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Responding to High Stakes Writing: When Six Colleagues Read One Cover Letter

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract: As preparation for the rhetoric and composition job market becomes more readily available through multiple sources, some cover letter writers may need clarification on the well-meaning but perhaps conflicting responses to writing given to them by mentors from differing backgrounds, statuses, and epistemes. This article seeks to illuminate the rhetorical situation behind the cover letter with simulated writing responses to a genuine cover letter by five reader archetypes: a supportive reader, a critical reader, an outside reader, a teaching-centric reader, and a research-centric reader. Through this exercise, cover letter writers are shown how to weigh writing advice through the juxtaposition of each reader's response. Cover letter readers as a secondary audience are also considered for preparing future job market participants.

Contriving the Reading Situation

Sarah Elizabeth Snyder

The importance of the cover letter in obtaining a career cannot be understated as it is essentially a textual stand-in for the applicant's physical presence. It is an institution's first glimpse at a potential colleague and is often the document that can make or break an application. Because it is such a high-stakes piece of writing and is considered an occluded genre of academia (Swales, 1996), the cover letter genre is often passed down from advisor to advisee explicitly, but there are opportunities for cover letter advice in many places now due to high demand for this type of professionalization (e.g., Elder et al., 2014; Pemberton, 1993) and the high-stakes nature of the genre. For example, in 2019 the Conference on College Composition and Communication leadership opened a "mentorship initiative for graduate students" where volunteers would help with many aspects of career planning, including giving feedback on the cover letter. This initiative was wildly successful, and although it was initially capped at 20, it quickly became full and overenrolled (S. Perryman-Clark, personal communication, May 1, 2020).

In the field of rhetoric and composition, having more opportunities for cover letter feedback is undoubtedly a good thing for people in the job market; however, with more advice comes more potential for confusion.

Whose feedback should the candidate take if it conflicts with other mentors' feedback? This is the humble beginning of this study: Joseph Janangelo (Joe), a kind, advanced scholar in rhetoric and composition, offered to help me revise my cover letter as I was finishing graduate school. When I told him that some of his advice contradicted that of my other mentors, Joe suggested that search committee members sometimes ask different things of a text. Joe then suggested that we build a conference panel around that idea,¹ with the intent of shaping the panel content into this collaborative article for *JRW*.

Purpose and Method

This novel look at the genre of the academic cover letter illuminates six cover letter reader archetypes (a supportive reader, a critical reader, an outside reader, a teaching-centric reader, and a research-centric reader) and their responses to a genuine cover letter. Each archetype was chosen to represent the positionality of the typical reader on a mock academic job search committee (e.g., supportive, critical, or outside) or at a particular institution (e.g., teaching-centric at community colleges or research-centric at R-1 institutions).

Each reader was also chosen for their extensive experience on archetype-specific search committees. For example, Mark Blaauw-Hara, with his teaching and community college expertise, was asked to represent the archetype valuing teaching experience, and Staci Perryman-Clark, with her expertise in research-intensive situations and institutions, was asked to represent the archetype valuing research ability. The “outside” reader, Cris Elder, was recruited based on specialty and familiarity with another field. For the supportive (Irwin Weiser) and critical (Michael Pemberton) readers, each person was

1 This study was first presented at the Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference in 2018, with the original readers Shirley K. Rose, Susan Miller-Cochran, Michael Pemberton, Irwin Weiser, Cristyn Elder, and Mark Blaauw-Hara.

asked to play the extreme version of the archetype from their experience (whether they identified strongly with the archetype or not). Although the authors acknowledge that this contrived nature of reading and identifying is not the most authentic representation of what happens on committees, for the sake of genre analysis, the cover letter reader archetypes serve as a mnemonic device for future writers of cover letters to use when imagining their target audiences as they draft. In our experience, this mnemonic device is also replicated commonly in mock interviews.

In this article, each reader's response to the cover letter is paired with specific advice for cover letter writers—especially in cases where reader responses diverge. To develop these responses, we met online to clarify roles based on our experiences in mock interviews. We did not give authors instructions per se; instead, authors interpreted the roles based on their experience with the roles in actual committees. The cover letter that was read and analyzed in this study (see the Appendix) is not a final draft but rather an early version to give the readers the most opportunities for feedback. It also lacks institutional context, as the audience “University of Hope” and “Professor Jane Smith” are imaginary.

Audience

This study addresses a dual readership. As we explicitly address cover letter writers, we also address a parallel audience of departmental and program committee members who read cover letters to find the best candidates. The latter group may benefit from thinking even more attentively about their work, their reading practices, and how and why they make the decisions they do, choosing candidates either by selecting or screening based on evidence and explanation. We hope this essay offers ideas for better understanding the dynamics of authoring and interpreting cover letters in committee. We hope that cover letter writers will see the potential conflicts between readers and

their expectations for this occluded genre to know how to optimize the genre for the best results. We hope that committee members will use these insights to create a more humane and kind job market experience for those vying for positions worldwide. We hope faculty mentors can use these insights to help cover letter writers understand how their prose may be read and interpreted as “evidence” that they can contribute something unique and valuable to a prospective department or program. The conclusion offers ideas for further investigation into responding to such high-stakes writing.

At any point in time, many of us will be on the job market, and others might be on search committees. As our field professionalizes, metadiscoursal conversations become necessary and helpful for those who wish to enter the profession, and the job market lies before the beginning of many new chapters in life. The ones who have run the gauntlet understand the harrowing experience that this can be, and we owe it to those still in the maze to help writing instructors find work and gainful employment. Through this rhetorical and genre-based cover letter analysis, we want to make the job process more transparent, comprehensible, and, if possible, humane.

Targeting Cover Letters by Carnegie Classification: Why WPAs on the Job Market Must Consider Institutional Classification

Staci M. Perryman-Clark

After reading the cover letter, my initial response was to identify the Carnegie classification type for which the letter might best suit. Because earlier paragraphs in the letter describe dissertation research in relation to the applicant’s training by faculty at Arizona State University (ASU), I initially thought the letter might be targeting Carnegie institutions with high, or perhaps very high, research activity. For example, the applicant is sure to mention that she is a doctoral candidate at ASU, an institution with a very high research activity classification. The applicant also names two professors

with field recognition, thus establishing the relationship between her work, her training, and key scholars in second-language writing and writing program administration (WPA). Furthermore, the author spends quite a bit of time describing her dissertation, its methodology (both quantitative and qualitative), and how this research contributes to the subfield of second-language writing. In doing so, she seeks to demonstrate her commitment to research and her potential to continue researching second-language writing on the tenure track. In essence, leading a cover letter with a discussion of one's research and scholarship aims to establish research potential as a scholar.

In addition to research, the letter clarifies the applicant's interests in WPA work and directing writing programs, as mentioned in the first and second paragraphs. After summarizing her dissertation research, the applicant discusses the relationship between her research and her work as an apprentice WPA in the second-language writing program. Such a move is strategic, particularly since some institutions do not see WPA work as intellectual work or work connected to research. The move is also smart because it seeks to show readers that the candidate has tenure potential in her ability to be a productive scholar as a junior WPA by aligning her research interest with WPA work.

While strategic, I am not sure the move is sufficient to convince readers of research productivity. For instance, the applicant aims to show how she might continue her dissertation research at the prospective university; however, in doing so, she does not account for methodological differences and indicators in terms of institutional types. Because the applicant states that she is using quantitative and qualitative research methods, she must justify using two different institutions and populations of students. Are the institutions similar? If not, will she do a comparative study? If comparative, why select these two different institutions to compare? If not comparative, how else might she justify her samples from both institutions? Without these details, readers are left to wonder if there are other justifications

besides convenience. This also raises the possibility of a missed opportunity to show that she has done her homework on the University of Hope, the prospective institution, to tell readers how she sees the connections between Hope and ASU.

As I read the letter further, I began to question whether the letter actually targets institutions with high and very high research activity. Besides the applicant's dissertation, there is no additional discussion of other areas of research or publications. While readers will undoubtedly examine dissertation research for potential productivity, some will look to additional forms of evidence of potential. From my experience on search committees, it is increasingly common for doctoral students to have additional peer-reviewed publications in addition to dissertation work. Moreover, given that the applicant does name a couple of key scholars in the field, readers may wonder whether she has had the opportunity to publish with them.

While publications could be listed on the applicant's CV, it would still be a good idea to mention other venues where one might find the applicant's work (if they exist). In a competitive market, institutions with high or very high research activity will certainly be drawn to doctoral candidates with peer-reviewed publications. Without additional publications, the candidate's interest in WPA work may not appeal to readers from institutions with high or very high research activity. Some of these institutions might only assign faculty to become WPAs after tenure so the applicant can first focus on scholarship and productivity. Other institutions might be open to junior faculty serving as WPAs; however, they might also want to see further evidence of productivity beyond the dissertation. As a result, I am not sure what to make of the candidate's case for doing both research and WPA work as a tenure-track faculty member nor which types of institutions the candidate is targeting.

After finishing the letter, the strongest arguments the candidate makes are those related to her discussions of teaching. In fact, her

strongest arguments for doing WPA work also relate to her teaching experience. The latter paragraphs of her cover letter discuss the relationship between WPA work more strongly than those for research. This discussion shows a much stronger connection to curriculum development and programmatic building. The candidate is also sure to provide evidence of excellence in teaching through teaching evaluations and awards, therefore showing strong potential as a teacher in higher education. In contrast to the discussion of research (where the candidate spends the bulk of her time) and WPA work, the discussion of teaching identified here more clearly demonstrates the concepts and ideas transferable from the work done at ASU to the prospective institution, University of Hope.

In sum, my final reading of the cover letter suggests the candidate is best positioned for comprehensive master's colleges/universities or bachelor's colleges/universities where excellence in teaching might be more strongly emphasized. While these institutional types might also be interested in research potential, this potential need not demonstrate high or very high research activity. That said, the cover letter could more strongly target a teaching institution if the applicant expands and moves the discussion of teaching in relationship to WPA work toward the beginning of the letter and ends by discussing dissertation research and its potential for contributions. Of course, the applicant might still apply to high and very high activity research institutions. Still, she should also create a different cover letter template strategically designed for doing WPA work at teaching institutions, therefore casting her job prospects much wider than this particular cover letter might suggest.

Sure, but Can They Teach? Reading from a Teaching Perspective

Mark Blauuw-Hara

Most search committees seek a well-rounded candidate who can contribute to the department in many ways. However, in real life, most committee members will have certain areas that they focus on particularly hard, whether that is because they see a need in their department—a niche to be filled—or because it is what they value highly. As Michael notes in his section (see *The Critical Reader*), the committee’s job is to narrow down a field of dozens to three to five candidates to interview. This is when the priorities of each committee member come into focus.

In this case, my job was to value the candidate’s teaching and service experience above their scholarship. This was a relatively easy perspective for me to take since it aligns closely with my actual approach in my position as the Writing Program Coordinator at a community college. I need to be careful to note that community colleges do not disregard scholarship; however, as the *TYCA Guidelines for Preparing Teachers of English at the Two-Year College* state, “Scholarship that directly enhances the institution’s ability to serve its students tends to be most valued” (Calhoun-Dillahunt et al., 2016, n. p.). Additionally, I am receptive to the recent calls by Jensen and Toth (2017), Griffiths (2017), Anelora (2008), and others that two-year college writing faculty should craft professional identities as teacher-scholar-activists, employing current writing studies scholarship to advocate for best practices and improved conditions for two-year college students, faculty, and institutions. For this cover letter exercise, I interpreted my teaching-focused orientation to mean that I was looking for someone with a strong teaching background and a history of scholarship and administration who would advocate for their students both within and beyond the institution. I further decided to operate from my stance as a two-year writing faculty member, since I thought that perspective

would be valuable to adopt on this team. Two-year schools serve high percentages of students, especially first-generation, working-class, and military-associated students; it is an important employment option that sometimes gets overlooked when graduate students survey the job market.

One common “red flag” for me as a real-life committee member is when an applicant leads their cover letter with a discussion of their research. When candidates spend the first page of a cover letter discussing their research agenda, I tend to set those candidates aside because I worry that their priorities will not be a good fit with a teaching-focused college. Accordingly, I was a bit put off by the positioning of the candidate’s discussion of her dissertation and her citing of specific sources, which came off as a bit “research-y.” However, this feeling was tempered by the focus of the candidate’s research, which seemed to be firmly grounded in praxis and curriculum. Two-year schools tend to have high percentages of developmental writers, so her research into the Stretch curriculum was quite applicable.

Additionally, the population of second-language (L2) writers has been consistently increasing at two-year schools (Raufman, 2019), so her research in that area also worked well. I loved the pragmatic goals she announced: “to collaborate with teachers and administrators to implement curricular and institutional initiatives that recognize and offer sustained support of the needs of diverse student populations” and to “put [her] research agenda at the service of the writing program.” I felt that these statements showed an orientation consistent with the teacher-scholar-activist stance. I also thought that one of her research findings—that writing programs need to be continually assessed and refined—showed an admirable blend of scholarship and practice. This understanding would help a writing program and mesh well with many accrediting agencies’ focus on assessment and programmatic revision.

Overall, I liked the candidate's discussion of her administrative philosophy, experience, and goals. In particular, I appreciated her section about mentoring other teachers. I, too, believe that good teachers must continually grow, and I have found that much of that growth can (and should) occur in the context of collaborations between faculty in a program. However, I did find myself agreeing with Michael's critiques (see *The Critical Reader*) at several points—notably, when he questioned her focus on graduate education and noted that she would be expected to work with a larger slice of teachers (lecturers, adjuncts, NTT faculty, etc.). Shirley K. Rose (in a presentation on this cover letter experiment at CWPA 2018) also agreed with this critique. She suggested asking the candidate how she would apply her experience to working with other faculty. As is often the case in actual search committees, the comments of some of the other committee members drew my attention to something I had glossed over in my reading, and I thought they made good points.

I thought the candidate's teaching section was particularly strong. Specifically, I liked that she had “a nine-year record of strong teaching at universities, community colleges, literacy centers, prisons, and in English as a foreign language settings.” I loved the diversity of experience that the candidate brought to the position. Her teaching record suggested that she was committed to working with underserved populations and would not try to “flee” difficult teaching loads after she achieved tenure or seniority. I also appreciated her discussion of cultural and linguistic diversity, which was consistent with current scholarship and best practices in writing studies. (Believe it or not, many candidates still have outdated—or harmful— notions about linguistic diversity.) The candidate's discussion of students' rhetorical choices and cultural power suggested that she would help her students gain more conscious control over their language in liberatory ways rather than advocating for “standard” grammar. I also thought the inclusion

of her teaching award was appropriate and showed that her peers recognized her excellence.

I liked the final sections of the cover letter because they portrayed the candidate as connected with a larger society of scholars. The specific connections—the Symposium on Second Language Writing and the Council of Writing Program Administrators—were also consistent with an orientation toward teaching and working with other teachers. The candidate came off as a real leader in these sections.

In all, this cover letter was quite strong. The candidate presented strong teaching experience, and her scholarship seemed to support pedagogy. Her commitment to mentoring and leadership suggested that she held the potential to help other faculty in the department grow in productive ways. My only substantive critique would be to lead with her discussion of teaching rather than her research, but as I said above, she did a great job showing how her research supported her teaching. Were this an actual hiring committee, I would advocate strongly for the candidate to have an interview.

On the Outside Lookin' In

Cristyn Elder

I read the attached cover letter as an outside reader, specifically a literature colleague, reading for a rhetoric and composition (rhet/comp) hire. Regarding job search committees (and tenure and promotion decisions), I have been both the outside reader for my department and a candidate whose application was read by outside readers. In the following paragraphs, I outline the general purpose for an outside reader, my response to the cover letter as an outside reader, and things to consider when writing for an audience beyond one's field.

The Role of an Outside Reader

The role of the outside reader on a search committee is primarily influenced by the positionality within the department of the

advertised job. In other words, is this a rhet/comp hire within a department where literature folk traditionally hold most of the power (as in my department)? Or is this a rhet/comp hire within an independent rhet/comp department, and the outside reader is not just from outside the field but from outside the department? In the former instance, the outside reader is often chosen to represent the department as a whole, considering the department's needs and not just the specific rhetoric and composition program. In the latter scenario, the outside reader may represent the college and other divisions on campus that will later determine whether the candidate will be promoted (and tenured, if applicable). The same is true in the first scenario, but the department's needs are also considered more immediately in the first example. Of course, it is also possible that the person being hired for the advertised position will be the only faculty in the program or department with a background in rhetoric and composition. In all scenarios, the location of the job position within the department can influence how much influence the outside reader has.

The outside reader can serve as a referee when there are divisions among the rest of the committee about what the program needs, helping resolve divisions more promptly. Search committees often choose an outside reader based on their ability to give a helpful perspective and the likelihood that they will collaborate in finding the best hire for the program (as well as the department).

An Outside Reader's Response

As an outside reader,² there were several aspects I appreciated about the applicant. First, I am glad to see her interest and experience in WPA work, as I am not interested in that work and would never want to have to rotate into that position. I would hope that this hire

2 In this hypothetical role, much of what is expressed here is not an accurate reflection of how I, a rhetoric and composition scholar, feel about WPA work, nor how I would personally respond to this candidate's strong cover letter.

ensures that. Second, I am glad to see the strength of her experience working with diverse student populations, including multilingual writers, because, as a literature scholar without this background, I find this to be difficult, challenging work. I am hoping she can help us address this student population. I also appreciate the various service work she has described, as this makes me hopeful that she will be a good departmental citizen and help with department responsibilities, including teaching the graduate student practicum.

However, there are some aspects of the cover letter that make her a weaker candidate for me, perhaps due to my need for more understanding of parts of the cover letter. To begin with, the applicant spends a lot of time discussing Stretch and developmental writing. However, I am not sure what Stretch is nor how it would relate to the job we are hiring for. (While I think I know what TESOL is, I am unsure what CWPA is.) Also, in describing her research, she writes that her methods “reveal larger phenomena with over one million institutional data points.” This seems vague and very different from the archival research and textual analysis that I do in my scholarship. It leaves me wondering whether she will be able to publish on this data or publish beyond a single article. Or is this data for a monograph (which is preferred by my field)? As she does not describe a research agenda beyond this single project or reference any publications (in print or in progress), it leaves me wondering whether she will be able to get tenure (assuming this is a research, teaching, and service position). Also, I wonder if this institution-specific research has prepared her for the job we are hiring for.

Finally, perhaps because I feel less like an authority on this candidate’s research, I may pay more attention to those things on which (I think) I am more of an expert (e.g., grammar). Therefore, I am very aware of and turned off by the number of typos in this cover letter, including extra spaces throughout the letter (i.e., some sentences are separated by one space, others by two), missing articles (e.g., in the

first paragraph “*the* study of . . .” and “*the* University of Hope”) and incorrect punctuation (e.g., a missing comma before *which* in the third paragraph). After all, writing is about grammar, and if this person is going to run our writing program, I am concerned about her use of correct syntax and mechanics.

A Note to Rhet/Comp Job-Seekers: Considerations when Writing for Outside Readers

It is usually unclear until you get to the interview stage who will be reading your materials, including the cover letter. But it is safe to assume that you will have at least one outside reader (if not more, based on the positionality within the department of the described job). As the above reader response reflects, an outside reader may have a different understanding of what it means to teach and respond to student (or peers’) writing. No matter the case, the following recommendations should serve one well when writing a cover letter:

- Define field-specific language (e.g., TESOL, CWPA, L2, Stretch).
- Describe your research and teaching in terms people outside your field will understand. (You will need to be able to do this at all stages of your professional career, particularly when it comes to annual reviews, promotions, etc.).
- Make explicit connections between your qualifications and the needs of the position to which you are applying (especially for a WPA position; how does your research/teaching/administrative experience transfer to the institutional context of the job position advertised?).
- Avoid parenthetical citations; they often do not mean anything to outside readers, and one runs the risk of alienating colleagues within your field if you do not cite the “right” sources.

- Stay true to yourself and your research, teaching, and administrative interests. For example, if you do not want to teach professional writing, do not market yourself as such. Remember that the search committee is not just looking for the right fit for them; you are looking for the right fit for you.
- Avoid typos.
- And know that outside readers will often defer to their rhet/comp colleagues when it comes to ultimately evaluating the fit of a candidate for a position and who ultimately makes the interview list.

Author Note: The final two readers illustrate how the “same” text can receive very different receptions.

The Critical Reader

Michael Pemberton

There’s one in every family. Two in mine, actually.

—“Zazu,” Rob Minkoff and Roger Allers, *The Lion King*

Most people will say that search committees are, by and large, composed of humane and supportive people who are, through no fault of their own, charged with a challenging task. They must read through dozens, sometimes hundreds, of application letters from promising scholars, all of whom are trying to convince a group of people they have never met that not only will they be great teachers, scholars, and colleagues but that they will be *better* teachers, scholars, and colleagues than anyone else who might be applying for the same job. The committee members must determine which applicants will likely be the best “fit” in their department, weighing each applicant’s strengths and weaknesses and winnowing the applicant pool to a small

group of likely prospects. In principle, I think that is a fair characterization. Everyone on a search committee has been a job applicant at one time or another, and they are very aware of—and sympathetic to—the stresses of the job search and the awkward rhetorical position of having to guess what might be appealing to a group of strangers in a relatively unknown departmental context.

That said, committee members are also keenly aware that they cannot hire everyone, so critical reading is the name of the game. Supportive or not, their job is to pare the pool from dozens to three or four, which means looking for something—anything—that will elevate one candidate over another. Ideally, this means reading letters generously, focusing on the positives, and looking for candidates whose application portfolios really stand out. Less ideally, one or more people will choose instead to focus on the negatives, looking for flaws, misrepresentations, questionable claims, or weaknesses that can be used to dismiss an applicant from the pool. Those weaknesses might be legitimate, or they might be grounded in personal preferences and prejudices.

My role was to be one of the skeptical readers in our search committee “family”: someone who read the letter harshly to identify places where the applicant was, for instance, overstating qualifications or presenting their qualifications in a way that was misleading to reviewers. As a part of my role,³ I also made it clear that I was nursing a grudge; I was annoyed that the position was open to newly minted PhDs when I felt it would be more responsible to limit the pool to candidates already eligible for tenure. It is not unheard of for search committee members to subconsciously (or consciously!) apply criteria that are not part of the formal job description, so I thought that taking

3 Pemberton’s role was “the critical reader” in the first presentation of this project at the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ Conference 2018, interplaying with Susan Miller-Cochran, “the supportive reader.”

this stance would be authentic even if the degree to which I tried to present my points might have been a bit over the top.

I started immediately with some snark about the candidate's statement that she was "uniquely" qualified for the position, and unsurprisingly, given her role as a "supportive" reader in this conversation, Presenter 1 quickly leaped to the candidate's defense. (Presenter 1 and I were sometimes each other's foils in this discussion, though there were some points in the conversation when we agreed.) For the most part, my critical comments fell into one of three categories:

- pointing out places where I felt the candidate's claims appeared inflated or misleading,
- lamenting that she did not adequately connect her scholarship or her teaching interests to University of Hope, and
- critiquing statements about her research that seemed vague and lacked important details.

Examples of criticisms in the first category were her claim that she was a WPA at the "Assistant and Associate level"—which sounded suspiciously like she was claiming faculty rank—and her statement that she had organized a professional conference. The rank issue was quickly addressed by other people on the committee. However, it is still worth remembering that faculty are not likely to be familiar with the job titles or job descriptions used at different institutions. A little explanation can go a long way toward clearing up any potential misunderstandings. Regarding conference organizing, it is also important to know that search committees might do some outside research to verify what an applicant says. For the candidate's letter, I got on the web, looked up the conference, and found that she was one of many conference organizers, not the sole person responsible. The imprecision in language gave a misleading impression, which could work against her when deciding who remains in the pool and who gets dropped.

The second category of comments I made, which focused on the candidate's failure to talk about the contributions she could make to University of Hope, highlights the most crucial component of an application letter. To a certain extent, these letters are expected to be somewhat generic when talking about research or teaching or service; no one has the time to write twenty or more letters that are totally different and completely individualized. Nevertheless, it is still important for candidates to tailor each section so that the letter does not read like a collection of boilerplate prose that differs only in the address it is being sent to.

If you are talking about your research, it would be prudent to discuss how your work can contribute to the department or the major. If you are talking about your teaching, it would be beneficial to link your research and experience to new courses you would like to offer or existing courses in the department that you are qualified to teach. If you are talking about service, familiarize yourself with the department's publications, workshops, conferences, and other service opportunities, and point out places of connection.

Most importantly, if you are applying for a WPA position, learn about the first-year composition courses, the students who take those courses, and the people who teach them. The candidate claims that her research will transfer to University of Hope, but she does not do a good job of explaining how. Her statement that "graduate education would be [her] first priority" could be interpreted as a limited interest in teaching undergraduate courses or, possibly, a lack of awareness that many first-year composition (FYC) courses are taught by lecturers and adjuncts, not just graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Again, that is a possible red flag for a committee looking for a good "fit."

Lastly, I felt the need to say something about the candidate's discussion of her research. Admittedly, the brief space of a cover letter does not allow for much explanation or detail about what is likely to be a very complex and nuanced dissertation but being too vague or

sounding too self-promotional will not work in an applicant's favor either. I was prompted to react to the claims, for example, that she "nourished interactions between [her] diverse colleagues" (how so?) and that her methods "reveal larger phenomena with over one million institutional data points" (such as?). It is important to remember that there is a delicate balance between saying too much and saying too little, just as there is a fine rhetorical line between adding a bit of sheen to one's accomplishments and putting on so much polish that it distorts perception.

Reading Enthusiastically: Reactions to a Strong Cover Letter

Irwin Weiser

Over the years, I have read hundreds—perhaps thousands—of application letters for faculty positions. I have been on search committees for beginning, mid-career, and senior faculty and for department headships and deanships. I have read from the perspective of a future colleague; the head of a "full-service" English department with programs in rhetoric and composition, literature, creative writing, linguistics, and second language studies; and the dean of a college of liberal arts. From that last perspective, I have read letters from people applying to be department heads and from finalists for faculty positions prior to my conversations with them during their campus visits. Paraphrasing J. K. Simmons in the Farmers Insurance television commercials, "I know a thing or two (about letters of application) because I have seen a thing or two."

I assume my reading strategy is similar to all search committee members: I am looking for "fit." Fit, for me, begins with how well the applicant meets both the required and the preferred qualifications that most job advertisements list; it also includes other kinds of experiences and accomplishments that the candidate describes. I am looking for specifics, though I am unimpressed with letters that seem to claim too much. I want to have a sense that the applicant has tailored the

letter to our job, not that I am reading a generic letter by a person applying for every advertised position they think they may have a chance to get or they think would be a desirable job. This is not to say that I expect applicants to write entirely new letters for every position they apply for, but that I want some evidence that the applicant has read the ad, is familiar with our program, and appears genuinely interested in joining our faculty.

I have read this letter assuming that the writer does understand the University of Hope and is including details we would find relevant (though other contributors to this article may find excessive boilerplate where I find “fit.”). I will also acknowledge that I pay attention to the letterhead and professional references. Am I at all familiar with the program that the applicant is coming from? Does the applicant work with people who are known and respected in the profession? So, when I read this letter from the candidate for our position at the University of Hope, why would I be interested in bringing this person to campus as a finalist?

First, the candidate recognizes that our position is for a writing program administrator, and she provides evidence of administrative experience as an assistant and associate director of several writing programs while a graduate student. More importantly, the applicant appears to understand the intellectual work of writing program administration, having chosen a dissertation that involves program analysis and assessment. The description of the dissertation, with references to its theoretical and methodological underpinnings, gives me confidence that the applicant understands research practices, in part through judicious citations of relevant scholarship. (I will note that “judicious” and “relevant” are significant terms for me; I am wary of applicants who fill their letters with citations as if they are writing a literature review—or worse yet, trying to show readers that they know which names to drop.)

Second, I am impressed with the range of teaching experiences in diverse contexts. We learn that the applicant has taught not only in universities but also in community colleges, literacy centers, and prisons; we learn that teaching includes not only composition but also English as a foreign language (EFL), grammar and linguistics, and perhaps most importantly for a WPA, practicum courses. Because the University of Hope, like most institutions in the United States, has an increasing population of multilingual undergraduate students, I am particularly impressed with the applicant's experience and research interests in second-language writing. I note, too, that the applicant does not simply provide a list of courses taught (we will have a CV for that) but discusses her teaching goals ("to become a teacher of teachers") and her teaching philosophy in the sentences beginning with "As a teacher, I frame my pedagogy . . .".

Third, the applicant provides evidence of professional engagement, both through conference presentations at TESOL and CWPA (and perhaps more that we will see on the CV) and conference organization work and participation in WPA-GO (particularly as the "innovator" of the Breakfast Buddies program and as Chair of the Digital Presence Committee for WPA-GO). This suggests that the applicant understands the importance of being professionally active and is interested in leadership. That bodes well for our program, which wants more than people who simply do their jobs, however well. We want to be recognized beyond our campus.

Despite my enthusiasm for this candidate, there are two things that concern me. First, in a letter dated October 20th, the applicant provides a specific defense date, April 3rd. If the letter included some reference to the status of the dissertation, I would be more confident that the writer would defend by that time. After the candidate's campus visit, this, of course, could be verified by a message to the dissertation director if we were considering making an offer to the applicant. Second, while I was pleased to see that the applicant has presented at

conferences, I saw no references to published scholarship or publications in process. That would not disqualify the applicant from further consideration but might be a disadvantage if other finalists demonstrate their ability to publish their work.

Looking for Leadership

Joseph Janangelo

Rhetorician Richard Lanham (1993) argues that, in contemporary communication, attention is the scarcest commodity. Lanham characterizes attention as a limited resource that writers covet, and readers reallocate at will (Lanham, 1993). The rhetorical situation of writers trying to recruit and retain readers' attention seems especially pertinent to cover letters, where writers strive to make compelling arguments for their candidacy. That situation has a working parallel because search committee members are reading those letters to find candidates who will strengthen their writing programs by adding diversity and value to their existing collection of colleagues.

With readers working to increase programmatic health and job candidates auditioning for roles, the job search takes on a theatrical dimension involving talent scouting and selection. In this job search, my directions are to be “a WPA reader who may scrutinize and mine the letter for writing program leadership interest, experience, disposition, philosophy, and potential.” Lacking time to discuss each of these traits, I will focus on disposition and discuss passages that catch and keep my attention.

A word about allegiances: As a reader, I try to protect the program and the people who study and work there. That also means protecting job candidates and helping them prepare for success at our program and school. It also means being on the lookout for both demonstrated and nascent leadership—evidence and intimations of the candidate's professional development and desire to work creatively and collegially to mentor others.

On a practical note, I look for potential colleagues who could contribute to our work and (be)come happy enough to succeed and stay with us, at least for a while. For authors, this means creating cover letter content that shows themselves to be an engaged and contributory leader-in-process whom committee members would like to interview. To catch my attention, authors can also make rhetorical moves that show the transfer of experience. That involves candidates drawing links between their past work and potential contributions to our school. It also entails offering insight into the larger project of working creatively and compassionately with people to challenge and support them as they do their best work. It can also mean showing a capacity to understand why “best work” is not always possible.

Discerning Disposition

Disposition reveals itself in one’s perspective and attitude toward students, colleagues, and experience. Disposition is a central leadership trait involving generosity and reflection in mind and character. In *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, Kouzes and Posner (2017) advise that “leadership is a relationship” (p. 23). That makes sense. It is a relationship with current and potential colleagues, and it is a relationship with one’s past and future work.

Achievements like degree completion, publications, and grants can make candidates appear competitive. With these things in a prominent place, disposition may be seen as supplemental but desirable. Quite candidly, disposition matters most when I explain why our committee should consider interviewing candidate B when candidates A and C appear more qualified or impressive regarding WPA coursework, experience, and publications. More than compensatory, disposition can “round out” a person’s candidacy. That is where strategic and sensitive writing comes into play. Composing an effective cover letter can mean being intelligent enough to “read the room” to respond to what a

search committee is looking for and self-aware enough to discuss one's accomplishments without appearing selfish or narcissistic.

Here is an example of a job candidate being both intelligent and strategic. By listing her defense date, she shows when she will be untethered to her graduate work. That is a wise move because, with a tenure clock running, the dissertation is one less thing to detract from her potential work on our campus. When the candidate writes that she is “specializing in rhetoric and composition, writing program administration and assessment, and second language writing,” she lists valuable and harmonic foci to a potential program leader. That inspires me to read on.

The candidate's description of her dissertation, which “examines the experiences of L2 writers in the Stretch Program,” shows that she has reflected on the broader relevance of her research. By defining her work as “a form of program analysis” and discussing the “need to continually assess programs as they age and their constituents change, completing one of many possible feedback loops,” she transfers her research from the program where she studied to writing programs writ large. This shows leadership and programmatic utility because her research will not be useful to her alone. Moreover, the words “continually assess” and “feedback loops” show awareness that programmatic work is in perpetual motion.

A purposeful disposition becomes apparent when the candidate shares her leadership intentions: “As WPA . . . my pragmatic goal would be to collaborate with teachers and administrators to implement curricular and institutional initiatives that recognize and offer sustained support of the needs of diverse student populations.” Turns of phrase such as “can be applied” and “collaborate” show the candidate planning to work on behalf of her colleagues while sharing the spotlight. The way the candidate discusses her contributions adds value to her leadership profile—notice how she recounts her experience: “Through three years of writing program administration (WPA)

experience at the Assistant and Associate level . . . I have contributed to the revision of the ASU Writing Programs through my research, teaching, and service.” The words “have contributed to” show the candidate working purposefully within the traditional triad. Then there is a slightly puzzling phrase, perhaps drawn from the language of the job advertisement: “I feel that I have nourished interactions between my diverse colleagues at ASU, and I look forward to doing so at University of Hope.” I applaud the candidate moving beyond her flashback to state what she wants to do at our school. However, I wonder what it means to “have nourished interactions.” Perhaps that is a topic for an online interview.

Job candidates, as asked, narrate their accomplishments. But could they do that in ways that show a taste and talent for building community and recognizing their peers’ contributions? Here is a central tension of the cover letter genre. Understandably, writers wish to project achievement and ambition, even eagerness and hunger for difficult and career-advancing work. It is also rhetorically challenging to discuss one’s contributions and achievements without over-using “I + verb” sentence constructions, which can seem narcissistic and dismissive of other peoples’ contributions. In other words, how can job candidates cultivate readers’ attention without appearing to covet it? Appreciative of the relatively high-stakes rhetorical situation of advancing one’s candidacy, the genre’s complications make sense. Yet, including multiple “I + verb” sentence constructions can yield a rather fast-paced reading experience. Consider these examples:

- “I was awarded the competitive and peer-reviewed graduate Teaching Excellence Award for my work with L2 writing students.”
- “I also created and piloted a ‘walkalong’ course . . .”
- “I have taught at local community colleges, where I work with students . . .”

- “. . . I designed curricula for multilingual sections of FYC, served as an L2 resource for teachers of all writing classes, and planned and executed over ten professional development workshops, breakout sessions . . .”
- “. . . I have organized one local and three international conferences . . .”
- “Every year since, I have organized and assessed this event with my teams.”

Such sentences can portray a job candidate as more of a solo artist than a team leader. The last example features a telling syntactical move: It is apparent who gets first billing. In terms of creating a more generous leadership persona, my advice would be to revise the sentence to say something like, “Our team organized and assessed this event on a yearly basis.”

Still, when in the job market, it may be read as advantageous for aspiring program leaders to show some hunger for attention and enterprise. That can mean expressing one’s ambition in ways that make one appear energetic and contributory. Consider these passages where the candidate uses “I + verb” structures to show how she would add value to the workplace. Notice how the story arcs show an entrepreneurial leader who understands the difference between appearing hungry and appearing ravenous:

- “I am eager to innovate new, engaging curricula.”
- “I welcome the prospect of contributing to faculty and professional development and facilitating other types of service in the writing program.”
- “I am also ready to teach many of these populations online.”

In these sentences, the candidate shows the rhetorical acumen of an articulate program advocate. Furthermore, presenting a link to her portfolio constitutes an effective conclusion and an evocative starting point because she makes it easy for readers to find valuable

information they could use to advocate for her candidacy. Sometimes, leaders expedite essential processes, and this potential WPA shows that she could do that for our graduate students. When the candidate writes, “From these service and leadership experiences, you will find me poised to begin mentoring graduate and undergraduate students in my first year,” she seems credible. She appears poised to explain, build, and reflect on her experience, showing the disposition of a potential program and even a campus leader.

A quick reflection: Reading cover letters can be a learning experience. It can remind me to resist the temptation of imposing my preferences and aversions about wording and exposition on a text. Many questions remain; for example, can reading cover letters be considered a micro-aggressive activity? When looking for leadership, I should also remember to look inward to recollect how daunting and dispiriting it can be to look for work, reminding myself to check my ideals and biases about perceived “leadership disposition.” If writers can be quick with their discourse, readers can be fussy and critical with their judgment.

Conclusion: What and How We Might Learn

Joseph Janangelo

In this article, we examine how six cover letter readers (CLRs) respond to a given text. We ask what compels CLRs’ notice, what content they amplify or minimize, and what they construe as supporting or complicating candidacy. In this conclusion, I will discuss three things: observations about the CLRs’ responses to the letter, ideas for making CLR reading more inclusive, and thoughts about how future researchers might take this experiment beyond our sample size to help our field move forward in understanding how CLRs may respond to such high-stakes writing.

I begin by noting that, in concept, the rhetorical situation can initially appear clear. Candidates are often advised to respond attentively

to the job description and advance their candidacy by showing how they could contribute to programmatic and institutional needs. Complimentarily, CLRers are asked to read closely, carefully, and without bias. However, what seems direct in plan becomes complicated in practice: Readers appraise the same text differently by amplifying and minimizing content based on their own appreciations and aversions.

A theory called “reader response” accounts for this phenomenon. Drawn from literary analysis, this approach finds a perceptive voice in Rosenblatt’s (1938) book, *Literature as Exploration*. Explaining why readers connect (or not) with given texts, Rosenblatt states that “there is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are in reality only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works” (p. 5). Rosenblatt contends that “the novel or poem or play exists, after all, only in interactions with specific minds” (p. 5). Rosenblatt’s point is that because reading is an interpretive activity performed by individuals with multiple—and potentially conflicting—affinities and aversions, writers can neither imagine nor control how readers will perceive and respond to their texts. That logic, applied to the rhetorical context of a group of CLRers reviewing cover letters to find potential colleagues, means at least five things. Based on our sample, here are the patterns I see:

1. Reading conscientiously for the common good (finding viable/stellar candidates) involves selecting, prioritizing, amplifying, and judging textual content.
2. Reading attentively and efficiently involves assigning value to textual content and exposition to give job candidates and their texts a fair and rigorous read.
3. Reading closely and critically can take the form of believing, questioning, doubting, and researching; I also see CLRers searching for and scrutinizing “evidence.”

4. Readers value textual content that suggests that the candidate's experience could help the writing program or department move forward in healthy and constructive ways.
5. CLR's, to a degree, look out for candidates' potential success and happiness. Within that assessment, there is a certain confidence in play—these CLR's deeply understand their work. As readers, they know what they are looking for and have a secure handle on the genre and its expected rhetorical moves and phraseology. They also know an in/effective passage when they defend or deride it.

In studying our CLR's' responses, I see two intertwining threads. One is that CLR's read to assess truthfulness, which speaks to the importance of perceived integrity and involves detecting and identifying reasonable and unreasonable "puffing" when readers believe they see a candidate exaggerating their achievements or contributions. That suggests that readers may hold job candidates' self-reported strengths especially suspect. If readers think they have detected debatable or sketchy evidence, they may do some internet research. If research confirms their suspicions, CLR's may wonder if a candidate is lying; if the candidate is lying in this instance, CLR's may begin to wonder about what else the candidate is prevaricating.

Readers may also look for awareness of institutional mission and fit. CLR's may value writers who address the job description closely by showing knowledge of student demographics and demonstrating links between their talents and what the institution does and needs. Conversely, readers may become vexed when candidates seem unaware of the institutional mission or unfamiliar with the department or writing program's students and initiatives. They may wonder if a candidate is applying to their school because of its location (the candidate wishes to stay in the state) or if they have some understanding

of what it means to work at a teaching institution or two-year college. CLRs may ask, does the candidate know who we are and what we do, or are they “just looking” for full-time work? Would this candidate come here and stay if we hired them? Would they enjoy working here with our students? These questions reveal that the classic interview question, “Why do you want to work here?” is more than a query that occurs during campus visits.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Responding to Cover Letters

Most of all, I hope reading and responding to cover letters will be informed by Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). While it is my experience that institutions often require search committees to enroll in DEI training, it is not my experience that such training involves detailed, self-reflective inquiry into what drives readers’ responses to cover letters’ content and design.

My thought is that CLRs’ perceptions of a cover letter’s strengths and weaknesses may reflect what I call *tutored perception* and *textual affinity bias*. In simpler terms, I suspect that, as CLRs, we are likely over-valuing—and teaching in our graduate seminars—cover letters that resemble models we have been taught (socialized) to appreciate, perhaps in graduate school, as models and exemplars of the genre. Those exemplars, very likely written and extolled as strong and effective by white scholars, tacitly celebrate and perpetuate white supremacy by further vaunting inherited whitely models of evidence, presentation, and argumentation.

As human beings and researchers, I hope CLRs will reflect on how their response to cover letters is influenced by default sense and memory of ideal texts and to consider how many of those texts were white authored. Responding fairly to cover letters involves exposing the tacit ideology of white supremacy discursive practices in the cover letter genre and the unexplored biases that can fuel and drive CLRs’ responses. DEI-focused inquiry could help us build on Rosenblatt’s

(1938) insights to ask how and *why* CLRers might read as they do. For example, we might invite CLRers to consider the mentors, models, and histories of knowing that inform their tacit textual content preferences and aversions. CLRers might inquire if the passages they deem well-crafted correspond to white discursive expository practices endorsed and celebrated by generations of white and white-deferential scholars.

I foresee some positive outcomes. DEI-focused conversations about CLR response and responsiveness could inspire more self-aware reading practices that resist a whitely inheritance so omnipresent it operates invisibly. If, as readers, we endeavor to observe ourselves at work, we might gain enhanced clarity on an important professional practice's epistemological tributaries; we can begin to recognize our professional conditioning by asking ourselves why we dislike certain content. As attentive readers, we might inquire if phrasing that seems sonorous is historically sororal with a white discursive practice that can be weaponized against candidates who do not emulate the expected structure, diction, and tone. That could give CLRers deeper insight into streams of input and historical seepage, including under-explored ideals about what represents persuasive writing and open-minded, equitable response. Another outcome might be for CLRers to study themselves reading, noticing, noting, and notetaking. That could help search committee members (SCMs) understand more about what they are looking for and question the expectations and models they may have in mind as they approach and do their work.

Planning Future Research Studies

Our experiment suggests that our field needs methodologies to understand how CLRers respond to high-stakes texts. That inspires several methodological questions: How can we learn what readers deem worthy or wasteful of their time? How best to collect data-focus groups, read-aloud protocols, or something else? How do we make DEI (inclusive of gender identification, CLR experience, and age)

integral to data collection and mining? Inviting reader reflection, I offer thoughts for building on this study or devising and designing your own unique approach:

- Expand this study to include a larger participant group.
- “Cast” several readers in each role, instead of one, to explore and express the variability of each perspective.
- Create more roles to include graduate student and non-tenure track faculty readers.
- Have CLRers do a real-time read-aloud of selected passages to get their spontaneous and “live” reactions instead of the polished summations our CLRers present here.
- Have the group of CLRers respond together to a passage, phrase, or paragraph vs. responding to the text alone.

As researchers, we might inquire into the writing that CLRers do as part of their work. By that, I mean the annotations and notes CLRers may make on or about a cover letter. With IRB approval, future researchers might also collect and examine CLRers’ textual markings (e.g., highlighted passages) and annotations to learn what they mean. Doing that could provide insights into why CLRers highlight or underline passages, what kinds of phrasing or content most prompt on- or in-text commentary, and whether, in main, readers’ annotations tend to bode well or ill for writers’ candidacy.

We might also research the possible relationships between a CLR reading a candidate’s cover letter and the *companion texts*, including the CV and dossier. Researchers might ask how CLRers harmonize their readings of the letter with its supporting documents—including teaching portfolios, writing samples, diversity and teaching statements, student evaluations, teaching observations, and letters of recommendation—to learn which texts and textual passages CLRers tend to prioritize and why.

Researchers might also study the impact of the *reading venues* where a CLRer encounters a text. For example, does reading on screen or

printed copy (and CLR's comfort with reading in those mediums) influence their response to letter content? Does it matter if CLR's review those texts at home, at work, or elsewhere? Consider how introductory framing texts such as departmental or programmatic letterhead may influence readers' perceptions. Consistent with Rosenblatt's (1938) theory of reader response, it would be beneficial to clarify if/when CLR's make assumptions or supplement content because of familiarity with the program or school. We might ask if readers make surmises about letter content and candidate viability based on their perceptions and knowledge of a program or past interactions with its faculty and alumni, particularly if they ever worked at, or applied to work at, that institution. It stands to underexplored reason that when CLR's peruse letters from several candidates from the same school or program, they might inadvertently or intentionally compare each candidate's descriptions of their teaching scholarly activities. Moreover, we might ask if CLR interest wanes when they read multiple cover letters from students in the same department or institution.

As researchers, we might try to learn about CLR's *responsiveness to surprise*: This is where genre subscription and adherence (Derrida & Ronell, 1980) come into play as CLR's approach texts with internalized models of cover letters they admire and use them as standards of judgment. What happens when the letter CLR's currently peruse stimulates recall of letters past? Are CLR's buoyed more by seeing familiar approaches or new ones? When CLR's see unexpected structural or content moves, do they tend to react with admiration for writers taking a novel approach, or do they favor candidates who make more expected moves? I wonder about CLR's disposition toward creative deviations from traditional templates and structures and if it is efficacious for writers to evoke a critical quizzical response or to "blend in" with the other group of cover letters awaiting reading.

We might also research how CLR's *work in community* with other SCMs. For example, what is the likelihood that CLR's work with a

sense that their colleagues will review and judge their response? I call this “peer presence” because, while CLRers may respond alone, they may believe they must explain and even justify their reading in search committee meetings. Permit me to evoke Louise Rosenblatt’s (1938) description of reading’s embedded aspect:

It is a mistake to speak of the experience of a book or a play or a poem, without reference to the context of that experience in the mind of the reader. He comes to the book from life. He turns from a moment from his direct concern with the various problems and satisfactions of his own life. He will resume his concern with them when the book is closed. There is every reason to believe that even when he is reading the book, these things are present as probably the most important guiding factors in his experience of it. (pp. 42–43)

Given the endless permutations of reader responses, Rosenblatt argues that there is no one static text. Nevertheless, in search committee practice, there is a text (a particular cover letter) for all interested parties to read, rank, and debate. Given that reality, potential research questions include: Do CLRers fear being judged as readers? For example, there may be letters CLRers admire for which they would feel compromised to advocate. Do CLRers praise or critique a letter because they think other, more influential SCMs will?

Those dynamics speak to precarity and vulnerability, some of which include race (Martinez, 2020), LGBTQI+, gender, age, and job security. Other variables include CLRer experience, whether it is one’s first time serving on a search committee with those SCMs, or if one holds seasoned status. I wonder about the differences between responses CLRers offer solo and in committee meetings. If there are appraisals, CLRers may feel the need to prove that they are fulfilling their commitment as SCMs and discerning readers. That relates to CLRers making decisions because they feel they have something to dis/prove

about themselves as readers to their fellow SCMs. CLRers may fear appearing remiss if they do not find content to criticize, as if they are not doing their job. Thinking especially of DEI, I wonder if CLRers harbor regrets over texts they wish they dared to defend even after a particular search is over. Because search committees necessitate collegiality and teamwork, researching these questions could help us explore the task of cover letter response in some of its asymmetrical, relational complexity.

On a parallel note, we might try to understand CLRers' work as fulfilling one's *collegial commitments* by supporting the shared project of finding new colleagues. If we pursue that thought, we might try to learn how CLRers approach the task itself. That would involve gaining insight into sensibilities that inform how CLRers configure their task of responding for the common good. Such research could help us articulate notions of integrity, equity, discernment, and duty. By gaining clarity on the allegiances and aversions that fuel responding to such high-stakes writing, we might learn more about how colleagues endeavor to read critically and conscientiously for the "good" of all people, programs, and departments concerned.

That thought begs the question: How receptive to unfamiliar or resistant texts do CLRers wish to become? Currently, CL authors must meet, and even play to, readers' expectations. I hope that dynamic does not remain so entirely in place. We need new endgames to understand the work of reading and responding to cover letters. Instead of offering tips for writers, per the usual focus when discussing and teaching the genre, we might learn how to do better as readers, perhaps by worrying less about enacting due diligence and more about gaining self-insight. By that, I mean it would be good to have more self-aware CLRers on the job, looking out for their own biases, asking questions about why they are impressed or bothered by certain features, and being sensitive to the idea that their sense of evidence and

eloquence likely emanates, at least in part, from tutored perception and white-privileging academic socialization.

Attending responsibly to the work's DEI components, we could research how CLRs respond to cover letters beyond tenure-track job searches. We could consider CLRs' response in adjunct, one-year, renewable, and permanent non-tenure-track searches. Researching CLRs' responses in those arenas could bring insight into the tests to which cover letter writers—and their readers—are put. That research could also show that, when it comes to responding to cover letters, the stakes are high all around. That makes the evolving project of studying the response to cover letters valuable and worthy of our ongoing research.

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Appendix

Early Cover Letter Draft (Analyzed by Readers)

October 20, 2017
Professor Jane Smith
University of Hope
Department of Language and Literature
Hope, State 10000

Dear Members of the Search Committee:

I am writing this letter in application for the position of Assistant Professor of English and Writing Program Administrator at University of Hope. I will defend my PhD in English from Arizona State University (ASU) on April 3, 2018. I work under the direction of Professors Paul Kei Matsuda & Shirley K. Rose, specializing in rhetoric and composition, writing program administration and assessment, and second language writing.

There are many qualities that make me uniquely qualified for this position. Through three years of writing program administration (WPA) experience at the Assistant and Associate level at ASU, I have contributed to the revision of the ASU Writing Programs through my research, teaching, and service. I have presented on writing and writing program assessment at multiple national conferences (e.g., TESOL and CWPA). As my academic background includes study of creative, technical, academic, and professional writing, in addition to rhetoric and composition, I feel that I have nourished interactions between my diverse colleagues at ASU, and I look forward to doing so at University of Hope.

My dissertation, *The Stretch Model: Including L2 Student Voices*, examines the experiences of L2 writers in the Stretch Program, a developmental writing program. As a form of program analysis, my research incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods which reveal larger phenomena with over one million institutional data points, and qualitatively investigates these phenomena through survey and interview techniques. With the assistance of generous grant funding, I have been able to examine L2 students' perceptions of the Stretch Program and compare them to the theorized needs of L2 students through composition theory, complicating some intentions of the Stretch Program for L2 writers. My findings indicate a need to continually assess programs as they age and their constituents change, completing one of many possible feedback loops. This project provides a sense of the effects that assumptions about student language background (and other factors) can have on student experience and trajectory in first-year composition and developmental composition. It also emphasizes the need for replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) research in program assessment, (e.g., Haswell, 2005; Miller, 2014; White, Elliot & Peckham, 2015). The skills that I have cultivated through this dissertation can be applied to University of Hope's Writing Program. As WPA and Professor of English, my research trajectory would complement my position, as my pragmatic goal would be to collaborate with teachers and administrators to implement curricular and institutional initiatives that recognize and offer sustained support of the needs of diverse student populations.

My research agenda would support this work. I will continue my program evaluation research by first finishing the update on the

Stretch Program. This includes analyzing basic writer data (which I have already collected), and publishing a full evaluation of the Stretch Program at its 20-year mark, including analysis and comparisons of multiple student groups. Multiple kernels of theoretical research concerning program design and assessment are growing from my dissertation, and it is likely that they will converge on the concept of writing and language support programs throughout students' university careers. Continuing this research facilitates the important work teachers and administrators do, recognizing the ways they are materially situated and intertwined within their local contexts and the opportunities that exist to do meaningful work with each other, with the students in their classes, and for the larger institutional culture. I look forward to putting my research agenda at the service of the Writing Program.

My work as a program administrator and L2 writing specialist will be symbiotic to my engagement in the Writing Program through excellent and inclusive teaching. First and foremost, I pursued my PhD to become a teacher of teachers, and as Writing Program Administrator, graduate education would be my first priority. Having co-taught the practicum for second language writing and undergraduate/graduate writing, I am familiar with the struggles that tutors and teachers experience when in real-life situations with students—especially L2 and basic writers who presumably have the most to gain from the writing program. I have an excellent record of teaching, consistently earning the highest evaluation scores (a “1”) at ASU. I also have a nine-year record of strong teaching at universities, community colleges, literacy centers, prisons, and in English as a foreign language settings. My teaching repertoire has breadth and depth: from written communication and rhetoric/composition to writing about literature, reading

and English as a second language, and pedagogical grammar and linguistics. As a teacher, I frame my pedagogy around the diverse linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds of my students. I enjoy contributing to their academic success by creating learning environments where differences in cultures are valued and nurtured. I concentrate on inclusive pedagogical techniques that give students the confidence to take control of their learning. My students learn that the linguistic and rhetorical choices they make are applicable to everyday life—not only in communicating with classmates within their writing course, but also across disciplines and in their communities. At ASU, I was awarded the competitive and peer-reviewed graduate Teaching Excellence Award for my work with L2 writing students. I am eager to innovate new, engaging curricula. Such work included developing and teaching a graduate-level academic writing course for international students. This challenged students to work with classmates in interdepartmental and interdisciplinary contexts and engaged advanced language learning students with the concepts of genre and composition theory. I also created and piloted a “walkalong” course for multilingual freshmen that included study skills and language instruction to complement the Stretch first-year course that they were enrolled in. In addition to my teaching at ASU, I have taught at local community colleges, where I work with students (most of whom are first-generation, developmental, and/or multilingual writers) in pre-matriculation writing and first-year composition courses. I also am ready to teach many of these populations online. My teaching embraces the linguistic diversity of all learners, drawing upon their first language backgrounds, intercultural rhetorics, global/transnational literacies, and life experiences to create transformative educational experiences.

I welcome the prospect of contributing to faculty and professional development, and facilitating other types of service in the writing program. For example, as the Associate Director of Second Language Writing at ASU, I designed curricula for multilingual sections of FYC, served as an L2 resource for teachers of all writing classes, and planned and executed over ten professional development workshops, breakout sessions, and programmatic initiatives aimed at supporting writing teachers' experiences with multilingual students. In service to national academic organizations, I have organized one local and three international conferences (the Symposium on Second Language Writing 2014, 2016; and the American Association of Applied Linguistics Conference 2015). In 2012, I innovated the Breakfast Buddies Mentoring Program for the Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization (WPA-GO), a national organization that supports graduate student WPA preparation and strengthens connections between pre- and in-service WPAs, at the Conference of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA). Every year since, I have organized and assessed this event with my teams. The Breakfast Buddies Program has enrolled over 300 mentors and mentees to date. In 2015, the program expanded to the Conference on College Communication and Composition and enrolled over 130 mentors and mentees from across the nation. I am currently serving as the Chair of the Digital Presence Committee on the WPA-GO, which is tasked with creating a new website for the organization. From these service and leadership experiences, you will find me poised to begin mentoring graduate and undergraduate students in my first year.

Thank you for considering my application. Please find the following documents in my interfolio dossier: *curriculum vitae*, unofficial transcripts, and contact information for my references. At your

request, I would be happy to send my full teaching portfolio, statements of teaching and administrative philosophies, research agenda, and additional documents. You are also welcome to peruse my Professional ePortfolio: <http://tinyurl.com/SnyderPortfolio>. I will be attending CCCC in 2018 and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you there, or elsewhere at your convenience. I can be reached at (555) 867-5309 or at sesnyder@asu.edu.

Sincerely,

Sarah Elizabeth Snyder, PhD Candidate