

Cover Letters for PhD grads

A cover letter is your opportunity to make a positive first impression which conveys your suitability. Just as important as your CV, it is where you can communicate your motivation, as well as your relevant skills, ability and experience for a particular opportunity.

Purpose of a cover letter

The purpose of a cover letter is to convince the reader of the strength of your candidacy **with a tailored document showcasing your suitability**. Its job is to get you to the next stage, typically an interview.

Unless given other instruction, always send a cover letter with your CV: it can significantly improve the success of an application.

How does a cover letter relate to the CV?

A cover letter compliments your CV. Although both documents feature details of relevant skills and experience, they function differently:

- Your CV functions as a record to consult, complete with finer details of your experience (such as dates to and from, locations, exact roles and additional detail). The reader will search this to find relevant evidence.
- Your cover letter functions as a guided tour, summarising the relevant experience, and showing or explaining how it relates to the opportunity and any selection criteria. It also evidences your motivation and enthusiasm for the opportunity (both the role and the organisation).

Your cover letter and CV may not be assessed at the same time: make sure your cover letter stands alone. Avoid phrases such as 'please see my CV', which ask the reader to do the work: the cover letter should make it really easy for them to select you for the next stage in the process.

Academic cover letters

Much cover letter advice applies equally to professional/managerial or academic/research opportunities.

A few points of difference:

- **Length** - for non-academic opportunities, it's typical to keep to one side of A4, but for academic roles they are more typically two sides of A4 (particularly if there's a need to also address proposed research or teaching). However, if longer than two pages, they are unlikely to receive the time to be read in full.
- **Statement of research interests** – this may be requested as a separate document. If so, just a brief summary is needed on a cover letter – it does not need to be repeated.
- **Internationality** – as academic opportunities are international, there are sometimes cultural variations to take into account. You may need to adapt your cover letter to fit the expected tone (humble or underselling?) or level of detail (telling the broader story or focused on just the selection criteria?) in different academic labour markets. If in doubt contact your Careers Service, or discuss with academic contacts who have experience with academic selection panels in that country. Consider whether anything requires regional knowledge that the reader may not have (for example, an acronym for a national public body) if so, give explanation or equivalency.

Format

It should look like a formal letter, including address and date.

Where possible, address a named contact formally with their title (Dear Dr X, Ms Y or Prof Z). If no contact is mentioned, you could opt to write to the head of the team/department (researching their name as needed) or get in touch to ask.

If you can't find a named contact, you could use 'Dear Hiring Manager', 'Recruitment Panel', or similar. Do NOT use 'Dear Sirs' unless in the unusual situation where you absolutely know that the recruitment panel is made up exclusively of individuals who identify as male, and yet who cannot be identified by name!

If writing to a named individual, sign off with 'Yours sincerely...'. If you couldn't find a named contact, it's 'Yours faithfully...'

Structure

The cover letter should exemplify your writing ability: clear, professional, well-structured and paragraphed.

This four-step structure (which can be used to create four paragraphs for a one-page cover letter) might prove useful. Sections 2 and 3 could be in either order:

1. Introduction

- Explain why you are writing
- Add a brief 'elevator pitch' to introduce yourself: summarising 3-5 key selling points (including no assertions – just statements of fact) in a strong first impression.

2. Why them?

- Give clear evidence of your motivation for both the role and the organisation – more than stating enthusiasm, *show* it through citing details of your research into the opportunity and organisation to your interests, values and experiences.
- If you could remove the organisation's name and replace it with that of another, it's not specific enough – show you've researched with enthusiasm.

3. Why you?

- Address the selection criteria or person specification – summarise your evidence from your CV.
- If there's a long criteria list, you could 'group' similar criteria together and use this to aid paragraphing. For example, if half the criteria relate to teaching, and half to research, you could dedicate a paragraph to explaining your evidence for each set of criteria.
- Not everything on your CV will be mentioned on your cover letter!
- If there are any circumstances you wish to explain, for example extended gaps, changes of direction, or taking longer to finish your degree, you can do that here. Use positive language and talk about what you gained in the process, such as resilience, problem solving or additional skills.

4. The ending

- State that you look forward to hearing from them. If you want to say anything about your availability for interview this would be the place to do that. You can also briefly reaffirm your enthusiasm for the role but keep it simple and don't waste space repeating things you have already said.

Top tips

- Follow any instructions given – if asked to 'send a cover letter', add a file to a simple professional email. If asked to 'send a covering email' you simply add the same content into an email (usually omitting the addresses and date).
- Turn your file into a PDF to aid readability, conversion between software and avoid unintentional markup left from 'track changes'!
- Use positive language: action words can illustrate your experiences in a really effective way. For example, 'initiated', 'delivered...', 'awarded...'
- Keep your cover letter well presented: if sending along with a CV consider a consistent typographical style.
- Double check spelling and grammar! Use spelling/grammar checkers, proof read and ask a friend to proofread it too.

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Institute of Fictional Literature
University of Imagination
Kettering
KT11 1OL

6th May 2021

Dear ...,

I write to apply for the position of Lecturer (Literary Theory). I am a final year PhD student in Literary and Cultural studies at Royal Holloway, University of London, with experience of undergraduate teaching, strong module feedback from my students, and professional organisational skills from my previous career in arts management.

I admire the University of Imagination's commitment to the study of theory, having attended the annual Literary Theory conference on campus and virtually since 2017. In conversation with Dr Theory and Dr Praxis, I've gained insight into their design for the modular course at undergraduate level. Having previously had input into course design in my role a first year module lecturer at Royal Holloway, I would be keen to fulfil their vision for the new Foundation level modules, using my experience working with learning frameworks, assessment methodologies and both in-person, virtual and blended teaching. In particular, I see a potential opportunity for the new modules proposed, such as LT101, to link into their progressive learning framework (TH101 –103) in order to support student progression and retention, as per the University Strategy 2021-6.

My university teaching experience has been built up over the last 2 years, where I've taught on a first year module (Introduction to Theory) as well as delivering a seminar series for Masters students on the taught 'Literary Theory and Criticism' programme. I put the 4 weeks of my 'Academic Teaching Practice' training programme to use across this experience, delivering using 'flipped' models, interactive lecture elements (mentimeter/kahoot) and creating a new module area on our VLE (Moodle) to support learning. My contributions online increased the module's visual and audio elements, adding video explanations of challenging topics, and 'self check' tools to support students before taking assessment exercises online. Teaching a diverse range of students, I offered additional informal question and answer 'wrap up' sessions online, which allowed me to understand where challenges to comprehension existed for students who had not taken English Literature A Level (or equivalent), as well as appreciating the intersection of cultural perspectives on gender and queer theory. I received a consistent feedback rating from students of 'very good' or 'excellent' for my teaching, and my reflective practice allowed me to complete the AFHEA award for teaching and learning.

My administrative experience comes from three years spent prior to my doctorate working as project assistant, officer and then deputy manager for the 'Arts for All' campaign from the National Theatre. Prioritising work was key throughout, particularly working to bid for project funding alongside delivering previously funded work: I am proud that both delivery and funding

This is an academic-style cover letter of 2 pages.

Formal letter style has your contact details top right (you are most likely to be contacted by email or phone and so make sure to include them). Their address is usually below on the left, and the date to the right.

Try to address your letter to a named person if you can – see advice on 'Format' above.

State the opportunity for clarity (and in case of multiple vacancies).

It can set a great first impression to introduce yourself by summarising the key objective facts of your candidacy – your key selling points.

The 'why them/this' paragraph – showing your motivation by adding real details from your research and preparation, and connecting them with your experience where possible.

The 'why you' paragraph (this could equally swap places with 'why them'). This summarises evidence against the selection criteria. As this person is addressing both a list of both teaching, administration and research criteria, they've chosen to split 'why you' into three paragraphs along these lines.

Consider what your reader will understand – this acronym, if mentioned in the job description, or common in the field, is fine to leave without explanation.

were on track at the point I began my doctorate. As deputy manager I attended project committee meetings, collaborating with colleagues in other areas of the organisation. As a result, the project increasingly featured new productions and became a core part of the new production scheduling and programming process. I volunteered to serve as chair of the staff development committee, and would be keen to contribute to departmental committees similarly, particularly around student experience, engagement and early career researcher development. I am also keen to participate in outreach and community engagement as detailed in the job description, potentially using some of the relationship building techniques by which I maintained an outreach relationship with 62 schools across 14 boroughs.

My research interests lie in the intersection between literary theory and social learning theory, particularly the role of our communities in shaping responses to literary work. I appreciate the enthusiasm of the department towards interdisciplinary study, and would anticipate productive collaborations with both colleagues in anthropology and sociology. Currently I am conducting constructivist research into audience feedback to Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* using a series of qualitative interviews with playgoers from a range of socio-political and religious backgrounds, working alongside the current touring production.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Paula H. Dee

For key criteria, don't just tell them you have experience – show them how strong it was by giving an indication of results.

As this is primarily a teaching role, research interests have been left until last and just briefly summarised. A role focused more on research may support having the paragraphs reorganised, with more emphasis and detail added to this section.

A simple ending is fine! No need to summarise again – they should have what they need by now!

NEXT: Same applicant – different job

We've used the same fictional applicant to show you how it's possible to tailor the same set of experiences to a non-academic role...

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Development and Community Team
Hull Arts Centre
Kettering
KT11 1OL

6th May 2021

Application for Audience Development Manager Reference: K1E00123

Dear ...,

I am eager to apply for this role, where I feel I could use the skills I gained over three years working on, and then deputy managing, the National Theatre's 'Arts for All' programme, as well as the insights, skills and personal development I've experienced through my PhD which addresses the role of community in audience responses to the arts (submitting next month).

Hull Arts Centre has an ethos that is similar to the approach I've taken to my own work in both study and arts management roles: 'meet people where they're at'. It's clearly been successful, given your Arts Council funding bid and the reach you've attained through the pandemic with both streaming and outdoor distanced performances. I particularly admire the work you've done in supporting home schooling in the local area, collaborating with teaching leads at KS4 and 5 to provide streaming performances of key exam texts. I would love to maintain and build on this success potentially using some of the relationship building techniques I employed at the National Theatre, where I maintained and grew an outreach relationship with 62 schools across 14 boroughs. My teaching at university has also given me skills and credibility to engage with education professionals (I gained an teaching and learning award for for my work, including producing new visual and video elements to aid learner engagement and outcomes).

As a project assistant, officer and then deputy manager for the 'Arts for All' campaign from the National Theatre I delivered and developed our audience engagement campaign, successfully building it into a core part of the new production scheduling and programming process. Over three years we doubled our borough reach, and worked with increasing number of settings, adding residential care homes, correctional facilities, community groups and individuals to our outreach programming alongside schools. Prioritising work was key throughout, particularly working to bid for project funding alongside delivering previously funded work: I am proud that both delivery and funding were on track at the point I began my doctorate. My PhD focussed on the role of our communities in defining and shaping responses to literary work, which has given me academic insight into community audience development. As a result, reach via community and faith groups is a key strategy I would seek to deliver as part of Hull Arts' continuing audience development.

I am now keen to use my academic insight alongside my professional track record to build new audiences for a theatre which truly shares my belief in the role of the arts for all.

Yours sincerely,
Paula. H. Dee

This is a more typical style of cover letter for non-academic roles, of 1 page.

Here, to save space the applicant's address is consolidated into a 'letterhead' style.

A document 'title' is an option to clarify the purpose or job reference.

The introduction highlights the key selling points again, but organised with the most closely aligned first. There's a clear 'end' date to the PhD as this full-time role isn't recruiting an active researcher.

The 'why them/this' paragraph – showing your motivation by adding real details from your research and preparation, and connecting them with your experience where possible. This audience is likely to understand KS4 (Key Stage 4) but not a university teaching award, which is just referred to in general terms.

'Why you' paragraph – addressing key selection criteria, and emphasising results.

Tell the story of your PhD and how it connects to what you're applying for, otherwise they may invent a narrative of someone who doesn't really want to do the job or might leave if an academic role came up!