



# The Science of the Cover Letter: How to Apply for an Academic Librarian Job

ESSAY/COMMENTARY

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## ABSTRACT

While serving on a search committee at my institution, I started thinking about what I wish someone had told me when I was trying to break into the field of academic librarianship. And at the top of the list is how to write a cover letter that will increase your chance of getting hired. This article contains a list of nine tips about how the hiring process works at one public university in Virginia. Readers will learn how to interpret the qualifications list in a job ad, how to link their experiences to those qualifications, and which rules they can ignore (like one-page cover letters). An example cover letter is included.

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While serving on a search committee at my institution, I started thinking about what I wish someone had told me when I was trying to break into the field of academic librarianship. At the top of the list is how to write a cover letter that will increase your chance of getting hired.

So, I decided to write an article about how to interpret the qualifications list in a job ad and then link your experiences to those qualifications to increase the likelihood of getting an invitation to a telephone or Zoom interview.

A few disclaimers here:

- I have only worked as a professional librarian at publicly funded universities. Private institutions may handle hiring differently.
- HR policies and practices at universities evolve. What's in effect today might not be when the next position is posted.
- These are my personal opinions. They are not the views of my employer.

## TIP #1: DEMYSTIFYING THE HIRING PROCESS

For readers to apply these tips when writing a cover letter, it probably makes sense to explain how the academic librarian hiring process works at my institution, James Madison University (JMU). Some public universities might post recruitment procedures for anyone to view, such as JMU's information for prospective employees.<sup>1</sup> It is likely worthwhile to do a search to see what is posted *beyond* the job ad. Alternatively, the American Library Association published guidelines for recruiting academic librarians might be generically informative, especially for those trying to break into academic libraries.<sup>2</sup> At JMU, here is the approximate hiring process we follow for faculty librarian positions.

**Convene a search committee:** Once the library receives funding for the position, it will convene a search committee. This could include a mix of library faculty and staff, or, in the case of a subject liaison, faculty from the disciplines the position will support. At my institution, search committees for a non-supervisory librarian position are usually between three to five members.

**Post the job ad:** The state requires our university to post a faculty librarian position for thirty days. You'll usually see the date when the search committee will begin reviewing the applications in the pool.

**Review applications and hold screening interviews:** The search committee will review the application materials and determine which candidates meet the most qualifications. The top candidates are invited to participate

in a screening interview with the search committee, often conducted via telephone or Zoom. Depending on how many candidates meet the qualifications, between two and ten applicants might be asked to take part in this screening interview. Libraries might provide applicants with some or all of the questions they plan to ask before the interview, to give candidates time to meaningfully reflect on their responses.<sup>3</sup>

**Invite candidates for in-person interviews:** The search committee will identify two to four candidates to invite for an in-person interview on campus. At my institution, these are daylong sessions that include a presentation to all library employees on a topic we specify and meetings with the position's home department, supervisor(s), the search committee (again), and other stakeholders who will work closely with the individual in the position.

**Gather feedback from library employees:** A survey is distributed to those who met with the candidate or attended their presentation, allowing the search committee to collect feedback from a range of library employees based on their experiences with the candidate throughout the day. The feedback is reviewed by the search committee after all of the interviews have been completed and will be weighed in their final recommendation.

**Make a recommendation:** The search committee meets and creates a list of pros and cons for each candidate. Based on these lists, the committee decides whether each candidate would be an acceptable hire for this opening. This assessment is passed on to the supervisor or academic unit head, who will check the references of the top candidate before extending a job offer.

Hiring procedures at every institution evolve along with industry best practices, so the process outlined above should not be viewed as comprehensive or binding. Because of how much can change from one institution—or one year—to the next, it is perfectly acceptable to ask clarifying questions if you are a candidate who has been invited to take part in an interview process.

## TIP #2: READ THE POSITION REQUIREMENTS CAREFULLY

Academic librarian job ads often have two different sets of qualifications listed.

The first type is required (or minimum) qualifications. For librarian positions, an "ALA-accredited MLS or MLIS or the international equivalent at the employment start date" is often a required qualification. Reviewing some ads for business librarian jobs posted to ALA JobsList and Indeed.com in Spring 2022, a list of required qualifications could include:

- ALA-accredited MLS or MLIS or the international equivalent at the employment start date.
- Commitment to excellent public services and improving the library user experience.
- Evidence of inclusive, equity- and diversity-minded practices.
- Demonstrated understanding of information literacy practices.
- Evidence of professional growth through publication, association activities, or other contributions to the field.

Candidates who don't meet a required qualification often will be excluded from serious consideration for the position. Before you devote your time and mental energy to applying for a position, make sure you fulfill or have an equivalent experience for every qualification listed as required—or will fulfill them all by the job start date. If you can advocate succinctly for why your equivalent experience should be considered, go for it!

The second type is preferred (or desired) qualifications. These are qualifications that the library's "perfect" candidate might possess and could include experience, skills, abilities, or knowledge. Examples of preferred qualifications in Spring 2022 business librarian job ads include:

- Experience in an academic, public, or corporate library with subject responsibilities in business.
- Demonstrated ability to work independently and collaboratively in a team environment.
- Familiarity with open access and other aspects of scholarly communication.
- Demonstrated knowledge of business, economic, and statistical library and data sources.

Search committees will evaluate candidates on both sets of qualifications. Ideally, you need to tell the committee how you meet each and every one they listed, mirroring the language that was used in the job ad. (What if you don't meet a qualification? I discuss that in Tip #4.) The committee will likely review all applicants using those qualifications as a checklist and translate that assessment into a numerical score.

### **TIP #3: YES, APPLICANTS GET A "SCORE" OR RATING**

Say a hypothetical library has posted a business librarian position using the nine qualifications listed above, five required and four preferred.

This library has five applicants for the position, and the search committee reviews each one using all of their application materials (CV/resume, cover letter, and any supplemental documents like a Statement of Teaching Philosophy,<sup>4</sup> Statements of Contributions to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion,<sup>5</sup> sample lesson plans, etc.).

The search committee rates the candidate's ability to meet each qualification on a scale of zero to four. If there is no evidence a candidate meets a qualification, they get a zero on the scoring grid. If there is ample evidence, that would likely earn a four (Figure 1).

If a required qualification (RQ) is not evident in a candidate's materials, the committee might stop scoring them without assessing how they meet the preferred qualifications (PQ).

Based on the ratings, Candidate A and Candidate C likely would be advanced to the screening interview because their scores were the highest among the candidates who met all of the RQs.

When considering whether to apply for a position, don't give up just because you lack one or more preferred qualifications! The preferred qualifications are often used by search committees to provide clear criteria for justifying the hiring decision, and they might not expect candidates to have all of them. Look for flexible language in the qualifications, such as "or equivalent experience" or "in lieu of." Comparable wording invites you to make a case in the cover letter for why three years of experience in the corporate world or at a nonprofit should be considered in lieu of a requirement like "Undergraduate or graduate degree in a relevant area, or equivalent experience." Coursework, self-study, mentoring, volunteering, and expectations of future development are all potentially relevant activities to demonstrate that you may meet a preferred qualification.

Essentially, preferred qualifications are bonus points. If you have them, they could lift your application above other candidates. But they aren't deal-breakers, so apply even if it would be an area of professional growth for you.

### **TIP #4: DON'T IGNORE QUALIFICATIONS YOU DON'T MEET**

If a candidate doesn't meet a qualification, their gut reaction might be "If I don't mention it in my cover letter, maybe the search committee won't notice I don't have it."

I can assure you that the search committee will definitely notice. As I just mentioned, the committee is evaluating how you meet every qualification listed in the job ad. If you don't meet a qualification, your best strategy is to acknowledge it directly and suggest how you will close the gap.

	Description	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C	Candidate D	Candidate E
RQ1	ALA-accredited MLS or MLIS or the international equivalent at the employment start date	4	0	4	4	4
RQ2	Commitment to excellent public services and improving the library user experience	4		3	2	1
RQ3	Evidence of inclusive, equity- and diversity-minded practices	1		4	2	4
RQ4	Demonstrated understanding of information literacy practices	4		3	0	1
RQ5	Evidence of professional growth through publication, association activities, or other contributions to the field.	3		1		4
PQ1	Experience in an academic, public, or corporate library with subject responsibilities in business	0		4		1
PQ2	Demonstrated ability to work independently and collaboratively in a team environment	4		1		1
PQ3	Familiarity with open access and other aspects of scholarly communication	2		4		3
PQ4	Demonstrated knowledge of business, economic, and statistical library and data sources	2		4		1
	<b>Score</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>20</b>

**Figure 1** Sample scoring grid for five candidates and how they meet the position's five required qualifications and four preferred qualifications.

How can you do that? Perhaps a position that interests you has a preferred qualification of “Professional experience with data science and big data.” You don’t have professional experience in this area, but you are open to learning about it. Here’s how you could discuss it in your cover letter:

*Expanding my knowledge about data science and big data is an exciting opportunity. If I were the successful candidate for this position, I’d work with my supervisor to identify local, regional and/or national professional development workshops that could help me get up to speed in this area, such as participating in a Library Carpentries workshop or the St. Louis Fed’s Data Literacy for Librarians program.*

Does this candidate have “Professional experience with data science and big data?” Nope. But they have a plan and that means instead of being rated zero for this qualification, they might be rated one or even two. Alternatively, a candidate

who lacks professional experience could highlight relevant coursework on data science or informal research they’ve done to show their willingness to learn about the topic.

It might seem counterintuitive to admit you don’t know about something, especially when applying for a job. But addressing it openly helps the committee evaluate whether you show self-awareness of your deficits, are open to life-long learning and mentoring, and how you might be able to grow into the position.

And knowing how you approach acquiring new skills could very well give you an edge over a candidate who ignores the qualification in their materials.

## **TIP #5: DON’T JUST TELL - SHOW US!**

It’s easy to claim that you have knowledge, especially in a cover letter. Of course, I am “Familiar with the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy.”<sup>6</sup> Check!

But you can make that claim more impactful by highlighting one or two projects/initiatives that demonstrate that you have the skills or experience sought—and how you will apply those skills if you land the job.

For example, a position might have this required qualification: “Excellent communication and presentation skills with an ability to present information clearly and effectively to groups of faculty and students.”

In your cover letter, tell the search committee about a presentation or training you’ve given, perhaps one for external clients or for an audience with mixed levels of expertise. This example should be brief—just enough context for your search committee to understand how this demonstrates you meet the qualification. Consider the following paragraph:

*In my current position, I have honed my communication and presentation skills by developing workshops tailored toward both graduate students and faculty about using Zotero for citation management. We drew thirty attendees over the four workshops I led last fall, and 70% of attendees said in a post-survey that they would recommend the workshop to a classmate or colleague.*

Qualitative feedback can also be included: “Faculty often tell me that my high-energy approach connects with students” or “My colleagues often come to me to help them write learning objectives.” What if you don’t have assessment data? No problem! You can still highlight your work on the project. But if you DO have observations that demonstrate the impact of your contribution, that will only enhance how the committee views your application.

And notice that in my example, I mirrored the language in the qualification. This makes it easy for the reviewer to see that you meet the qualification. A cover letter is not the place to pull out your thesaurus. Some positions draw dozens or hundreds of applicants. By not utilizing the specific terms from the job ad, you risk having your highly relevant experience overlooked.

## **TIP #6: NEVER IGNORE QUALIFICATIONS ABOUT HOW YOU SUPPORT A DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT**

Many universities will have this requirement. In our recent positions, one of our preferred qualifications was an “Articulated ability to help foster an inclusive and equitable work environment.” You might wonder how you’re

supposed to address this qualification in an authentic and meaningful way. Here are a few ideas:

- Have you participated in workshops or training about contributing to inclusive or accessible workplaces in any of your previous jobs? Tell us about how that training had an impact on how you performed your duties or changed your approach to a situation.
- Were you part of a task force or student organization aiming to make your campus or workplace more inclusive or accessible? What did the group accomplish? How did that experience affect your work with customers or colleagues?
- Do you use Universal Design for Learning in your information literacy instruction or in workplace training sessions? How has it improved outcomes?
- Have you done relevant community service work? Tell us why you got involved.
- Are you interested in learning more about an inclusive topic, such as recognizing unconscious bias or decolonizing library collections?<sup>7</sup> Tell us what training opportunities you would pursue if you had the resources to do so.

It’s critical that the search committee can see whether you share the hiring organization’s values or guiding statements, which candidates often can find on the library’s website.<sup>8</sup> Adding a generic statement in your cover letter like, “I believe in diverse and inclusive workplaces,” won’t help them do that. Identify a story that demonstrates that you understand what it means to interact with people whose backgrounds and experiences might be different from yours.

Some jobs ask candidates to address diversity and inclusion in your cover letter without tying it to a specific qualification. Other positions might require a separate diversity statement to be included in your application materials. Candidates should make sure they’re not only addressing the content of the job ad, but also following any logistical requests like a separate document with their diversity or teaching statements.

Ignoring this requirement altogether? Never a smart choice.

## **TIP #7: REMEMBER: YOUR RESUME/CV AND COVER LETTER WORK TOGETHER**

A colleague used this simple metaphor to describe how these two critical pieces work together: Resume = facts; cover letter = stories.

That's why I rarely mention that I have an MLIS in a cover letter, because that's the first item on my CV. Instead, you might use your cover letter to talk about why you went to library school or why you are interested in being a business librarian, but only if that story pertains to the job you are applying for. Here's an example:

*I started my career as a journalist because I wanted to tell impactful stories that sparked change in our community. Then I pursued a library science degree in order to dig deeper into the information that could shape those stories. This position, as a business librarian, will let me draw on both those passions. I will be helping students research their entrepreneurial endeavors, making sure their story is able to change the world for the better.*

You might try a similar strategy with positions that call out technical qualifications or software knowledge, including requirements like “Knowledge of Bloomberg, Cap IQ, FACTSET, WRDS, & Refinitiv products” or “Experience in instructional technologies such as learning management software and LibGuides.” Try to tell a story about how you have used that software to make an impact for users or colleagues.

One solution to deploy is adding a Technical Skills or Tools section on your resume. That way you can succinctly show that you have the knowledge cited in the position description without devoting space in your cover letter to a list of products or software.

## **TIP #8: YOUR COVER LETTER CAN BE LONGER THAN A PAGE REALLY**

Early in my career, I was a steadfast adherent to the “rule” that cover letters should not exceed one page. I might have had to tinker with the font and adjust the document margins, but eventually it *would fit* on a single page!

Once I sat on the other side of the table and began rating candidates, I began loosening my approach. If the list of qualifications is long, like the nine items in the hypothetical job ad above, there's no way you can meaningfully address all of them in a single page.

Rather than cutting out valuable examples that show how you meet the qualifications, give yourself permission to go to a second page. Doing so will enable the search committee to connect your experience, knowledge, and skills to the position's qualifications more clearly if you invest space in telling your story well.

So, I suggest you internalize this new rule: Cover letters for academic librarian positions probably should be two

pages. If you are just beginning your career, there's likely no reason to go beyond two. As you gain experience and start applying for positions with more responsibilities, you might even run into a third page.

## **TIP #9: DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP**

Take advantage of cover letter and resume review services through American Library Association divisions, such as the New Members Round Table.<sup>9</sup> Or look for opportunities with other professional associations, at library conferences, with your LIS program's alumni chapter, through a student organization or from the career services office at your university (sometimes also available to alumni).

Another option is to see if people in your network have connections at the institution where you are applying. In the past, I have answered questions for candidates who are referred to me by a colleague. As long as I'm not on the search committee and I'm knowledgeable about how the position fits into our strategic plan, I'm usually happy to help a candidate who is truly interested in learning more about a position that my library has posted.

And if a library is holding an information session about the job, make time to attend! We have hosted them for some of the positions we've posted in the last few years. They were set up as webinars so that candidates could be anonymous. These sessions can tell you a lot about organizational culture and the application process, and are especially useful if you want to clarify something about a qualification or one of the supporting documents requested.

These sessions also demonstrate that a library is attempting to value the candidates' needs in the hiring process and not just their own—hopefully signifying this would be a good place to work.

## **CONCLUSION**

Forbes and other companies have been declaring the cover letter “dead” for years, but it's unlikely that universities will do away with the requirement anytime soon. The nine tips outlined in this article should help applicants understand the cover letter's role in the hiring process for academic librarian positions. Appendix A shows how this advice would tie together into an actual cover letter. I adapted this letter from one I submitted for an actual job application several years ago as a newcomer to the library field. But this one is written to address the nine qualifications in the fictitious job ad proposed in this article, and I wrote it based on the



experience level that I brought into my first academic librarian position.

Constructing your cover letter to help the search committee connect your experiences to the position requirements is your best chance to advance out of the applicant pool and land a spot in the screening interviews. Once there, consult the guidelines and best practices shared by the American Library Association (both the NMRT and others), the Association of College and Research Libraries, and CORE: Leadership, Infrastructure, Futures<sup>10</sup> for tips on how to prepare for screening or on-campus interviews.

## NOTES

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## ADDITIONAL FILE


The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix A.** Sample Cover Letter. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/valib.v67i1.657.s1>

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