Cover Letters & Personal Statements

Dr Steve Joy, Careers Adviser
Overview

1. Shortlisting
2. Purpose of a cover letter / statement
3. Tips on structure
4. Striking the right tone
5. Any questions?
Empathise with the shortlisting process
If you only remember one thing:

It’s not all about you.
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It’s about *them* – what your potential employer is needing and wanting.
What’s the point of a cover letter?
Potential

Suitability

Eligibility
Find a good balance
Structure – keep it simple
The number one rule:

Nobody wants to read your autobiography.
Dear [Name / Job Title]

Para 1: What are you applying for? Where did you hear about the job? Who are you? What’s your ‘headline’?

Para 2: What do you bring to the role? What’s your evidence for those claims?

Para 3: Why do you want to do this particular job at this particular organisation? What’s your vision for the role?

Para 4: Conclusion, e.g. dates you’re available

Yours sincerely / Yours faithfully,

[Your name]
“This is your opportunity to distinguish yourself from other applicants, and give an impression of your character. Be positive. Show that you are aware of our business by giving relevant examples of how you have used your skills with accounts of what you’ve done.”
Personal statement, e.g. for a Masters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Para 1:</th>
<th>What are you applying for?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who are you?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What’s your ‘headline’?</td>
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<td>Para 2:</td>
<td>What academic experience do you have?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What preparation have you undertaken?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What skills do you bring to the course?</td>
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<td>Para 3:</td>
<td>Why do you want to do <em>this particular</em> course at <em>this particular</em> university?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What are your goals?</td>
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Advice from an admissions officer:

“The statement needs to express the applicant's interest in the subject, and perhaps include some academic references or reading that they've undertaken. Explaining why a particular university or school has been selected will also demonstrate that the applicant researched the institution's area of expertise. Applicants may also allude to their career aspirations, or whether they would be looking to continue with a PhD or postdoctoral studies.”
Don’t forget:

*Relevance* is what matters. Never include anything for vacuous reasons such as “I’m proud of it” or “it reflects my personality”.
Striking the right tone
Don’t repeat your CV
Avoid personal opinions

Demonstrate, don’t commentate.
Personal opinions

- “X and Y make me the ideal candidate for this position.”
- “I have gained extensive experience of X.”
- “As a [job/position], I successfully honed my skills in X and Y.”
- “I have excellent communication skills.”
- “I am capable of working independently and as part of a team.”
- “I enjoy finding solutions to problems.”
Showing, not telling:

“I am well versed in digital marketing.”
"I am well versed in digital marketing."

"I have sought out opportunities to develop my digital marketing skills. For example, I interned last summer at the Poppleton Gallery, where I developed a new visitor blog and promoted it via Twitter. The blog continues to attract 1000 hits per month."
Write about your emotions only with extreme caution.
Emotional language

- “I am passionate about international development.”
- “I have always wanted to work in strategy consulting.”
- “I am committed to helping others.”
- “As a child, I always loved reading.”
- “I am enthusiastic and motivated.”
- “My long-standing interest in the archaeology of ancient Britain...”
Sticking to the facts:

“I am passionate about helping people to develop their talents.”
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“As captain of the College’s ‘lower’ boats, I recruited and trained 40 new rowers last autumn. This was the highest number of novice boats since 2009, and more than 50% of the novices decided to continue rowing after the first term.”
Behave with dignity

Do not pander, flatter, or in any way suck up to your potential employer.
Undignified pandering

- “I would be honoured to join a world-leading organisation such as yours.”
- “It would be a privilege to discuss this further with you at interview.”
- “As the global market leader in X, with an unrivalled portfolio of Y and a highly skilled team, your company is the perfect place for me to start my career.”
- “The opportunity to work under the supervision of world leaders in their field, such as Prof X and Dr Y...”
Tailoring to a specific organisation:

“I am excited about the prospect of working in a creative and dynamic environment such as AAA.”
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“I first came into contact with your organisation when I did a voluntary placement with BBB. I have researched your current projects, and your anti-homophobic bullying initiative most closely matches my experience working in schools and with LGBT groups in Cambridge. I am keen to learn more about how you evaluate the effectiveness of these programmes and report on your outcomes to stakeholders and funders.”
Tell good stories
Ten irritating mistakes

1. Far too long
2. Simply repeating the CV – in long form
3. Starting every sentence with ‘I’
4. Using emotional language
5. Content not tailored to the specific application
6. Assuming expertise on the part of the reader
7. Using clichés from ‘template’ letters
8. Formatted differently to the other documents
9. Addressed ‘Dear Sir/Madam’
10. Incorrect use of ‘Yours faithfully’ or ‘Yours sincerely’
CVs and Cover Letters

- how to compile them
- how to target them
- with examples

CVs and Cover Letters for PhDs and Postdocs
Any questions?