



Great jobs for bright people



How to Write a Cover Letter for Research Jobs

○ An ebook with tips and examples to create the perfect cover letter

1 The purpose of your cover letter

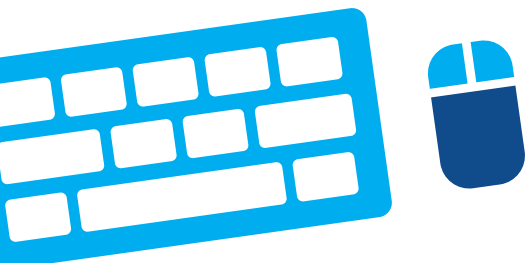
The power of the cover letter in making an effective job application should never be underestimated. A good cover letter will grab the employer's attention and make them want to read your CV. The purpose of your cover letter and CV together is to whet the employer's appetite, to establish you as a serious contender for the post and to persuade the recruiter that you are worth an interview.

The cover letter exists to:

- Demonstrate your enthusiasm for the post, based on the research you have done about the role and the institution (after all, you are applying for a job as a researcher!)
- Explain your rationale for applying and how the role fits with your career plans
- Answer the question "Why should we hire you?" by demonstrating how you meet the key criteria for the post and what sets you apart from other candidates
- Provide evidence of your written communication and language skills, including the ability to be clear, succinct and articulate. This is especially important for research roles as the combination of strong technical research ability and excellent communication skills is highly sought after.

This ebook focuses on cover letters for roles in research and addresses:

- When to send a cover letter
- What format to use
- How to tailor it to a particular role
- Marketing yourself in the cover letter
- The do's and don'ts of cover letter writing
- An example 'before' and 'after' cover letter with detailed explanations of the improvements made
- A checklist for you to ensure your cover letter is as effective as possible.



2 When to send a cover letter

You should always send a cover letter with your CV unless you are expressly asked not to. The only exception is if you are posting your CV on a database/ with an agency where it will be seen by numerous employers, in which case a Profile on the CV itself is helpful.

Even if you have explained your motivation for applying on the application form, it is still worth sending a separate cover letter. This is because the cover letter gives you another opportunity to market yourself and can strengthen your chances.



3 The format of a cover letter

For jobs in research, you should aim for your letter to be no longer than a page. In order to make an impact, and to prove that you can explain ideas fluently and clearly, the letter needs to be succinct. This is not the place to give in-depth detail about your research; remember that the letter may be read by non-researchers too, such as staff from Human Resources. You can always give further details of your research activities on your CV or in an Appendix to your CV.

Keep paragraphs short and your typeface clear (a font size of 11 or 12 is recommended) as the employer's attention span will be brief.

It is traditional to write the cover letter in paragraph format, and this is the format we have used for our example letter, although some candidates choose to use bullet points and/or bold to highlight key points.

The order of paragraphs is not critical, but the following is recommended:

- ▶ **Address and salutation:** Address the letter to a named person i.e. the head of the research group. A quick email or check of the institution's website should elicit this information.
- ▶ **First paragraph:** An introduction, explaining which job you are applying for, how you heard about the post, and some brief background on who you are e.g. in terms of your research interests and background.
- ▶ **Middle section:** Evidence of how you meet the top 3 or 4 criteria for the role, with brief illustrations of your research and your achievements.
- ▶ **Final section:** Explain what attracts you to this role in this institution and how the role fits in to your career plans.
- ▶ **Concluding paragraph:** A conclusion summarising what makes you suitable for the job and a statement expressing interest in an interview.

4 Tailoring your letter

The best way to tailor your letter effectively is to:

4a Do your research

Your cover letter needs to show what a great match you are for the job. The job and person specification will only give you so much. In order to understand the job context, how your own research interests will fit into the department's research programme, what the recruiters are really looking for and how the job might develop in future you need to make your own enquiries.



This could include:

4b Online research

For example: into the University and Department's research programmes, it's research profile, the research interests of key staff and so on. There is much information available publicly (for example; the department's latest research ranking, Research Body websites and on researcher forums). For external appointments, you may be limited to what is available publicly so do use your networks to access these.

4c Discussion with the recruiting manager

Most recruiters are only too happy to answer questions about the job from potential applicants beforehand. This can also help you get your 'name in the frame' early. Just ensure that your questions are intelligent and be warned that the conversation might turn into an informal interview. You should reflect on why the employer should hire you, and refine your 'elevator pitch' before arranging the call.



4d

Conversations with other researchers in the research group and department

Including other researchers who have worked in collaboration with them. For internal roles, you can use your internal networks to find these people. For external roles, you might ask the recruiting manager to put you in touch – or use your networks to see who knows someone in the right department and institution.

The depth of your research will show in your application and can really distinguish serious applicants from the rest of the pack. It's also great preparation for the interview stage.



4e

Be selective

The best way to tailor your letter is to pick out only the top three or four criteria for the post and focus your evidence on these. If the employer is convinced you have the right credentials, experience and skills for the areas that matter most, the chances are that they will invite you to interview. Your CV and your interview can cover the rest.

Remember to include your skills outside research

4f

Whilst the focus of your cover letter may be about communicating the relevance and depth of your research expertise and your rationale for seeking this post, don't forget to give evidence of those softer skills which may also be relevant to the job. These are likely to be outlined in the person specification and may include project planning, writing funding bids, managing other staff and communicating with colleagues outside your institution.



5 Marketing yourself effectively

Before you write your letter, you need to be clear on what your Unique Selling Points are for the role in relation to the key job criteria.

Think about what will differentiate you from the competition. Consider who else might apply, internally and externally, and what they might offer. Consider what makes you stand out from them. This might include:

- Greater depth of expertise in this field or a higher research profile than other likely applicants
- A particular blend of experiences which give you a unique perspective (e.g. having worked in both academic research and industry, or having research experience in more than one discipline)
- Specific achievements in your current and previous roles
- A qualification which is highly relevant to the role, but which not all the other applicants will have
- A passion for and commitment to this area of research or working for this institution (e.g. perhaps you completed your PhD there)
- Well developed research or funding networks which could prove helpful in the job
- Or anything else you think might make the stand out in a way which is relevant to the role.



6 Tips for success

Do:

- Put your most convincing evidence first. You need to make an impact in the first few sentences. Talk about your current or most relevant job first
- Focus on achievements in your current and previous roles rather than merely your responsibilities. Quantify these wherever possible
- Illustrate your achievements with brief but specific examples, explaining why these are relevant to this role. You can refer the employer to the CV for more detail
- Concentrate on the areas which differentiate you from the competition rather than the basic job criteria
- Demonstrate how well you have researched the role and the job context when explaining your career motivation
- Explain your rationale if you are seeking a career change or sideways move
- Be succinct. Ask a friend to go through it with you and edit out any wordy sentences and redundant words
- End on a note of enthusiasm and anticipation.



Don't:

- Try to summarise your CV or give too much detail – you need to be selective about the points that you highlight
- Make unsubstantiated statements about relevant skills and experience without giving examples
- Send the same or a similar letter to more than one employer. Never 'cut and paste' as employers will suspect a lack of research and career focus
- Make generalised statements about why you want to work for the institution (e.g. referring to 'a top 50 global institution' or 'a department with a high reputation')
- Use jargon specific to your employer or profession which the employer might not understand
- Focus on what the employer can do for you – it's more about what you can do for the employer.



7 Example cover letter – with comments



Dear Sir or Madam

I am writing to express my strong interest in applying for the position of Research Fellow in Applied Health Research in the Institute of Advanced Healthcare Economics.

After studying for a BSc in Biological Sciences at the University of Midtown (where I scored an average of 82%) I continued my academic career by studying for an MSc in Public Health. I was then accepted to study for a PhD in the Department of Applied Social Studies at South Midshire University (ranked 8th in the UK in the Sunday Times Good University Guide) which I began in September 2009 and finished in June this year. This involved competing for research council funding with 20 other applicants.

My dissertation title was 'Health Disparities and the impact of Social Class on Clinical Outcomes'. My supervisor was Dr W Jennings. I have contributed to a number of publications, including the "Healthcare Science Review", "Journal of Health Economics", "Clinical Commissioning Digest" and "Review of Socio-Medical Studies". I have also attended a recent conference on Democratic Healthcare Structures within Socially Excluded Communities.

I am eager to further my career at your institution and am now seeking a position where I can apply my extensive research interests and skills.

The Institute's tradition of excellence and its reputation for intellectual rigour are matched by my own passion for quality and my commitment to the future development of health policy research. Your goal of 'eradicating health poverty through improving patient outcomes' is congruent with my own beliefs and aspirations.

I have had extensive experience in policy research, data analysis, research evaluation and statistical modelling. I also studied Advanced Research Methods as part of my MSc. I have had experience of using SPSS and ATLAS-Ti software as well as having skills in advanced Excel.

I have had held two research assistant positions, one in my academic department and one with the Department of Health and I found these experiences both rewarding and valuable.

I am a dedicated team worker, excellent communicator and accomplished project manager with strong organisational and planning skills. I spent three years as a member of the PhD Staff Student Liaison Group, attending regular meetings and disseminating information to my fellow students. I play a great deal of sport and like to challenge myself physically, regularly attending sessions at my local gym.

I am very excited about this position. It would be a huge honour to work for the Institute and I would be very grateful for the opportunity to further my career in this area.

Yours respectfully and in anticipation of your swift response.

Yours sincerely

1: Always address the letter to a named person where possible, ideally the hiring manager.

2: This is obvious.

3: You don't need to give a plotted history of your career – this can be found on the CV. The first main paragraph is your chance to capture the employer's interest and should immediately highlight your credentials for the post.

4: This kind of academic success is assumed and will not give you an edge over other candidates at this stage in your career. Work experience, or more recent successes will be more persuasive.

5: This kind of detail can be found on the CV and does not need to be repeated in the cover letter.

6: This sentence adds very little and is assumed.

7: This sounds like platitudes. The quote may have been taken from the employer's website and is not showing any evidence of researching the position.

8: Beware inserting long lists of activities and skills which are not backed up with evidence of achievement.

9: Again, this information is clear from the CV.

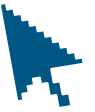
10: More unsubstantiated lists!

11: This just shows you carried out the role – not that you were any good at it.

12: If you are going to mention interests outside work, make sure that they are relevant e.g. they demonstrate personal

13: The cover letter needs to answer the question 'What could I do for you if you hire me?' not 'What could you do for me?' qualities which are key to the job and also that they differentiate you from other candidates. Popping to the gym regularly does not improve your credentials for the job.

8 Example cover letter – improved version



Dear Dr Schmidt

I would like to express my interest in the position of Research Fellow in Applied Health Research which I saw advertised on jobs.ac.uk

I have recently completed my PhD in "Health Disparities and the impact of Social Class on Clinical Outcomes" at the University of South Midshire. My PhD involved primary research with clinicians and patient advocates and culminated in a set of recommendations for local Clinical Commissioning Groups. Prior to that I completed a Masters in Public Health at the University of London, where I gained a distinction.

This position appears to be an ideal blend of my experience in evaluating patient healthcare outcomes using statistical modelling and my expertise in clinical commissioning policy.

I am particularly impressed by the Institute's commitment to improving patient outcomes in deprived communities. As an active member of my local NHS Patient Concern group, this is an area about which I am passionate.

I am also drawn to the Institute's multidisciplinary approach to research. Having collaborated extensively with academics in the Department of Economics during my PhD, I believe in the importance of thinking beyond narrow academic disciplines.

I have held research assistant posts in both academia and in central government making me ideally suited to a role focusing on the interface between researchers and clinicians. My experience of evaluating the impact of changes in clinical commissioning on local patient groups whilst at the Department of Health has given me a real understanding of the practical applications of health policy on communities. I also took the opportunity to learn advanced data analysis techniques, for example using SPSS and ATLAS-Ti to investigate the correlation between local commissioning structures and patient outcomes.

At the Department of Health I worked as part of a close-knit team of researchers from different disciplines and nationalities. This increased my confidence in communicating my research to those outside my field and improved my intercultural skills. As an active member of the PhD Staff Student Liaison Group, I learnt how to problem solve, build relationships and to negotiate practical solutions. These influencing skills stood me in good stead during my internship, where I successfully persuaded the South Midtown Clinical Commissioning Group to participate in my research project and to implement some of its findings.

I am confident that my expertise in clinical commissioning and patient impact, my broad experience in both academic and government research, my focus on a multidisciplinary approach and my strong organisational and influencing skills make me an ideal match for this position.

I would appreciate an opportunity to discuss my experience in more detail at interview and I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Yours sincerely

1: Always say where you saw the position advertised.

2: Succinct but informative. The employer can check out more detail on the CV itself. Bear in mind that the CV may be read by non-specialists and non-researchers too (such as HR Staff).

3: This statement is more persuasive as it is better tailored to the post, and focuses on the applicant's Unique Selling Points as a candidate.

4: The statement of admiration is backed up by evidence of where the candidate has demonstrated those beliefs.

5: This shows that the candidate is aware of what makes the department distinctive, and that they have given some thought as to why the position would suit them.

6: Here the skills required for the job are evidenced with actual concrete achievements. Select those achievements most relevant to the target job.

7: Team working is likely to be a key part of the person spec for a researcher position; Even if not stated on the spec, it is often assumed so always show you can work in teams as well as independently.

8: This could be important for a role in a department with a large international staff and/or student body.

9: This time, actual evidence of influencing skills is given.

10: Finish on a statement which is well tailored to the person specification and which answers the question, 'Why would I be a perfect fit for this position?'

11: End on a note of confidence.

9 Cover letter checklist

Before you send off your letter, use our final checklist to ensure your letter is as strong as possible.

Have you:

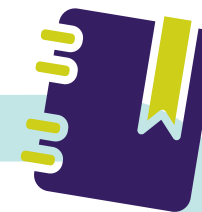
- Done your homework so that you are clear about what the employer wants?
- Given clear evidence of how you meet the most important criteria of the job?
- Kept it to one page or less?
- Put your most important evidence in the first half of the letter?
- Explained your research clearly in a way that non-researchers could understand?
- Asked a friend to proof read it and ensure the language is succinct and clear?
- Addressed it to the right person?
- Given a convincing explanation of why you want the job?
- Ended with a summary of why you would be perfect for this role?



Need help with your CV? Visit our website for [example CVs](#), [guidelines](#) and tips as well as an [Academic CV Template](#).

10 About the author

Lisa Carr is a careers consultant and coach who works with a range of public and private organisations including the University of Warwick and Warwick Business School, where she coaches Executive MBAs. She began her career as an HR manager in the energy industry and spent a number of years lecturing for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. After qualifying as a Careers Guidance practitioner she has worked with a wide range of clients from undergraduates through to senior academics and company directors.



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