



## PRESENTING YOURSELF ON PAPER

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### TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL APPLICATION PACKAGE

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. At this stage, the search committee is most likely attempting to whittle a large field down to a more manageable size. Stated another way, *they are looking for reasons to eliminate you*. If you stumble here, you are unlikely to advance to the next stage.

Thus, your application materials should be:

- *Free of grammatical or typographic errors.* While this may seem stunningly obvious, many of the submissions we receive contain these blemishes. Everyone needs a careful proofreader!
- *Attractively and cleanly presented.* You don't have to be a graphic designer (or hire one), but you should ensure that your materials are uncluttered and professional. Avoid unusual typefaces and overly decorative backgrounds.
- *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 our process at Wickenden Associates; other search firms may have different views.)

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### 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.

- 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.

- 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.
- Include as a separate document a list of three professional references, with an explanation of their relationship to you. Include phone numbers and email addresses; rest assured we will not contact references without seeking your permission first.

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## THE COVER LETTER

The cover letter represents your first chance to sell yourself to the search committee. It allows you to elaborate upon your résumé, convey enthusiasm about the opportunity, and make the case for your suitability for the position. (Do not include the cover letter in the body of your email. A separate cover letter sent as an attachment will look much more professional when we present your credentials.)

Cover letters should be long enough to demonstrate that you have carefully thought about the opportunity, but not so long that you lose the audience. More than three pages is probably too much. A compelling cover letter gives the reader a strong sense of the candidate's personality and leaves the search committee eager to meet you. It's best to avoid excessive use of the word "I."

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 position description and given some thought to the challenges facing the school. Surprisingly few candidates pay attention to the desired qualities and skills enumerated in the Opportunity Statement. If you can point specifically to the ways in which your experiences and skill set match the list of ideal qualities, you will increase your chances of advancing in the process.

If you have a professional or familial connection to the school or the community, the cover letter is a good place to note it. Above all, the letter should demonstrate enthusiasm and specify why you are intrigued by this particular opportunity. Remember that your materials are going to be reviewed by search committee members who love their school!

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## THE STATEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

The Statement of Educational Philosophy serves two important purposes:

- 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 information about your *educational* philosophy, candidates often seize the opportunity to talk about their leadership beliefs and style as well. Please don't approach the philosophy statement as an academic exercise. Avoid jargon, extensive citations, or discussions of educational

theory. Aim 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.

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## FINAL THOUGHTS

While making a good impression on the search firm is not as important as making a good impression on the search committee, we do appreciate candidates who pay attention to the details of the application process that are always outlined on the last page of our Opportunity Statement. In particular, please honor the application deadline (earlier is better!) and include, as requested, a list of three references.

A few tips:

- Adobe Acrobat (pdf) files sent via email attachment are the most reliable method of transmitting your materials to us. Please don't use filenames like "resume" or "cover letter," as we are likely to be receiving numerous files with that name – particularly on deadline days! "JSmithresume" is better.
- There is no need to follow up by also sending your application via regular mail, fax, or express services. Multiple copies of the same material generate confusion.
- We acknowledge all email applications promptly. If you do not hear from us within a day or two of your submission, please reach out to ensure that we have received it.
- You might also wish to include with your application package other supporting materials such as an article you have written or speech you've delivered that provides insight into your character. Letters of recommendation are also welcome, although not required.

Finally, if you are new to the search process (or even if you're not) don't hesitate to inquire if you have questions about your application materials. Ensuring that candidates present themselves fully and well serves the best interests of everyone involved.

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Founded in 1986, Wickenden Associates is one of the nation's premier independent school consulting firms, specializing in Head of School and other senior leadership searches. Visit our Leadership Library ([www.wickenden.com/leadership-library](http://www.wickenden.com/leadership-library)) for other articles in the **Advice for Aspiring Heads** series.

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