**The Community College Cover Letter**

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The most common mistake that candidates make in applying for a job at a community college is reusing a cover letter they wrote for an opening at a four-year campus.

Besides the fact that serious job seekers should craft each cover letter with a specific institution and job posting in mind, there are key differences between two-year and four-year institutions that should be tacitly acknowledged in the letter. Repurposing a cover letter originally aimed at a research institution tells a search committee that either you don’t know much about two-year colleges or you view them as a backup plan. Neither attitude will endear you to committee members.

If you are genuinely interested in teaching at a two-year college — or at least hope to appear that way — here’s what you need to keep in mind as you write your cover letter.

**Mention the specific job and institution.** That’s good advice for any cover letter. But when applying for a community-college job, it’s particularly important to let the committee know, in your first paragraph, that you understand exactly what you’re doing. You can also use the first paragraph to state your interest in the position, to note where you saw it advertised, and to explain briefly why you think you might be a good fit. (You can expand on that later in the letter.)

Something like this, for example, would accomplish those goals and constitute a sufficiently personalized opening: “I am writing to apply for the position of Instructor of English (#JB2803) that I recently saw advertised in *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* I hope you will consider me for this position, for I believe I have the teaching experience and educational background to be an asset to your department there at South Valley Community College.”

**Put your teaching experience up front.** Unlike many research universities, where teaching is sometimes seen as a distraction from more important pursuits, community colleges are teaching institutions, first and foremost. Assuming you meet at least the minimum qualifications for the job, what the search committee most wants to know is how good a teacher you’re going to be. Everything else is secondary.

That’s why I always tell graduate students: “If you have a lot of teaching experience, spend the entire second paragraph of your cover letter (and maybe the third, too) talking about it. And if you don’t have a lot of teaching experience, spend your entire second paragraph talking about it, anyway.”

Obviously, if you’ve held multiple teaching positions and taught dozens of courses, that’s going to look pretty good to hiring committees. But even if you’ve only taught a course or two, you can still talk about your classroom experiences, what you learned from them, and how they have kindled your desire to work at a teaching-focused campus.

**Show, don’t tell.** Simply saying that you have a “passion for teaching” or that you believe in a “student-centered classroom” is unlikely to resonate with search committees. Such comments just sound canned, not to mention a bit self-aggrandizing.

Instead, explain what you’ve actually done that illustrates your “passion” for teaching: “This semester in my course on X, I am trying Y (name a specific activity) with my students. The results are encouraging. (Then state one or two reasons why.) Next semester I plan to do Z.” Describe how you’ve conducted class in a “student-centered” manner — ideally, without actually using that phrase. Your actions, to the extent that you can describe them adequately, will carry a lot more weight than jargon.

**Put your research toward the end — and don’t dwell on it.** The fact that you earned a Ph.D. and wrote a dissertation is a plus (even though most two-year colleges still only require job applicants to have a master’s). If you have an ongoing research agenda, that’s fine, too. Be sure to mention it in your letter, but only briefly, and only after you’ve talked about your teaching. Do not go into great detail about your research, except perhaps in rare cases where it might be directly related to some aspect of the job opening — for example, if your dissertation focused on developmental education or on underprepared high-school graduates.

You may well want to continue your research if you get the community-college job, and that’s commendable. Just don’t give the committee any reason to suspect that your research might interfere with your real job (teaching) — or, worse, leave the impression that what you really want is a job at a research university.

**Make your letter long enough (but not too long).** I’ve seen everything from a one-sentence cover letter (“Please see attached documents”) to a three-page monster. The former frustrates me (it doesn’t tell me anything about the applicant), while the latter bores me to tears. Both are likely to wind up in the “no thanks” pile.

The ideal length for a community-college cover letter is about a page and a half — long enough to be substantive without being tedious, repetitive, or full of you-know-what. Let me put it this way: As a member of a search committee (which I am, frequently), I would regard anything less than a page as a missed opportunity for you to give us a sense of who you are and why you want this job, while anything more than two pages will make my eyes start to glaze over.

**Above all, don’t patronize.** My least favorite kind of cover letter, of the thousands I’ve read, is the one that sounds as though the applicant is talking to people he considers his intellectual inferiors. Such letters are surprisingly common, no doubt because many applicants, coming out of highly regarded Ph.D. programs, do actually feel superior to “community college types” — even while making a bid to become one of them.

You don’t have to approach the committee hat in hand. You’re an applicant, not a supplicant. Attempts to shamelessly suck up will be glaringly obvious to seasoned, world-weary committee members — but so will an attitude of vague superiority. In terms of tone, try to land somewhere in between: “I believe I possess the attributes you seek” as opposed to “It is clear that I am highly qualified for this position.”

In sum, when applying at a community college, use the cover letter to let committee members know you understand exactly what you’re getting yourself into; that you’re excited about the prospect of teaching at a two-year college (at *their* two-year college); and that you’re completely on board with the college’s teaching mission. Do all of that without sounding too much like Eddie Haskell (Google him).



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