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# How to Write a Cover Letter for Academic Jobs

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

## 1 The purpose of your cover letter

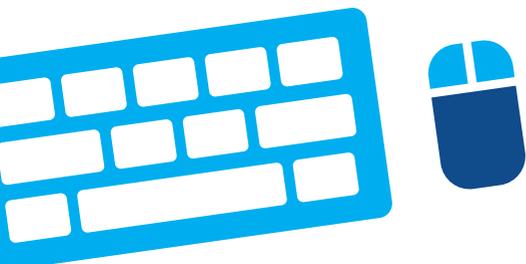
**The power of the cover letter in making an effective job application should never be underestimated. A good cover letter will grab the employer's attention and make them want to read your CV. The purpose of your cover letter and CV together is to whet the employer's appetite, to establish you as a 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
- 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 teaching roles as the ability to communicate the nature and impact of your academic work to a non-academic audience is crucial.

### This ebook focuses on cover letters for roles in Academia 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 academia, the length of the cover letter will depend on the seniority of the post. In any event, you should ensure the letter is no longer than two pages; one and a half pages is better still. 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 and academic interests; remember that the letter may be read by non-academics too, such as staff from Human Resources. You can always give further details of your academic and 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 Department.
- **First paragraph:** An introduction, explaining which post you are applying for, how you heard about it, and some brief background on who you are e.g. in terms of your research interests and academic background.
- **Middle section:** Evidence of your academic career in terms of your research interests and achievements as well as teaching and administrative experience. Also mention your future research plans. The balance between research, teaching and administration will depend on the nature of the institution and department's work.
- **Final section:** Explain what attracts you to this role in this institution and department 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 academic offering, what the recruiters are really looking for and how the department and job might develop in future you need to make your own enquiries.

This could include:



### 4b

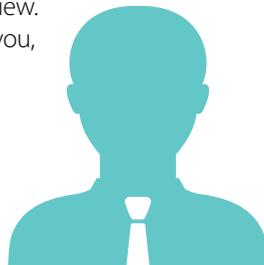
#### Online research

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

### 4c

#### Discussion with the Head of Department

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 well researched and be warned that the conversation might turn into an informal interview. You should reflect on why the department should hire you, and refine your 'elevator pitch' before arranging the call.



### 4d

#### Conversations with other academics in the department and institution

You can also speak to people who previously worked there, who have worked with key staff in the department at some point in their career, as well as support staff. This will give you a better idea of the culture of the institution and the work of the department. For internal roles, you can use your internal networks to find these people. For external roles, you might ask the Head of Department to put you in touch with other staff – 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 academic experience, 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 supervising PhD students, writing funding bids, managing other staff and project planning.



## 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. international experience, having worked in both academia and industry, or having held posts in more than one academic discipline)
- Specific achievements in your current and previous roles
- 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 (publications, new courses developed, funding awards won and so on). 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 someone to go through it with you and edit out any wordy sentences and redundant words. Some academic institutions offer a confidential careers advice service to staff members through their University Careers Service
- 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.



**Example cover letter – with comments**

Dear Sir or Madam

I am writing in response to your advertisement for a Senior Lecturer in French History in the Department of French at South Shields University. I believe that this post represents an excellent opportunity for me to develop my academic career and I consider myself to be an eminently suitable candidate with highly relevant research and teaching experience.

My PhD dissertation was entitled “The Haitian Revolution: The Role of the Planter in Political Life in the 1790s. My first post-doctoral position was at Midshire University where I supported research into French Caribbean Society. This was then followed by another post-doctoral position developing research into democracy and society in eighteenth century Guadeloupe. In 2007 I was appointed Lecturer in the Department of French Studies.

I have published 13 papers on Post Colonial French Atlantic history (see Appendix in my CV) and recently attended a conference on Electoral Reform in the French Caribbean. My current research is on The Planters of Tortuga: 1752 – 1806: Migration and Exile in the French Revolutionary Atlantic.

This study makes innovative use of interdisciplinary research methodologies including nominative record linkage to understand key aspects of the French Atlantic world between 1752 and 1806. Drawing principally on a systematic sample of records on government assistance to planters from Tortuga exiled in France during the 1790s, it explores how an examination of Tortuga’s planter class sheds light on the relative strength of metropole-colony ties, especially the role of migration in maintaining human ties across the Atlantic. It examines common assumptions about the “deserving poor” through analysis of assistance offered to exiled planters in Tortuga, neighbouring St Domingue, the United States and France. The dislocations and the experience of loss and exile among planter families in the 1790s are dissected and their impact on the interconnected French and Haitian revolutions reviewed. This work shows that, in addition to economic and institutional ties, familial ties linked metropole and colony in significant ways. Born, married and buried on both sides of the Atlantic, and often bound together by the obligations of French property law, members of Tortuga’s planter class belonged to “transatlantic families”. For these individuals, voyages across the Atlantic were part of their expected life course and were often required in order for individuals to meet changing family obligations. The study also finds among the Atlantic world’s cosmopolitan elites deeply shared understandings regarding the civic practice of extending charity and relief funds to the deserving poor. Elites in Jamaica and the United States, for example, emphasised deeply with the plight of formerly prosperous planters brought low by rebellious slaves and the misfortunes of war. And they expressed these shared values in the giving of private charity and state aid to displaced planters from Tortuga.

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

2: Say where you saw the post advertised.

3: This is obvious.

4: Keep the cover letter punchy; it is not an essay. This sentence is not adding much as the content is assumed. Better to go straight into why they might want to hire you before the employer loses interest.

5: The cover letter is not a summary of your CV – rather it is the place to highlight and evidence key, relevant, achievements. Be selective.

6: This level of detail is better in the CV itself.

7: This reads more like a PhD abstract and is too detailed. Bear in mind that your cover letter might also be read by non specialists, such as HR staff. Just highlight the key areas of research which link best to your target position and which really establish your academic credentials.



Finally, this study demonstrates how the actions of more than 6,000 planters simultaneously shaped the histories of both the French and Haitian revolutions. Through thousands of individual petitions, exiles influenced both government assistance policy and the state’s colonial policy, particularly its goal of repatriating Tortuga’s exiled planter class. Indeed, examining these petitions alongside pertinent legislative debates unravels the seeming paradox of the metropolitan government’s consistently positive view of the Tortuga planters, especially during the understudied periods of the Directory and Early Consulate.

I am now keen to develop my academic career further in a highly rated research institution where there are opportunities for future career development. With a reputation for academic and research excellence, I believe that joining this department will expose me to a vigorous research community which will allow tremendous cross-fertilisation of ideas. I would also be interested in getting involved in your joint degree programmes and in your e-learning initiatives, which is an interest of mine.

I currently teach four undergraduate modules covering up to 25 students. I supervise three PhD students and get involved in PhD admissions and viva examinations. I also invigilate examinations and sit on the SSLC, which involves negotiation and problem-solving skills. Indeed, I believe improving communication with the student body is paramount. My efforts in improving the student experience have helped the department achieve a reputation for transparency and innovation.

In summary, I would like to reiterate my interest in the position and would be extremely grateful if you would consider my application positively. I am convinced I would bring a great deal to the department.

Yours sincerely

8: This is too vague and could apply to any post; you need to tailor to the specific role targeted and show you have done your homework on the dept.

9: This needs backing up to include evidence of this interest.

10: Although accurate, this is standard stuff and is unlikely to make you stand out as a candidate. Always think about what you can offer that might differentiate you from other candidates.

11: There is no point making general assertions about your beliefs and principles, however relevant, unless you can back them up with evidence.

12: Too vague – what efforts?

13: A bit waffly – not persuasive.

**Example cover letter – improved version**

Dear Professor Edwards

I am pleased to attach my CV and application form for the post of Senior Lecturer in French History as advertised on the jobs.ac.uk website.

For the past five years I have held the post of Lecturer in the department of French Studies at the University of Northtown, where my research has focused primarily on Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century French Atlantic history. I have a particular interest in the history of the Haitian revolution and have recently developed a new undergraduate module in Post Colonial Caribbean History in collaboration with the department of History and the department of Hispanic Studies.

I have published widely in the field of French Atlantic history and society. My monograph, "Piracy and Revolution in the Lesser Antilles" won the Leverhulme award and I was invited to become a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. My research received outstanding peer reviews and helped the department attain a 4\* rating in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise.

Currently I am researching the history of the great planter families in Tortuga in the early nineteenth century and their links with the Haitian Revolution, for which I have been awarded a two year grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. My enquiry focuses on the transition from autocratic and feudal structures to democratic institutions in the French Atlantic and the cultural barriers to democracy in post-colonial societies. It examines transatlantic family structures and their influence on French and Colonial political life. I have been fortunate to spend a six month sabbatical at the Universite d'Etat d'Haiti where I was able to conduct primary research with officials in the Haitian government and the United Nations. This has resulted in a six month consultancy project from the Haitian Ministry of Social Justice to advise on electoral reform.

I believe my research has clear links with your Post Colonial French History research group and would contribute well to your joint degrees with the Sociology and History departments, for example your modules in Nineteenth Century French Caribbean History and Slave Societies in Eighteenth Century French Colonies.

Having discussed my research interests with Dr Benoit and Dr Ward, I was impressed by the close integration of research and teaching in the department. I am passionate about the value of integrating doctoral research into undergraduate teaching and recently introduced a programme for PhD students to supervise and mentor undergraduates during their final year dissertations.

1: This gets straight to the point and shows you have already held a similar level of post.

2: Always give evidence of what you have achieved in your current and past roles; especially anything which shows how you will be able to improve the current offering of the recruiting department.

3: It helps to give actual quantified outcomes and to show how you will improve the standing of the department/enable the department to access funding and/or improve their league table position.

4: This bolsters your academic credentials, shows you can apply your research and proves you can generate income.

5: This is based on knowledge of the department's offering, demonstrates more career focus and shows clearly how you can contribute if they hire you.

6: Evidence that you have bothered to research the role properly, are seriously interested and are known to people the recruiter trusts. If you don't already know people in the department, ask around to see if anyone can introduce you. Failing that, contact the Institution and ask if you can discuss the post before submitting your application.

7: There is actual evidence here of a real interest and some evidence of initiative and achievement. It also balances academic excellence with evidence of administrative/managerial skill.

I am also impressed by the strength of your e-learning platforms and believe I can help develop these further. As placement officer for the year abroad I extended our e-learning resources to provide support from Language Assistants to students during their second year overseas. This received excellent feedback in our departmental Student Experience Survey.

I currently teach undergraduate modules on French Atlantic History 1790 – 1840 and The Haitian Revolution and its Links to French Political Life and can also offer both undergraduate and postgraduate modules on Twentieth Century French Caribbean Politics, Francophone Slave Literature and French Caribbean Language and Dialects. I currently supervise three PhD students and have seen two of my PhD students receive their awards this year.

In addition to my teaching and supervision duties, I serve on the Staff Student Liaison Group. From 2009 - 2011 I acted as Undergraduate Admissions Tutor for the department; a period which saw an 8% rise in applications at a time when applications nationally dipped by 5%. This was achieved by implementing a new schools outreach programme and improving communications with prospective students at the post-offer stage.

As associate editor of the 'French Atlantic Political Review' I have organised a number of conferences. This included a conference on 'Electoral Reform in the French Caribbean' in Haiti in April which was attended by 350 delegates and where I was one of the keynote speakers.

In summary, I believe my relevant expertise in French Atlantic history, politics and society, my strong research and publications record, my ability to support the department's joint degree programmes and my achievements in integrating research and teaching whilst improving the student experience make me ideally placed to contribute in this Senior Lecturer position.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss my application further at interview. Please contact me if you would like any further information in the meantime.

Yours sincerely

8: Anything which ticks boxes in terms of league table positions is likely to go down well.

9: This is more helpful as it is specific.

10: Try to include evidence of success, not just that you carry something out.

11: More hard evidence of a positive impact on the department.

12: Try to be specific, but its fine just to mention one or two recent examples of your work – the rest can be found on your CV and/or discussed at interview.

13: This is a stronger pitch for the job and answers the question 'Why should you hire me?'

14: This sounds polite but confident.



## 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 two pages or less?
- Put your most important evidence in the first half of the letter?
- Explained your academic interests clearly in a way that non-academics 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?



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## 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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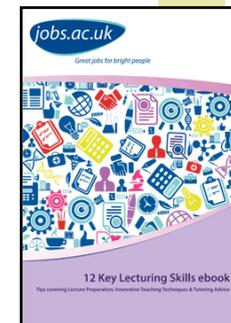
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