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Review of Sessions C5 and G1:

Understanding Job Advertisements and Composing Effective Cover Letters I & II

Joe Janangelo, Loyola University Chicago

Kelly Ritter, University of North Carolina-Greensboro

This workshop consisted of two 75-minute sessions, one held each day of the two-day conference. Joe Janangelo and Kelly Ritter blended their practical advice with compassion and a good sense of humor, which quickly created an environment where audience members felt comfortable asking questions unique to their situations.

The first (session C5) was designed as a way for audience members to understand the role of cover letters in our trajectory from graduate students to professionals to faculty members. Ritter and Janangelo provided both general advice (write a new cover letter for each application and tailor it to the institution type) and specific recommendations (aim for under two pages) while emphasizing the cover letter as a rhetorical device with a very specific purpose: get us a job. This session demonstrated that the cover letter is one way in which we demonstrate our professional ethos. As we describe our research, teaching, and service in a cover letter, Ritter and Janangelo recommend we examine how each sentence contributes to teaching search committees about how we are competent, professional, and helpful – not divalike! – future colleagues.

The second session (G1) focused on how a particular sample letter demonstrated (and did not demonstrate) the advice proffered in the earlier meeting. Cris Elder, recently hired as an assistant professor at the University of New Mexico, graciously allowed attendees to review and comment on the letter she wrote as part of her application packet for what was to become her new job. She walked participants through her reading of the job ad and how it influenced the letter's content. In particular, she encouraged applicants to focus on any job duties or qualifications that are repeated—even in different forms—throughout the job ad.

In sum, we found Janangelo and Ritter's advice invaluable to our positions as later-stage graduate students considering the job market. We are lucky to have mentors available and willing to guide us through the not-always-transparent-or-common-sense process of job seeking, and we would be thrilled to see this session (or another one similar to it) offered regularly at national conferences.

Key recommendations from the sessions:

- Be specific. Create cover letters that “demonstrate the precise fit between your talents and the department or program's needs” and tell the story your CV can only hint at.

- Use the job ad to guide your letter. Required and preferred qualifications in job ads are listed in order of preference; thus, our letters would be best served to address the first of these that most closely fit our experience and qualifications.
- Show “tenure-stream thinking.” Briefly describe how you will build on your past and current research for future projects. Emphasize how you are able to *finish* projects.
- Consider the cover letter as a writing sample. Revise. Read it out loud. Share it with peers and mentors for feedback. Since committees are reading hundreds of applications, help them out by following genre conventions. This isn’t the time to stand out because of formatting and design choices.