

Presenting Yourself on Paper: Tips for a Successful Application

SUCCESSFUL educational leaders are nearly always successful communicators as well. So it is entirely appropriate that search committees carefully scrutinize the application materials of Head of School candidates. In addition to information about the candidate's credentials and qualifications, the résumé, cover letter, and statement of educational philosophy also provide important clues about an applicant's writing skills as well as their approach to their audience.

The application package is the first hurdle in the multi-step Head search process. If you stumble here, you are unlikely to advance to the next stage.

All written materials should be:

- *Free of grammatical or typographic errors.* While this seems like a stunningly obvious bit of advice, many of the application packages we receive contain one or more of these blemishes. The moral: *Everyone* needs a good proofreader!
- *Attractively and cleanly presented.* You don't have to be (or hire) a graphic designer, but you should ensure that the documents you present are uncluttered and professional-looking. Avoid unusual typefaces and overly decorative paper. Most word-processing software includes one or more simple templates for résumés and business letters. Do not bind your credentials packet, as it will probably need to be photocopied.

- *Concise.* Search committee members are busy people. They do not want to wade through wordy résumés or pages and pages of marginally relevant supporting materials.

Here are some specific tips to help you with the three major components of the application package: the résumé, the cover letter, and the statement of educational philosophy. (*This advice reflects the process we use at Wickenden Associates; other search firms may have different views.*)

The Résumé

Your main goal in developing your résumé should be to highlight your qualifications and experience without too much extraneous detail. For most people, a two-page résumé is more than adequate.

1. List your professional experiences in reverse chronological order, with the most recent job first. Include the years spent in each position, titles held, and a brief description of the organization (including city and state) as well as the scope of your responsibilities.
2. Do not omit dates from your résumé in an attempt to obscure information you would rather not convey (e.g., your age, positions held only briefly, or a gap in your work history). Gaps that are long enough to require an explanation should be explained briefly, either in the résumé itself or in your cover letter. (continued ➤)

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- *The Semifinalist Interview: Tips for Presenting Yourself Well*

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3. Do not include a photograph.
4. Include on a separate sheet a list of five professional references, with an explanation of their relationship to you. Include phone numbers; rest assured we will not contact references without seeking your permission first.

The Cover Letter

The cover letter represents your first chance to sell yourself to the search committee. It allows you to elaborate upon the bare bones of your résumé, convey enthusiasm about the position, and make the case for your suitability for the job.

If you are using the same cover letter for more than one position, you are missing an opportunity. Well-written cover letters are carefully tailored to the particular job. Candidates use the cover letter to demonstrate that they have read the Opportunity Statement describing the position and thought about the challenges facing the school. A good cover letter gives the reader a strong sense of the candidate's personality and leaves a search committee eager to hear more.

Statement of Educational Philosophy

The Statement of Educational Philosophy serves two important purposes in the search process:

- It enables the search committee to evaluate the extent to which the candidate's beliefs about education match the mission and philosophy of the school.
- It provides a writing sample, helping the committee to see how well the applicant can communicate about education with an audience of non-educators.

Although we typically ask for a Statement of Educational Philosophy, candidates often seize the opportunity to talk about their leadership beliefs and style as well. Candidates should not view the philosophy statement as a piece of academic writing. Educational jargon should be avoided and there is no need for elaborate citations of sources or discussions of educational theory. Your goal should be to convey the values and beliefs that

underlie your professional practice. Anecdotes are perfectly appropriate, particularly if they help to illuminate your approach to students and colleagues.

You might also wish to include with your application package other supporting materials such as a newsletter article you have written or speech you've delivered that provides insight into your character.

New Rules for the Electronic Age

It is becoming increasingly common for candidates to send application materials to us via email attachment. We welcome such submissions, but offer a few important guidelines for success:

1. Again, avoid complicated formatting and unusual typefaces, which often do not transmit well.
2. Use a standard, reasonably up-to-date software package such as Microsoft Word or Adobe Acrobat (pdf files).
3. Do not include the cover letter in the body of your email. An attachment will look much more professional when we present your credentials.
4. Please don't name your file "resume" or "cover letter," as we are likely to be receiving numerous files with that name – particularly on those deadline days! "JSmithresume" is better.
5. If you send your credentials via email, do not also send them via regular mail, fax, or express services. Multiple copies of the same material generate confusion. We acknowledge all email submissions via return email and will let you know if there is a problem.

Finally, if you are new to the Head of School search process (or even if you're not) don't hesitate to ask us for advice about your application materials. Ensuring that candidates present themselves fully and well serves the best interests of everyone involved in the search process.