

# The importance of following directions when you apply for jobs (essay)

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## Stay Inside the Lines

In any Ph.D. job search, if there is an application process, you should read the instructions before you do anything, writes Natalie Lundsteen. You should take your time, be thoughtful and follow directions.

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**By**

[Natalie Lundsteen](#)

As a child, you may have been taught to color inside the lines, follow directions and do as you were told. Yet in your Ph.D. research, you may need to turn ideas upside down in order to make an impact.

Following directions is a tough longstanding habit to break. In third grade, I remember (even now, many years later) an in-class worksheet assignment listing about 50 different tasks, which included writing poems and math equations on the page, along with instructions to erase most of those answers. (And, of course, one of the instructions was to use a pencil, and I used a pen.) There was some physical silliness on the list of instructions, like wolf howling, jumping up and down, hopping around the room on one foot, and a simple first line of the directions, which read, “Read through all these directions first.”

You know where this is going. Close to the end of the long list of tasks on that page was the instruction for each student to “do nothing listed on this sheet except sign your name and turn in the worksheet.” It was a humiliating, yet memorable, situation that wounded my seven-year-old pride.

Fast-forward to my future years as a doctoral researcher, where the entire process of undertaking a Ph.D. encouraged independent thinking and creation of original ideas. In seminars, graduate students and scholars argue ideas, dissect theories and rethink concepts. Pushing back is the norm, and an innovative mind-set is encouraged. Yet, for job-seeking Ph.D.s, skipping directions, ignoring instructions or coming up with a new way to do things can be more than just embarrassing or awkward. It can literally cost you a job. So put your Ph.D. self back into childhood color-inside-the-lines thinking, because most of the time with job applications, when you don’t follow directions, you don’t get a do-over.

In any Ph.D. job search, no matter the industry or occupation, if there is an application process, and if there are instructions for your application, you must read all the requirements and directions completely through. Even if you

are so excited about the opportunity you can't sit still, read the instructions before you do anything. Then read them again. And again. Don't take any action until you have read what is required. Take your time. Be thoughtful. Follow directions.

That may seem like the most obvious advice in the world, but Ph.D.s are curious creatures and many do not have extensive experience in the world of applications. Those with experience will know that if there's a way to get around doing the formal application, you try to find it -- but at times you must endure a structured application process.

Now, you might think it's an easy task to apply for a position, because you know how to fill out forms, and you've applied for loads of fellowships. How hard can it be? Or take sending a simple CV and cover letter in an email. No problem, you've sent hundreds, so you think, "I'll just quickly send my application from my phone." Or perhaps you might think that you know a *better* way to apply than what has been directed, or maybe you would like to provide information about yourself beyond the formal requirements. No. No, you do not know better. Just ... no.

One evident reason to take your time, read instructions and follow directions to the letter is to ensure that your application is even seen. This is generally the case in high-volume applicant situations. Make it easy for anyone who might be reviewing or reading your material to see how perfect you are for the position. Don't let application reviewers get distracted from (or worse, become irritated or annoyed by) the process of glancing through materials as they are quickly sorting candidates into yes or no categories. Why give people an opportunity to put your CV or résumé on the no pile? Why be the application that makes a reader grimace and lose his or her train of thought?

Hiring managers and recruiters will freely admit that, with huge numbers of applicants, it is not difficult to be ruthless during the initial applicant review. They are looking to discard as many candidates as possible to be able to get to a manageable number of good applicants. They can drop a candidate into the no pile for a number of reasons, including that he or she:

- doesn't have (or didn't list) the required experience;
- didn't list a salary requirement;
- didn't attach all requested documents;
- didn't attach *any* documents;
- sent a CV instead of the requested résumé; and/or
- sent a résumé and did not fill out the (tedious résumé-replicating) online form.

It will of course depend on the job and the organization and the specific processes required to apply, but applications tossed into the circular file often end up there for small, easily avoidable reasons. Whatever the field or industry, a basic premise holds true: you're in competition, and whoever is hiring is looking for a way to whittle down the number of competitors. So, do what you are told to do!

Here's why it's important to thoughtfully follow directions and give full attention to applications: first impressions are crucial. If you can't follow the (usually basic) instructions enumerated on a job listing, on an application website or even in a request in an email from a contact, it follows that you won't be a colleague who pays attention to detail -- and thus are not worth the time to meet.

Don't second-guess and don't be arrogant when it comes to sending materials or completing an application. Candidates often think it's a good idea to show enthusiasm and send extra materials (extra references, extra writing samples, writing samples in excess of what is required), but it's not. Sticking to what is directed in terms of extras is usually a hard-and-fast rule, although exceptions to it can depend on the situation and the job or industry. However, don't waste time pondering what else those receiving your application materials might want to see -- and please don't assume you are smarter than the HR system (or the hiring manager, or the search committee chair).

If a horrific online system asks you to basically retype your entire CV or résumé, do it. Don't say, "See attached

résumé.” Should you send a cover letter when the job ad simply says to send a résumé? Yes, probably -- that one can't hurt. But don't send copies of reference letters or a transcript or any other material unless it has been requested.

Do include details as required. If you are asked to provide evidence of a skill, do so. For example, if the job description requires undergraduate teaching experience, make sure the word “undergraduate” is on your CV *and* the online application form (if there is one) *and* in your cover letter. And beyond that, provide detail of the student population you taught, including majors, nonmajors and so on. Did you develop the syllabus, create and deliver lectures, serve as a TA, train other TAs, get student evaluations? Follow the directions and provide that evidence.

Don't leave a required field blank in an application form (especially for an online application system). Yes, the salary requirement question is scary. If the salary field is not required you *can* skip it. Or put down a salary range whenever you have that ability. (Sometimes a hard-and-fast number is all that fits in the space provided.) If you must list a specific number, not a range, and have no idea what to list, make a phone call or send an email to the HR department or even the hiring manager to ask for advice on listing a range. Keep in mind that, with any application process, you can ask for clarification about any of the sections or questions or requirements. Seek help from a graduate career professional, from a contact within the organization or even through a direct query to the HR department or hiring manager.

Don't send applications or job emails when you are distracted (say, by your phone or in a few minutes' break from the library or lab). Give the process a laser-like focus. Remember that euphoria and excitement over the “coolest job ever” may also cause you distraction, so don't dash off an email reply or cover letter without putting some thought into the project. Pay attention to details. Don't misspell your own name, or any name. Forgetting to attach documents, or attaching the wrong documents is an oops in most cases, but it can be lethal in the job search.

If you take your time with an application, such scenarios are less likely to happen. If and when they do, you will be more likely to realize what you've done and be able to recover quickly and efficiently if you are centered and focused. And finally, please remember that graduate career advisers have been there, done that, seen it. They can offer an objective and usually sage solution to any Ph.D. career calamity.

## Bio

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