ensure that students learn statistical tools and understand how valuable they are in explaining complex social behaviors.

Although I have done research on comparative international labor migration from Mexico and the Dominican Republic to the United States, and recently from Colombia to the United States and Spain, my dissertation explores a different area within the field of migration. It investigates the consequences of forced internal migration in Colombia, with particular emphasis on internally displaced persons who resettled in the outskirts of Bogota.

My study focuses on the effects of internal forced migration on gender and household composition, socioeconomic characteristics, and labor trajectories. For that purpose, I have designed research instruments to collect quantitative and qualitative data on nonmigrants, migrants, and forced migrants in three diverse areas of the periphery of

Bogota. The study also allows me to explore literature on urban development, social stratification, and assimilation. Given the research interests of your faculty members, I will be a suitable candidate in collaborating with them on their research efforts.

As a professional demographer, I have presented my research at the Population Association of America Meetings, the Latin American Studies Association Congress, and other academic meetings in the U.S., Mexico, Costa Rica, and Colombia.

I am convinced that internal conflict has had long-term effects on war-ridden countries and their neighbors too. Allied countries are also at high risk of receiving large migration flows as a result of their intervention. My research experience on international and forced migration will allow me to explore even further the impact of conflict on development and international migration. In an effort to enhance the academic dialogue on the effects of civil conflict I organized two sessions at the Latin American Studies Association Congress, in October XXXX, one on internal and forced migration in Colombia and the other on international migration from Colombia. In addition I am putting together a research agenda on international migration patterns from Guatemala, El Salvador, Haiti, and Nicaragua -- countries with a history of social unrest -- to neighboring countries and the United States.

I look forward to discussing the position with you in the next few weeks and to visiting your department for an interview if you decide to pursue my application. My curriculum vitae is enclosed; my letters of recommendation will follow under separate cover. Please feel free to contact me if you need more information. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Candidate's Name

Julie Miller Vick is associate director of career services at the University of Pennsylvania. Jennifer S. Furlong is a graduate career counselor at the university. Vick is co-author of "The Academic Job Search Handbook" (University of Pennsylvania Press), along with Mary Morris Heiberger, who was associate director of career services at Penn. You can order their book directly from the University of Pennsylvania Press.

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