The Anatomy of a Cover Letter

Based on this short job advert for an adjunct position, you can see how this cover letter has been designed to address each of the stated points, and to show that the candidate understands the needs of the employer.

Original job advert:

Organization: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, America's first museum and school of fine arts is seeking an Adjunct instructor to teach one survey course in our BFA program beginning Fall 2010. The course will examine scientific ideas from the fields of astronomy, physics, earth sciences, biology, or other relevant field of scientific inquiry, to acquaint students with the role sciences have played in human civilization. The class will meet one day per week. A Master's Degree is required, PhD preferred. Candidates should have prior teaching experience as well as the ability and desire to work with art students.

To Apply:
Qualified candidates should send their cover letter, cv, pertinent writing sample or other supporting materials, and contact information for three references to jobs@pafa.org, fax to (215) 972-6194 or mail to Human Resources 128 N. Broad St., Philadelphia, PA 19102

Final version of cover letter sent to PAFA:

Dear James Gaddy and Jeffrey Carr

I am applying for the position of ‘Adjunct Instructor’ advertized on the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts website. I have a proven background in innovative course development and effective teaching that ranges from tutoring undergraduates at the University of Oxford, making scientific information easily accessible to visitors and staff at Disney’s Animal Kingdom, to my undergraduate and graduate teaching experience at Arcadia University and Hunter College (CUNY). I enjoy teaching as an outlet for my creativity, as I seek to provide real-life and meaningful connections between the science I teach and my students, leading to greater excitement about the subject and more active learning by the students.

I have a documented track record of being able to translate complex science into written or oral materials that can be understood by a wide range of audiences, with varying degrees of expertise in science. My science writing awards were received for articles written about my doctoral research in animal behavior, and research performed by my peers at Oxford. At Disney, I interacted with park visitors on a regular basis to talk about the research being performed with the animal collection, and tailored my explanations to be understood by adults and children alike. Including broad, multi-disciplinary examples within my taught courses has always been one of my teaching goals – providing a panoramic perspective of the biological sciences rather than a narrow focus. This approach ensured that the 250 animal keepers I taught at Disney’s Animal Kingdom were able to understand the relevance of the subject matter despite their varying knowledge of the scientific method. In creating a science survey course for PAFA’s BFA program, I would draw upon topics that would explain science’s impact on human culture, and that have played some role in art itself (e.g., why are van Gogh’s sunflowers yellow?).

My energy and enthusiasm for teaching benefits the students, and enhances their enjoyment and ability to understand the information they are provided. My course at Arcadia University received an overall mean assessment score of 4.7 (out of 5) based on student assessments, and I continue to receive positive
feedback from my Hunter College students as well, including “…it is no exaggeration to say that, of nearly 25 years of education, it has been my favorite class. The content and manner of presentation were extremely engaging, thorough, and informative” and “I have been waiting for a class just like this that makes me think outside of the box ... I was happy to have a prof. who finally challenged me to push myself past what I thought I was able to accomplish. I feel very proud of myself for finishing this class as I have to say it was one of the most difficult classes I have ever been part of, but I wouldn't have changed it at all”. I encourage student participation as much as possible, and the feedback that I receive from students through activities and discussions plays an important role in my ability to assess student learning styles and individual student progress. I also encourage students to discuss their questions, ideas, and perspectives with me outside of class to help them connect more deeply with the subject.

I took the opportunity to work part-time as a staff member at the University of Pennsylvania so that I could continue to teach as an adjunct. My work as an Associate Director involves a lot of teaching and one-on-one student advising, and I am fortunate to be able to work with students in the sciences, humanities, and arts on a daily basis. Teaching a science survey course at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts is just the type of opportunity I have been looking for, and one that I will relish with much enthusiasm. The outcomes of scientific research influence our lives on a daily basis, and I find the process of highlighting these influences to be very enjoyable. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have, and would be willing to present a trial lecture on a topic of your choosing (or one that I can select) relating to biological or earth sciences.

Thank you for your consideration. Yours sincerely,

Dr. Joseph Barber

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The anatomy of the cover letter:

Dear James Gaddy and Jeffrey Carr,

Some research on the PAFA website gave me the information I needed about the HR person in-charge of this search, and I found the other name (the faculty search committee chair) from one of my wife’s coworkers, who used to work at PAFA in their development office. I put both names just to hedge my bets in terms of who would actually read this letter.

I am applying for the position of ‘Adjunct Instructor’ advertized on the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts website.

Get straight to the point in your cover letter – tell the person exactly what you are doing without beating around the bush. Stating where you saw the posting advertised is one of the conventions of cover letters. I actually heard about this position from my wife’s coworker, showing how having people in your network who know about your interests (mine being teaching as an adjunct), can be very beneficial.

I have a proven background in innovative course development and effective teaching that ranges from tutoring undergraduates at the University of Oxford, making scientific information easily accessible to visitors and staff at Disney’s Animal Kingdom, to my undergraduate and graduate teaching experience at Arcadia University and Hunter College (CUNY).
This was for an adjunct teaching position, and so I summarized my teaching abilities right at the start, so that they know that I am qualified, and that it is worth them reading on. This position involved teaching science to art students – and so briefly mentioning that I am able to teach diverse audiences is a key point that I expanded on later in the letter.

I enjoy teaching as an outlet for my creativity, as I seek to provide real-life and meaningful connections between the science I teach and my students, leading to greater excitement about the subject and more active learning by the students.

Artists are creative, and so making a connection between me, as a scientist, and them, as artists, is a strategy to show that I would be easy to work with. I would understand the creative process, and would be part of that, albeit through teaching science. Employers want to make sure they “like” the people they hire. The term “active learning” is one of those educational “buzz words” that it is always good to include. Artists are definitely “active learners” because they are very much hands-on with their work.

I have a documented track record of being able to translate complex science into written or oral materials that can be understood by a wide range of audiences, with varying degrees of expertise in science. My science writing awards were received for articles written about my doctoral research in animal behavior, and research performed by my peers at Oxford.

You can’t just say that you can translate complex science for diverse audiences (or or that you have good leadership or communication skills, etc.), you have to provide evidence. In this case, my evidence is the awards I won for my science writing when I was doing my PhD. These were listed in my CV, and so I didn’t need to elaborate on them too much in the letter. I did write mostly about animal behavior, which had the drawback of painting me as a biologist, and not someone who can teach more broadly in the sciences, which is what PAFA was looking for. However, one of the articles I wrote was about my friend’s research in biophysics, which got an award, and so I wanted to make this point in the last sentence.

At Disney, I interacted with park visitors on a regular basis to talk about the research being performed with the animal collection, and tailored my explanations to be understood by adults and children alike. Including broad, multi-disciplinary examples within my taught courses has always been one of my teaching goals – providing a panoramic perspective of the biological sciences rather than a narrow focus. This approach ensured that the 250 animal keepers I taught at Disney’s Animal Kingdom were able to understand the relevance of the subject matter despite their varying knowledge of the scientific method.

Again, the key skill I wanted to illustrate here was my ability to teach science to a broad audience. The students at PAFA have lots of art classes, a few literature classes, one or two social science classes, and just one science course. Many of the students may not like science, or may have not done much science. They could potentially be resistant to learning science, and so I needed to show that teaching this unique group of students would not be a problem for me. I have had similar experiences in the past.

In creating a science survey course for PAFA’s BFA program, I would draw upon topics that would explain science’s impact on human culture, and that have played some role in art itself (e.g., why are van Gogh’s sunflowers yellow?).

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My letter is tailored for PAFA, and I wanted to make it clear that I understood their needs. They mentioned addressing “the role sciences have played in human civilization” in the job advert, and so I echoed that here. I could have used the word “civilization” to make a stronger connection. From my perspective, talking about science’s role in human civilization is a bit of a nebulous concept – nothing springs to my mind as a way to structure this in lectures. I had alternative ideas about what the course would look like. I wanted to tie science into the art that the students were involved with [it turned out that PAFA wanted a science course that was not overly focused on the art side of things]. My example here about van Gogh’s flowers is meant to trigger their interest. I want them to ask themselves, “well, why are they yellow?” so that they would want to invite me to the interview to expand on this. Of course, I prepared an answer to this question, and planned a hypothetical lecture that would address this topic, and this did come up in the interview.

My energy and enthusiasm for teaching benefits the students, and enhances their enjoyment and ability to understand the information they are provided. My course at Arcadia University received an overall mean assessment score of 4.7 (out of 5) based on student assessments, and I continue to receive positive feedback from my Hunter College students as well, including “…it is no exaggeration to say that, of nearly 25 years of education, it has been my favorite class. The content and manner of presentation were extremely engaging, thorough, and informative” and “I have been waiting for a class just like this that makes me think outside of the box ... I was happy to have a prof. who finally challenged me to push myself past what I thought I was able to accomplish. I feel very proud of myself for finishing this class as I have to say it was one of the most difficult classes I have ever been part of, but I wouldn’t have changed it at all”.

I was not just saying that I was a good teacher, I provided evidence of this fact. The Arcadia assessment was a formal one run by the university. The quotes from Hunter College came from a Survey Monkey assessment I sent out to students at the end of my course. I picked comments I thought would showcase my abilities – these were the actual comments provided by students.

I encourage student participation as much as possible, and the feedback that I receive from students through activities and discussions plays an important role in my ability to assess student learning styles and individual student progress. I also encourage students to discuss their questions, ideas, and perspectives with me outside of class to help them connect more deeply with the subject.

Adjunct teaching is hard. You don’t get much time to connect with students, or understand their needs, in the same way that full-time faculty can. I wanted to show here that I would be committed to my students by being willing to continue discussions outside of class. This could just be by e-mail, but my hope was that this statement showed commitment to PAFA.

I took the opportunity to work part-time as a staff member at the University of Pennsylvania so that I could continue to teach as an adjunct.

I needed to address the question they might have about why I was applying for this adjunct position, which probably paid only about $3500 with no benefits, and how I would be supporting myself outside of this PAFA position. I also needed to make sure that they knew that I had the time to be an adjunct for them.

My work as an Associate Director involves a lot of teaching and one-on-one student advising, and I am fortunate to be able to work with students in the sciences, humanities, and arts on a daily basis.

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Even working at Career Services gives me useful teaching experience, so I slipped that fact in there too. In the job advert, they stated that the successful candidate would have “the ability and desire to work with art students”. I had never actually taught art students before. However, I do advise students from the School of Design here at Penn, and so I used this experience to talk about my ability to work with art students – this is talking about my experiences in the language of the employer, so that they can see the connection between my experiences and what they are looking for. Not all Design students here would consider themselves art students, but some would.

Teaching a science survey course at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts is just the type of opportunity I have been looking for, and one that I will relish with much enthusiasm. The outcomes of scientific research influence our lives on a daily basis, and I find the process of highlighting these influences to be very enjoyable.

This statement humanizes my skills and experiences, and shows that I am just generally motivated by teaching, and would find the process of doing this enjoyable. PAFA were not looking for someone who needed this position to give them money (e.g., while they were looking for other teaching jobs). They were looking for someone who would be a long-term supporter of the PAFA mission, and who would enjoy teaching this course just for the sake of teaching it. Again, I tried to show that I understood what they were looking for byrestating that this course is about showing how science impacts our lives.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have, and would be willing to present a trial lecture on a topic of your choosing (or one that I can select) relating to biological or earth sciences.

I used the strategy of offering to give a trial presentation in some of my previous job applications. When I was at Oxford applying for the Disney position, I realized that the Atlantic Ocean was going to be a bit of a stumbling block in terms of them getting to meet me. My wife happened to be doing her PhD fieldwork in Orlando at the time, and so I had been planning on visiting her anyway. In my letter to Disney, I stated that I would be in their neighborhood for a couple of weeks during that summer, and that I would be happy to drop by and present to them. They took me up on that offer, and eventually hired me.

Thank you for your consideration. Yours sincerely,

Dr. Joseph Barber

Update:

I did get an interview – which is all that the CV and cover letter is meant to get you. However, I was not offered the position. PAFA were looking for a broad course that touched on biology, chemistry, and physics, and my background and experiences (and most of the examples that I gave during the interview) were much more focused on just biology.