

Tips for improving your cover letter and resume for GSI applications

By Bill Currie

Resume:

1. List the year that you started your current graduate degree program, not just the year you expect to graduate. A student in their third year of graduate school has more experience than a student in their first year. One can't always tell how long the student has been in the program when only the expected finish date is listed.
2. List the date of your undergraduate degree. List the accurate name of the program and degree. Sometimes the major listed on the resume does not match the degree written on the transcript, or what I know is the correct name of the major because I'm familiar with that program. To me this looks unprofessional or looks like a lack of attention to detail. Or it seems like the candidate is being creative and changing the name of their degree program to a name they like better – which is not OK to do on your resume.
3. Provide your GPA for each degree, and current GPA for your current program. GSI positions involve grading other students, which is a big responsibility. It's the professor's job to ensure that the GSI is a student who gets strong grades themselves, and thus is qualified for this responsibility. If the GPAs are not listed, the sense that is conveyed is that the applicant is trying to hide a low GPA, and it's hard to move that application to the top.
4. Provide a complete listing of all of the courses you have had, both as an undergraduate and in your current graduate program. Including grades for each course is ideal -- so include your transcripts. Some students just list 5 or 6 courses on their resume that they think are relevant. But I'm looking at a wide range of things. If you've had my graduate course, I want to see when you took it and your grade. If you've taken the course you are applying to be a GSI for, I want to see when you took it and your grade. Also, don't assume that the course you are applying for only requires expertise in one set of topics, such as ecology and natural science. In this case, the course may emphasize natural science, but it also covers social science, policy, and development, so having course work in those areas is a strength. Many of the assignments involve grading student writing with an emphasis on critical thinking. Because of that, if the applicant has had several humanities courses and received good grades, that is also a strength.
5. If you have been selected for a fellowship or similar award, list the correct, full name for it, instead of writing something vague like "Fellowship related to X." The professor may be familiar with the specific fellowship and it may be impressive, but if your description is vague, he or she can't tell if it's the one they are familiar with.
6. When listing past work experience, make it clear what the topic area was. Some students list the job duties for a past position on their resume using phrases like "gathered and analyzed data." This gives no information about what the topic area was. Often the job titles are equally vague.
7. When listing time periods for employment, be careful about writing them as "2010 – present." When a student lists a job at a state agency or NGO and includes "—present," this is a red flag.

Are you continuing to work at that position while you are in graduate school? A GSI position requires a substantial amount of time, energy commitment, and reliability. A professor is not inclined to hire someone as a GSI who is working on a graduate degree program *and* trying to continue another part time job while they are a GSI. This is somewhat true of volunteer activities too if they seem like demanding or distracting activities. Having impressive and demanding activities in your past is a plus; but having them in the present, while trying to handle a GSI position, is a red flag. If anything on your resume suggests this is a potential concern, you should address it in your cover letter.

8. Some students include a category such as "Travel experience." This can be a plus. If you have traveled a lot around the US or to other countries in a way that was education-related or work-related, this shows you are serious about your chosen field and you have developed a broad perspective.

Cover letter:

1. Describe your availability during the term you are applying to GSI for. Write about what else you will be doing during that term. From the professor's perspective, just because you have applied for the GSI position doesn't mean you appreciate how much work it will be or how it will impact your schedule. Not all students are able to manage their time effectively. Show that you "get" the level of commitment involved and be forthcoming about what else you will be doing that term. How many classes will you be taking? Will you be working on a thesis or a Master's project, and what stage is it in? Will you be engaged in any significant volunteer or extracurricular activities? If you will be busy in addition to the GSI position, don't try to hide that. It's not necessarily negative. Write about how you will manage your time to ensure you are able to devote the time needed for the GSI. At the very least, this shows that you have thought about it.
2. Will you be on campus the entire term? Are you able to stay on campus for a couple days after the final exam, leaving enough time to grade the final and enter all the grades? Will you be available for planning and meetings before the start of classes and/or at the end of the previous term before the GSI starts? Typically these requirements are listed on the fraction calculation worksheet for the position, but many students apply for a GSI without recognizing that this is part of the job. If you explicitly state in the cover letter that you plan to be on campus before, after, and during the entire term, and that you plan to be available for pre-term planning and post-final-exam grading, that is a big plus.
3. Show that you understand what the course is about. Some students write a great deal about their own generic qualifications in a certain academic area, but show little understanding of what the specific course is about.
4. Are there examples you can give about your abilities to manage time, communicate well, engage students, and be reliable, beyond the cryptic information on your resume? Write about things you've done in the past that show these abilities. Specific examples are the best.
5. Speak not just to your generic qualifications, but to the specific job qualifications outlined in the job description.

6. Let your personality and passion come through in the cover letter. This is your chance to provide a narrative that goes beyond the factual information on your resume and transcripts. If you have held 4 different research internships on your resume, that's great, but is there a thread that connected them all together for you and that describes who you are and what has driven you to make the choices you have?