
Editorial

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On My Way In III: *It's Not All About Me*: Writing a Cover Letter for an Academic Position

Some texts are key to scholarly careers – cover letters, letters of reference, curricula vitae – yet are never intended for publication. They are – perhaps in part for that reason – under-scrutinized genres of academic writing. When one serves on an appointment panel, one inevitably reads hundreds of samples of such texts, provoking reflection on what makes them effective (which in turn generates ideas for the next time that one oneself must produce these dreaded documents again). Inspired by Joseph Weiler's series *On My Way Out: Advice to Young Scholars*, this piece, which emerged from conversations with Devon Curtis and Sara Kendall, and developed thanks to reactions from members of the EJIL editorial team (Anny, Ana, JHHW, Orfeas and Wanshu), reflects on the cover letter as a genre of academic writing.

1 The Argument of a Cover Letter

Seeing the cover letter as a genre of academic writing means recognizing that it presents an opportunity to make an argument. But what should that argument be about? Many cover letters read as 'all [you should know] about me'. However, such letters miss a key point: the opportunity to make a case for a fit between an individual and a place. Effective cover letters show that the applicant has considered the needs of the hiring institution and how he or she would meet those needs. It is all about that relationship, about that fit. In that sense, cover letters are not 'all about me': job first, applicant second.

From that perspective, it is immediately evident why the occasional one-paragraph cover letter 'I herewith apply for the position you advertised; please find my CV attached' is unlikely to impress. The applicant leaves it to the committee members – often reading dozens if not hundreds of applications on an evening or during the weekend – to do the work of identifying why this person would be a good fit. Perhaps the applicant is lucky, and their referee has made the argument for them in

their letter of reference. Even then, the ‘I-apply; see-CV-attached’ cover letter leaves a lazy or even disdainful impression: the applicant does not even seem interested in the institution to which they are applying. One gets the same impression from more elaborate cover letters that clearly have been sent to numerous institutions, as for instance may be evinced by different paragraphs mentioning different institutions (opening paragraph: ‘I have always admired the University of A’; next paragraph: ‘It therefore gives me great pleasure to apply now for this position at the University of B’).

The more the cover letter is tailored to the hiring institution, the more evidence there is that the applicant has considered the needs of, and fit with, that institution. Sentences along the lines of ‘I deserve this position’ do not radiate that spirit. Prizes and fellowships may be a matter of ‘deserving’; academic positions are not only about individual achievement. Letters that summarize the curriculum vitae also miss an opportunity. Not only do they duplicate the role of the CV in the application package; they also leave the ‘so what?’ question unanswered. What is the reader meant to take away from this letter? The members of the committee can draw their own conclusions, but leaving it to them means missing an opportunity to show respect to the institution, the committee members and their time. It is in that sense, too, that strong cover letters are not ‘all about me’.

2 Job First, Applicant Second

One way of showing that one has prioritized the relationship is by literally putting the job first, and oneself second in the letter. These are the (perceived) needs of the job; and this is how I would meet them. Or: these are the characteristics of this institution, and this is how I would enhance its strengths, or help address its challenges. Or: this is the potential of this job, and this is how I would realize it and why I am well positioned to do so. Or: it is this requirement of the job that really appeals to me because Or: this institution/programme/course is currently characterized by A; my vision is that we could make it

Ideally, all of this is written concisely. Whilst expectations of the length of a cover letter vary (also depending on whether separate research proposals or teaching statements have been requested), committee members are invariably pressed for time.

As in all writing, showing is more persuasive than stating. Don’t tell the panel that you would make an excellent fit; show them. Don’t tell the panel that you have an outstanding academic record; show them. Don’t tell the panel that you have an unparalleled reputation; leave that to them to judge on the basis of the evidence that you advance.

Applying for jobs is hugely time-consuming and it may be tempting to take a cover letter off the shelf / out of the electronic files. But this approach is unlikely to lead to a job-first-applicant-second letter: whilst the applicant may not have changed much since they dispatched the previous cover letter, the institutions to which they subsequently send the letter are likely to be different.

3 Intelligence Gathering

The tailored cover letter requires knowledge about an institution. The job ad is unlikely to provide an institutional X-ray, but it is a good starting point. Some members of the committee may be using the requirements of the advertisement as indicators for their checklist: the clearer the applicant makes the case of meeting the criteria, the more boxes are checked and the higher the chances of at least being shortlisted. Institutional websites also provide information beyond official promo-talk. They show what the institution highlights about itself and reveal silences that indicate opportunities. Often, they also show what potential future colleagues are or have been working on, thus making it possible to prevent the howler. ‘This institution really needs a specialist in international X law’, when a member of the department – or, indeed, member of the committee – has mostly been publishing on just that. Finally, chat! Ask supervisors, peers and colleagues what they know about the institution. Sometimes advertisements provide a contact person to whom specific questions can be asked. And one can ask them whether the procedure allows contacting other members of the department, for instance, to talk about research culture, teaching loads or the expectations of PhD supervision. After all, it is in everybody’s interests that the applicant wants the *actual* job.

4 Not-All-About-Me Benefits

Readers of cover letters will value different styles and different contents. Not all committee members will care as much about this job-first-applicant-second orientation. Some may particularly focus on finding ‘a genius’, irrespective of their consideration of the broader community of which they will be a part. To those, a singular CV may suffice. But for committee members who [recognize the importance of collaboration in academic life](#) – whether research, teaching or administration – it may matter that cover letters are not ‘all about me’.

The job-first-applicant-second letter has more advantages. First, to those emerging from the PhD, it invites the applicant to imagine and portray oneself as a potential colleague. True, both as a PhD candidate and as an applicant one is being assessed. But the criteria differ. In the case of a job application, it is about so much more than one’s PhD and indeed about so much more than the academic writer. How does one think of oneself as a teacher, a colleague or indeed, a PhD supervisor? Secondly, the ‘it’s not all about me’ attitude may also allow those not inclined to put themselves first – whether for personal or structural social reasons – to shine, namely in the light of the advertised job. Thirdly, an ‘it’s not all about me’ approach puts rejection into perspective: after all, in many instances, some people are preferred over others not because of any inherent strengths of the former or flaws of the latter, but because of internal dynamics in, and needs of, universities and departments. And finally, in the – let’s face it exceptional – case of an offer, it is an extra reason to thank (the) god(s) or fortune and to celebrate!

In This Issue

This issue of EJIL opens with a call to disorder international law. *Michelle Staggs Kelsall* invites international lawyers to let go of liberal vocabularies and reframe how the international legal order is constituted by conceiving of norms, conventions and principles with reference to a multiplicity of spatial and temporal orders. The next article, by contrast, aims to bring some orderliness to the International Law Commission's mandate to progressively develop international law. *Nikolaos Voulgaris* distinguishes between progressive development *stricto sensu* and legislation, on the basis of the different methodologies employed by the Commission. His article also proposes principles that should guide the work of the Commission when topics of special political sensitivity are at stake. The section then moves from Geneva's Palais des Nations to virtual infrastructures. *Jan Lemnitzer* argues that due diligence applies in cyberspace, with third states having a duty not to allow their networks to be used for cyberattacks. Lemnitzer looks to the laws of neutrality, the *Alabama* award and the *Corfu Channel* judgment as providing the necessary guidance for what is commonly perceived to be a grey area of modern conflict. The following article proposes an inward turn for international lawyers. *Odile Ammann* examines the dominance of English as the *lingua franca* of international legal scholarship. Ammann expands on the reasons and implications of this language bias, before advancing a number of strategies that international lawyers can pursue to mitigate its negative effects. The Articles section closes with a look at dominant narratives of the history of international criminal justice. *Ziv Bohrer* and *Benedikt Pirker* challenge conventional accounts that portray the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg as the first ever international criminal tribunal. Bohrer and Pirker map earlier experiments and argue that pinning the origins of international criminal justice to 1945 or 1919 reflects disrememberance efforts that seek to present contemporary proposals as unprecedented developments.

This issue continues with two *EJIL: Debates!* The first one begins with *Yishai Beer's* conundrum: when does a right to self-defence end? Beer suggests that the victim state must stop fighting when resort to force is no longer necessary, although this carries the burden of presenting a convincing case that its self-defence terminated at the first reasonable opportunity. *Tom Ruys*, replying to Beer, advocates for the maintenance of the 'halt and repel' doctrine as the prevailing approach, which, in his view, Beer reads too narrowly and fails to displace persuasively. According to Ruys, Beer's proposed criteria lend themselves to vaguer, more indeterminate readings and abuse by states.

In the second *EJIL: Debate!* of this issue, *Corina Heri* contends that the European Court of Human Rights ought to take the opportunity of recent applications to rule on the human rights impact of climate change. Heri argues that the doctrine of positive obligations is apt to capture the risk of impending harm involved in such cases and that the impact of climate change can be framed as ill-treatment under Article 3, both moves having the potential of 'greening' the Convention. For *Alexander Zahar*, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. In his reply to Heri, Zahar warns against a conflation of adaptation and mitigation questions. Simply because the European Court of

Human Rights has decided on adaptation matters, he argues, it does not follow that it can also adjudge on mitigation.

Our Roaming Charges image in this issue points to one of the many lingering side-effects of the Covid pandemic – chaotic air travel.

The issue ends with two contributions in the Critical Review of Governance rubric. *Sarah Nimigan* argues that electoral success at the International Criminal Court hinges on nominating states' relative weight in financial contributions to the Court, the human resources expended in campaigning (including vote trading and diplomatic lobbying) and whether the nominating state has been the subject of an ICC investigation. *Henok Asmelash* highlights the challenges and possible ways forward of the regulation of fossil fuel subsidies, with a focus on the recent plurilateral initiative for an Agreement on Climate Change, Trade and Sustainability under the auspices of the World Trade Organization.

We close with a Last Page poem by the 19th-century Ukrainian poet *Taras Shevchenko*, translated by John Weir.

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In This Issue – Reviews

This issue features reviews of three monographs, two engaging with non-Western approaches to international law, the other with a central question of the *jus ad bellum*. We begin with *Lauri Mälksoo's* review of *Russian Contributions to International Humanitarian Law* by Michael Riepl. Published on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this is a timely book if ever there was one, and it traces a reverse 'Damascus' move: Russia's transformation from early advocate (Paul) to later sceptic (Saul) of international humanitarian law. Mälksoo finds it 'remarkable', not just for its timeliness and broad sweep, but also because it treats its heavy topic in 'lively language'. We next have *Said Mahmoudi's* review of *Islamic Law and International Law: Peaceful Resolution of Disputes* by Emilia Justyna Powell: an 'ambitious' study drawing on a wide range of sources, but one that, according to Mahmoudi, might overstate the relationship between Islamic law concepts and dispute settlement preferences. Finally, this issue features a review of *Military Assistance on Request and the Use of Force* by Erika de Wet. *Christian Henderson* finds much to agree with in this 'rigorous doctrinal positivist' analysis, among them the author's 'nuanced' responses to the question of who can request an intervention, which emphasizes the continuing significance of effective control.

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