

A Dozen Sentences That Should Appear In Your (Academic) Job Application Letter

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When you apply for an academic job, your cover letter is your opportunity to help a hiring committee interpret your curriculum vitae. More important, the letter is your opportunity to excite them about your work in a way that isn't possible with a dry curriculum vitae.

In drafting a cover letter like this, your long term goal is obviously to land an academic job. The more immediate goal, however, is to use the cover letter to get you on two shortlists. First, there is the shortlist of a dozen people who will be invited to submit more writing samples and have references checked. Then there is the shortlist of three or four people who will be invited to visit the hiring department.

There are some standard things that most hiring committees look for, most of the time. Some of this will vary by institution, department and discipline. Below are suggestions about what these key sentences can look like.

1. I am would like to be considered for the position of [title copied from job ad] in [exact department name from job ad] at the [exact institution name from job ad]. I am an advanced doctoral candidate in [your department], and am eager to be considered for this position.

This opening should be short and can certainly vary—this is just a suggestion to get started. But don't get the job title or department name incorrect! The odds are that you will submit for many jobs, be shortlisted for a few, and be offered one or two. In all the cutting and pasting, make sure these letters are correctly addressed.

2. My doctoral project is a study of [cocktail party description]. Much of the research on this topic suggests that [characterize the literature as woefully inadequate]. But I [demonstrate, reveal, discover] that contrary to received wisdom, [your punch line].

This short paragraph is the key statement about what you are doing with your doctoral project, and how you will contribute to an intellectual conversation that is larger than just your project but unable to advance without your findings. Don't name the scholars whose work is less than satisfying. In some critical theory traditions you could position your work by naming other scholars, but don't do too much of this—this letter is about you and your work. After this paragraph, there should be a long paragraph full of details about your research and as a first draft it contain one sentence on each chapter in your manuscript (though it shouldn't read like a table of contents).

3. To complete this research I have spent [X years of my life] doing [fieldwork / labwork / archival work / statistical analysis]. I have travelled to [these cities or libraries], interviewed [X number of experts], created [original datasets / original compositions / original artwork].

This sentence should be followed by a paragraph of details telling the story of the research

process. Wow the committee with the volume of artifacts you've studied, people you've talked to, or places you've been. By now, you are one of the world's experts on your domain, so describe all the evidence you've been working on and the kinds of intellectual work you've put into becoming this expert.

4. I have completed [X] of [Y] chapters of my dissertation, and have included two substantive chapters as part of my writing sample.

Many hiring committees expect their top candidates to be almost finished with the doctoral project, since the dissertation is one of the first tests of commitments to a research trajectory. You could submit an introductory, literature review, or conclusion chapter, but these don't usually contain much substantive, original research. Ideally, the review committee will be excited by your original research and come begging you for more once you are on a short list.

5. I have well developed drafts of several other chapters, and expect to defend in [month, year].
OR Having defended in [month, year], I plan to [turn it into a book-length manuscript for a major scholarly press / select key chapters for publication in disciplinary journals].

Ideally your advisors will confirm this in their letters. Committees will want to know that your defense date is not going to be during a month in which you will technically be working on their coin. Hiring committees are almost certainly going to confirm what you say here with your mentors. If any of your committee members are unwilling to commit to even a season of the year for your defense date, or you don't have two substantive chapters to submit to the hiring committee, it's probably too early for you to be on the academic job market.

6. Although my primary area of research is [disciplinary keyword here], I have additional expertise in [another disciplinary keyword here] and am eager to teach in both areas. I have [taught / served as a teaching assistant] in courses about [A, B, and C]. In the next few years, I hope to develop courses in [X and Y]

Departments love hiring people who can teach a couple of things. Ideally some of the courses you can or want to teach are on the course catalogue of the department and are in the domains identified within the job ad. Take the time to look up the courses offered in the department you are applying to and use their keywords. Although the hiring committee will take research fit as most important, teaching skills and interests will be taken seriously. Distinguish between courses for which you served as a teaching assistant from those in which you were the instructor of record—the former may not be good evidence of what you want to teach in the coming years.

7. For the most part, my approach to research is through [social science or humanistic method keyword here] and I would be interested in developing a methods class on this approach to research.

Many departments struggle to have their methods classes taught, and signaling your interest in this is likely to put you ahead in the pool of candidates. Don't worry though, teaching commitments are constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Moreover, job candidates are particularly valuable if they can demonstrate how they cross methodological boundaries, appreciate diverse approaches to inquiry, and can contribute to advancing knowledge with

different analytical frames.

8. Although I have been focused on my graduate research for several years, I have been actively involved in conversations with [scholars in the department you are applying to, or scholars at other universities / professional associations / conferences / other disciplines].

This can be the one paragraph about service and professionalization, highlighting conferences you've attended, workshops you've organized, and other things you've done to support the intellectual life of your discipline. If you are crossing disciplines by applying for work in a department that is different from the one that trained you, you will need to demonstrate the ways in which you already have some affinities for the new discipline. Showing that you are familiar with faculty interests reveals that you understand the work that goes on in the place you want to be working.

9. In the next few years, I hope to be able to investigate [reasonably related problems or questions].

This sentence should be about your research trajectory over the next five years. The department will be investing quite a few resources in the person they hire, so the hiring committee will look for hints about the direction your research will take over the next few years. When we finish a PhD we're always exhausted, but we always have notions about what we'd like to do next. Communicate those research possibilities in an eloquent way, don't leave the committee to assume you will be doing more of the same if they hire you.

10. I am interested in this post for a variety of personal reasons: [something about the character of the department / university / community / city].

The committee will be happy to see that you know something about the character of the place you want to work. This may be particularly true for colleges and universities that have distinct liberal arts traditions, unique community programs, or other special features. A committee might not invite you in for a talk if have reason to believe you would not seriously consider a job offer from them.

11. Because of my graduate training, my doctoral research, and my teaching [experience / interests], I am uniquely qualified for this job.

Here have a few sentences about your general focus, your course work, and definitely point that you have experience teaching in the domains sought in the job description. Think creatively about a brief statement on why you are uniquely qualified for the job.

12. In the next few months, I will be attending the [conference A] and [conference B]. If you or your colleagues are also planning to attend, I would be happy to meet for an informal conversation.

These days many departments make their first shortlist after a round of phone interviews or informal conference visits, so make yourself available. It would be great to alert people if you are giving a paper somewhere, because then they can come and watch you in action.

These sentences are roughly in the order they should appear in for applications to jobs at research schools. For these kinds of jobs, there most of the content should be about research, followed by one or two paragraphs about teaching and perhaps one paragraph about service. If the job you are applying for is mostly about teaching, you can expand the amount of space dedicated to that topic.

Shoot for two and a half pages of content: less than that and you might not seem like an advanced doctoral candidate well immersed in a project; more than that and committee members may stop reading. As you write, drop in the names of granting agencies that have supported you, or the names of journals that are publishing or reviewing your work. Ideally you will have lots of faculty eager to write letters for you. It is great if at least one of these letter writers can come from a university other than the one you are at though this is not always possible. Hiring committees love getting reference letters on different university letterheads: it shows that you have social capital beyond your home department.

Try to get the full name of the person who is heading the search. A greeting like “Dear Committee Members” at the top of the letter just isn’t as good as showing you’ve done enough background research to address your letter either to the head of the department or the head of the job search. And have a friend proofread your document for grammar and spelling—every faculty member who contributed to crafting the dozen sentences above has seen application letters containing typos.