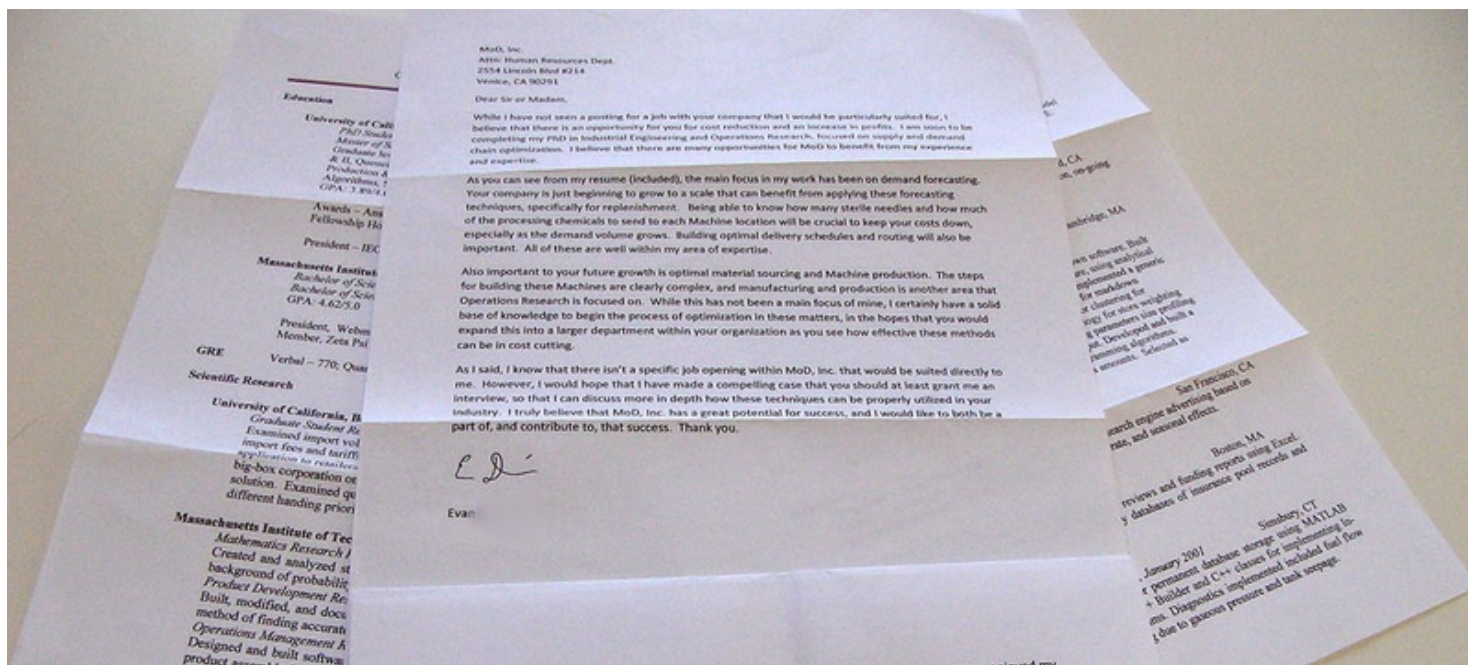


'It's the Cover Letter, Stupid'

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Relax, I'm not calling you stupid. For any millennial readers, I'm just paraphrasing Bill Clinton's unofficial campaign slogan from 1992: "It's the economy, stupid." His purpose was not to insult supporters or alienate undecided voters, but rather to constantly remind himself and his staff of what he considered the most important issue in that election.

In much the same way, if you're planning to apply for a full-time faculty position at a two-year college this fall, I would encourage you to adopt my revised version of Clinton's slogan as your personal motto. Because even though you will probably be required to submit multiple documents — including a CV and an official employment application — the single most important one will be your cover letter.

Unfortunately, many job candidates seem unaware of this maxim. I was reminded of that last spring when I served on a faculty search. We were reviewing the applications when a young colleague — serving on her first hiring committee — noted with frustration how bad many of the cover letters were. She seemed surprised.

I wish I could say I was. I've written about the [importance of cover letters several times](#) on these pages. So have [Karen Kelsky](#) and [others](#). But apparently job candidates still aren't getting it. They're either dashing off a letter without giving it much thought, or, more commonly, they're simply using the wrong format. So please allow me to go over this territory again, with two goals in mind: First, I hope to help you improve your chances of getting an interview at a two-year college. (All those bad cover letters? Right into the reject pile.) And second, I'll have an easier time slogging through cover letters next time I'm on a search committee. (Because, really, it's all about me.)

The prime directive here: You must tailor your cover letter at both the macro and micro levels. What does that mean?

Tailoring at the macro level. That means your letter is appropriate for the type of institution to which you are applying. I've said it before but it bears repeating: A cover letter designed for a research university will not work for a

job at a two-year college. Yet Ph.D.s who apply to community colleges often make the mistake of devoting space in their cover letters — extensively and prominently — to their dissertation topic and research interests.

Remember: Most two-year colleges do not require faculty members to conduct research and publish. (There are notable exceptions, especially in the Northeast.) The fact that you have a Ph.D. may give you an advantage over other candidates; it might even be listed as a minimum qualification for the job. (That's still not the norm at two-year colleges, but it is becoming increasingly common.) Even so, any information about your research belongs in a short paragraph *late* in your letter. At that point, if you mention your dissertation topic, keep the description brief, unless it pertains directly to what you'll be teaching at the two-year college.

Here's what should go up high in your letter: a long paragraph about your teaching experience, or maybe two, if that experience is extensive. Your CV will probably list the campuses where you've worked and the courses you've taught. Your purpose in the cover letter is not simply to reiterate that information. Rather, your letter should give the committee a sense of the breadth and depth of your experience as a classroom teacher, focusing on relevant issues such as diversity, technology, and curriculum design. You also want the committee to have zero doubts about your commitment to, and enthusiasm for, the teaching mission of two-year colleges.

If you don't have a lot of teaching experience, talk about what little you do have and how it's shaped you as a teacher. As I often say when I speak to graduate students about cover letters: If you have a lot of teaching experience, spend about 150 to 200 words talking about it. If you don't, spend at least 100 words talking about it, anyway.

Ultimately, search committees at community colleges want to learn two things from your letter:

- Do you really understand what we do?
- And are you completely on board with our teaching mission?

Tailoring at the micro level. That means writing your letter to a specific institution, starting with the salutation. Try to address your letter to the person who will initially review the applications — usually the department head, the director of human resources, or the search-committee chair. It isn't always possible to find out who will do the first read. Sometimes, a thorough internet search will yield the name. However, in many cases, you simply won't be able to find one person's name attached to the search so you'll be left with "Dear Committee Members."

Next, include the institution's name in your opening paragraph, noting that you saw the college's ad and would like to apply there. (One of the more embarrassing faux pas we see: Candidates send us cover letters that express interest in interviewing at a completely different institution. That's kind of like calling your new partner by your ex's name — a major turn-off.) Also, look for other opportunities throughout the letter to mention the college by name, especially in closing.

Finally, micro-level tailoring means responding directly to the points made in the position announcement. Let us know how you meet the listed qualifications and tell us about your experience with the specific job-related duties mentioned in the ad. That shows you actually read the ad — not a given, believe me — and you genuinely care about the activities that are important to the hiring college.

You don't necessarily have to fulfil *every* qualification listed in the ad. Usually, they're divided into two categories: "required" and "preferred" If you don't meet all the qualifications on the "required" list, there's probably no point in applying. However, few people will measure up to the ideal candidate envisioned in the "preferred" list, which can include anything from club sponsorship to teaching online to working in a prison setting. With luck, you'll find at least two or three items on the wish list that do apply to you and that you can emphasize in your letter.

The final format. An effective cover letter for a full-time faculty position at a two-year college would probably cover about a page-and-a-half. Here are the elements it should have:

- A short opening paragraph that names the institution and the specific position and expresses interest.
- A long second paragraph (or two) that focuses on your teaching experience, particularly as it relates to the position announcement.
- Then, three or four medium-sized paragraphs that talk about your education (including your dissertation topic, if applicable), other relevant activities (such as serving on committees or sponsoring student organizations), significant publications, and any honors and awards — all with an eye toward pointing how you fit the specific qualifications listed on the job ad.
- A short concluding paragraph that references your “attached CV” and asks for an interview.

It will also help if you write in a conversational style, colleague to colleague, rather than in the stilted prose of a journal article. Neither do you want to be too informal — this isn't an Instagram post. But you do want to be engaging. Your first goal is for committee members to actually *read* your letter — not just scan it. And you want them to be suitably impressed — not just with your qualifications, but with the person revealed through the text.

The objective here is to get an interview. So remember: The cover letter isn't just informational — it's persuasive. Carefully crafting it for your audience may be time-consuming, but it will be time well spent.