

*As we enter the spring hiring season, this month's Muse-ing comes from Dr. Julianne Snider, Director and Associate Research Professor at Penn State's Earth and Mineral Sciences Museum & Art Gallery. Dr. Snider offers some crucial advice on an all-important, but too-often neglected element of your application: the cover letter.*

Picture if you will: Our museum has an open position. We form a search committee. As a committee, we craft a description of the work that needs to be done. We determine what qualifications someone will need to do that work. We write a detailed job announcement that includes the desired qualifications and required application components—resume, cover letter, and references. We send the announcement out to *MuseWeekly* and the world. We wait anxiously for applications to arrive. We are excited by the incoming stream of applicants filling the candidate pool. Although we are busy with our regular jobs, we are looking forward to engaging with qualified candidates. We know not all applicants will make it to the interview stage, but we are prepared to give all applications full consideration. Sadly, it turns out that not all of the applicants have submitted cover letters. Without a cover letter an application is not complete and we must automatically kick those applicants out of the pool. We return to the pool and begin the process of reviewing the application materials of the remaining candidates. At this stage, where will your application be? Undergoing review or laying in the sodden heap of rejects?

Having been a member of many search committees, I know the tale above is not fiction. Again, today, I had to kick out another potentially qualified candidate from our applicant pool because the application did not include the required cover letter. Cover letters are incredibly important! Yet, cover letters seem to be the document most frequently missing from an application packet.

As a job seeker, it is important to read the entire job description and application requirements for advertised positions that interest you. As a job applicant, it is vitally important to submit all documents asked for in the announcement. If the announcement states "Interested Candidates should upload the following documents: cover letter, resume, names of 2-3 references," not doing so can result in automatic rejection of the application.

Incomplete application packets imply two things—the applicant is not really interested in the position and/or the applicant is incapable of paying attention to detail. Although neither implication may be correct from the applicant's point of view, a potential employer is too busy to investigate whether these conclusions are true. In some cases, especially positions within government agencies, HR policy requires rejections of incomplete applications.

What's so important about a cover letter? Your cover letter is your first, and maybe only, chance to introduce yourself to a prospective employer. Your cover letter is your opportunity to say how your existing skills will benefit the museum (or other entity) and why you are the best applicant for the advertised position.

What should you include in this important letter? Your cover letter does not have to be long—one page, three to five paragraphs, should be enough space for you to assure your potential

employer that you are applying for the job advertised, convey your enthusiasm for the position and the organization, and highlight specific experiences and strengths that are relevant to the job (especially those which may not be foregrounded or explicit on your resumé). Successful cover letters are concise, easily understood, and are genuine and sincere. They are tailored to the position for which you are applying. Successful cover letters are not a narrative version of your resume, and the objective and goals section of your resumé is not a substitute for a cover letter. In the end, successful cover letters provide relevant insight that complements the resumé.

If you need more guidance, consider the [University of Denver Law School's answer](#) to the question: "What is the point of a cover letter?": "The primary purpose of your cover letter, when combined with your resume, is to get an interview."