

Zoology Postdoc Cover Letters Workshop 21 January 2015

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Organised by the Zoology Postdoc Committee/Alecia Carter

The Zoology postdocs gathered to ask a panel of academics in the Department what they look for in academic cover letters, including cover letters for postdoc positions and lectureships. Below is a summary of the **questions** that were asked by the postdocs, and some notes of the responses (bulleted) and some *general comments* from the panel as the discussions continued. Important, reiterated points are underlined, and the most important couple that kept coming up are in **green**.

Please note these documents are a product of an informal discussion and represent personal opinions that do not reflect the position of the University and the Department of Zoology on these matters. They are rough transcripts of the conversations that have not been edited for content.

Don't worry about writing a cover letter for a paper; no one reads it

Think about: What would convince the selection committee to give you their money—what would you look for if you were recruiting someone?

What's the role of the cover letter?

- In the UK, the cover letter is as important as CV; they [the selection committee] won't just look at the cover letter.
- Probably the least important of the CV, references, etc.
- For postdoc position, cover letter is very important, but not as important for academic job.

Cover letter for postdoc: what's the ratio between what you've done and plans for the future

- Want to see that the candidate can think for themselves, but don't want them to take over
- There should be a synergy, interactions with lab. Balance between lab and independence.
- Show why you want to work with a person, and familiarity with the work/concepts; clarify motivation!
- Need to show that you are serious, have motivation.

Apply to work with an individual or Department, say why you fit and how you'll add to it.

The letter is another opportunity to give MORE information

- don't put in redundant information,

- bring other things out,
- show the logic of why you want to work in that particular Department!

How long should it be?

- Less than one page/No more than two sides: a page and a bit.

Other points:

- *ADD EXTRA MATERIAL that isn't in the CV*
- *Your chance to show why this particular lab/department is good for you/you're a good fit.*
- *Say that you've spoken to XYZ in the Department*
- *Make clear that you REALLY WANT the job!*
- *Don't qualify things: "I'm very good at this, but..." Women do this more than men, don't be 'honest' here as you're likely wrong about your own skills!*
- *Men's confidence is expressed generally differently to women. Don't overinflate yourself, but be confident in your abilities.*

GET FEEDBACK!

- Easier for others to say where your strengths are
- Balance between: Calm quiet confidence, not trumpet-blowing

Biggest mistake from a postdoc applying for a job:

- *Not specific enough*
- *Not tailoring the cover letter to the job*

Tailoring it to the job: focus on skills or concepts/topics?

- The skills are in the CV, the cover letter is for showing that you're aware of the lab's/department's work
- Give EVIDENCE for your skills in the cover letter, do not list your skills.

Do you explain what your role on a (top journal) paper was?

- Yes. (If you did a lot) or you weren't a first author
- The cover letter is a good place to go through anomalies in your CV:
 - E.g. why you stayed in the same place for undergrad, postgrad and postdoc.
 - E.g. redesigned undergrad lab teaching etc.

Explain: Why do you want them and why do they want you!

- Compliment them, not that the lab/Department has a deficiency
- Do the homework.

What if you want to work in a place because your partner is there?

- Be honest, it will come out in the wash sooner rather than later

- Don't make too much of it

Make sure the cover letter has a nice, clear structure.

- Shows laziness if there are typos, meanderings, grammatical errors
- It's the first impression: don't make it sloppy-looking. Gets stuck in ppl's subconscious and difficult to get rid of

Research statement not for postdoc cover letters: where's the boundary between safe and ambitious?

- Need experiments that you can do from day 1.
- Build a case for blue sky questions, but don't be too ambitious

For postdoc positions, money is an issue:

- Be realistic about funding: say you'll strive for independent funding to work with the lab.
- It's a lot of time and effort to get funding. Find out what's available.
- How do you get to the point of getting money!

Do some spying about the lab: don't apply to a lab that wants a slave if you want to be independent.

Should one have a label of themselves in the first paragraph?

- No. Be careful about it. Don't pigeon-hole/label yourself narrowly
- If there's an advertisement out, there will be guidelines for what they're looking for in the further particulars.
- *Make it obvious you fit the guidelines.*
 - e.g. is there any evidence for the statements you've made

Predicting the interview:

- It will be obvious what they're looking for. The questions aren't unique, and should be easy to prepare for.

Interpersonal relationships are important: How can you indicate in the cover letter that you're a nice person?

- Difficult to advise.
- Self-reflect: do you primarily look out for yourself, or do you care about your colleagues
- Comes across in reference letters: ask your referees to mention that you're collegial (if that is the case)
- You can pick it up in a cover letter that other people are on the radar.
 - Mention teaching, outreach etc.
 - Requires a lightness of touch

Mention collaborations in a cover letter?

- Yes. Demonstrates personal determination and interpersonal skills

Mention papers in the cover letter?

- *No, redundant!*
- Paint a broader picture of yourself

If someone is changing a field drastically, i.e. skills are quite different, how to mention it?

- Some evidence that you're on the pathway to making it, highlight anomalies in the cover letter.
- Need something concrete for everything that you say, not just aspirations.

In PhD interviews: for every statement, have a concrete example for why it is true

We have transferable skills! Talk to people at conferences. It just has to be done. It makes all the difference. Be reflective about your networking.

Do your homework!

You're trying to get to the interview! References, CV, cover letter: paint the picture. MOST PEOPLE DO NOT THINK ABOUT IT: you will stand out if you do! Have people read about it.