

Standing Out from the Crowd: Producing Your Best Cover Letter and CV

By Gordon Hicken and Timothy Jones

Upon graduating, a logical next step for many collegiate percussion students is to apply for a new position, whether it be admission to graduate school or a teaching position in public schools or higher education. In addition to honing the technical, musical, and pedagogical skills required to earn these positions, students must also develop organizational and writing tools that will elevate their application materials in consideration for such positions. Below, we present some tips and suggestions that we hope will help your documents stand out to a search committee or admissions team.

PRESENTATION

The appearance of your materials will affect the committee's first impression of you. All of your documents should look polished, clean, and organized. Carefully consider your font choice, text size, indentations, and margins for your curriculum vita (CV) or resume and your cover letter. Avoid cluttering your document with overly ornate fonts or extraneous formatting. Ensure that your text is large enough to be easily legible, but not so large as to appear that you are padding your document. Also, be sure to submit your final documents in PDF format. This guarantees that your formatting

will appear exactly as you intend it to when the files are opened, distributed, and potentially printed. Word processor files (e.g., .docx, .pages) are prone to missing fonts, incompatible versions of software, and unintentional reformatting.

While there is great merit to a one-page cover letter and a CV full of achievements, ensure that the pages are not so jam-packed with text and information that it is difficult to navigate or digest. It is better to submit a legible two-page cover letter as opposed to a one-page letter that is crowded with quarter-inch margins and eight-point text size. However, if you do plan to utilize more than one page in your cover letter, ensure that your writing is concise and that you actually have enough information to warrant a document of that length.

Your CV should have a clear hierarchy that guides the reader through the entire document. Each major section (e.g., Education, Teaching Experience, Performing Experience) should be labeled with the same format and sub-headings, and entries should present all relevant information in a concise package. The "Styles" or "Paragraph Styles" tool in your word processing software is very helpful when trying to maintain consistent headings, sub-headings, and other structures. Your CV's format should allow readers to quickly summarize an over-

view of your professional experiences, but also provide them with enough direction to locate specific details quickly. Avoid padding your document with extra spacing to add pages. Committees will see through the fluff!

CLEAR, CONCISE GRAMMAR

The cover letter and CV should both be concise and to the point. Committees see many applications and need to quickly determine who will advance in the process. This is not to say that either document should skim details, but focus on your strengths and think about how you can encourage the readers to turn the page to learn more about you.

Your cover letter is essentially an invitation for the committee to look at your other documents. Provide relevant information that reflects your accomplishments up to this point in your career. Utilize action language and examples of accomplishments (e.g., "I published an article" or "I collaborated with colleagues"), both of which are more effective than items that you *might* do or that you *plan* to do.

For example, "I hope to bring prospective students to campus at PAS University" is less effective than, "In my previous position, I invited prospective students to the PAS State campus so they could experience the life of a student for a day."

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Your experiences and accomplishments will lead the committee to the conclusion that you can and will do more of the same at their institution. The cover letter is a perfect place to highlight initiatives or activities that are not easy to list on a CV. These items will help committee members connect the dots on how you managed to accomplish goals with your studio or ensembles, and how you will do the same at their institution.

Try to consider your own cover letter and resume from the perspective of a group of people who have not met you. How will they perceive you? Does your cover letter speak clearly of your qualifications; demonstrate your ability to succeed in the areas listed in the job description; display professionalism and organization; show that you are collegial and a beneficial addition to the team; make them excited for the unique qualifications that you bring; and show that you are genuinely seeking this job?

ACCURATE LISTINGS OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Your cover letter and CV should exhibit your finest accomplishments and achievements. While this is essentially a chance to brag about yourself and what you have done in your career, it is also important that you do so accurately and efficiently. Avoid terms such as “countless,” “endless,” and other hyperbolic words that can make your accomplishments seem inflated or inaccurate.

For example, “I taught countless students who were successfully admitted to colleges” would be better if it were more specific, such as: “Three of my private students earned admission to PAS University last year.”

On your CV, try not to list the same accomplishment multiple times unless it is absolutely warranted. Repeat listings

appear as though you are padding your document and may lead the committee to question why you need to list the same accomplishment multiple times. Also, be sure to put your most meaningful and relevant accomplishments towards the beginning of your CV. Everyone applying for collegiate percussion jobs probably performed in their undergraduate wind ensemble, but not everyone performed in a notable ensemble at the summer festival you attended last year.

You are only as strong as the weakest point on your CV. Though you may want to keep a chronological record of personal growth and success, a long list is not necessarily needed for most applications. Carefully consider whether certain entries will frame you as a strong candidate or weaken your credibility. For example, if you are 35 years old and have completed your DMA, listing your high school honor band is likely unnecessary.

As your career progresses and your reputation grows, your CV should shrink to only include major contributions. Think about Steve Gadd: his reputation and accolades precede him, so other than fulfilling the curiosity of the reader, he needs little more than his name on his CV. His artistry and body of work are prominent, and his influential drumming extends into many areas of music and the arts. If you are the director of a collegiate percussion program, certain qualifications and experiences are implied through your title. It's easy to get buried in writing about the tasks that affect your day-to-day routine (our busy work) and miss the highlights of why you are a great candidate for this position.

WRITING FOR THE SPECIFIC POSTING

Be sure to address each of the specific areas of expertise outlined in the position description. Do not simply talk about

how you meet the criteria, but discuss how your unique skill set will enhance the position and the institution to which you are applying. Remember that most schools display a mission statement or some other declaration that establishes the goals of their program, and certain schools maintain traditions (e.g., percussion orchestra or military-style marching band) that define that institution. Do your research, address these aspects of the program, and show how you will be an asset once you get the job.

If you're applying for a teaching position, be sure to put your relevant teaching experience as high as possible on your CV and mention it in your cover letter. If you avoid your pedagogical experience when applying for a teaching job, the committee will likely question that avoidance and your qualifications. The same goes for a committee that is looking for a performer. Don't neglect your relevant performance information when that is the committee's focus.

Should you provide information that is not requested? This is a subjective point of applying for jobs. Some applicants will stick to what is requested and make a strong case, whereas others will read between the lines and contribute additional pages with their teaching philosophy, successes in their current or previous programs, and even take a calculated risk in providing goals and intentions for the job to which they are applying. If your cover letter and CV are focused and compelling, the additional information can demonstrate maturity, big-picture thinking, and vision. However, be careful when pushing the boundaries, as search committees are already swamped with applications that don't meet the application criteria, are incomplete, or are poorly put together. A massive stack of unsolicited papers could easily go straight in the recycle bin.

FINALIZING THE MATERIALS

It is usually helpful to get at least one other set of eyes on the materials you intend to submit with your application. Let a trusted colleague read and critique the materials without any preamble from you to justify why certain things are on your application. This will allow you to get honest feedback, questions about unclear information, and ideas for closing any gaps. Always, *always* proof your application materials with fresh eyes before finalizing and mailing or submitting. Typos, auto-correct errors, and grammatical inconsistencies can unintentionally convey to the committee a lack of care, professionalism, and attention to detail.

When applying for several jobs in short succession, be very careful about cutting and pasting information. A fatal mistake that nearly every committee sees is the applicant who applies to as many jobs as possible and accidentally leaves the name of another institution or job title in the current application. We all know that most people cast a wide net. Jobs are not abundant, and we often search to find the right fit for ourselves. Remember, every search committee hopes to find the candidate who specifically wants the job at their university. So, what makes the place you are applying for special to you? What attracts you to that school or program? Articulate your intentions clearly in your cover letter.

Finally, remember that you intend to enter the search committee's world – the place where they work, socialize, pour out their hearts and artistic energy, and invest significant amounts of time. The committee does not take filling a position lightly, and they are studying applications carefully for the perfect faculty member to fill the missing piece of their puzzle. Take time compiling your documents, put your experiences and accomplishments at the forefront of your materials, and display your passion for what you do. Leave the search committee with no doubt that you are the correct choice for the job.

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