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Your Official Job-Application Checklist

By David D. Perlmutter

For the novice, the logistical challenges of an academic job search can be exasperating, especially when dozens of applications are involved. Getting things right (providing the correct materials, from CV to sample syllabi, in the style and form most sought by a particular search committee) and submitting the application on time (via sometimes complicated e-interfaces) are never as easy as they may sound on initial prospect.

It follows that obsessiveness is a good quality in applicants for tenure-track positions. Most fields (although not all subfields) are buyers' markets. With hundreds of candidates—many of them highly qualified—for one position in, say, 20th-century American literature, harried committees are often looking for some way to narrow the pool. A missing item (like Page 2 of your teaching-philosophy statement), a late upload (because you put off doing it until the midnight of the deadline and your hard drive crashed), or even a typo on the sixth paragraph of your cover letter may get you passed up before you're even fully considered.

So details matter. All the more reason to get the materials and the procedures right.

Create a system; follow it. One of my doctoral advisees is seeking a tenure-track position—he's amazing, by the way; please hire him!—and has shown the true diligence of the professional. He has constructed an Excel chart to help him keep track of the openings, the required materials for each, references, deadlines, keywords in the job profile, and so on. While it took him some time to put together and will require updating, the chart will help him avoid the "What is that deadline again?" problem.

Follow his lead: Create some sort of system that will help you know the who, what, where, and when of the hunt. Allow some boxes for "extra" or "other" to annotate details native to a particular search, such as a page-length limit on a cover letter.

Note any new developments, such as when your references confirm they have sent off your letters of recommendation, and check them off as they

occur. Include a box for “connections” to fill in with any information about faculty members at the hiring department—especially the search chair or committee members. If you used one of their books when you were working as a TA, for instance, you might want to make a note of that and mention it if you get an interview.

Scan the chart at least once a week to make sure you aren't missing any coming deadlines.

The CV as introduction to you. Faculty members are busy, and even something as important as a new hire will not get everyone's deep, undivided, thoughtful inspection. That's why some materials are more important than others in capturing the committee's attention, with the CV and the cover letter (more on that later) perhaps tied for No. 1.

The CV is the most accessible document you will send in: A committee can glance over it a lot more easily than a teaching-philosophy statement or a sample of one of your publications.

The first page of the CV may even be the make-or-break initial filter of whether you fit the position profile. Just looking at your dissertation title may excite one committee and persuade another to stop reading. If you are applying for a job in a particular subfield, and your dissertation and advisers are obviously in another, the searchers may simply view that as a look-no-further indicator of "not right for the position."

So what can you do? Certain information is required on every CV, but you can reorganize it for different positions to emphasize areas in which you fit well with the job description at hand. If you are applying for a job at a teaching-oriented college, for example, your classroom experience should be prominent on your vita.

Don't be afraid to annotate as well where an item on your CV may require additional explanation. Case in point: The dissertation title may not mention a subfield sought by the hiring department, but what if half the chapters of your thesis do? An italicized note elucidating that connection would help. Likewise, if a journal you've written for is obscure but has a high impact factor, let the reader know.

Another CV challenge involves which information to leave off. Perhaps you're applying for a specialized position. Should you delete a few of your publications in unrelated areas to avoid confusion? Maybe, since you are trying to tell the committee that you are focused on what it says it wants. In addition, a CV can look "stretched" if you include items that seem minor or unrelated—hobbies, marital status, talks at book clubs, and such.

Perhaps the most controversial item to remove from a CV is the dissertation's year of issue, in the case of an older candidate whose Ph.D has, to use the horrific terminology, "passed its freshness date." Yes, age discrimination is illegal even when masked by a request for a "recent degree," and dismissing great candidates because they have been adjuncting for three years in a very tough job market is hardly ethical.

Yet it happens a lot, or it would not be talked about so much. Here you have to make your own call. However, the date of dissertation is so common an item on a CV that leaving it off seems to be a clear signal to the committee that you, or your degree, are not fresh off the vine.

Letter of application. The second document that a committee is likely to read completely, or at least peruse, is the cover letter. Here, compared with your CV, you are allowed immensely more freedom of content, style, and tone—but all the choices may daunt you.

Best to begin by determining what you are *not* going to write. An application letter is not an autobiography, an encyclopedia of your accomplishments, or a cry for help. Think of it instead as a short (no more than two single-spaced pages), reasoned introduction to the main points of why the search committee, and, subsequently, the faculty and relevant administrators, should consider you for at least the next step of an interview.

Begin by taking hints from the people who will decide your fate. Carefully read the job ad to uncover four or five required and preferred characteristics for the position. For example, the department will probably mention a particular subfield. An ad might also include notations like, "We are looking for someone to teach classes in 'social media and health' and 'introduction to strategic communication campaigns,'" or to take particular methodological approaches. Highlight those keywords—and enter them on the job chart you've created. Make sure your cover letter exactly answers how you fit each characteristic.

Cover letters do not have a standard format, and they would be painful to read if they did. But incorporating your skills, talents, and achievements as well as philosophy and outlook into the categories that a search committee has provided is the best way to organize a letter. That doesn't mean that you can't add further talking points, such as some relevant technical, intellectual, or experiential skill. A personal touch—mentioning how much (and why) you like the prospect of teaching at this kind of institution or living in the area—can't hurt so long as it is sincere and specific, not forced and generic.

Be positive in the style and tone of your letter. Never complain about your current situation. You are auditioning to be not just a researcher or teacher but also a colleague, so sound like you will be a good one. Don't simply list your solo achievements; offer some examples of your cooperation with or service to others.

A cover letter is rarely a good place to deal with problems. Perhaps you received below-average ratings from students for a class you taught by yourself. Consider asking your references to offer context. Your adviser, for example, might explain that the below-par evaluations were the result of your teaching a tough, "eat-your-peas" skills class that was undergoing a content revision. She might then add how you worked hard to learn from the experience and have greatly improved as a teacher.

Similarly, be careful about overcongratulating yourself. If you are applying for a research-heavy position and you have already published quite a bit, don't actually say things like, "I am the most published graduate student I know!" Rather feature your publications list up high in your CV, mention them in your letter, but leave the effusive praise to your references. Instead of sounding like a prima donna, you will seem a star in the making.

References. I have written several columns already about choosing good references for an application. You want to make sure they are not, by error or intention, actually "unrecommending" you for the job, nor should they be so [over-the-top](#) that they are not taken seriously.

Here I want to restrict myself to the actual selection of your references. First, you don't want a reference list that looks like you're trying to avoid something or somebody. Listing three assistant professors, for example, is problematic because (a) they are much less likely to have longstanding personal connections in your field; (b) they are unlikely to be "names" that might lend you some of their prestige; and (c) their uniform selection may prompt the search committee to ask, "Didn't this candidate impress anyone on the senior faculty?"

So balance the roster. Your adviser is almost a requirement. But other supporters can include those who are familiar with different parts of your expertise. Not every reference letter can or should be identical. For a mixed position of teaching, research, and service, you might have one of the standard troika write about your excellence in research, another about your classroom skills, and a third talk up what a great colleague you've been.

Others to include? Your department chair may not have supervised you or sat on your committee but can testify to your professionalism and good

citizenship. (Note: The head of the search committee may call your chair anyway.) Consider listing outsiders as well, such as professors you have impressed at other colleges.

Your teaching philosophy. No item in an academic-job application is as puzzled over and even derided as the teaching-philosophy statement. There is nothing wrong with the idea per se; it is important that you be able to articulate why you do what you do in the classroom.

Perhaps the problem is the word "philosophy." It forces people to think they must sound lofty, high-minded, and altruistic. I prefer to call the document a "teaching statement." In it, I would rather read an explanation of your practical approaches to teaching, an annotated description of your experience, and, perhaps most important, your attitudes toward the craft through the observations you have made and lessons you have learned.

You've probably taught or been a TA in at least one course that did not have great results or strong student-evaluation scores. Here is an opportunity to show how you "course correct" versus showing how correct your courses have been. Talk about the problem student in that course, the time you realized your lecture had turned out to be incomprehensible, the discussion section from hell. Then describe how you bounced back, learned from the experience, and did it better thereafter. Good teachers, as other good teachers realize, are constantly adapting. No one gets it right every time and certainly not the first time.

Review, proof, and check off. You may never hear if your application packet suffered from a small or epic fail of logistics. A kindhearted search chair may call you to say that Page 2 of your CV is missing, or she may toss your application aside and proceed to the next one. Almost nobody will call you to tell you that you forgot to proofread your teaching statement.

So look things over several times. Have a trusted and literate friend do the same—perhaps you can trade off the duties. That advice may seem self-evident but we all make mistakes in the rush of any major project. Also, check off on your job chart any application that is ready to go.

Getting all of the required materials done correctly and promptly will not necessarily get you the position, but the effort will allow you to leap the first hurdle toward being considered for it.

That said, this is 2012. We are in the third decade of the public Internet. Along with the official application materials comes the much hazier world of what search committees learn about you from the Web. How not to be embarrassed by—and instead prosper from—the unofficial materials of the





job search will be the focus of my next column.

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 **fortysomethingprof** 2 days ago


You're absolutely right that the changes in format and other purely clerical tasks can consume a lot of one's time when putting applications together. Why doesn't one of these oversight organizations like the AAU come up with recommendations for standardizing applications? Medical schools did this long ago. Maybe that's not as complicated, and obviously it's not as disciplinarily diverse. But really, does it matter whether a teaching statement is one pages or two? One wonders if the quality really being tested (as in many interviews) is raw stamina?

5 people liked this. 


 **david_perlmutter** 2 days ago in reply to fortysomethingprof


As someone who writes lots of letters as well, I would love to see this.




 **fortysomethingprof** 1 day ago in reply to david_perlmutter

Oh yeah, that's a no-brainer. Personalization of every letter is just a drag. Make a system so you CANT personalize it and everyone will be better off for it.

1 person liked this. 

 **durgamaa1** 2 days ago

For the past 7 years, I have been following the type of advice you are now giving. No tenure track yet. Only adjunct jobs.

9 people liked this. 



david_perlmutter 2 days ago in reply to durgamaa1

Sorry to hear that. You understand all advice is an attempt to help people (a) narrow thier odds and (b) avoid common mistakes--that are way too common. No guarantees...luck plays a huge role. I meet great folks all the time who never got that one, good break.

10 people liked this. [Like](#)



fortysomethingprof 1 day ago in reply to durgamaa1

Let me tell you, we see plenty of stuff from applicants that is so lousy that you wonder what the hell they were thinking.

3 people liked this. [Like](#)



henry_adams 2 days ago

Excellent advice. I would add on thing. The author states that the head of the search committee may call the chair of the candidate's department. I say the head of the committee must call that chair to do a fact check. In a collapsing profession like higher ed, the number of desperate applicants who lie about their credentials is horrifying.

Henry Adams

5 people liked this. [Like](#)



fortysomethingprof 1 day ago in reply to henry_adams

Calling someone who is not one of the candidate's official references is "out of order" in most HR environments now, unless the candidate has provided you with a privacy release to do so. The call might be allowable if you ask only for "directory level information" and if more information is offered you should not write it down. If you've going to do that then it should be by email, not over the phone, so that the exchange can be documented.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



GGt2 1 day ago in reply to fortysomethingprof

Perhaps, but god knows it's common for people to contact anybody they know at an applicant's school or former employer to try and get some kind of scoop. You have to be prepared for that in some fields and academia is one of them.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



minnesotan 23 hours ago in reply to GGt2

And well we should, the HR drones be damned! I've seen a lot of colleagues/applicants/students who didn't necessarily lie on their CV, but definitely "tweaked" the truth. A pre-conference presentation at a sub-group's symposium might get "tweaked" into implying it was a presentation at the extremely selective main conference. An encyclopedia article might be "tweaked" to imply to the reader that it was in a peer-reviewed journal. Etc.

I find it very (Very!) disturbing that academics would do this, but I find it even more disturbing that few people are ever caught! It's awfully hard to see these things happen, and not be able to mention it to anyone without potentially horrible consequences for all involved.

Like



edumacator 1 day ago in reply to henry_adams

Have you seen this much yourself? I've heard very little and would love to hear some stories.

1 person liked this.

Like



viscommprof 2 days ago

Appearances matter. I looked half-heartedly for another position for several years. But when I became serious, I re-constructed my CV. Instead of the my-eyes-glaze-over, blah-blah list, I made the document readable and accessible: bolder headlines for section headings, indents under headings and bullet points to list my duties and accomplishments.

On my cover letter, I used bullet points to match the requirements specified in the job ad. You want diversity? This is what I did: bold type, bullet points.

My updated approach netted me three phone interviews, a Skype interview, two campus visits and a job offer, which I accepted. Sure there were lots of variables and no small modicum of luck involved, but having been on a lot of search committees, I know my application stood out just on format, and one search committee chair told me so, too,

13 people liked this.

Like



oldphilprof 2 days ago

This is all very good advice to which I will add only one point. If you leave off the date of your dissertation this can cause confusion. Does it mean you are still ABD or that you received your degree more than a year or two ago? If you think the latter can hurt you in the hunt for a tenure-track position, you must believe the former will as well. Omit the date at your own risk.

4 people liked this.

Like



music_librarian 2 days ago in reply to oldphilprof

Absent a date, my first assumption would be that the person is ABD.

3 people liked this.

Like



mzmaccalarian 2 days ago in reply to oldphilprof

Don't leave off the dissertation date, because *we will figure out when you graduated anyway*. And this will irk us.

7 people liked this.

Like



koufax33 2 days ago

I also kept a Google Doc spreadsheet and gave access to my main references - this was helpful.

2 people liked this.

Like



jenj2012 2 days ago

I have a question for the experts on here--if you do realize a mistake in your cover letter almost immediately after you send it, should you just write off that job or should you try resending with an explanation?

Like



david_perlmutter 2 days ago in reply to jenj2012

Just for me--I am fine with an "oops, attached is correct, updated version."

2 people liked this. Like



mjcurry 2 days ago in reply to jenj2012

Resend, as it usually goes first to an administrator who may scan or copy it for the committee (our applications get posted on a private Blackboard site) so they can replace the mistaken document with an updated one.

1 person liked this. Like



fortysomethingprof 1 day ago in reply to mjcurry

Bingo.

Like



temporaryname 1 day ago in reply to jenj2012

As a search committee chair, I'll happily take an updated letter and replace the one in our system, and the rest of the committee may well never even get a chance to see the original one.

Of course, a minor typo isn't going to sink you, even though we reserve the right to giggle a little over it. (Disclaimer: My field isn't American Lit or Modern History—they may well be looking for anything they can get to winnow the piles of applications they receive.) If we've been around long enough to be on a search committee we've all made mistakes, and odds are some of them have been bigger than the one you just sent us.

1 person liked this. Like



wowie 2 days ago

Regarding those dissertation dates.... How about some comments from those of you who have served on Search Committees. Have you (or do you, or how much do you) discriminate against a candidate whose dissertation or PhD is a few years old? I suppose you have no choice given your task but to trust the industry (the history of previous search committees' decisions to decline the candidate) and conclude, well, if s/he hasn't been picked up yet, there must be some reason. And so it goes.... Am I wrong?

1 person liked this. Like



comingalive 1 day ago in reply to wowie

For me, it depends on what the candidate has been doing since then. If the letter and other things on the resume (publications etc) indicate that the person has been keeping up to date with the discipline (even if they haven't had a relevant position), then I have no problem considering someone with an older degree. Experience is valuable as well.

5 people liked this. [Like](#)



dbcarr 1 day ago in reply to wowie

comingalive's response jibes with what I've seen and expected on search committees. If a candidate has been out a while and continued to seek and place publications, attend conferences, and compile a strong teaching record, then the date is less important. If the candidate has little or nothing in the pipeline--regardless of the degree's date--that would raise eyebrows. Sometimes search committees will request an interview to learn more in those cases; sometimes not. If they do, the rest of the application must indicate a very exciting candidate.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



temporaryname 1 day ago in reply to dbcarr

In fact, my own lean would be to prefer someone with experience than a fresh and new but untested face.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



r_angelo_borrelli 1 day ago

I actually titled my teaching statement as "educational outlook." It's probably my favorite piece of writing. So of course, no one will read it.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



tigerseye 1 day ago

If the position is primarily teaching, **PLAY UP YOUR TEACHING**. Discuss it first in both your cover letter and CV. When candidates go on and on about their research, we figure that they won't make the adjustment to our load, will be miserable and leave. If the school is undergrad only, remove all mention of grad students and courses in all of your documents. We see that as you don't know what we are, or you don't care. In sciences, explain how you'll work with undergrads in the research lab. Tell us why your project will be great for our undergrads. Our equipment is on our website--tell us how perfect our stuff is for you, or tell us what you'll need and how much you're looking forward to helping us get one!

Let us know that you want to be here, not that you just applied because we have a position. We know we're not Harvard, but we really can't afford a failed search.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



minnesotan 23 hours ago

"The second document that a committee is likely to read completely, or at least peruse"

Pedantic Man's super-message of the day: to peruse something is to read it thoroughly. The increasing use of "peruse" as synonymous with "scan" or "skim" is highly informal (and some might say incorrect, but Pedantic Man attempts to be polite).

1 person liked this. [Like](#)

