

How to apply for a faculty position.

As I complete my role as chair of a faculty search committee (again), I am reflecting on the ways that junior researchers might strategize applications for faculty positions at academic institutions to improve their competitiveness. No one can change their record, but there are ways that help a search committee identify an applicant's qualities.

First, let me explain how I approach an application. Yes, sure, I'll skim your cover letter to see what you say you do, but scientists are data driven and seek objective observations. So – I'll be blunt – I take your cover letter with a grain of salt, at least initially, and instead I really scrutinize your CV and Google Scholar (or equivalent) profile. That means these should be absolutely spotless and accurate – be sure to remove any publications on Google (or equivalent) by others who share your name. It's your CV and profile that allow me to objectively assess your training, what you actually do (not necessarily what you say you do), your research impact, and your research style – whether you publish a single hugely impactful paper each year, 10 papers each year with little impact, or something in between, and whether you work solo, in small groups, in big groups, etc. Only after that will I read your cover letter in detail, then your research statement, then your teaching statement. Yes, we know recent PhD's or ABD's may not have the same research, teaching, and mentoring productivity as post-docs or faculty. That's why we apply rubrics (yes, we use rubrics) that account for experience OR potential. Still, if you don't have experience, you need to convince me you have potential – that you know what it takes to succeed.

Otherwise, here are 7 simple steps on a path to success:

1. Provide whatever the ad asks for in a way that makes it easy to find (headings, bullet points, separate documents, etc.). And label all files with your name. I now have 160 files labeled "Cover letter" and another 147 labeled "CV". Which ones are yours? If you have any questions, don't be shy, contact the search committee chair. OK, true, I can't handle a load queries from every applicant, so be sure your questions are concise and relevant. But remember that my goal as search committee chair is to obtain as large, diverse, and talented a pool of applicants as possible. If talking to me means your application is easier for the committee to follow, everyone benefits.
2. Make sure your CV has the following information:
 - Degree information, including years and institutions. Thesis title and advisor can be included, but are less crucial. If you don't tell me your degree year (yes it happens...), trying to track that down is super annoying.
 - Positions held: Start with your current position and work backwards. I want to know where you are now, then where you've been.
 - Research interests: Make it obvious and concise. I spend a ton of time trying to figure out what people do. Just tell me. And be brief – a few lines are fine.
 - Funding information: include only successes and pending proposals (not failed submissions), and amounts to you or your institution.
 - Teaching experience. What classes have you taught (titles and level – undergrad, grad, or mixed), and in what capacity (TA? Instructor of record?). Teaching score summaries are

helpful but can be deferred to a teaching statement. We don't expect them to be perfect the first time.

Advisees/mentees: Who have you mentored and/or advised, when, and what did they work on? Graduate students and undergraduates are both important.

Awards and honors: everything starting with college. I don't need to hear about high school or earlier.

Publications: Treat this as a reference list and list in reverse chronological order, broken up by year with standard citation formatting. You don't need to annotate. Separate journal articles and refereed chapters from abstracts and comments. Use symbols or underlining to show which coauthors are students.

Professional development: Academic applications benefit if you document your work towards improving teaching and research practices. That means listing workshops, training sessions, and/or courses in teaching, DEI, outreach, etc. For teaching, we especially want to verify that you use (or know how to use) evidence-based instructional practices (=commitment to excellent teaching) and can support a diverse and inclusive learning environment (=student retention plus a commitment to addressing student needs). You get extra points for taking a course or workshop in course design and then implementing it in a class.

Service activities: You will have an advantage if you can document how you have served your department, scientific society, community etc. But we don't expect early stage researchers to have much experience. It's more important for more senior researchers.

3. Explain how you will fit into the department, both in teaching and research. Look over the main faculty's research and the department's course offerings, and see how you can complement others. In addition to potential research collaboration with faculty, predict how students in other groups could benefit from your expertise. Departments rarely have latitude to hire two people who do similar things. If it looks like you overlap someone who is not about to retire, explain either how you're different or how the double strength allows a uniquely impactful program.
4. In both your teaching and research statements, explain how you will foster diversity, equity, and inclusivity. Yes, DEI has become strangely controversial in the US, and some state legislatures (like mine) prohibit public universities from referring to DEI or requesting DEI statements. But every search committee cares about DEI statements (or sections of text that address DEI in teaching and research statements) because they allow us to evaluate your commitment to learning, retention, and professional success for our students¹. Most importantly, don't just say "I will integrate DEI into my research and teaching" (or "...foster DEI in my classes and research group"). Rather, explain HOW you will do that – what activities or practices will you use? Give examples. To prepare, either attend DEI workshops and training, or educate yourself from the literature and recorded workshops.

¹ And when I say "students" I mean ALL students. Remember that DEI isn't just about race, ethnicity, and gender. Yes, these considerations are important (absolutely!). But some of the largest demographics that benefit from DEI practices include first generation students (meaning, students whose parents have not attended college), veterans, and returning students. Many of these folks are middle class white guys who just need a little help navigating their college or graduate school experiences. DEI practices help them do that. More generally, DEI training provides broad-based, flexible methods to promote the success of students – ALL students. That's why we look for it.

5. Proofread your cover letter. A surprising number of letters announce how delighted the applicant would be to work at a different institution that also happens to be hiring this year (“I am excited to join the faculty at Whatsamatta U...”). I get it – you’re applying to multiple jobs, and forgot to change the name of the institution. But mistakes like this suggest inattention to detail, which is not a good sign for a professional. Before submitting, run a search-and-replace on the institution name. And make sure you spell the name of the institution correctly. Ours is B-O-I-S-E. We’re not a company that makes speakers.
6. In your research statement, tell me where you plan to get funding. Are you focused on one particular program? Multiple agencies? Multiple programs within one agency? Industry? Those kinds of details help me see how you fit in and what your broader trajectory is. If you really want someone to read your research statement, put in some figures with captions that explain what the data illustrate and mean. Think of it as a research proposal – you wouldn’t submit that without figures, right?
7. Look up your current institution’s instructor training program (virtually every university has one) and sign up for workshops and training. Or, in the US, attend workshops at NAGT’s Earth Educator’s Rendezvous (if you’re not in the US, look for remote attendance options). Focus on strategies for teaching and for supporting students of diverse backgrounds. Then list these workshops or courses in your CV and talk about them in your research and teaching statements. Remember, don’t just say you support diverse research and learning needs, document successes, and give examples of how you accommodate them (or plan to).

At this point, you may be thinking, “OK, but what about my research? Doesn’t that matter?” Yes, of course – you won’t get a second glance otherwise. But, first, it’s easy for search committees to evaluate research because that’s what we’re all trained to do. More importantly, I see many excellent applicants who are broadly comparable in their research potential, especially after accounting for the year of their PhD. Often, what gives one applicant an edge is not the one extra paper they published or the impact factor of the journal they published in (which is far less important than actual impact, anyway). Most people write compelling research statements, even the ones that lack figures. Rather, what tips the scales in our early review stages often is a well-written teaching statement, evidence for student mentorship, or participation in professional training. Once you become a faculty member, yes, doing good research and publishing impactful papers are major responsibilities. But they’re not the only ones. And while no one expects you to excel at everything, everywhere, all at once, we do expect you to be knowledgeable about what it takes to attain success in all areas, to take actions to prepare for success, and to articulate those actions in your application.

And, for those of you who are faculty advisors of graduate students and post-docs, think about how you can help them prepare for the diverse responsibilities of a faculty member.