**YGT episode 230**

You're listening to, you've got this episode 230. Welcome to you. You've got this, a weekly podcast for higher education professionals looking to increase their confidence and capacity for juggling the day-to-day demands of an academic life. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Linder. In this episode, I thought I would talk a little bit about what makes a good cover letter.

I've had a lot of clients recently in my coaching practice who are going back on the job market, and they're starting to create materials. And for some people it's been a while since they've been on the market and they're starting to ask some questions about how do you design a good cover letter? How do you design some job materials that are really going to move you forward in the process?

And I talked about this topic way back in September, 2016, I had a podcast episode about this. Um, but now that it's been about four and a half years, I thought maybe I should revisit this. And that it might be beneficial for some people who are listening, who may also be thinking about, or maybe you're currently on the job market.

So I thought I would talk a little bit about, um, how I work with this process in coaching and give you some ideas of maybe how this could help you develop a cover letter that could be effective for the job market. Now I do want to kind of qualify that I'm really talking about cover letters within the academic space.

I don't have a lot of experience working with cover letters for people who are moving into industry. And I know that there are quite a few people in higher ed who are making that leap and thinking about that. Um, so this is really about kind of my understanding and experience and expertise with cover letters within an academic context.

And, um, I think that there are other resources available out there. If you're looking for something that's a little more industry specific. So the first thing I think, um, that kind of goes without saying, but it's probably something that should be said just in case is that every cover letter you write should really be personalized to the job.

And I think that some of us maybe got kind of advice in our early career that you could draft kind of a master cover letter and just send that out and change like the title of the job that you're applying for. And, you know, the institution within the cover letter. And I've certainly received, you know, when I've been on search committee, we've received, um, letters that had the wrong institution or the wrong job title, because they were clearly just swapping it out and they sent us the wrong file.

And I think that this is a little bit more challenging for people who are going on a job market and looking. Like across a really broad spectrum of possible jobs. If you're writing 30 of these cover letters, of course, there's going to be some overlap, but if you have a really targeted job search and you have a very clear sense of where you're headed, you may not be writing as many letters, and this can allow you to really personalize the letter to the specific position description and the institution.

Now, I think it is helpful before you write a cover letter to do just a little bit of research. You might want to know if the institution has had any major initiatives that you want to refer to. That would be relevant, you know, within the letter that you're writing. Um, maybe they have a more recent strategic plan that you want to take a look at.

If you're looking at a certain department, that department might have a blog or other information that you could take a look at that would give you a little bit more information about kind of what's been going on lately with that, um, area of the institution. I think it can be also helpful to do a really deep dive in the position description to really try to pull out words and phrases and things that they're using in that position description that you want to echo or point to in the cover letter.

Now it can be really helpful to have a little bit of like a matrix where you pull out specific things that are especially like the mandatory requirements in a, in a position description. You put them on kind of one side of a table, like in a matrix. And then on the other side, you map out the things that you have in your past experience or the skills you have, the credentials you have.

Um, the job titles you've had, whatever it is that kind of maps onto what they're asking for so that you can do like a direct correlation between those things and make sure that they're mentioned if not in your CV or your resume that they're mentioned in the cover letter in a really explicit way. Now, one of the things I mentioned way back in September, 2016, when I talked about making a good cover letters and I will make sure to link that in the show notes, in case you want to listen to that as well, is that really the cover letter is.

It's sole purpose in some ways is to move you onto the next stage of the job interview process. So really what you're trying to do is unlock the door to the phone interview or to the next step of the interview process. And oftentimes what this looks like within kind of a committee, that's looking at these cover letters and your materials is they're trained to see if you're qualified.

So sometimes if you're not explicitly clear in your cover letter, that you have a certain amount of years of experience or there's other kinds of boxes that they're trying to check in some institutions, the way that their searches work, they literally could not move you forward. Like if they can't check that box that says you meet that minimum requirement, they're going to set you aside and you're not going to make it to that interview process.

So this is why that matrix can be really helpful because if you're writing down the minimum or the mandatory requirements for the job, and then you're mapping out where you're talking about those things in the cover letter, it can be really helpful to make sure you are checking those boxes. Now I think that there are a few different ways to structure a cover letter.

And I was recently actually talking about this with a client and I walked through an exercise with her in a coaching session to really try to draw this out a little bit based on a particular position that she was looking at. So the first, um, kind of structural way that you can think about this, it's almost like a narrative you're telling the story of where you started and where you are now.

And what has kind of led you to this particular position. And you're offering little milestones along the way that would kind of point the people who are potentially hiring you to all of the areas where you're qualified for the role. Now, this is something I think that can work well for things like leadership positions, where you're basically talking about kind of what you've gathered along your career that has led you to the place that you are now.

Um, and so sometimes that narrative structure can be useful. The other structure that I think can be useful is almost like a five paragraph essay. This is something you might have learned like way back in high school. Um, I certainly learned it there and it's not that the cover letter itself is five paragraphs, but the idea of a five paragraph essay is that you have three main points that you're working through within the letter.

So this can work well in two areas. One is if you want to focus on skills and the second is if you want to focus on maybe your professional values and how they map onto the particular position that you're looking at. So you might start your letter and say, you know, in this letter, I'm going to lay out three key areas that really have prepared me for this particular position.

And then you might spend a couple paragraphs on each area, but you're really kind of trying to highlight. Specific things that are going to, um, show the alignment between your background and skills and experience in the particular job that you're applying for. So you can have that kind of narrative structure.

You can have a structure based on your skills. That's more of like a five paragraph essay, or you can have a structure that's based on your professional values. Now the professional value structure, I think works really well. If again, if you're going for a, kind of like a leadership role where it matters what your professional values are, or you're going to be having a lot of decision-making and autonomy.

And so that kind of matters that you have certain values in one situation where I was working with a client, they were moving into a role that was very data intensive. And so we thought it would be useful to talk about how that person views data and how they value data and kind of their. Background and experience with data, but also come from kind of a more personal perspective, like their respect for data and how they approach looking at an analyzing data in previous positions.

So I think that that kind of values piece sometimes is about kind of core professional values. But sometimes it's also about like a particular lens that you're bringing to a situation based on your background and experience that shows kind of a level of maturity of, of what you know about a particular area.

So I could see this applying to skill sets or values around things like, um, collaboration or building teams, anything around management, where you're giving almost a little bit like a philosophy of, of what it is that you think about those particular areas. So when you're thinking about the cover letter, it's important to look at that position description and through kind of what is being asked for in the position you might decide, which of those structures do I feel is a better fit than narrative.

One, one that's focused more on skills, one that's focused more on values, and then you can use that to kind of shape any research or kind of further exploration you might do about the role or the institution. Now what I find really helpful when you do this is you can take that matrix that I mentioned before, and you can use the lens of the narrative or the skills or the values, and start to kind of populate next to the position description elements.

What are the things from your background, your experience, your skillset, that you would maybe draw a connection between what they're asking for and what you have done in the past. Now, one thing that I did recently with a client that I think was really helpful is we basically had a brainstorming session that allowed her to draw connections between words and phrases that were in the position description and things that she had in her background.

Now, one of the areas where this can be especially helpful is things like projects that you've worked on over time. Now, these are not necessarily going to show up on your CV if you publish them maybe, or if it was like a grant or something like that, maybe, but sometimes we do projects like around strategic planning or different reports that we write, or even like overhauling a particular system, you know, within a unit or an office that we work within, um, or merging different departments.

I mean, there's lots of projects that we might have that actually point to a really. Important experience or skill set that we've developed over time. And it's not necessarily going to show up on the CV. So these are perfect things to bring into the cover letter because it's really kind of painting a picture of who you are as a professional.

And it allows you to draw in kind of some extra stuff so that your cover letter is not just like a regurgitation of your CV. So there definitely needs to be alignment between the CV and between the cover letter and between the position description. But you want to make sure that there is enough kind of diversity of those documents as well, that they're really complimenting each other.

And it's not just kind of a, a complete overlap in terms of what it is that you're describing. Now you might be thinking this takes a lot of time and you're probably right. That when you start to build out the matrix document, when you do a deep dive into the position description, when you do a little bit of research on the institution, and then when you start to write out the cover letter itself, this can actually take quite a bit of time.

But the thing that can kind of save you some time, I think is that you can draft some paragraphs around common themes, values, skillsets, experiences that, you know, you might want to talk about across different cover letters. And this will allow you to kind of mix and match those things. Depending on the positions that you're applying for.

Now, this is assuming that you're not applying for like drastically different positions across multiple institutions, that you're, you're probably niched into a particular area that has similar skillsets that has similar requirements that they're looking for. And that will allow you to kind of shape the cover letter toward the culture of the institution or the culture of a department or unit without having to like completely start from scratch every time.

So I think that that's kind of the savior there is that you have a little bit of like a template that you can create, but I recommend creating that, not at the, the level of the letter itself, which is, I think what some people would say is you just create a one letter and then you swap out the institution and the position title.

I recommend creating those templates at the paragraph level so that you can maybe swap paragraphs in and out, depending on what they're asking for. And it may be that some institutions, job positions would get a certain paragraph and others would not based on kind of what they're asking for and what they want to know about your experience.

So I hope that this is a little bit helpful in thinking about how to draft a narrative within a cover letter that is really going to be aligned and connected to exactly what it is that's being asked for in the position description. Again, one of the better things about cover letters is that they're moving you forward by painting a picture of who you are and what your fit is with the position.

And as I mentioned in September of 2016 in the episode, The best cover letter is the one that moves you on to the next stage of the job process and unlocks that door for you so that they can get to know you even more. So I hope that some of these tips and ideas are helpful for you, especially if you're on the job market or you're thinking about going on the job market.

And I would love to hear if you have other tips or suggestions to share with people, or if you have their questions that you're hoping that I'll answer in this area, you can always email me at hello at Dr. Katie linder.com. You can tweet to me at Katie double underscore Linder. You can connect with me on Instagram at Katie underscore Linder, any way you contact me.

I always love to hear from you. Thanks for listening.

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Okay.