

**Karen Kelsky**

academic career coach at The Professor Is In

The Professor Is In: How Do I Pitch Myself for a Visiting Assistant Professorship?

[Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Google+](#) [E-mail](#)

March 17, 2014

Want more advice from Karen Kelsky? Browse [The Professor Is In archives](#).

You have provided a lot of advice on how to write letters for tenure-track positions, but my question is: How should we adapt our letters for one-year VAP (Visiting Assistant Professor) applications?

This is a good question. First off, for any readers unfamiliar with my basic advice on the tenure track job application cover letter, you can find it here, in this post on my blog: [Why Your Job Cover Letter Sucks \(And What You Can Do To Fix It\)](#).

The letter described in that post is for a permanent position, and the advice leans toward an R1 or elite SLAC situation in which research is prioritized.

But what if you are applying for a temporary position, one in which teaching is the priority?

Understand first that most VAP positions are replacements for faculty who are on a planned sabbatical or leave. The purpose of most VAPs is to replace the teaching that is lost while that faculty member is off

campus.

VAPs are different from adjunct positions, however, in some significant ways. They are full-time, they carry benefits, and usually you will be given an office and be expected to participate in the life of the department during your year.

Therefore, the VAP application has to achieve a careful balance: It needs to show your ability to teach a quite specific set, type, or area of courses. But it also needs to demonstrate that you are an active researcher who is “deserving” of a place at the departmental table. (To be very blunt, this is in contrast to adjuncts or instructors, who are hired *only* to teach. Otherwise they’re ignored or disavowed.)

The competition for a VAP role is intense. It is a “good” line on your CV, particularly if you are a brand-new Ph.D.

Therefore, here are the changes you should make:

Put teaching first, before research. The VAP ad will likely specify the areas—or even the titles of the courses—you’ll be asked to teach. Your application must address these directly. The committee will want you to be specific about your experience teaching in these areas, and it will want to hear your ideas for the courses. These ideas should be brief but, again, specific, and also original and memorable. If you use predictable readings and predictable methods such as “a midterm and a final,” there will be little to stand out in your application.

Do not neglect or diminish research. You must keep your full set of paragraphs on current and past research and publications. Your standing as a scholar will figure prominently in this deliberation.

You can, however, **remove the “second project” paragraph.** The committee doesn’t need to know your long-term research/publishing plans toward tenure.

You can **keep a brief paragraph on service, but let it be very brief.** You will not win anyone over by promising to become the department slave or making grandiose offers for ambitious initiatives about symposia, study abroad, or even substantial committee work. You are a visitor. I dislike service paragraphs in most job letters of any kind, and I usually recommend leaving them out. The one form of service that has reliable “selling power” is anything related to diversity.

Tailoring is still critical. You need to show familiarity with—and interest in—the department, its faculty, its students, and its programmatic initiatives and curricula. While it’s true you are only there for a year, you are nevertheless probably competing for this position against hundreds of other candidates. They will include “fit” as part of their deliberations.

Dear Readers: Have a question about the academic job market and/or professionalization? Send it to me! I welcome any and all questions related to the job market, preparing for the job market while in graduate school, coping with the adjunct struggle, and assistant professorhood. Send questions to me at gettenure@gmail.com.



Karen Kelsky is a career consultant who runs the website The Professor Is In. She's been a tenured professor at two public universities (Oregon and Illinois) and has advised many undergraduate and graduate students, as well as mentored junior faculty. She answers reader questions as a contributor to Vitae.

[Read More from Karen](#)

This article relates to...

- [The Professor Is In](#)
- [applications](#)
- [hiring](#)
- [job market](#)
- [cover letters](#)
- [dossiers](#)
- [search committees](#)
- [assistant professorships](#)