

Match with the Practicum You Want: Five Secrets for Standing Out in Your Cover Letters

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If you are like most practicum applicants, you will overlook one of your most powerful tools: the **Targeted Cover Letter**. Unsure of exactly how to present your qualifications effectively, you might feel tempted simply to copy the sample letter you received from your training department and focus your energy exclusively on preparing for interviews. Unless your sample letter was developed by a highly-skilled writer, however, this strategy places you at great risk - of selling yourself short, overlooking the qualifications that distinguish you from other applicants, and coming across as simply One More Generic Applicant. Unfortunately, standing out from your competition during an interview is not the greatest challenge you face:

You first have to make sure that you get one.

What makes your cover letter so important? Without the benefit of supporting application materials (i.e., a personal statement or a description of your training and professional goals), it stands completely alone. Thus, it not only has to carry all of the weight in making a good first impression on your prospective supervisor and training staff, but also convince them that it is worth their time to schedule an interview and learn more about you. Clearly, the fewer opportunities you have to capture your audience's attention, the more you must capitalize on making the most of each one you do have.

Furthermore, standing out on paper is much more demanding than standing out in person because you have only one opportunity to make your pitch. So, you must get in, grab your reader's attention, say what you have to say, and get out while they are still interested in what you have to say. You will not be present to modify this first impression or correct any mistakes. so you must communicate clearly and accurately. Most importantly, you must remember that you are writing to psychologists, not accountants or sales directors, so you probably want to pay extra attention to how you come across on paper. The more you can "flesh out" what makes you an attractive applicant, the better your chances of receiving an invitation for an interview.

To improve your chances of getting an interview, therefore, you owe it to yourself to take some time to step back and become more actively engaged in composing your cover letters. Ideally, this strategy will help you to attract three or four (or even five) interviews so you have some choices about which site best suits your needs and interests. Thus, rather than simply giving in to temptation and passively leaving your fate in the hands of selection committees, you can influence the outcome substantially.

Your best strategy involves creating a master or prototype cover letter that includes all of your best material and then tailoring it to fit with each particular site. The following guidelines will get you started and keep you focused as you compose and refine this important document:

1. Start your opening paragraph with a focus on your reader and gradually shift

throughout the paragraph to a focus on yourself and what you want. One of the biggest turn-offs I experience in reading the average cover letter is an opening sentence that begins "I am writing to apply for your 2005-06 practicum program". Although this is true, it is a rather abrupt way to begin a letter, especially in an area as relational as clinical work. Remember that one of the most important things a therapist can do is establish strong rapport from the start. This is true even (especially) with supervisors and mentors. A far more effective opening is "Thank you for your willingness to review my application for your 2005-06 practicum training program." While the difference is subtle, notice the emotional reaction you would have as a reader if the letter writer created this tone of warmth and respect. It is not unlike the impression you make when you always remember to refer to professional psychologists as "Dr. _____". There is a reason people earn Ph.D.'s and Psy.D.'s, and it's not that they like to pay off large student loans. The time to become more familiar is after you have been invited to do so, no earlier. Start out as formally as possible and maintain this formal tone until the other person indicates that you may shift to become more casual.

Say something in the first paragraph about why you would like to train at this site and/or work with this supervisor. Take some time to find out more about the site, the supervisor(s), and the training program before you write your letters. Go beyond reading the description of the practicum experience in your school's materials. Track down a few students who have trained at each of your chosen sites in the past. Ask them to describe in detail what they liked about the training, what they wish they had known about it ahead of time, and what sets this practicum apart from others. At interviews, I am constantly amazed by how little applicants know about either me (as a supervisor) or the site where I provide training and supervision - especially given the number of students I have supervised in the Chicago area. Thus, nothing impresses me more than someone who has done a little research about me and my approach to training/supervision and about the kind of population we serve at my center.

2. Tell selection committee members enough about yourself and your qualifications to peak their interest, but don't tell them everything. (Make them invite you in for an interview to hear more about you and what you have to offer.) Open your second paragraph with a statement that your background and previous experience have prepared you well to benefit from the training they offer. Then, give at least three specific examples of what you have done and how each experience sharpened your skills, built your knowledge, or broadened your exposure to different clinical situations. (You can spread these three points over the second and third paragraphs.) The more specific you are, the more clearly your reader will be able to see the goodness-of-fit between your training goals and what their site offers.

The reason I suggest three examples is that this number presents you in three different dimensions (Ironically, cognitive psychology has demonstrated that the average human being can retain 3.5 chunks of information in short-term memory. So, you should have good luck in having committee members keep you in mind between reading your application and meeting your for an interview). The more general your statements, the more difficult they are to remember. Concrete examples, on the other hand, create clear pictures in the minds of your readers.

Choose your three main points carefully to show as much about you as possible. For example, your first point could be about how volunteering to staff a crisis telephone hotline exposed you to the range and depth of problems clients face. Your second could be how your racial/ethnic background has influenced your perspective on clinical work in a particular way. Your third could be about the reason you want to learn psychological testing in an inpatient environment or how you would use an emergency room rotation to sharpen your skills in making sound clinical decisions. In short, the more specific your examples, the more clearly you will distinguish yourself from your competition (other applicants) and the more convincingly you will show why they should want to train you. Or, you could use each of your three points to describe the most important learning you have gained from previous practicum training (substituting a volunteer or work experience if you will have not had previous practicum training by the time you apply).

3. Tailor your prototype cover letter to each different site. Make explicit connections between your training needs and what they have to offer. From your research about the site, summarize the three or four main characteristics about the site that attract your attention. These can include 1) what specific skills and knowledge you want to gain during your practicum year (especially as it is related to the kinds of unique experiences you can get at each site), 2) how working in this setting will broaden your exposure (e.g., working in a community mental health center exposes trainees to how clients present in acute episodes of their illnesses, how to link clients with emergency services and address their immediate case management needs such as housing, employment, and substance abuse treatment), and 3) how you would benefit from the particular theoretical approaches, intervention methods, and supervision styles you would encounter at this site.

Again, find out as much as possible about the site ahead of time so you can make an informed presentation of yourself. Be prepared to answer questions that would logically come up at each different site - e.g., Why do you want to work in community mental health? What makes you well-suited to work with children? Adolescents? Adults? How would training in a university counseling center differ from working in a community mental health center? From an outpatient clinic at a hospital? Pick up the phone and talk with someone who has trained in that setting before. Ask about the particular benefits of training in that setting and at this particular agency place.) One of my writing clients said he wanted to learn testing in the inpatient unit of a hospital so he could learn how each test contributed to answering the referral question(s) and in detecting the severity of each client's psychiatric symptoms. Another described how she wanted to train in community mental health so she could gain exposure to a wide variety of diagnostic presentations and learn how medication and therapy/counseling work together. A third wanted to train in a university counseling center to see how academic and individuation issues interacted with psychiatric and emotional symptoms among students..

4. Give selection committee members some idea about what it would be like to work with you as a trainee. The truth is, most supervisors care much more about what kind of person you are than about what you already know. They can (and will) teach you everything they believe you need to know in order to work well with their population and to become a competent psychologist. Unfortunately, they have nothing to say about the kind of person you

are (how reliable you are, how conscientious you are, whether you can work well independently while remaining in strong, regular contact with your supervisor, whether you are adaptable enough to take on difficult clients and to help with routine/mundane tasks when they ask you - such as helping to move boxes in the file room or stuffing envelopes or answering the phone). Yet, these latter qualities are often the most important factors in a site's interest in particular applicants. The most attractive qualities I look for in trainees are: curious, easy-to-work-with, adaptable, thorough, reliable, detailed, and self-reflective enough to see their effects on others around them.

5. Conclude by summarizing your main points and re-stating why you think your background and training needs are a good match for this site. Having concluded your third paragraph with a summary statement about how your qualifications fit well with what the program offers, you are prepared to ask for an in-person interview. Open your final paragraph by expressing your enthusiasm and desire to train at this site: "Thank you again for your willingness to review my credentials. I look forward to the possibility of training with you and your staff in the coming year." State your availability for an interview at their convenience and invite them to contact you, listing your telephone number and email address again (regardless of whether they are listed anywhere else. The last thing any reader should have to do - especially at the moment they want to contact you to schedule an interview - is take time to search for your phone number or email address. And, the last thing you need after investing so much energy in writing this letter is to have a training director decline to call you because he or she could not find it right away. (Incidentally, while I am on the subject of contacting you, be sure to change the outgoing message on your voice mail to include your full name and telephone number so the training director knows right away that he or she has reached you. Erase any music or other distracting sounds and replace them with your most professional greeting. Never underestimate what a poor impression you will make on a professional who I left wondering whether or not he/she actually reached you and can leave a message. Nothing causes me to hang up the phone so quickly as being forced to listen to Brittany Spears or 50 Cent (or any other musician or silly message) when I am trying to conduct business. Also, change the name on your email address (or open a separate email account for professional messages). Imagine how you will appear to a training director who sees "Hotbabe94@gmail.com" or "PsyDwannabe@sbcglobal.net" on your CV and cover letters.)

Add a single statement or two that closes your letter with the same respectful, gracious tone you used at the beginning, before finishing with "Sincerely." One of my favorite combinations is: "Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to speaking with you soon." As you look over the final draft of your letter, take note of the overall graphic presentation you have made. While you may feel free to create a simple letterhead for your letters, resist the temptation to go overboard. Remember that you are applying for professional training in clinical psychology, not advertising or public relations. You do not want to risk conveying an image of superficiality in the layout of your letter that conflicts with the serious content you spent so much time developing. Keep your paragraphs short, no more than 8 to 10 lines each. Use at least an 11- or 12- point font in a typeface that is easy to read (e.g., Arial, Times Roman, Universal.) Avoid anything flowery. Just because you have the technical capability of making something artistic does not mean you should use it in this professional context.

In summary, you have made a significant commitment to your professional training. You have already invested countless hours completing coursework, papers, and exams. You might believe that it is too soon to worry about your training or that supervisors and training directors know more than you do about what you need. Don't fool yourself. Their main priorities are, respectively, filling up their training slots with the best applicants they can get and placing as many students as possible. They have much less vested interest in making sure you get what you want. You will spend many years working in this profession. This next year will strongly influence your first impressions of what it will be like to work as a psychologist or counselor.

Don't you, therefore, deserve to have the best training you can get from the start?

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