

## ADVICE

## Beyond the One-Page Cover Letter



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By Gary DeCoker | OCTOBER 04, 2012

We recently concluded a search for a program associate. Because it is an entry-level position, we received a lot of applications from candidates new to the hiring process. As I read over the 50-plus applications, a few missteps kept showing up.

And I noticed that many candidates used several tactics that may work elsewhere, but didn't seem quite right in an academic context. So after concluding our successful search, I decided to pull together some suggestions for applicants offered from the hiring side of the table.

**It's OK to go beyond a page.** One piece of advice that most novices seem to follow is the need for a one-page cover letter. The mythology of the one-page letter is so strong that I even had applicants write to ask me whether they could exceed the limit. The first time I received that question, I envisioned hiring the person only to find out that he asked me for permission for every aspect of his working life. Sure, a one-page cover letter is the norm. But if you have a good reason for a second page, don't fiddle with the margins or the font to fit all the content on one sheet. Just move ahead to page two.

**Read and refer to the job description.** Most job ads include a reference to the employment page of the university's Web site, where applicants can find additional details about the position. It was clear from the cover letters we received, however, that many applicants didn't find their way to our Web site information. They simply saw the posting somewhere and quickly clicked off a generic letter and résumé.

The best cover letters distilled our job description into four or five key criteria, and then described their experience and qualifications in relation to those criteria. Such letters, many of them more than a page long, showed the kind of analytical thinking and good writing that are a foundation for success in higher-education administration.

**Balance confidence and humility.** I heard Bill Holland, author of the book, *Cracking the New Job Market: The 7 Rules for Getting Hired in Any Economy*, describe what he thought would be good lead-in to a résumé: "computer literate, graduating honors college senior with proven communication, team-building, and leadership skills, who has been able to

make a difference under challenging circumstances in communities in which she has volunteered and worked." A statement like that might work at the top of a résumé, but a cover letter full of such self-confidence would be off putting.

Along with your qualifications, you want to convey that you are open to growth on the job. Balance the letter by mentioning your enthusiasm for professional development opportunities. Show you are interested in having a mentor and in continued learning.

**Know the university.** A job posting, especially at a small college, is an invitation to join a community. In your cover letter, be sure to demonstrate that you know something about the job and the college.

**Follow instructions.** The previous search I chaired was for a tenure-track faculty position. We asked those candidates for a variety of application materials, including course evaluations, syllabuses, and teaching statements. Some applicants ended up sending us 10 or more attachments. On the receiving side, keeping all of those documents organized was a nightmare.

Remembering that problem, I included a statement in our job description for the administrative search: "Submit documents (letter, résumé, and names of references) in a single PDF or MS Word file." About a third of our applicants failed to do that; one sent seven attachments.

From back in the day of paper applications, I remember a dean who would pass around application documents with his red circles around misspelled words and other errors. As I sorted through the applications with multiple, annoying attachments, I thought about those red circles and how they entered the search committee's deliberations in subtle ways. Should candidates who fail to follow instructions or proofread their materials automatically be eliminated? That seems a bit extreme. But a smoothly functioning office requires attention to detail and protocol. And candidates should remember that search-committee members read applications with that in mind.

**Get to the point.** Many cover letters open with a sentence explaining how the position came to the applicant's attention. Such openings can seem formulaic, but they often convey important information. For instance, saying that you found out about a position from *The Chronicle* sends a different message than saying you happened to see it on your friend's Facebook page. If you learned about the opening from someone in academe, you might note that it was Professor X, in Department Y, at University Z. But that approach only makes sense if the professor has a connection to you and to the position.

Unless you have a reason to refer to the source of your knowledge of the posting, you might consider setting aside this formality and getting right to the point: "I'm writing to apply for the position of program associate." That sentence leading into an enthusiastic paragraph might have a better chance of catching the reader's attention.

**Contact the search chair only with legitimate questions.** Searches often get delayed. In our case, various complications kept the hiring committee from meeting for more than three weeks. During that time, I received a couple curt e-mails from candidates who pointed out our tardiness and asked where their application stood. When the committee got back to work, those testy e-mails became part of the applicant's dossier.

Other applicants chose a more tactful route with e-mails volunteering to provide additional references or to make themselves available for phone calls. Having been a candidate for various positions, I'm sensitive to the frustration of the waiting game. (I once received a letter informing me that the position I applied for two years earlier had just been filled.) But when you're in the middle of deliberations and delays, impatient e-mails from candidates are seldom well received.

There are times when you should contact the search-committee chair—for instance, if you have been offered a position elsewhere. In that case, you could write to withdraw from the search or ask for a status update on the committee's decision before accepting the other job.

**Don't rely on your e-mail.** Most universities tell applicants to send their application packet to the human-resources office or to a departmental secretary. Including a polite e-mail along with the attachments is a nice gesture, but don't assume that the content of your message will reach the search committee. In many cases committee members receive only your letter and résumé. If something is important to your application, make sure to say it in your official cover letter.

**Keep your references informed.** Some search committees ask for the names and contact information of your references. Don't forget to keep your recommenders informed about your applications and the possibility that a search-committee member may be calling. It is an awkward phone call when the reference doesn't know the applicant's intentions.

**Don't let your résumé do the talking.** Several applicants included a sentence in their cover letters that went something like this: "As you can see by my résumé, I am especially qualified for this position." That was it. It was apparently our job to figure out why.

In other cases, the résumés themselves really didn't speak to us. A combination of in-house vocabulary, jargon, techno-terms, and acronyms gave some résumés a certain level of authority—like that of a physician dictating into a microphone after a diagnosis—but left us wondering what exactly the person's job history was all about. The résumé is your outline, and your letter should make it come alive.

**Avoid superfluous information.** One of the most enthusiastic cover letters we received was from a local candidate. She spent most of her letter discussing the appeal of working at a

colleagues are to her. **Beyond the One-Page Cover Letter** is mostly a description of the applicant's qualifications in teaching English as a second language. He had inferred that our program, which brings Japanese students to the United States, would require a person who could teach English. Unfortunately, ESL was not mentioned anywhere in our job description. In writing your letter, focus on what is important to the search committee, not to you.

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**Make sense on the Internet.** As we narrowed the pool from the first cut of 15 to the six candidates we interviewed by phone, I Googled each one. Nothing salacious appeared. A few beer-drinking photos and Tweets, but we're not prudes. Most applicants had LinkedIn pages of varying detail. A few profiles caught my attention because they seemed to present a different person than the one we saw in the application materials. The best ones matched what we already knew from the letter and résumé. Managing your professional presence on the Web is more than just adjusting your Facebook privacy settings. Make sure that you are presenting a coherent image of yourself.

**Don't give up too easily.** If you don't get a job right away, all you can do is keep trying. But how do you know whether you are on the right track? After a few months of searching for an administrative post, you should have received at least a couple nibbles. A phone interview or an invitation to campus is a sign that your materials are in order and your approach is working.

After an interview that doesn't lead to an offer, you might request a follow-up conversation with the head of the search committee. It's tempting to ask, "Why didn't you hire me?" But I find that such calls go better when the candidate's request is instead focused on seeking suggestions for how to improve. The conversation should be about you, not about the committee's decision-making process.

If you have yet to receive a single positive response after several months of effort, it's time to reboot. Ask a mentor or career counselor to look over your cover letter and résumé. Talk to people you know who have recently been hired. Then keep trying.

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