

What is an academic cover letter?

The most important piece of your job application is the cover letter because it is the first writing sample an academic hiring committee will read.

All academic cover letters should be singled-spaced.

They should be 12 point, Times New Roman font.

They should be a max. of two pages (and a min. of one-and-a-half pages).

All academic cover letters should be written on University letterhead.

Formatting aside, the academic cover letter is a genre totally unlike cover letters you may write for non-academic positions. It follows its own formula, which is discussed below.

Paragraph 1: Introduction

Your name.

The position you are applying for and where it was posted.

Your PhD credentials, including institution, program, dissertation (or book) title, and date of graduation.

Dissertation committee members (especially if they are prominent figures in the field).

Your current academic employment.

Paragraph 2: Your Dissertation / Book Project

What does your dissertation / book argue?

What are the components/methods of that argument?

Choose several clarifying examples from the dissertation or book.

Paragraph 3: Your Published Work / Second Book Project

This paragraph has a little latitude in terms of content.

For lit. studies: If you have published one or more essays, here is where you should briefly describe them. You should also talk about your 2nd book project.

For CWs: Many of you will have multiple publications that pre-date the dissertation project. Curate this body of work so that it showcases overarching themes / methods. If your work has been praised publicly, consider using a short, carefully-chosen quote as part of this paragraph.

Paragraph 4: Your Teaching

In brief, what is your teaching philosophy?

How does your teaching strive to be inclusive and diverse?

Use examples to illustrate.

What is your teaching range?

Paragraph 5 : Closing

Express enthusiasm for the position, the colleagues, the department, the institution.

Include an email address and phone number where you can be reached.

Close with your signature, followed by your typed full name.

NB: You should change the order and emphasis of this model if you are applying to institutions that you think are more interested in teaching than in research. In such instances, mention your dissertation in the introductory paragraph, then proceed directly to discussing your teaching experience and methods in paragraphs 2 and 3. Follow with a brief paragraph about your research near the end of the letter.

Learning more about academic cover letters

Here are additional resources that further unpack and demystify the job letter:

[Understanding Cover Letters](#) from *Inside Higher Ed*

[The Teaching Centric Letter](#) from *The Professor Is In*

[Academic Cover Letter Sample](#) from *Purdue University's Online Writing Lab*

[Cover Letter Guide](#) from *The University of Chicago's Graduate Program*

What is an academic CV?

In the academic world, the CV is a complete, no-frills list of all that you've done in the academy from the beginning of your graduate career to the present. It has no page limit. It should be readable, but plain.

The CV serves as a complement and handmaid to the cover letter in that the cover letter selects key components of the CV, amplifies them, and constellates them into a narrative portrait of who you are as a professional academic.

Formatting the academic CV

[Dr. Karen's Rules of the Academic CV](#) from *The Professor Is In* is a thorough guide for how to format your CV.

Ellen Mayock's [Writing and Rewriting the CV](#) presents a nice overview of the CV, and Victoria Reyes's [How to Write a CV for the Academic Job Market](#) includes an organized section list of CV headings (plus a good list of dos and don'ts). Both of these articles are from *Inside Higher Ed*.

In addition, the [Streamline / Simplify your CV](#) section (along with the rest of the post) from *The Professor Is In* offers insight on what search committees look for in your CV.

Here is a sampler packet of [CVs \(and some cover letters\)](#) from Harvard University's Graduate Career Center.

The dossier (aka academic letters of reference)

The dossier is a packet of letters of recommendation. In the academic world, job ads ask for three letters, which you should solicit from your dissertation committee members and/or teaching mentors.

Here are the takeaways for soliciting recommendations:

- Contact your recommenders in August. ***Do not wait until September.*** These letters can be up to three, single-spaced pages, so they take faculty a good amount of time to think about and write.
- Provide your recommenders with your job letter and CV. Ask your recommenders if they'd like any additional information.
- Provide your recommenders with several polite reminders 1-2 weeks before your first job application is due.
- Thank your recommenders!

While it is standard for all three letters of recommendation to be solicited from your dissertation committee, you may consider one or more additional “teaching letters” from faculty members who can speak intimately to your teaching.

You may also consider procuring 1-2 letters from a senior faculty at a different institution who knows you relatively well and can speak to your promise as a scholar. (If you are still a PhD candidate, I would not worry too much about these external letters. If you have developed a professional network and have these contacts, great. Use them. If not, just stick to your dissertation committee members.)

While job ads only require three letters, you may upload more than three (I have seen up to six letters in a dossier), so feel free—if you feel it to be in your interest—to include letters from your committee members, teaching mentors, and external recommenders.