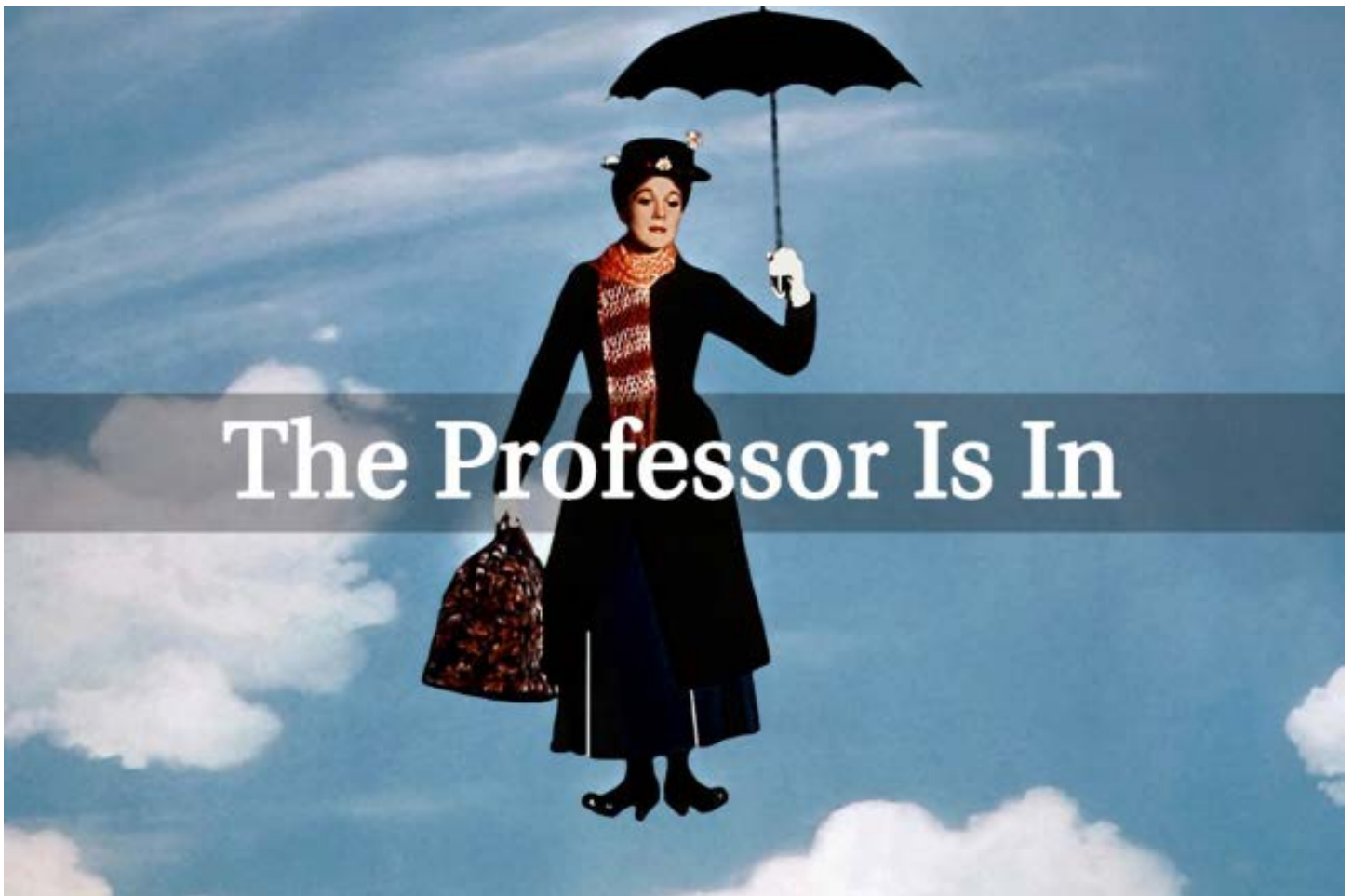


ADVICE

# Your CV Should Inform. Your Cover Letter Should Persuade.



*By Karen Kelsky* | JULY 12, 2018

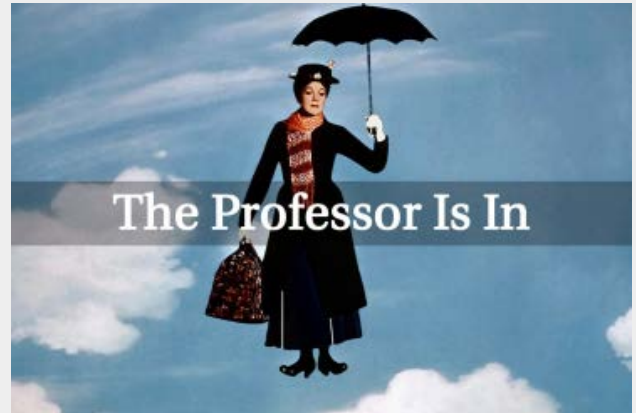
Question: I'm preparing my job documents for the fall and looking for ways to economize. Can I just write a really short cover letter since all the information I would put in a letter is already on my CV? The cover letter feels redundant.

NO.

And the reason for that is — they are two different documents. They have different functions and are designed to help the search committee ascertain distinctly different things. Summer is a good time to go over the basics of both documents as candidates prepare for a new academic hiring season.

The CV. It's a chronology of your accomplishments. As a genre, it has its own conventions and styling, where form follows function. The CV is a comprehensive record of the following:

- The nature of your work. Do you have a diversity of outputs? Are you publishing in peer-reviewed journals *and* presenting at scholarly conferences *and* being invited to give talks? Are you only presenting on other people's panels, or do you also show intellectual vision and leadership by organizing panels in your field and subfield for your Big National Conference? Are you invited to be a discussant? That is: Have you reached the level in your career where you are trusted to be an intellectual commentator who integrates the purpose of a panel into a whole greater than the sum of its parts, and has the perspective and disciplinary literacy necessary to put different strands of arguments, presented across a range of papers, into dialogue with one another?
- The pace of your work. Are you going to conferences every year or sitting out every other year? Are you going to too many conferences? Do you have a legible pipeline —



## The Professor Is In

[Karen Kelsky](#), through her business, The Professor Is In, has advised countless graduate students and junior faculty members on how to navigate the perilous waters of the job search. Twice a month she answers questions from readers on all aspects of the hiring process. Here is a sampling of her recent columns.

- [What Actually Happens After the Interviews Are Over? And Who Decides?](#)
- [The Professor Is In: Should You Reach Out to Potential Colleagues Before the Campus Interview?](#)
- [5 Big-Picture Mistakes New Ph.D.s Make on the Job Market](#)
- [The Professor Is In: My New Colleagues Are Inundating Me With Advice](#)

meaning: Do you organize your publishing strategy to, ideally, always have something in press (or just out), something under review, and something in preparation? That helps a search committee understand whether your pacing will put you on track to earn tenure.

- The volume of your work. This is not just about how much scholarship you do; it also matters for teaching. Have you been a teaching assistant only once — for one section of one course? Or perhaps you have taught the bread-and-butter intro and methods courses in your discipline six or seven times. You can extract examples of effective pedagogy (which you will need to do in your cover letter) from a class you taught once, but whether or not you are a seasoned teacher in the sense of clocking sufficient experience is demonstrated by how many times you have taught XYZ 101.
- The people in your corner. The final page of your CV should list the names and contact information of your references. A quick scan, at a stage before the letters are requested, will reassure the search committee that the people who should be writing your letters — like the head of your dissertation committee or the chair of the department where you are a visiting assistant professor — are not mysteriously refusing to be your recommenders. Is one of your references a well-known scholar from another campus who is willing to vouch for your brilliance? That scores you points, but it is not something you can mention in your cover letter without sounding like you are name-dropping. On a CV, however, the appearance of the scholar's name speaks for itself. Your candidacy gets a boost without losing any points for sounding self-aggrandizing.

The cover letter. The letter you include with each job packet has a mission distinct from the vitae. Whereas the CV is a document that informs, the cover letter is a document that elucidates and persuades. In the letter you have to be able to explain the following:

- The substance of your research. Sure, you can list the full title of your dissertation or book manuscript on your CV. And, especially in the humanities and social sciences, the long subtitle after the semicolon probably offers insight into your project. But that alone is not enough detail about your topic. The cover letter is where you have to explain your central argument or discovery (in a discipline-appropriate way, of course) and how you came to it — that is, your methods, research design, hypothesis, scope.
- The contribution of your research. Follow up the elucidation of your argument by making the

case for how your research contributes to your field and subfield. This is where the persuasive part comes in. You have to zoom back, frame your project with a wider lens, and spell out what intervention your work is making. What is novel about it? And why is it innovative rather than just new? What are you doing that is contributing to moving your field of study forward either epistemologically, hermeneutically, or methodologically?


- The view inside your classroom. The cover letter is where you show what kind of teacher you are. The CV is where you list how many courses you've taught and where you've taught them, but it's not the place where you explain your logic for structuring the syllabus in the way that you do. The letter, not the CV, is where you offer examples of how specific assignments — multimedia final projects, group debates, course papers arrived at through multiple revisions — lead to learning outcomes that students will take with them once they leave your course.
- How you "fit" the place. Presumably your CV hints implicitly at your fit for a particular job. But a CV can only imply, or at best attest to something. It cannot persuade. The coda of your cover letter is where you make the case for why you would be a good fit for a specific department or program. Rather than leaving the search committee to read between the lines of your CV — trying to establish possible collaborations or ways in which you would augment their course offerings — you can make those connections for them in the letter, and frame your candidacy as an asset. A CV cannot show that you did homework on their department, but a cover letter can. A CV cannot say, "I can envision collaborating with X professors in your department on Y project, as their new research project intersects with something I have already been exploring in my last three articles." But your letter can — and should.


In other words, if you don't understand that a CV and a cover letter are not just redundant vehicles for the same information but are documents that exemplify fundamentally different genres, you are going to shortchange yourself and your application.

*Karen Kelsky is founder and president of [The Professor Is In](#), which offers advice and consulting services on the academic job search and on all aspects of the academic and postacademic career. She is a former tenured professor at two universities. Browse an archive of Kelsky's previous advice columns [here](#).*

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