



Virginia Tech Postdoc Essential Skills Series

Cover Letters

Wednesday, November 9th, 12-1 PM



RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
VIRGINIA TECH.

Cover Letter

A Cover Letter exists to allow you to articulate your fit for a position you are applying to.

Specifically, you should seek to:

- Highlight your qualifications: You'll show how your skills and experience relate to the employer's needs for a specific position.
- Showcase your motivation: You'll demonstrate your enthusiasm for the specific position and the organization.
- Reflect your voice and written communication skills: You'll give the employer a sense of your personality and writing style.

Importantly, you can leverage a cover letter to better connect your past experiences (that may seem disjointed or a questionable “fit” at first glance) to the current opportunity.

Video overview: <https://vimeo.com/299525791>

Cover Letter Construction Begins with Analyzing the Job Description

Start with a job description:

Example - Postdoctoral Affairs Program Administrator at Virginia Tech

The Program Administrator establishes and coordinates postdoc orientation and onboarding resources and events. Working with stakeholders across campus, the Program Administrator develops professional development, career advising, and community building programs specific to the needs of Postdoctoral Associates and their mentors.

The Program Administrator is a chief advocate for the postdoctoral community, ensuring a supportive campus climate for postdocs.

...the Program Administrator navigates the administrative components of postdoctoral life, developing and improving processes for the postdoctoral community. The Program Administrator supports the establishment, refinement, or revision of policies and processes impacting postdocs on campus.

The Program Administrator develops and manages programs to recruit high quality postdocs.

- Job description also touched on collaborating with campus stakeholders.

Cover Letter Structure – Introduction (1st paragraph)

- State clearly in your opening sentence the purpose for your letter and a brief professional introduction.
- Specify why you are interested in that specific position and organization
 - **Why Them?**
- Provide an overview of the main strengths and skills you will bring to the role.

I write to you to apply for the Postdoctoral Affairs Program Administrator position (Job #: 517212) within the Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). I am a neuroscientist by training, obtaining my Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2014. Over the past several years, I have become increasingly interested and involved in supporting the scientific workforce, specifically postdoctoral researchers, first as part of the Vanderbilt Postdoctoral Association leadership and recently as the Postdoc Program Manager at North Carolina State University. In January 2020, I began serving a three-year term on the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) Board of Directors and in August of 2020 started my role as Communications Chair with the Graduate Career Consortium (GCC; re-elected to serve another one-year term beginning August 2021). Serving in these roles simultaneously have pushed me to handle multiple projects and deadlines efficiently and work with a diverse group of volunteers to drive key initiatives forward. In addition, these leadership experiences have allowed me to observe trends in graduate student and postdoctoral career and professional development and provided me opportunities to learn best practices in this space. **I look forward to leveraging my past experiences and expertise in postdoctoral affairs in this newly-created role at Virginia Tech.**

Cover Letter Structure – Body (2-3 paragraphs)

- Cite a couple of examples from your experience that support your ability to be successful in the position or organization.
- Try not to simply repeat your resume in paragraph form, complement your resume by offering a little more detail about key experiences.
- Discuss what skills you have developed and connect these back to the target role.
 - **Why You?**

In my current role as the Postdoc Program Manager at NC State, I have functioned in a variety of administrative areas including the review and approval of postdoc position descriptions, hire actions, and policy oversight. **I helped finalize our Postdoctoral Grievance Policy that was approved by the Provost's Office in June 2020 after incorporating a variety of recommendations from campus stakeholders.** In addition, I currently liaise with departments, centers, and colleges across campus to support them in postdoc HR and policy matters. Furthermore, I oversee several initiatives related to **postdoc onboarding and communication including co-facilitating our bi-monthly new postdoc orientation** with a member of the NC State Benefits Office. Through new postdoc orientation and other communication efforts, I seek to empower NC State postdocs with information relevant for their career & professional development.

Other body paragraphs focused on:

Data collection for needs identification and advocacy efforts; program development; outcome tracking; communication efforts

Cover Letter Structure – Closing (Last paragraph)

- Restate succinctly your interest in the role and why you are a good candidate.
- Thank the reader for their time and consideration.

I am excited about the opportunity to work with a variety of Virginia Tech stakeholders to establish the new Postdoctoral Affairs Office and build a robust postdoctoral training experience at the university. **My experience working in postdoc affairs at the institutional and national (NPA) level and network of contacts working in the space will allow me to bring best practices in postdoctoral training to Virginia Tech.** In addition, my 2.5+ years working to support postdocs at a large, land-grant university has helped me understand and address some of the unique challenges in supporting postdocs stationed across a statewide network of research centers, including leveraging technology (Slack, Zoom, etc...) to drive engagement and connection. To close, I look forward to developing programming and strategies to boost postdoc recruitment, deliver exceptional career & professional development in an accessible and equitable manner, and leverage our postdoc alumni and career outcomes to demonstrate the value of postdoc training at Virginia Tech. Working with stakeholders across campus, the state, and beyond, I believe we can build an exceptional training environment to prepare our postdocs for the next stage in their careers.

What if I don't have "work experience"?

Your graduate and postdoctoral training is "work experience" but you need to frame it in an effective manner, tailored to the employer and job description.

[Watch video](#) (start at 40:20)

Have you volunteered or participated in activities outside graduate school or your postdoc that demonstrate work-relevant skills?

Think:

- Leadership
- Teamwork
- Project Management
- Effective Communication

Cover Letter Examples – Chris applying as postdoc



COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Christopher T. Smith

Postdoctoral Research Fellow

Dept. of Psychology, Vanderbilt University

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Dear Foundation for the National Institutes of Health:

I am writing to apply for the Scientific Project Manager – Neuroscience position at FNIH. I possess many of the communication, leadership, project, and time management skills required to succeed in this position.

Currently, I am an NRSA-funded postdoctoral fellow at Vanderbilt University. I have been broadly trained in neuroscience at the undergraduate and graduate level (where I also was NRSA-funded) with experience in both animal and human models of reward, motivation, and decision making and have collected and analyzed data at the genetic, neural, and behavioral level. Throughout my 10 years as a PhD and postdoctoral trainee, I have mentored 20 undergraduate students, receiving UNC Psychology Department's 2014 Graduate Student Mentor Award. Mentoring requires strong communication, time management, and organizational skills which I also have used effectively in my own research projects.

Cover Letter Examples – Chris applying as postdoc

To the Graduate School at North Carolina State University:

I am writing to apply for the Postdoctoral Affairs Program Manager position (#: 00100440).

Currently, I am an NRSA-funded postdoctoral fellow at Vanderbilt University. Over the past 2 years, I have been a member of the [Vanderbilt Postdoctoral Association \(VPA\)](#)'s Executive Board serving as Treasurer (2016-17) and Vice-President (2017-18). During my first year on the Board, I helped the VPA navigate a move from the Vanderbilt University Medical Center to the Graduate School with a mission of increasing our services and support to a broad community of postdocs across seven schools/colleges at Vanderbilt. We have increased our attendance at VPA events in both raw numbers (from ~300 to over 500 attendees at all events in 2016-17 versus 2017-18) and diversity (now ~34% of attendees are from outside the Medical School, and an average of 18 departments are represented at any VPA event). This transition also entailed myself and other Board members learning how to work with a newly-formed Office of Postdoctoral Affairs (OPA) on initiatives to increase postdoc engagement at Vanderbilt. This included the creation of a master email listserv containing all postdocs based on HR records and the institution of a postdoc orientation program to inform newly arrived postdocs of resources available to them, including the VPA. We also created a VPA website which the association controls and which I have served as co-webmaster since 2017. My experience in managing website content will be useful in maintaining NC State's postdoctoral resources website. An effective postdoc association website at Vanderbilt has allowed us to reach our large (~550) postdoc community and serves as a central hub for resources and upcoming events information for postdocs.

Exercise: Practice Articulating Your Skills

5 Mins to draft paragraph
Or plan to acquire skill

5 Mins to share with
Breakout group

ACTIVITY

- Think of a skill you want to be able to convey when applying to a hypothetical job....

Some ideas, from [LinkedIn 2022 In-Demand Skills Analysis](#):

Top Soft Skills to Future-Proof Your Career:

1. Leadership
2. Communication
3. Problem Solving
4. Management

Draft a short paragraph that provides concrete examples of you leveraging the skill effectively.

If you feel you need more examples of how you display these skills, how might you find ways to practice/obtain them while still at Virginia Tech?



Additional Readings & Resources

- [Cover Letter resources from Virginia Tech Career and Professional Development](#)
- [Link to Google Drive with Cover Letter Resources and Examples](#)
- [Additional examples from UCSF](#)
- [NIH Office of Intramural Training and Education video on CVs, Resumes, and Cover Letters](#)
- [Princeton University Center for Career Development Guide to CVs and Resumes](#)
- [Advice on Academic Cover Letters](#)



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