

FOCUS on Students: Applying for an Academic Job

By Robert W. Vallin

Once again we are at hiring season. Hundreds of applicants are each sending out triple-digit numbers of applications, trying to find a post-doctoral, tenure-track, or temporary position. This time-consuming process keeps the applicants worried and guessing about their future. It is a hair-pulling experience also for the department committee looking for that elusive “best fit.” Departments are well aware that a wrong move could end up being a 40-year mistake. Having served on several search committees as well as having compared notes with colleagues about their own adventures, I have decided to put pen to paper and give some help to those looking for employment. If you would like to find some more complete thoughts on the process I recommend going to the American Mathematical Society’s page on advice for new PhDs at <http://www.ams.org/employment/job-articles.html>.

Each job has its own nuances and it is important that you research these. This department emphasizes research. That one refers to excellence in teaching in its advertisement. Perhaps department A has someone who does research in analytic number theory just like you. Maybe department B has someone who is an officer in a group in which you wish to be active. This type of information can easily be found via the department web site. Departments are looking for a colleague who will be a good fit for them, and showing that you know details about their mission or faculty makes a good impression. It is easy to write one cover letter and just keep changing the address of the department, but such generic letters may get pushed to the bottom of the pile. Try to tailor each application to the situation. Also, even though you are the one looking for a job, this is not all about you. It is about those doing the hiring, too.

True Story: He was about to graduate. Very sure of himself, he would tell anyone and everyone who would listen how organized he was. He also complained

about how unnecessary and unfair it was to make each packet meet the needs of each school. “Too busy with his other stuff,” he told his friends. In the end, all the tenure-track jobs passed him by. Near the end of the school year he was lucky enough to find a temporary job. The moral: The requirements for your packet and department web site are there for a reason.

Schools can, for the most part, be sorted into one of three categories: Research Institutions, Liberal Arts Schools, and “the Rest.” When I was at a “the Rest” university and a cover letter said how the applicant’s goal was to teach at a liberal arts school, my only thought was, “Then why are you wasting my time?” Unwanted material will have the same effect, such as sending a teaching or research statement to a school which did not request one. That says you either didn’t read the ad or just don’t care.

Cover Letter

This is the first thing the committee will look at. It is your pitch, telling them why you are exactly what they’re looking for. These are much different from non-academic cover letters in that the readers are not the people you will work for, they are the people you will work with, your potential future colleagues. Any letter that is bland enough to be sent to every place you apply will not help you make any short lists. As with anything you sign your name to, make sure someone else (really at least two someones) reads it. Typos must be corrected. If your letter refers to the school by name, make sure that it is spelled correctly. Now is not the time to impress with fancy fonts or over-the-top gushing enthusiasm. Instead impress them with your professionalism. Remember, if you are sending out 100 applications, the committee is reading at least twice that many.

True Story: The cover letter read well. However, in the first paragraph, the first

letter of every line was a larger font-size than the rest. Bold-faced, they stood out. Put together, these letters spelled out the name of the applicant. Funny? Yes. Hiring material? No. The moral: You’re trying to be my colleague, not my entertainer/cheerleader.

Curriculum Vitae

As the Latin translation implies, this is your life. Like a résumé, this should be a history of your work. Unlike a résumé, this does not have to be short. Usually a CV starts at two pages and then grows. Everything should be included: personal information, education, dissertation title and advisor, teaching experience, research experience, papers (research, pedagogical, and expository) published or submitted, talks given, awards, service work, grants and fellowships received, workshops or mini-courses taken, meetings attended, and professional memberships. The page http://www.resumesandcoverletters.com/Academic_CV.pdf is a good sample of an academic CV. It’s a bit long, but it shows the numerous items that can go on a CV. Be warned though, a CV means something different in Europe. It is more of a résumé. When looking to the web for help, you’ll find lots of information that may be true in other countries (such as including a photograph), but that is not correct for an academic job in the U.S.

True story: The committee member could not tell you if she was qualified. He did not know how her CV read. He couldn’t get past the pink paper. Neither could anyone else. The moral: Stand out with your hard work and thoughtful presentation, not with the eye-catching trappings.

Teaching and Research Statements

Read the ads carefully to make sure these are requested. Again, when they are included but not asked for, they can give the impression that the applicant is using an assembly line approach and not

paying attention. After the first 100 or so applications the committee does not desire anything extra to read.

If you are required to write a teaching or research statement, be concise and be honest. If you have experience using applets to teach or have taken a minicourse on group work in discrete math courses, talk about it. Any involvement in reform movements should be noted. But if you haven't done any of these, don't despair. Just talk about what you do in the classroom and what you'd like to do in the future. Do not talk negatively. Saying how much you dislike "the sage on the stage" will immediately put you on the no list if the person reading your statement prides himself on his lectures. Similar ideas hold for research statements. Begin with some background to put your thesis problem in context. However, don't go into excruciating detail. The readers are not experts at what you study and lots of terminology and notation show that you are not judging your audience well. Start with your thesis, then any additional work you have done. Finally, talk about what you hope to explore in the future.

True Story: His research was good. His interests meshed well with the department without duplicating what the faculty already did. Next up on his agenda, he was going to take a stab at that Riemann Hypothesis he'd heard about. The moral: Too ambitious to be reasonable puts your application in the round file.

References

You need to have at least four references lined up. One should be your thesis advisor. One should specifically address your teaching. The others should depend on the specifics of the job. Are they more interested in your research or your teaching? Remember to pay attention to the skills of your letter writers. Before you ask someone to write a letter, ask yourself (and selected others), "Will the potential letter writer write me a good reference?" One short paragraph where your reference writes yes, you were in her class, and you did well, is not helpful. On the other hand, a three-page technical paper on your thesis will be

unintelligible for most of the committee. Finally, it is helpful if the writer is someone people will know, but only if what that person has to say is both substantive and positive.

True Story: This was a letter from someone who was well-known regardless of what field you were in. Even the envelope was impressive. Too bad the contents were not. They said, "I met this person once when he gave a talk in a session on our mutual interest. His presentation was good. I'm sure he'll do an excellent job teaching whatever class you give him." The consensus among the hiring committee was that the applicant probably thought the name on the letter would carry such cachet the contents didn't matter. The moral: The contents matter a lot.

Second True Story: No need to elaborate on this. In part the letter read, "Student evaluations show his English is improving, but I can't tell."

Transcripts and AMS Cover Sheet and MathJobs.org

More universities are now requiring official transcripts and a copy of the most recent AMS cover sheet. There is very little to say about these. Most schools will accept copies of your transcript until the last step and to be hired you will then need the official ones. If your undergraduate institution is in another country and the transcript is written in another language you would do well to start early getting an official copy and having it translated into English.

The AMS cover sheet (available for download at <http://www.ams.org/cover-sheet/>) is a one-page synopsis of your contact information, year of PhD, research interests, and references. Use the most current version because the older version does not ask about eligibility to work in the United States. Using this old version implies the answer to that question is no, which may not be a problem, but it may imply that the applicant is trying to hide that fact, and a less than honest applicant is definitely a problem. Some universities are asking applicants to apply through mathjobs.org, spon-

sored by the AMS. Visit this site and think about using it to put together your application packet.

Still to come will be the phone interview, the on-campus interview, and negotiating the deal. We'll cover those in a later article. One last tip: Seeking a job is a long river to navigate and not all of its twists and turns are clear. At no point should you argue with the committee about the paperwork or the process in general. Be accommodating and be collegial. Hopefully you now have some help in getting the process started. Good luck to everyone searching to be that perfect fit.

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This is the second in a series of short articles for students. The overall title for the series will be **FOCUS on Students**. Some of these articles will be for undergraduates, others for graduate students, and many for all students. These articles will also be posted in the Student section of the MAA web site.

Distinguished Teaching Award Winner



*Bob Wilson
University of Wisconsin at Madison
Wisconsin Section*