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### Seven tips for academic job applications from a selection committee regular

Ersanilli, E.

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# IMISCOE PHD BLOG

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*PhD Insights, Imiscoe PhD students' blog*

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## SEVEN TIPS FOR ACADEMIC JOB APPLICATIONS FROM A SELECTION COMMITTEE REGULAR

*By Evelyn Ersanilli*

Over the years I've been part of a dozen selection committees for research assistant, PhD, and postdoc positions in the social sciences in the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Many of the applications we received made for agonising reading. While they have given me some good anecdotes to tell at dinner parties, I'm happy that the IMISCOE PhD blog is offering me the opportunity to turn my experience into what I hope will be useful tips for future applicants.

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While this seems very obvious, easily half of the hundreds of cover letters I've read fail to do this. In your cover letter, explain why the advertised position is a logical next step in your career; how it relates to your interests and to the work you've done before. You can refer to overlapping topics, theories, cases or research methods. If you struggle to find overlap, this may suggest the post isn't a good fit for you. Keep in mind that committees are looking for a good candidate, rather than to fulfil your lifelong dreams. Therefore focus your letter on why you would be a good fit for the position rather than the other way around.

## **2. Address all requirements listed in the vacancy text**

Keep in mind that your cover letter and CV are the main and often only source of information the committee has to determine your suitability for the position. It is therefore crucial to highlight the requirements you meet in your letter and/or CV. One of the best bits of advice I've read on this is 'show, don't tell'. So rather than only repeating the requirements from the vacancy text ("I have excellent interviewing skills"), explain how you've acquired or used these skills (e.g. "I acquired excellent interviewing skills during my PhD fieldwork. For this I recruited and interviewed 70 undocumented migrants...").

## **3. Cover enough but not too much**

Letters for academic positions can be 1.5-2 pages. Focus on including all and only the necessary information. Always include a summary of your previous research and findings and explain why this was so interesting/important/ground-breaking. Depending on the number of applications committee members may not read your letter in full. Unnecessary information may distract from information on your suitability. Keep in mind that your letter is also treated as a writing sample. A poor structure raises questions about your writing skills.

## **4. Show you've read up but don't be a suck up**

If you are applying to a project position (i.e. a post on a grant awarded to someone other than you) it is a good idea to relate to the project. You can do this by briefly mentioning what (theoretical) approach you would take or research design you would choose, though be careful not to take it in a

completely different direction from how the project was designed; this is unlikely to be what the principal investigator wants.

Furthermore, it can be good to mention why you are interested in working at the institution offering the position. You can write why you feel the research climate would be a good fit; for example a focus on interdisciplinarity, a certain theoretical approach or the presence of scholars whose work you regularly use. If you can't write anything genuine, then it's best to skip this element of your letter. It's less important than the issues in Tips 1 and 2. I once read a letter from an applicant stating they had enjoyed reading a paper of mine that was not yet available online. Needless to say this application went straight to the 'reject' pile.

## **5. Making the most of your CV**

You can work with a standard CV that you tailor to the vacancy; leaving out the information that is not particularly relevant to prevent it distracting from what is. Use clear headings, a consistent date indication with reverse chronological order and don't make it too cluttered. This will make it easier for the committee to locate the relevant information. Show off what you have done and what you are doing, but remain within the bounds of the truth. Depending on your career stage it can be helpful to list the title of your Ba and Ma thesis and/or courses that are relevant to the vacancy. For language proficiency use the standardised European framework (from A1-C2) rather than ambiguous terms such as 'average'.

For publications only use "forthcoming" if they have been accepted for publication. Papers that have not yet been submitted and may be little more than an abstract can be listed as 'in progress'. Listing these as 'forthcoming' signals a lack of understanding of the academic publishing process. If you are concerned about not having enough publications or taking a long time to finish your PhD, think about the other things you have done and list them on your CV. This can be research assistance, teaching, service to the profession such as organising seminar series, or data collection.

## **6. Only contact committee members with questions they can meaningfully answer**

While it is in the interest of the committee to receive applications from well-informed applicants, it is only a good idea to contact the committee with questions they can meaningfully answer. For example about flexibility on the start date, about what to do in case the relevant degree has not

been awarded, case selection, or more information on the project if none is given in the vacancy. Keep in mind that committee members tend to be busy academics. Contacting the committee only to draw attention to your name or with questions you could have easily answered yourself after a proper reading of the vacancy text or using common sense is unlikely to leave a good impression.

## 7. Think carefully about which writing sample to include

Most vacancies ask candidates to submit a writing sample to help assess their writing and analytical skills and gain additional insights into the research background of the applicant. It is important to choose this sample well. Always provide a full article, working paper, chapter or dissertation. Ideally the sample is recent and relevant to the vacancy and single-authored. If the sample is co-authored, add a note explaining your role (think about data collection, analyses and writing).

In closing, keep in mind that competition for posts can be fierce. You might be an excellent candidate, but if your application fails to show this, you're unlikely to be shortlisted. I hope these tips will help you do yourself justice.



Evelyn Ersanilli is a senior researcher at the Department of Politics, University of Amsterdam where she leads the [RIGHTS project](#) funded by an ERC Starting Grant.