

ACADEMIC COVER LETTER BASICS FOR ADVANCED DEGREES

How to address the letter:

Address the letter to a specific individual (search committee chairperson) using his/her correct title. If no name is listed, use "Dear Search Committee Chair."

First Paragraph:

Explain how you heard about the position ("Your announcement in...", "At the suggestion of..."), and who you are ("I am completing my PhD in under the direction of"). Within this first paragraph articulate one strong sentence related to why you are applying (a strong fit statement). This fit statement should somehow connect to the mission of the institution and the students and programs at the institution.

Middle Paragraphs:

With a firm grasp on the specific needs of the department, the details of the position, and their emphasis on research vs. teaching, discuss how your achievements and qualifications fit with the specific requirements of the position. Explain your interest in the department/position, and how your background/training connects to the specific mission of the department. You should cover teaching and research experience in the letter, but the order in which you discuss them will depend on the emphasis for the specific position.

Depending on what the position emphasizes, your next paragraphs should focus on *Research* or *Teaching*:

Research:

Discuss your dissertation, identify your chair, explain what you were investigating, and give an overview of your findings. Mention publications (pending or published) and presentations related to that project, and any grants obtained to support the study. Two to three sentences on your dissertation topic is sufficient.

Discuss other research you've been involved in, as well as upcoming projects (interdepartmental projects, sub-fields you've been active in, field research, collaborative projects, industrial or applied research, your supervision of undergraduate research, etc.). Be careful not to simply list items on your CV, but rather give an overview, and draw the reader's attention to items of particular interest to the committee, or that have special relevance to the job for which you are applying. They'll be interested in collaborative projects, publications, grants, and invited papers; just reference them briefly so that they'll look at your CV.

Teaching:

Discuss your interests in teaching and why you want to work with students at their institution. Discuss your teaching experience (without repeating your CV point by point), and summarize any preparation you received (TA training, OID, mentoring). Give the reader a sense of your approach with students, and cite effective use of technology to enhance teaching and learning, alternative teaching methods, field study, and/or interactive teaching techniques. You may also want to tie in any guiding philosophies or theories behind your approach.

Armed with as much information as you could find about the department to which you are applying, list the courses and subject areas you are prepared to teach. If your area of expertise fills a gap in their department, make a case for how you will complement the existing curriculum.

Last Paragraph:

List the materials you have enclosed, and offer to provide extra materials if needed. Identify the people who will be sending letters of recommendation. Thank the committee for its consideration, and indicate that you are looking forward to meeting with them in the near future.

Things to Remember:

Write clearly, and make sure it follows a logical flow. Check and double-check grammar AND cutting and pasting you may have done from other letters, don't recycle letters from other applications. Read your letter OUT LOUD to yourself to help you identify typos, incomplete sentences, rough transitions, etc. While this seems obvious, mistakes are very common in cover letters, and committees will rarely forgive your oversight.