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writing a job letter

Posted on [August 19, 2011](#) by [ctb](#) — [17 Comments](#)

It's that time of year again... time to sharpen one's job market skills. As someone who secured tenure-track employment inside of the last five years, I frequently have finishing grad students ask for help in preparing their dossier for the market. I've also sat on a few search committees at this point. Advise is better with examples, but I don't have copies of my old letters any more (they didn't survive the switch from PC to Mac, nor the switch from paper to electronica). I used to hand those letters out to grad students going on the market. But, I don't have them anymore. So, I've written below some examples of what I how I would write a letter. I'm not a new PhD, so my examples won't exactly translate to new job seekers, but the tenor of the letter would be the same.

Note that the advice (for whatever it is worth) is directed towards new PhDs in History looking for traditional academic employment. In general with our grads, I usually spend most of our time working on the C.V. and the cover letter. Other elements of the dossier should be more comfortable for the potential job seeker- you need a very polished writing sample, particularly a chapter or two from your dissertation that exemplifies its argument and the power of your writing; you need a teaching portfolio with sample syllabi, student evaluations, and a statement of your teaching values. If, during your tenure as a grad student, you ever get laudatory emails from students or in comments from your TA evaluations, keep them. Print them out. They can be very important in proving

Search

parecer:

parecer:

Hacer juicio ú dictamen acerca de alguna cosa... significando que el objeto excita el juicio ú dictamen en la persona que le hace.

Deducir ante el Juez la accion ú derecho que se tiene, ó las excepciones que excluyen la accion contrária.

RAE 1737 Academia autoridades

Buy my

your readiness to teach.

The ancillary materials requested by specific institutions will clue you in, in part, to what the school is looking for. Regardless of those materials, though, all institutions want a CV, a cover letter, and letters of recommendation. The latter you have little control over. I don't think it matters whether a letter comes from a dossier service or directly from the individual. But, I would suggest that you cultivate your relationship with committee members and other letter writers such that if there is a job that you really want, they will be willing to write customized letters for it. A strong dossier letter is certainly sufficient. You do, though, have complete control over your CV and your cover letter.

What does the cover letter need to accomplish?

The cover letter must accomplish a variety of tasks → express your enthusiasm for the job, communicate your degree readiness, your research chops, detail the importance of teaching to you, and your availability to interview. It also implicitly expresses your capacity to communicate in a clear and concise manner, your attention to detail (particularly the details listed in the job ad), and your understanding of the type of institution that you're applying to.

Your cover letter must be tailored to the specific type of institution to which you are applying. Generally, there are four types of institutions to which we apply- the R1 research university; the R2 research/teaching university and research-interested liberal arts college; the comprehensive regional university and fully-teaching centric liberal arts college; and the community college. The first important point for writing a cover letter is **know the type of school you're applying to, and customize the letter for that category**. By customize, I don't mean that every letter needs to be written from scratch. Rather, develop a template for each institutional category. Each template will rearrange the order and emphasis of the kind of information that your letter needs to convey.

So, a template for an R1 would look something like this:

book!

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Introductory paragraph

|

Current research/dissertation/competitive
funding received

|

Future research

|

Graduate-level teaching

|

Undergraduate-level teaching

|

Service

|

Concluding paragraph

Whereas, for an R2/Research-oriented liberal arts school, you might have to omit graduate level teaching, downplay your future research agenda a bit, and beef up the undergraduate teaching for a template like this:

Introductory paragraph

|

Dissertation/current research

|

Teaching

|

Future research plans

|

Service

|

Concluding paragraph

It is always a very good idea to connect one's research interest to one's teaching. And furthermore, to specifically mention your ability to teach whatever the ad mentions you need to be able to teach. Likewise, for teaching-centric schools, that aspect should be front and center in your template:

Introductory paragraph (with dissertation title/topic included)

|

Teaching

|

Research Interests current and future

|

Service

|

Concluding paragraph

In any case, the sections on research and teaching need to reflect the interests and needs of the institution to which you are applying. How to do that? Well, I would imagine you need to research the school and its department at least a little bit before applying to it! The ad should give first clues to what they're looking for, but sometimes they do not.

What you are trying to convey is that you are able to walk in directly to the job on August 1st, 2012 and thrive.

The Introduction

We don't write letters too often any more, and it's important to remember that formal letter writing has its own boilerplate. If you can, put it on heavy-stock paper or letterhead.

Use the formal boilerplate:

Your Name

Address

City, State Zip

email

Date

Name of the Committee Chair, or the Search

Committee

Address

City, State Zip

Dear Professor ___:

In the opening sentences, it's important to establish upfront your bona fides and what you are applying for:

I am pleased to submit my application for the position of Assistant Professor of Latin American History at the University of Whatever as advertised on H-Net. I am currently in my fifth year as Assistant Professor of Latin American History at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I completed my Ph.D. in Latin American History at the University of New Mexico in 2006 under the direction of Dr. Kimberly Gauderman. My primary areas of specialization are legal culture, gender and sexuality, and empire in late colonial and early republican Spanish America.

That's it for the introduction. The whole paragraph. What comes next, of course, depends on which template you are following. It goes without saying, though, that you need to check, double check, and triple check to make sure that the Professor Name, the Address, and the University you name in the opening sentence all match!

I'll give a few more examples of the kind of text I'd write now. Note, though, that this text differs from what an ABD or a new PhD would need to say.

Research

Remember, the cover letter is not the space for modesty. You need to, well, brag about your work and state why it is important. If it is at all possible, explicitly connect your work with the departmental priorities that you determined in your scouting. This section can be 1-2 paragraphs long, depending on how much really needs to be conveyed:

*My research interests have focused on the relationship between governance, legal culture, gender, and the political upheavals caused by the Atlantic liberal revolution in the northern Andes. My book, *The Limits of Gender Domination: Women, Law, and Political Crisis in Quito, 1765-1830* (University of New Mexico Press, 2010) provides a social, legal, and gender history of the corregimiento of Quito (the city Quito and its immediate hinterland in modern-day Ecuador) that tracks the interplay between these themes. Utilizing a variety of primary sources gathered in Ecuador with support from the Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Fellowship, my book argues that through the end of colonial rule, Spanish legal and social practices resisted the full consolidation of a legal patriarchy, a resistance that was counter-intuitively undone in the transition to republican rule. Women of all ethnicities and social ranks effectively used*

the legal system and their property rights to mitigate domination by the region's men and an increasingly aggressive and invasive state. I analyze women's activities within the context of shifting ideologies of governing authority and through criminal and civil litigation, notarial and city council records, and legal commentaries intended to guide judicial practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. My sources reveal that the women of Quito inherited, bequeathed, loaned, and otherwise controlled property, engaged in public market activities, pursued sexual relationships, and used the legal system to pursue or defend their interests against each other and against the men in their lives. Such actions were discouraged by Bourbon legal theory and judicial manuals, and then drastically curtailed as Quito made the transition from status-based to contract-based governance in the early republic. Across that period, the infrastructure of customary practice that afforded women autonomous legal and economic identities was dismantled by liberal political and judicial forms that were attached to citizenship.

I would probably add a second paragraph to this, but only if I was applying to an R1 or R2 school. Otherwise, I'd leave it at the above. A second paragraph might look like this:

My book provides a significant revision of late colonial gender relations, within the context of unstable legal and political cultures. I document significant legal autonomy among women of many different social estates. For example, despite legal strictures requiring married women to secure license from their husbands or the court to make legal acts, I have documented that this was routinely ignored. Overall, approximately 70 percent of female plaintiffs and defendants engaged in the legal system independently, without regard to their marital status. This was made possible through the structural currency of derecho vulgar (customary law) and the messy labyrinth of law and jurisdiction that afforded magistrates significant discretion. It was also rapidly dismantled by the emergent liberal state as Quito's legal and political structures were transformed by the transatlantic liberal revolution. The new state of Ecuador constructed a private sphere of contract and property that had never before existed, walling off a man's home as his castle, a space exempted from the police powers of the state. The important conclusion of the book, then, is that the full consolidation of patriarchal rights in Quito was itself a product of the liberal revolution that made nation states of kingdoms.

The structure of all this is to go from general description of one's dissertation (themes, funders, sources, sub-disciplinary identities) to specific and (hopefully) important conclusions. If you have spun a publication out of your dissertation, work that into the first research paragraph. Substitute dissertation for book, and then mention your article(s) as a place that you've argued some salient point from your diss. "As I demonstrated in my article, "Between Prescription and Practice" (*Colonial Latin American Review*, 2007)," The exercise of writing this kind of paragraph is useful because it helps you articulate before sitting in an interview what it is your dissertation does. It shouldn't be that difficult to write either, assuming you wrote grant proposals along the way in grad school.

Finally, it's useful to recognize that your dissertation will need revision for publication. You don't need to necessarily include this in your letter, but you should have prepared before the interview a mental list of revisions or new info that will be needed for publication as well as a list of two or three presses that you have in mind for submission.

Future Research

Even though you've just finished your dissertation (or are frantically working to finish it), you need to indicate especially to institutions that put a high value on research (which is an increasing percentage in the last 10-15 years) that you're not a one-trick pony. Even if you don't have a well developed idea post-dissertation, you need to have something to say in your letter and in interviews about where you're heading.

It doesn't need to be much, and you won't be held to it in the future. If there is something in your research that will be unanswered in your dissertation but that you have a feeling for, go with that. In my original letters, I explained that we had no feeling for the extent to which women and convents were the originators of both formal and informal loan instruments. I suggested I'd be doing a project that used notary books and civil litigation to try to determine that. Haven't done it (though I'd still like to!).

Teaching

It matters whether or not the institution you're applying to has undergraduate-only instruction, a Masters program, or is a PhD granting institution. Regardless of the case, your teaching paragraph needs to connect to the needs of those programs:

I am an enthusiastic proponent of undergraduate education. As UT's only tenure-track Latin Americanist, I have sought to continually develop a broad range of undergraduate offerings for our students. In my time at UT, I have taught ten different courses ranging from the "History of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America" to "Women in Colonial Latin America," to the "Mexican Revolution" to the "Spanish Conquest." I have also taught more survey-oriented courses in both Early and Modern Latin America. I am always looking for effective means to incorporate media and technology into my teaching, as well as intensive discussion of primary and secondary readings to engage students on a number of levels. Finally, I am developing a study-abroad course to take undergraduates to Quito, Ecuador to study the history of indigenous politics and modernization in the Andes. Copies of all of my course syllabi are available at <http://chadblack.net/teaching/>.

This paragraph in and of itself is too short to constitute the whole of a teaching section, particularly for more teaching-oriented programs. I would amplify it by researching the individual

department and emphasizing the areas in which my teaching experience would compliment or expand the department's current emphases. The same would go for graduate teaching. If you have any special training or experience for teaching, this would be the place to explain it. Also, you must mention any and every course listed in the ad, and how you're prepared to teach it.

Service

By service, I mean service to the discipline. If you've worked for any conferences, or helped edit a volume, or managed a website related to you discipline, put that information here. If you're committed to public history, or to public consumption of your writing and run a blog for that purpose, put it here.

Conclusion

The concluding paragraph needs to list the enclosures sent with the letter (writing sample, transcript, syllabi, etc.), the names of your recommenders, your plans to attend the AHA (and the reason why if its for more than interviewing), and an invitation to contact you if the committee needs any more information. It would look something like this:

Please find with this letter of application a copy of my C.V., Chapter 2 from my book, and whatever else you asked for. Letters of recommendation will be forthcoming from Drs. Smart Person-Who-Knows-Me, Another-Smart-PersonW-Who-Knows-Me, and Third-Impressive-Recommender. I will be at the AHA in Chicago in January as a participant on a really nifty panel, and would be happy to meet with the search committee at any time. Please contact me if I can provide any additional materials that might help the committee

evaluate my qualifications.

Finish respectfully:

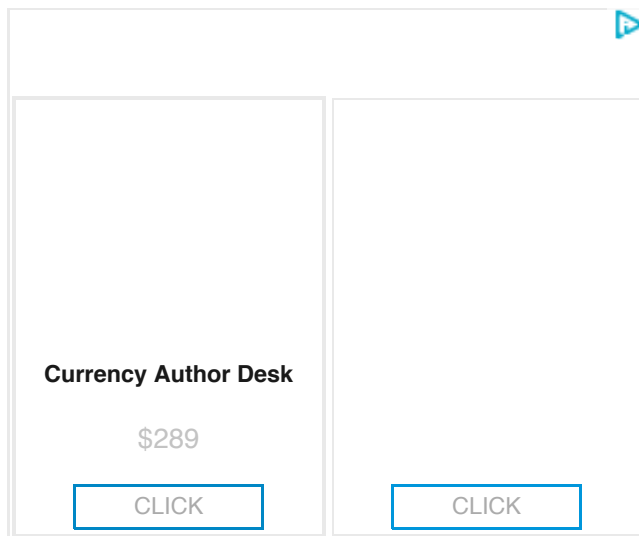
I appreciate your consideration of my application.

Sincerely,

Graduate students I've worked with have had success in getting interviews with such a letter. Note, though, that the letter is more a piece that can get you excluded from consideration than it is one that will get you included. By that, I mean to say you can torpedo your file with a poorly executed cover letter, but the merits of the rest of your dossier combined with the X_Factors of any give search committee are what will get you the interview.

Good luck this go round! I'd love to hear cover letter advise from others... what they like to see when serving on search committees. Or, what you don't want to see.

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The advertisement is a rectangular box with a light gray border. In the top right corner, there is a small blue triangle icon. The main content of the ad is split into two columns. The left column contains the text "Currency Author Desk" in bold, followed by "\$289" in a smaller font. Below this text is a blue-bordered button with the word "CLICK" in white. The right column is mostly empty, with a blue-bordered button containing the word "CLICK" in white at the bottom.



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17 comments on “writing a job letter”

[is this ARG? » Blog Archive » isthisarg.org Social Media Digest for August 20th](#) says:

August 20, 2011 at 1:11 am

[...] Burcu S. Bakioglu shared writing a job letter « parezco y digo. [...]



Queens College GSLIS (@qcgslis) says:

August 20, 2011 at 12:29 pm

Great post about writing a job letter



[johnacaseyjr](#) says:

August 22, 2011 at 4:51 pm

Thanks for your post. I'm revising my cover letter and this was really helpful. And thanks to Jeff McClurken for retweeting it.

John



[ctb](#) says:

August 22, 2011 at 5:12 pm

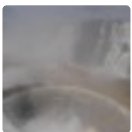
Sure thing!

And, good luck on the market this year. I hope it helps.

[ProfHacker - The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) says:

August 26, 2011 at 1:54 pm

[...] Black has a wish-we'd-run-it post on "Writing a Job Letter": The cover letter must accomplish a variety of tasks → express your enthusiasm for the job, [...]



[shawnaus](#) says:

October 13, 2011 at 2:51 pm

Chad, thanks for this.



[ctb](#) says:

October 13, 2011 at 3:15 pm

No problem. Others did it fit me once upon a time, albeit in a more private forum. Good luck on the market!



[the parezcoy digo year in review « parezco y digo says:](#)

[December 31, 2011 at 4:32 pm](#)

[...] Finally, in a more professional development-oriented pitch, I published the teaching philosophy statement from my tenure file, and also a guide to writing a history position job letter. [...]

[Hacking the Academic Job Cover Letter - ProfHacker - The Chronicle of Higher Education says:](#)

[October 18, 2012 at 9:00 am](#)

[...] Black, a historian and friend of ProfHacker, has written an excellent guide to Writing a Job Letter. Chad makes the obvious but essential point that you should customize your letter for the job. In [...]

[writing a job letter « parezco y digo « The Politics of Health Care says:](#)

[October 19, 2012 at 3:08 pm](#)

[...] <https://parezcoy digo.wordpress.com/2011/08/19/writing-a-job-letter/> [...]



[on the market says:](#)

[October 20, 2012 at 9:13 am](#)

The research paragraphs don't seem to communicate any of the larger issues that your research investigates (i.e., why non-specialists should care). It certainly reads descriptively but there isn't necessarily a "so what". Am I missing something? For purposes of the cover letter, isn't the "so what" more important than the nitty gritty?

Also, why bother mentioning things in the final paragraf, such

as, please find documents x, y, and z attached... and please expect letters from Professors so and so? Isn't that a waste of two lines? Wouldn't it be obvious to the review committee what you had submitted? I can understand a reference to supporting documents in the main body of the letter, if the applicant wants to draw a particular connection, but listing things at the end seems superfluous to me. Thoughts?



ctb says:

October 20, 2012 at 9:26 am

On The Market–

On the final paragraph, this is a formal letter. It is both a tradition and courtesy in the long history of writing letters that include enclosures to mention them in some form or another. It functions the same as the formal boilerplate at the beginning of the letter. It also signals you've paid close attention to the ad and are fulfilling its requirements.

As to the research statement, I would suggest that unlike, say, an NEH application, there is less need to make such general appeals. Job searches are for specific sub-disciplines/time periods/geographical regions. Your task is to place your work in those criteria. That's what we've looked for on every job committee I've served on in History. Not knowing what your discipline is, things may be different for you. This is also, as it were, free advice and I'd welcome you to ignore the parts you disagree with.



on the market says:

October 20, 2012 at 9:46 am

Thank you for your reply, and sorry about my typo in the second paragraph (not paragra^p). Based on what you have said, would you then disagree with point three on Karen

Kelsky's PPII blog: <http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/08/07/why-your-job-cover-letter-sucks/>

As far as I can tell, she emphasizes interdisciplinary relevance over details of the research itself.

As for ignoring the parts I disagree with, I wouldn't be reading articles like this if I weren't interested in learning, so just because I disagree with something at first, doesn't mean I must be right or that I am not open to changing my mind. I'm just trying to understand the logic of formalities, which don't always make sense on the surface. And I'm in the humanities, so I can't imagine my field's expectations would be all that different from yours. Thanks for sharing your thoughts.



ctb says:

October 20, 2012 at 10:09 am

Yes, I do to a certain extent disagree with pt. 3 on theprofessorisin's list. And, this may be specific to History. We do want to know what your dissertation/book is about, its core arguments, and major themes. It may be what you did as a student, but History is a book-centric field still and the first question we ask is "is this dissertation publishable, and therefore the person tenurable." That's not to say that you should drone on and on about it (a mistake also made in interviews).

I have zero interest in the letter in seeing a list of conference papers or articles you've spun off (especially conference papers). That's what a CV is for. She is right that committees judge the future publishability of your work, but in History this can only be done in the context of the dissertation. At least, that's the case at an R1 like where I am.

Also, I don't read what she says in pt. 3 as suggesting you should be talking in interdisciplinary or generalist terms about

your work. Quite the opposite. It's about your field and projecting confidence in your work in that field.



Jane says:

October 22, 2012 at 12:42 pm

Thanks so much for posting. I am on the academic job market for the first time and have benefited greatly from this!



ctb says:

October 22, 2012 at 4:12 pm

Sure thing Jane. Hope it helps, and best of luck on the market this year.



Betazoid says:

January 18, 2014 at 4:15 pm

I was curious to understand how I needed to approach my cover letter and as such wanted to learn whether the university I am sending the letter to was an R1, R2, or what have you.

A tenured professor friend of mine referred me to the Carnegie Classifications website where I read their FAQ and learned that these categories are no longer in use (and has not been in use since 1994...?) and as such this information is outdated.

Their FAQ states:

=====

Q: What happened to Research I, Research II, etc.? Has the Carnegie Foundation altered its traditional classification framework?

A: The Research I & II and Doctoral I & II categories of doctorate-granting institutions last appeared in the 1994

edition. The use of Roman numerals was discontinued to avoid the inference that the categories signify quality differences. The traditional classification framework was updated in 2005 and since identified as the Basic Classification. Many of the category definitions and labels changed with this revision.

=====

Any updated recommendations you might have that are in keeping with current classification methods would be welcome.

Thank you!

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