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career *insights*



How to write a killer cover letter for a postdoctoral application

8+1 3

By Bill Sullivan

Many graduate students applying for their first postdoctoral positions underestimate the importance of the cover letter. While it may be true that your awesomeness is beautifully outlined on your curriculum vitae, your cover letter often will dictate whether the busy principal investigator puts your application at the top of the heaping pile or into triage.

First impressions are everything for some people, so leave nothing to chance. If you provide only your CV, you aren't being very personable, and you lose a precious opportunity to highlight some things that make you stand out. On the other hand, a cover letter is also an opportunity to shoot yourself in the foot, so here are a few do's and don'ts.

Start off right. Address your potential future PI properly, as "Dr. (insert surname here)." If you begin your letter with "Dear Sir/Madam" or "To Whom It May Concern," your application could be dismissed as generic and untailed for the position. A letter that appears to come off an assembly line is likely to ride directly into the trash bin. If you do not invest the time to learn about the PI and his or her research, then the PI is not likely to invest the time to read your application.

After the salutation, the first statement should be a formality that states why you are writing to the PI. It is important to respect how hectic a day in the life of a PI can be, so get right to the point — something like, "I am applying for the postdoctoral position available in your laboratory that was recently advertised (where)."

The second sentence should specify your current position, place of work and mentor. If you are not immediately available for hire, it is useful to mention when you will be able to start. End the first paragraph with just one or two concise sentences that hint at why you are the ideal candidate for the position — you will expand on these points next.

In the second paragraph, elaborate on why you should be considered for the postdoc — not just any postdoc, mind you, but this particular postdoc in this particular lab. Yes, it is infinitely easier to use the same cover letter for the dozens of postdoctoral positions for which you are applying, but that is not going to cut it. These uniform letters are easy to detect and usually dismissed as lazy and insincere. If you fail to convince the PI that you are taking the postdoc search seriously, then the PI is not likely to take you seriously. It is essential that you customize your letter, emphasizing how your background is aligned to the PI's studies and the specifics called for in the advertisement. Consider this the first demonstration to your future PI that you are resourceful and thoughtful — if you fail to do your homework, it does not build confidence that you will be diligent with your project. Equally important to

convincing the PI that you have the right stuff is conveying your excitement for learning something special that is studied by his or her lab. Strive to balance what you would give to the lab and what you would gain from it.

In paragraph three, it is time to brag about a few key achievements, such as your most important paper or two, a grant or fellowship, or other notable honors (an award-winning presentation at a conference, for example). You also can briefly mention that you have experience training more junior people if that is the case. But don't give a laundry list of every minor award — that is why you submit a CV. The cover letter is the trailer, and your CV is the movie.

End your cover letter with the same professionalism you used at the opening. Thank the PI for his or her time and consideration. Be sure to provide your contact information and state that you look forward to hearing from him or her. Everything discussed above should fit onto a single page — 1 ½ pages at most.

There are a number of important don'ts that apply to cover letters. Things that might seem trivial to you actually can be turnoffs. Use plain email stationary free of distracting backgrounds or pictures. Choose a font that is not too big, not too small, not in color, definitely not comic sans and NOT IN CAPS. A plain, boring font like 12-point Arial or Helvetica is easy on the sore eyes of a PI struggling to read the 87th postdoc application. At midnight. After struggling with an online manuscript submission. I can hear the chorus of nonconformists arguing that unconventional fonts and graphics make their applications stand out. Of course it does, but I contend that it is a gamble to present yourself in this manner. If you have the goods, you don't need the glam.

Some applicants waste valuable sentences describing how they "deeply admire" the "esteemed" laboratory or how they always dreamed about working with the PI. When the cover letter is heavy on flattery, the applicant usually is light on talent or productivity. If your cover letter contains significant blocks of text copied straight from the advertisement, you may be construed as someone with poor language skills or unable to paraphrase. It should go without saying that spelling and grammatical mistakes are inexcusable and often taken as a sign of laziness and carelessness — two of the worst attributes a scientist could possess. Finally, avoid slang and attempts at humor, and do not end your sentences with an exclamation point!

I hope these tips help you land that perfect postdoctoral position.



Bill Sullivan (wjsulliv@iu.edu) is an associate professor at the Indiana University School of Medicine. Follow him at www.twitter.com/wjsullivan.

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6 COMMENTS

[P Ghosh](#)

[12/9/2013 11:05:29 AM](#)

Fantastic article... just missing a sample. But its a great skeleton! Thank you for taking the time to write this Dr. Sullivan!

[naveen kumar](#)

12/8/2013 6:02:16 AM

Thank you Professor,
 After reading this artical "how to write a cover letter for post doc position" i got idea how to write impressive. This artical is well written, its is everybody necessary read to get good opportunity for bright future.
 once again thank you very much

[Far Naj](#)

11/28/2013 8:02:39 PM

Thank you for the information. Can you also please provide some information on 'how much should you read the group's papers you are applying to?'

Just enough to ensure your research interests are relevant and you are aware of group's area of research? Or, you would want to include several references to their papers to let the PI know you understand their research well?

About the length it should not be more than 1.5 pages the most? Thank you very much indeed.

[Pavan Kumar Challa](#)

10/25/2013 11:39:31 AM

Great article.Nice presentation of the do' and don'ts.

[Kevin Liu](#)

10/7/2013 4:42:28 PM

This is really a great article. My experience of initial postdoc application made exactly the mistake Dr Sullivan described in the article. I sent out dozens of applications with generic cover letter. The results were always no reply or politely decline. Finally, I stopped wasting time in that way and started investing time in the labs I was really interested in, reading related papers of the lab and investigating the research interest of the PI. I quickly got several positive responses and interviews. I strongly recommend every postdoc applicant to read this article carefully before submitting an application.

[Joan Sullivan](#)

10/2/2013 8:56:35 PM

Excellent article! Very well written.

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