



The Cover Letter: Road Map to a Successful Reading of Your CV and Executive Summary

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In a previous column, we described the importance of preparing an Executive Summary, used in conjunction with your curriculum vitae (CV) as a way of presenting your best qualifications for a position, and standing out from the crowd. However, when responding to an ad or request for your CV/executive summary, you must never send them unaccompanied. They must be “chaperoned” with a cover letter.

A well-crafted cover letter is your chance to demonstrate how your skill set and other desired attributes match uniquely with the specific needs and requirements of an organization. Such a cover letter addresses many of the requirements and needs of the position as described in an ad or materials drafted by a search firm.

We suggest the following *prework* before you set fingers to keyboard to prepare your materials:

- ❖ Have the ad/information about the desired position available.
- ❖ Draw a line down the center of a page. Head one side *They Want/Need* and the other side *I Have/Bring*. This is often referred to as the “T” approach.
- ❖ Deconstruct the ad, line by line, on the side *They Want/Need*.
- ❖ On the side headed *I Have/Bring*, elaborate with an example how you meet/match or exceed their wants and needs. You should be able to get most of this information from your Executive Summary, and your writing of your success stories (problems/issues, your actions, results—PARs), which we described in an earlier article. If you have no experience in a certain area, do not fret; few of us are perfect!

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Writing the Letter

Now it is time to draft the letter. There are at least three ways to format these essential cover letters. All have the aim of showing how you are a unique match or fit with the job requirements the organization is look-



Page S. Morahan, PhD: “The cover letter is an opportunity to express graceful pride in your accomplishments, remembering always that the focus is on your desire to bring this wealth of experience and skill to help the recruiters fill their requirements/needs.”

ing for in the ideal candidate. All begin with the appropriate heading and salutation, and an opening paragraph detailing where/how you learned of the opportunity and why you are writing. For example, after the appropriate heading, note the position you are applying for:

RE: Division Chief: Academic Vascular Surgery

Dear Dr. Taylor:

“Your recent ad in Academic Physician & Scientist for Chair of . . . at asks for skills, traits, education, and experience that closely match mine.”

Many candidates then incorporate the information from the “T” items into paragraph form. Move gracefully across each item from your table until you address most of what they are seeking in a candidate. Proceed with enthusiasm and competence as you begin to move across the “T” items line by line, matching their needs with what you offer. Be sure to write in short paragraphs so that the competencies you are stressing do not get lost. Close your cover letter by directing the reader to the enclosed CV and Executive Summary for additional highlights of your background. For example, to fit the above “T” diagram, you might begin:

Of particular interest to me is your desire to enhance the research reputation of the department, while maintaining a strong clinical enterprise. My experience seems to be an excellent fit for the future desired for . . . department.

I have had more than 10 years of experience in designing and managing

Education and training	MD/PhD (microbiology) 1979 Progressed through residency and fellowship in Pediatric Urology...
Board eligibility	Board certified in _____
Development of subspecialty and Residency or Fellowship training	Residency training director from 1999 to 2003
Involvement in clinical/basic science research	Grant and publication history includes 10 years of continuous funding from NIH, foundations and clinical trials as Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator with microbiology researchers.

innovative program projects that involve developing novel methods to identify molecular markers for... and to use these to design diagnostic methods that can be used in the community setting.

This research has required recruiting, developing, and retaining an interdisciplinary team of clinical, basic and social science researchers, as well as community health workers. I am pleased that more than 70% of our skilled staff has been with us for the last five years. Since ___ school is located in ..., which has one of the highest incidences of ___ in the US, I foresee exciting possibilities for this research.

I have also had considerable experience in managing a strong clinical enterprise. For the last five years, I have been Vice Chair of Clinical Operations for This involves directing x faculty and x staff, and a total budget of \$x. During this time, we have increased billable hours by x% and collections by x%. Part of this increased effectiveness and efficiency has come through our participation in the Institute for Healthcare Improvement collaborative on improving As part of this collaborative, we have developed quality improvement management skills in ... and so on.

Your department of ... already has an excellent reputation for clinical service. I look forward to the opportunity to discuss how my background can advance the department to new levels of research, while maintaining your excellent clinical operations. I have included my Executive Summary and detailed Curriculum Vitae for your information.

Some candidates have used the “T” format directly in their letter. After the appropriate heading, in the opening paragraph mention that you are applying for the position detailed in an ad in a recent issue of *Academic Physician & Scientist*. State simply that as you have reviewed the requirements you have determined you are a good fit as seen below: and here you insert the T table. Finish the letter with a statement such as “Additional highlights of my career are found in the enclosed CV and Executive Summary.” Close as you would any cover letter.

Others will use the “T” to cluster areas of needed competencies, experience, and

education and craft succinct paragraphs detailing the match. Peppering your letter with examples (PAR “stories”) helps the reader to understand the match clearly and to see you as a viable invitee for an interview. This type of letter might begin as the ones above. Next you detail competency areas to the left in italics with examples to the right. (Here you have clustered competencies from the ad or job description and not used the graphic lines of the “T.”)

Close as mentioned above.

Choosing which format to use depends on several things. First is your style; choose the format that will best represent you. Second, who is your audience? If you have any understanding of the “style” of search committee members or search firm executive, write to their style—*speak their language*.

Finally, the letter is not a place for understatement or humility. It is an opportunity to express graceful pride in your accomplishments, remembering always that the focus is on your desire to bring this wealth of experience and skill to help the recruiters fill their requirements/needs.

Just think of your CV and Executive Summary as *detailed maps* of your experiences. The well-crafted cover letter provides a focused lens for reading those documents. It is much like the critically important abstract in scientific papers or grant applications, or the personal statement in promotion packages. ❖

They Want/Need for Chair of...

1. Board certified in ...and full professor rank
2. Demonstrated experience in directing large grants that have received national recognition
3. Financial management of large clinical practices
4. and so on....

I Have/Bring

1. Your credentials
2. Your experience in drawing people together to apply for innovative interdisciplinary center grants that have been renewed for 10 years for a total of \$X M in direct and indirect costs; ability to recruit, develop and retain a stable staff of research personnel, election to Institute of Medicine, etc.
3. Your experience as Vice Chair of Clinical Operations for Department, with a clinical staff of X professionals and staff and a budget of \$ X, in increasing billable hours and collections by X %; improving quality through Institute for Healthcare Improvement collaborative initiatives, etc.