

# Non-Academic Job Applications by PhD Students and Graduates: Letters and Personal Statements

## INTRODUCTION

If a CV is the skeleton, the cover letter or application statement is the flesh and ligaments and muscles on the bones. It is the themes that connect together the facts and the choices you have made. It is the next level of detail that adds to the basic information you give on the CV.

The key principles of all application letters are the same, whether you are applying for academic or non-academic jobs:

- Put yourself in the reader's shoes
- Give evidence of your suitability and relevant experience
- How you write is as important as what you write

And a good way to think about what categories the content should fall into, can be answered by these three core questions:

- Why me? (What in my background has brought me to this point of applying for this job?)
- Why this role? (What are my relevant skills and experience that make me good at this job?)
- Why your company/organisation? (What do I know about what you do that means we would be a good fit for each other?)

There is no perfect template for a cover letter. The letter should be personal to you, and a precise reflection of the job you're applying for. So try to avoid just copy-and-pasting your cover letters from one application to another. The reader will be able to sense that it's not a bespoke, tailored application, because they know the job description at least as well as you do, and know what they are looking for.

## NON-ACADEMIC APPLICATIONS

The biggest challenge you are going to have is that unless you are applying for a job where a PhD is either a requirement or a specified advantage, it is up to you to sell what the PhD offers, and what you offer because you have a PhD. It might seem really unfair that when you have worked so hard to get the PhD, you then have to convince someone else why it is helpful to them. But the challenge you have is that most people make assumptions about PhD graduates without really knowing what they are getting. And it's up to you to revise those assumptions and show them who you actually are.

The biggest assumptions that recruiters have about PhD graduates are:

- You've spent so long working alone, you won't be any use in a team
- You have to be right all the time, because that's the authority you are used to having
- That your research is the most important thing to you and that you won't be very interested in anything else
- That your PhD makes you superior to other people

Your job is to show an employer that these assumptions are false by giving them other ways to see you. This is where putting yourself in the reader's shoes is absolutely essential.

Your PhD does certainly give you very high level skills in:

- formulating ideas
- expressing information
- critical evaluation
- analysis
- a range of communication skills
- and many others

But you need to find a way to:

- express how your skills meet and match those in the job description and person specification
- show you understand what the job actually involves and what it will be like to do

## **GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT GOOD LETTERS**

### **PUT YOURSELF IN THE READER'S SHOES**

One of the hardest things to do when writing a cover letter is to see yourself through someone else's eyes. It is probably obvious to you why you want the job and what you bring to it, but it is not obvious to anyone but you where your skills and experience actually match what the recruiter is asking for. At the other extreme, it is also not enough just to go through the job specification matching what you have done to every bullet point.

Here are some ways that you can show you have thought like the person recruiting for the job.

- The order in which you present information will influence what they remember about you – if you talk about your PhD first they will think that is the most important thing you want them to remember. But is it for this non-academic job? Is that the most important thing they need to know about you? And how relevant is it to your ability to do the job?
- Make it as easy as you can for them to see your strengths – make sure you use really clear and straightforward language. Don't reinforce the perception that PhD graduates can only write in long sentences and with sophisticated vocabulary!
- Try to find themes in your background that reflect themes in the job – say, one or two key skills in combination with one or two highly relevant areas of expertise. That will help you group information together within or across paragraphs and make the letter less like a list beginning 'I am good at...'
- Think about what the job will be like on a day-to-day basis. Will it involve regularly communicating with large numbers of people in and outside the department? Will you be left to work on your own a lot? Try to create a letter that enables the reader to imagine easily what it will be like having you in the room with them, working at the next desk.

- All sorts of people might read your letter of application, from a future boss to a future colleague or more junior team member. You can't write for every possible reader, but try to build rapport by showing a genuine passion and interest in the work.

## **GIVE EVIDENCE OF YOUR SUITABILITY AND RELEVANT EXPERIENCE**

Giving evidence is absolutely crucial for any job, but for PhD graduates applying for non-academic jobs, it's almost more important than in any other context. You have to do more work than the average candidate to show that are interested in this job because of what it is and how it intersects with your specific interests.

What you put in the letter not only provides the basis for the sifting out of you as a candidate they want to interview, but it then provides the basis for questions asked in the interview. It also enables the reader to see that you are able to engage with key aspects of the job without having to be taught what to do first.

- Make your examples as relevant as you can to the reader and make it as easy as you can for the reader to understand why you have told them particular details about yourself.
- Analyse the job description and person specification for the list of core transferable skills required. How many do you have, and what examples do you have for each? You may not want to address each one individually, but you will need to address each of the essential or desirable criteria as a theme in your letter.
- Demonstrate you understand the subtle differences between different types of transferable skills. For example, don't say things like 'I am a good communicator.' Show you understand the difference between persuasion and negotiation, or analysis and problem solving.
- When you give examples, draw widely from across your experience, academic and non-academic. Always choose examples that show you understand what each skill means in the context of this job.
- You might want to discuss briefly why you have done a PhD and how you think it's useful in this role. If there is some direct connection to the role, then obviously that will give you an area to build on. But even if it isn't, make a virtue of one or two key aspects of the PhD experience – be that content or skill development – and use examples to help the recruiter see those as an advantage, as enhanced value in what you can contribute.

## **HOW YOU WRITE IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT YOU WRITE**

As a researcher, you should be good at identifying different writing styles. Familiarise yourself with the idioms and vocabularies of the industry or sector you want to work in. You are not aiming to copy that literally in your letter, but you should be able to demonstrate in a practical way that you understand the style of communication that is favoured in the sector. Above all, avoid lengthy sentences, difficult-to-read constructions, and specialised vocabulary. Don't make it difficult for people to read your application, and don't alienate them with the style of your writing.

## **APPLICATION FORMS**

Many employers will now ask for an application to be made through an application form template, either as a Word document or an online template. This can sometimes be a frustrating document to fill in, as it may not exactly match the way your CV is laid out. There will though usually be either the option to upload a cover letter or associated documents as separate attachments, or a box where they ask you for 'Relevant Information' to your application. This is where you would put cover letter type content.

## **FINAL DETAILS**

In all the focus on content, it can be easy to forget the obvious stuff, so have you:

- √ Named the job you are applying for and where it was advertised?
- √ Made a note at the end of the letter of any dates you are not available for interview?
- √ Made sure your contact details are on the letter somewhere in case it gets separated from your CV?

## SPECIFIC CONTENT FOR NON-ACADEMIC JOBS

Non-academic job applications will require some or all of the following:

- CV (see the non-academic CV examples)
- Letter or application statement on an application form
- Competence-based application form

The letter should be no longer than 1.5 pages at the very most, and preferably one page

### CONTENT

As outlined above, a good cover letter will cover three key areas.

#### Why me?

Here you are aiming to answer the question, “what in my background has brought me to this point of applying for this job?”

It’s easy to start with the idea that you have done a PhD and are just looking for the next step, but for many people their choice of job after a PhD will connect back to a longer term theme.

- Try to give the reader a sense of continuity through your different career decisions (academic and professional, and including the PhD if you want to do so). Without itemising everything you have done, try to show connections and progression.
- You need to show your motivation too: what are you hoping to contribute to and gain from this role? However you should avoid the implication that this is a stepping stone to something else.
- Do talk about why you want the job, but try to be specific about what it offers you other than just saying ‘this is a great opportunity for me’.
  - Does it consolidate a range of other experiences you have had?
  - Does it offer you the chance to make your academic research relevant outside the university context?

#### Why this role?

Here you are aiming to answer the question, “What are my relevant skills and experience that make me good at this job?”

As above, it’s easy for the recruiter to assume they know what you bring as a PhD graduate, but you need to make at least the same amount of effort as any other candidate to match yourself to the job description and person specification. The subtext of that is that you are going to be good at reaching out to colleagues, clients and contacts, which goes some way to countering the idea that PhD graduates have spent three years in solitary isolation.

Because the letter is flesh on the bare bones of the CV, you don’t need to repeat everything that was in the CV. Your aim is to build connections between different things you have listed, to demonstrate your skills and experience. For example, if a key skill required is persuasion, then try gathering two or three different examples together to show breadth: “I have extensive experience of persuasion, from my retail customer service experience to the seminar teaching I did with undergraduates, helping them pick up a particular view in a text.”

If you are writing a letter, rather than filling in a competence-based application form (see below), make sure you touch on all the essential and desirable requirements in the person specification. It is a challenge to get all that content in within a length limit, but remember

that part of what you are trying to demonstrate is that you can write concisely and still communicate effectively.

### **Why your company/organisation?**

Here you are aiming to answer the question “What do I know about what you do that means we would be a good fit for each other?”

It would be really simple just to look at the job advert or description, or visit the website, and then summarise what you have learned. But firstly, employers expect that and are looking for something more. And secondly, as a PhD graduate, you are almost certainly going to be making a move out of what has been your home sector of higher education for the last three or more years, so you need to show you know what other sectors actually involve.

- If you’ve picked a job out to apply for, it’s a reasonable assumption by the employer that you know enough about the sector to be interested in committing to working in it. Show them what you know.
- Show you understand what the trends are in the sector, what new developments have recently or are likely to take place
- Do your research into what function this company or organisation has in the sector. Are they very specialised? Are they providing one function in a chain of other functions? Do they combine several functions? Are they a market leader?
- Try to build a connection between yourself and their company: if there is any overlap with your research, then it’s fine to talk about commonalities of interest. But it is more likely that you will be able to show the themes or aspects of their business that interest you. If you have common earlier experience then show it. But it’s also fine to note that this is a new departure for you, and therefore why this particular company offers a good starting point.
- Do delve into news stories (preferably not controversial ones!), commentary, annual reports, social media trends and other sources beyond the company’s website for further information about them.

## **COMPETENCE-BASED APPLICATION FORMS**

Some employers will ask for an application on a form which is structured by sections to indicate what kind of content you have to include. Sometimes those sections will relate directly to areas of the person specification. Otherwise, they may cover more general categories of skills or competences, such as communication skills, managing self and others, delivering service excellence and so on. It is up to you to decide which skills from the person specification belong in which category, and then show how you have relevant experience of them.

Increasingly, sifting of applications is done on the basis of whether you have matched evidence from your own experience with the items in the person specification. If you don’t give evidence of each of those items, you are deemed not to have met the person specification and won’t then be considered for interview.

There is also often a section entitled something like ‘Proven Experience’. This often relates more directly to the role in terms of expertise and experience, rather than giving evidence of the relevant skills. You may wish to adapt the content of any traditional cover letter you have written for a similar type of role and break it down to fit these different requirements. You will also often end up writing more and in more detail in a competence-based application form; there are sometimes character or word limits, but often the sections are not limited in length.