

## An Open Letter To Applicants:

I know cover letters are hard. But they serve a purpose, I promise. They are my cheat-sheet to your resume. I want to know:

1. **Where/how you heard about the position**
2. **Who you are**
3. **That you know what the position IS** – and can articulate why you are interested in it (I don't care if it's the real reason or not, just show me you can make up an articulate reasonable answer)
  - a. Bonus points if your articulate reasonable answer demonstrates that you understand what the position is/entails
  - b. Do not make it all about you! A sentence or two is enough
4. **That you have the skills and qualifications** we asked for on the job posting - no, this isn't always clear from your resume, especially when it comes to specific skills (IRB process, computer program experience)
  - a. Don't tell me you're a qualified or ideal candidate – show me
5. **I don't care about your senior thesis.** It's enough to tell me you did one – otherwise, I don't care unless you can relate it to relevant skills we asked you about (ie, IRB process, etc)
6. **That you are not crazy**
  - a. Do not mention sharks unless you are applying to a marine biology lab
  - b. It is okay to be boring. Really. I want a boring but informative cover letter. It's not a creative writing exercise.
7. **That you can write** – and write professionally
  - a. Address it to the correct person
  - b. Proofread & spell-check
  - c. Don't pad – it comes off as unprofessional
  - d. Be polite & courteous
  - e. Don't be pretentious. You are not God's gift to humanity, or to me.

While we are on topic – when you give me your references...and I don't care where you give them to me, in your cover letter, on your resume, whatever (although a separate document would be nice...), please tell me who the hell these people are, where the hell they work, and how the hell I get a hold of them (by phone AND email). If you tell me how you know them, that's just a cherry on top. A name and an email address is not a whole heck of ton of useful.

Especially since we check references by phone.

As for your resume....are you a college senior? I do not want or need to know about what you did in high school. You can list your high school. If you have to, you can list one thing from high school. But otherwise, unless it's directly relevant (like...you-are-applying-to-be-a-brain-surgeon-and-you-did-a-brain-surgery-internship-in-high-school), I don't care! If you leave it off and have a shorter resume, I may assume you're being selective about what you include. If you include tons of high school stuff, I KNOW you just didn't HAVE anything else to include. The other thing about resumes? Please please include some descriptive text – everyone applying to this job has been a research assistant. Tell me what you did. Trust me on this one.

**Example of a decent cover letter:**

Dear Ms. Westgate,

I recently heard of the opening for a research coordinator in your lab at the Center for the Study of Health and Risk Behaviors through the psychology list-serve at my university. I'm currently a senior psychology major at the University of Washington and will be graduating this May. I was excited to see the research coordinator position because I am very interested in your applications of concepts of implicit cognition to the alcohol literature and hope to apply to a clinical PhD program myself in a few years.

I have spent the past year working as a research assistant in Dr. Jones' lab, studying the effects of candy deprivation on toddlers. During my time in the lab, I ran subjects, scheduled appointments, assisted in the creation of study materials, and was involved in the IRB process, assisting in the preparation of IRB modifications. I also had the opportunity to assist in programming materials using MediaLab and online web survey packages, including SurveyMonkey and Qualtrics. I am also familiar with other programs we used in the lab, including Inquisit and ePrime, although I did not work with them directly. In addition to my work with Dr. Jones, I am also nearing the end of a senior thesis on domestic chickens' perceptions of alcohol use. As part of the process, I completed IRB applications, planned and designed study materials, oversaw and conducted participant running in the lab, and analyzed data for write-up and presentation as a poster at our undergraduate research seminar. I would love the opportunity to further my own development and bring my research skills and experience to your lab. Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Erin Westgate

Example of a bad cover letter:

To Whom It May Concern,

Dark moody clouds drenched the sky in opaque holographic suites. Omens rose on the waves like waters out of the career services building I visited yesterday. I would like to apply to your research job.

I am in my fourth year of taking history classes and have taken lots of classes related to your topic. Because of my copious years in a sorority and being highly involved as sororety events, I am very good at creating time management and also I was a student athlete and volunteered at a hospital when I was in high school. Also, I used to take horseback riding lessons, which taught me to be kind and embrace the world and made me want to bring service to the people who are in need. I am now ready and willing to bring my extensive skills and learning experiences to the broad world of employment after graduation. I think your job is the ideal position for me, mostly of all because I want to live in Seattle. Also I would be unique because I would endeavor to bring a more humane view to your research and seek to be nice to patients. Because of this skills and all my experience and unique perspective, I am clearly the ideal candidate for this position. I am now rising out of the past to embrace my shining future.

Your Humble Servant,

**Erin Westgate**