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Essay on how to stand out in a cover letter for a teaching institution

Submitted by Terry McGlynn on February 5, 2014 - 3:00am

This is the second part of an essay on the cover letter for teaching institutions. The first part -- covering basic requirements and mistakes -- may be found [here](#).^[1] This part deals with ways to stand out (positively).

The letter is the right length. Spilling onto a third page is too wordy, but not getting far enough into the second page is too terse. The best cover letters I've read (in my opinion) go some distance into the second page. Five brief paragraphs should be fine. You're not fooling anybody by shrinking the font, other than yourself.

You communicate that you might have a realistic idea about what it is like at that institution. Many applicants for teaching jobs really have no idea how much teaching happens. If you're smooth, you can subtly phrase things to make it clear that you won't get sticker shock when you find out what the teaching load is like. If you can find a credible way of explaining that you are able to thrive while teaching a full course load, include it in the letter. As a drawback, I don't know how to recommend how to do that smoothly without having already had that experience.

You are open-minded about your teaching assignments. Sometimes, new hires are stuck with the classes that senior faculty are tired of teaching. In others departments, new hires are rewarded with the opportunity to teach their specialty. You never know what the department needs, and even if the job ad is detailed and specific, the people in the department might not have equally specific ideas. In addition to explaining that you can teach the things in the ad, you should indicate that you enjoy teaching at all levels (if this is true) and that

you're open to a variety of courses that are suited to your qualifications (if this is true).

Specific references to campus-specific traits indicating that you can fit in well.

These things are particular to a person and to a campus. For example, if you do work in Latin America and the university has a clear emphasis or strategic direction toward Latin America, bring this up. Another example could be that you know that the college has a nature preserve adjacent to campus, and that is the home to organisms that you study, and that working there would allow you to engage in long-term and student-centered research. The more you do your homework, the greater the chance you might find a connection. Don't make a stretch, but if it's a natural fit, it's O.K. to mention it in the cover letter and then amplify in the teaching and research statements as needed.

Your research is in the area required in the job ad. Perhaps this is a surprise, but this is not in the "required element" category for a reason. Job ads are forged through compromise, and are typically unsatisfactory to members of the search committee, and might be altered by administrators before going to press. You can't put too much stock in them (Including the role of research on campus, or the role of religion on campus). You never really know what the department is looking for from just reading the job ad. You can't ever really know until you get an offer.

If you really want to work at a particular college, it can't hurt to apply even if you don't fit the exact subspecialty in the job ad, except for the time spent on the application. Your odds are lower, as the job ad might be accurate about the search, but you never know if they'll like what they see. Just don't try to sell yourself as something that you are not. For example, the ad for my current position called for an ecosystem ecologist. I clearly am *not* an ecosystem ecologist. It turns out that the department just wanted an ecologist, and an ecosystem ecologist was a field that they were somewhat interested in, but they weren't that picky. If you do fit, that's wonderful for you, and you have much better odds. But, there is a chance you still could land an interview if you don't have the exact specialty in the ad. Just be honest about your qualifications and interests, because the untruth usually smells a lot like bull.

Gorgeous prose. A workmanlike and sufficiently written letter isn't a bad thing, necessarily. But excellent writing will make you stand out. There are different ways to write beautifully, but they all require practice. There are lots of people and places that are pleased to tell you what good writing looks like.

You're a member of an underrepresented group. Nobody is going to be hired solely because of ethnicity or gender. However, this can help get you on the short list. Once you get on campus, this stuff mostly doesn't (or shouldn't) matter to the department, though it could to an administrator. (I've only once been involved in a faculty search in which there was a clear affirmative action candidate. Administration insisted that we create an extra interview slot for a particular applicant from an underrepresented group, who otherwise wouldn't have gotten a slot. This person showed up and was nothing short of amazing, far better than all of the other candidates. That was affirmative action at its best, in an environment where it was necessary.)

If you're a member of an underrepresented group, make sure it is overt in your application somewhere, because it could increase the chance you get an interview. It's not cheating, and it's not unfair. *It's giving the institution the opportunity to make the choice that it wishes to make.* Once people meet you in person, how you got the interview doesn't matter. On my campus 50 percent of students are Latino and 30 percent are African American, and we need more faculty who are not only role models for our students, but also physically appear to be role models. Research shows that this makes a difference in students' lives, and if there's a chance that a person from one of these groups might be the best candidate, I definitely want to find that out. The best person for the job is picked, but indicating your underrepresented status could give you the opportunity to show that you're the best.

If the job is in an unpopular or expensive location, provide a compelling reason to live there if you have one. In my opinion, it's helpful to spend a single sentence explaining a specific personal reason for moving to, or staying in, what many consider to be a difficult place to live. For example, there are a bunch of great colleges in the Midwest, and upstate New York, in tiny towns multiple hours away from what any genuine city. Those places may have trouble recruiting – and keeping – faculty because of where they are located.

There are similar recruitment problems in very cosmopolitan – but expensive – cities. If you explain that you have deep personal ties to a location, or that your spouse is interested in returning back to his or her hometown, I think it would help.

For example, when I applied for a job in Los Angeles while I was employed in San Diego, I had to explain (in one sentence) that I grew up in the area and was interested in moving back. Otherwise, they probably would not think that I was serious, because San Diegans universally think that San Diego is way more awesome than LA. (When I lived there, I thought that, too. It might be something in the unfluoridated water that causes the mass delusion.) Keep in mind that your reason to bring up personal stuff has to be very compelling. Just saying that you'd like your kids to grow up in a rural town with a nice community isn't going to cut it. The academic job scene is a seller's market, and these personal factors matter only when you think you can prevent them from not taking you seriously. For example, if an applicant has a very strong publication record, teaching campuses might be afraid to waste an interview slot on someone who, in their view, is likely to opt for a job at a research institution.

You don't have too many strings attached. Search committees shouldn't – and often don't – make decisions based on their knowledge of the personal lives of the applicants. But, if you have information, it's hard to avoid thinking about it. The bottom line is that if you have a spouse with a portable job, and the search committee knows this, they would feel better about investing an interview slot in you. Likewise, if they suspect that you have a personal barrier that would keep you from moving, this could, unfairly, influence the decision-making process.

Such possible scenarios include a dual-academic-career situation when a double hire is impossible, or being single and moving to a small remote town, or having a spouse whose job cannot easily move. If you can say something to make it clear that these possible negatives don't apply to your situation, you might be better off by doing so. Is it fair? No. But it is in your interest, and life isn't fair. You don't want to refer to a spousal employment situation, or the lack thereof, with specifics. But you can push that borderline by saying that you "do

not have any personal or professional constraints that would prevent you from permanently relocating to the area.” (I’d like to be very clear that I intentionally work at avoiding using these kinds of data when making decisions about applications, and I honestly think that I am functionally unbiased. However, I’m going to leave it to the committee members to decide which information they want to use, and I typically lean toward sharing more rather than less if it has the potential to work in my favor.)

That’s the end of the lists.

As a guiding principle, when in doubt, be straightforward and honest. You don’t want to get a job by pretending to be someone that you aren’t, because then you’ll have to continue pretending for another six years.

As a caveat, keep in mind that all generalized advice about how to prepare a faculty job application is apt to be wrong about some things. The people who evaluate applications are normal folks just like you and me, and we all do things our own way. So, anybody who says that the cover letter is the most important part of the application, or that the C.V. is, or that the teaching statement is, well, they’re just making that up. The search committee is not monolithic, and every part of the application is important.

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