Planning and Organizing Academic Cover Letters

How do academic cover letters function?
Search committees will use your academic cover letter to get their first impression of you and to interpret your C.V. More specifically, search committees need to know how their position and institution are a good fit for you, given your career trajectory.

How can I create an effective narrative of my past experiences?

1. **DECIDE WHERE YOU'RE GOING**: What future experience are you well-positioned to move toward? What, given your experience, is the next ideal move for you?

   "My graduate work developed methods and applied them to relevant antiviral and anticancer"

   "Currently, I'm trying to understand the basis for molecular recognition at the atomic level using "

   "I want a position that will enable me to continue to use / develop [X] qualifications, skills, or interests."

2. **GET A FIX ON THE INSTITUTION**. Identify abilities or qualities a candidate needs to excel in that position. Then determine which of your qualifications and accomplishments will particularly interest this department.

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<tr>
<th>Job Ad / Department Website</th>
<th>Job-specific Qualifications and Skills</th>
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<td>Tenure- track Assistant Professor of English: Specialty open, but the candidate should be able to teach Moravian's first -year <strong>writing seminar</strong>, as well as <strong>200- and 300-level courses in the essay and nonfiction writing</strong>. Demonstrable interest in <strong>writing program administration</strong> (including first-year writing, instructional <strong>technology</strong>, <strong>writing across the curriculum</strong>, <strong>faculty development</strong>, etc.) and/or <strong>journalism</strong> and <strong>new media</strong> also desired.</td>
<td>Teaching-oriented - wants to see qualifications related to teaching writing over doing research. Administrative skills &amp; familiarity with technology and different styles of writing across disciplines.</td>
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3. **WARNING! DON'T JUST RESTATE EXPERIENCE:** One common pitfall in narrating past experience is when writers simply restate the experiences from their C.V. in chronological order.

**BAD EXAMPLE**

"I write in response to your call for Assistant Professor of English. **This Spring,** I will defend my dissertation in Rhetoric from Carnegie Mellon University. **Prior to that,** I received a Master's in English from the University of Texas – Austin. **After that,** I was accepted to pursue a doctoral degree at Carnegie Mellon. **I have also worked with Dr. John Smith. In addition,** I have also worked with Dr. XXX..."

4. **INSTEAD, RE-FRAME PAST EXPERIENCES AS A CLEAR PATH TOWARD FUTURE GOALS:** Which of your past experiences have played the most significant role in developing your career trajectory? How have they helped you develop your present and future focus?

**GOOD EXAMPLE: (Explicit arguments for fit)**

I write in response to your call for an Assistant Professor of English. This spring I will defend my doctoral dissertation in Rhetoric from Carnegie Mellon University. I am a university-honored instructor with over six years' experience teaching college writing and three years as the First-Year Writing Program’s Assistant Director. I am prepared to take on writing administration responsibilities, teach non-fiction and literature, and develop technologically enhanced instructional methods for writing across the curriculum (WAC). My expertise designing and administrating curriculum that balances liberal arts education and professional specialization makes me a tailored to the liberal arts mission at [Rural Liberal Arts University].

**GOOD EXAMPLE: (Less explicit about fit)**

My primary research goals are directed toward understanding the basis for molecular recognition at the atomic level using physics-based computational methods. As a postdoctoral fellow at [University] and as a graduate student at [University] with [Dr. So-and-so], I have balanced method development for computational structure-based drug design with the application of these powerful tools to relevant antiviral and anticancer targets. My future research plans are aimed at [discuss near-term research goals]. My ultimate aim is to [discuss long-term research goals]. [*NOTE: Implied in this example is that the career trajectory aligns well with the program's goals]*
5. DEVELOP A NARRATIVE AND ORGANIZATIONAL SCHEME THAT BEST REPRESENTS YOUR NARRATIVE: There are many variations based on the job responsibilities, department, academic discipline, and other factors.

| Salutation | Directs your letter to a specific individual or group; "Dear Prof. X" or also acceptable is "Dear Committee members"
| Introduction | Includes your full name, where you discovered the position, your current status (and defense date, if ABD), and states your area of study
| Your dissertation | How does your research contribute to the field of research? What are your outcomes?
| Future research | What is your future research agenda? Planned publications? Or threads related to your findings?
| Teaching | How do you bring your teaching philosophy to the classroom?
| Service | How does your service work connect to your research, teaching, and/or contribute to your field?
| Fit paragraph | How do you see yourself fitting in with specific colleagues in the department? What teaching or research could you contribute to their program?
| Conclusion. | Thanks the reader for their consideration, announces availability and contact info, and explains how separate materials will arrive (if arriving separately)

Special Considerations:

- Cover letters in STEM fields tend to condense these moves onto one page
- Sometimes to condense material, STEM cover letters might leave out teaching and service.
- We recommend analyzing relevant examples from your field and the type of position you are applying for.
- Important to position yourself as a "colleague" and not a student: be concise and direct, limiting expressive language that you might use to "sell yourself."