

Non-Academic Job Applications: Letters and Personal Statements

Introduction

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

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 obvious to you why you want the job, and what you bring to it, but it is not as obvious where your skills and experience 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 of the job specification.

- The order in which you present information will influence what they remember about you – if you put your PhD first they will think that is the most important thing you want them to remember. But is it?
- Make it as easy as you can for them to see your strengths – use clear language and clear examples.
- Try and find themes in your background that reflect themes in the job – 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 organisation? 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.

Give evidence of your suitability and relevant experience

Giving evidence is absolutely crucial. What you put in the letter not only provides the basis for questions asked in the interview, but 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.

- Don't just say things like 'I am a good communicator.' Give examples of when you had to deliver a difficult message or craft a technical report to be understood by a non-technical audience. Choose examples that show you understand what this skill means in this context.
- Do establish your credentials, so if having or doing a PhD shows you have essential expertise in a relevant area then put it down. In a non-academic letter

you might want to say ‘my background as an academic researcher’ or ‘my professional research experience’ instead of naming the PhD outright, particularly if you are afraid that the reader may think you overqualified. Remember, a PhD is a qualification in being able to research as well as a pin on the great map of knowledge.

- Do talk about why you want the job, but try to be specific about what it offers you than just saying ‘this is a great opportunity for me’. Does it consolidate a broad range of other experiences you have had? Does it offer you the chance to make your academic research relevant to corporate or public sector contexts? Does it offer you the chance to find new ways to apply specific skills you have? If so, how?
- Make your examples as relevant as you can to the reader, so they can see the read-across to their organisation or the content of the job. Make it as easy as you can for the reader to understand why you have told them something about yourself.

How you write is as important as what you write

Letters for academic jobs will naturally include discussion of your research, and will probably include highly technical language, but letters for non-academic positions or speculative applications for opportunities you want to create must show that you understand how and when to use different kinds of language. A common fear among non-academic employers is that PhD graduates will only be able to talk in long words and long sentences, and yet an expectation in most non-academic jobs is that you will be required to work with lots of people from many different parts of the organisation and beyond. So you must do more than say you are a good communicator, you must write your letter clearly and precisely to show that you can express yourself well. Always get someone else to read it through!

Final details

- Have you named the job you are applying for and where it was advertised (not necessary in a statement on an application form as that is usually covered elsewhere)?
- Have you made a note at the end of the letter of any dates you are not available for interview?
- Have you made sure your contact details are on the letter somewhere in case it gets separated from your CV?

Specific content for non-academic jobs

When you choose to work outside the academic environment as a PhD graduate, you need to be sensitive to a number of factors.

Combat pre-conceived ideas about PhDs

- Be precise about your objectives in applying for the job and about what you bring to the job.

- As outlined above, use language very carefully when you talk about yourself, so you overcome the perception that because you are highly trained you might also be aloof or unapproachable, or unwilling to work in a team.
- Be aware that you will need to reassure them subtly that you are going to be an asset not a hindrance by being better qualified than other people in the organisation.

Know the sector

- Employers often fear that you have only a ‘scholar’s eye view’ of their sector or, worse still, are ignorant of what they do. So show you understand what work is really done by the organisation, and what the job itself actually entails.
- Use any research you have done into the company sparingly and to highlight your suitability, skills and strengths, rather than to show that you have done your background reading.
- Allude to key aspects of the job that are not part of the obvious business of the company but which also reflect some of your own skills, such as relationship building, communicating messages, finding alternative solutions to problems.
- If an organisation has published projects or reports in areas that are of interest to you then say so, and why, but again be careful about using language or analysis that is too scholarly.

The content of the letter will fall broadly into two categories: why you want the job, and why you are well suited to the job.

Why do you want the job?

- Why do you want to work in this sector? What relevance does it have to you and do you have to it? How does it fit with your career objectives – can you trace a line through your past experience that shows why this is a logical next step for you?
- If, alternatively, you are doing this because it is something completely different then give an intelligent justification for your change of direction. If you can find ways to show how that change of direction does have roots in other experiences you have had before, then that is helpful. You will though need to put much more emphasis on your relevant skills portfolio and the other competences you bring (see the list of competences in the presentation ‘Non-Academic Careers on the PhD pages of the LSE Careers website).
- Why would you do well in this job/career? What competences do you have that are appropriate? What potential in you will be developed in this role? Why are you interested in the evolution of this sector or organisation and why do you want to become part of that? How will your presence contribute to the development of the company in achieving their objectives?
- What specifically do you offer in terms of skills and experience and how can you use them? Again, the competences list can be helpful here, as can the job description. But also try to think about doing the job on a day-by-day basis and draw out some themes from the job that reflect your strengths.
- What interests me about this particular role? Dig a bit deeper into the job itself. PhD students are often concerned that the job they are applying for is more junior than the corresponding academic opportunity to which they would

be entitled, and that they might have to convince an employer that they are not over-qualified. So think about what advantages there might be from learning about the sector or the company ‘from the bottom up’, what peer learning opportunities there might be, how knowing the way the organisation does its business in a more detailed way might help you contribute more effectively more quickly, and find ways to express that.

- What challenges in the job appeal to me? It is fine to acknowledge one or two of the aspects of a job that might really differ to your existing experience, but try to make a feature and a virtue of that, showing how your alternative perspective might be useful, or how you can contribute different ideas about strategic development or communication opportunities, for example. Just as your PhD is a cross-section of different ideas, data and disciplines, so all your professional experience to date is a cross-section of different skills and experiences which, when broken down, will look much more appealing to an employer than the simple label of ‘PhD graduate’.

Speculative Applications and Enquiries

Sometimes you will want to approach an employer with the hope that when they hear about you they will want to create an internship, voluntary, temporary, consultancy, or even permanent job opportunity for you. This applies particularly to smaller organisations who do not recruit often or widely, companies who don’t have large scale regular recruitment schemes or employers in whom you are particularly interested because they are a very good match for your interests.

You will probably approach them first of all with an introductory email or cover letter, plus your CV, so that email or letter is going to be the equivalent to going up to them at a conference or a public event and introducing yourself. You don’t get long to sell yourself and what you offer, and you need to make yourself sound as relevant to them as possible in a relatively short space.

So:

- Think of the reader. Think of the reader. Think of the reader. Yes, you are selling yourself, but there is so much more emphasis than usual on seeing yourself through their eyes, because they have to develop really quickly a sense of how you could fit within their organisation.
- Do be clear about what sort of opportunity you are seeking. But be realistic too. In the current market, permanent jobs are unlikely to be offered in response to a speculative approach, so consider whether offering consultancy would be a good compromise if you want longer-term paid work, or an internship if you are just looking for experience.
- Be clear about what assets you are bringing them, both in terms of skills and expertise. Again, it is so important to frame your research specialism in a way they can actually use, so refer to work that they have done already that you know of and are interested in, so they can see you are intelligent and that you have done your homework.
- You won’t have a job spec to work from so use commonly understood competences to define what you offer, and again frame that in relation to the company itself. It is no good offering data analysis skills if they are primarily

concerned with advocacy or delivering complex messages, so make it as easy as you can for them to imagine why you would be an asset from the moment you arrive. Remember too that you will rarely be offered training, as the assumption is you are coming in with as much to offer as you have to gain.