

Dear Job Applicant,

I'm sorry you're looking for a job. I've done it myself, and it's not much fun. For what it's worth, I did so when the world seemed much less competitive, when the competition had fewer credentials, and when young people were much less traveled.

Young people have often put decades into preparing themselves for their jobs, and the jobs just don't come. Part of the problem is too many people want these jobs: we got 600 applications for one of our recent openings, and 1,000 for another. That's far worse odds than admission to any university. In fact, it's far worse odds than even the most competent person can feel comfortable competing against.

Even so, through sorting through all of these applications, my colleagues and I see a lot of examples of people who aren't doing themselves any favors. They make rookie mistakes, they approach things the wrong way, and they torpedo their own chances.

What we've done here is try to channel the frustration we feel at seeing potentially good people undermining themselves into something constructive. The product is our advice to job seekers in Middle East policy. A lot of this advice is general and applicable to a wide range of fields—so don't be reluctant to share it with your friends.

General Advice

- There is no excuse for typographical errors in application materials. Triple- (or more) check the name of the organization to which you are applying and the spelling of the names of people you name in your application. Know people's proper titles, capitalize correctly, etc. Ensure that your materials are free of grammatical errors, and enlist friends and relatives to do so. We take errors in materials as a sign of ignorance, sloppiness or lack of interest. You would be shocked how many people foiled their own chances in the cover letter, before we even got to their CV. Don't let this be you.
- Send your documents as PDFs, with names clearly specific to both you and the organization to which you are applying. "Cover revised" is a bad name for a document; "Alterman CSIS" is a good one.
- Follow instructions for any given application process scrupulously.
- See things from the other side's perspective. With a stack of 25 (or 50) applications to read in one sitting, and several sittings to endure before the job is done, each application doesn't get the same attention. Some get tossed out because the applicants seem clearly unqualified (or overqualified) for the position, and others get tossed out because they

contain obvious mistakes. It takes 30 seconds to pick up on these things, and maybe even less. But among the remainder that one might spend 3-5 minutes reviewing, who might the reader want to spend 30 minutes with in an interview? Here, it's helpful to have some things that stand out as "hooks." One hook could be as simple as your hometown or a crazy summer job you had. Another hook can be unusual travel, or collaboration with a professor, or something really entrepreneurial you've done. If you've done unique research, talk about why you did it and why it got you excited. Say something about leadership and team sports, maybe, or your willingness to train for endurance sports. What you need to do is stand out as a unique human being with a connection to whoever is hiring, and not just more ink on paper. All of this should fit into a strategy about what you want people's impression of you to be. I'm sure some folks are just looking for office drones with limited ambitions and a great willingness to follow orders. We're not.

Cover Letter

- If you are adapting a cover letter to a particular position, triple- (or more) check that you have not left the name of another organization in the text of your cover letter.
- Your desire to have a job is your problem, not that of the person hiring. That person is trying to fill an unmet need that resulted in the permission to hire in the first place. No one, but no one, is looking to add someone to their staff who has a sense of entitlement, or a person who spends a lot of time feeling sorry for himself or herself. Don't give a shred of a hint that you are such a person.
- Convey genuine enthusiasm for the position, not merely why you'd be a good fit. How will it advance your goals? For an entry-level position, give some sense that you understand how the position will be a starting point from which you launch your career and where you see yourself going.
- If your experience is primarily academic, do more than just list relevant courses you have taken. Discuss a class or two that particularly had an impact on your views on the Middle East, how so, and how that is relevant to the position for which you are applying. Demonstrate how your academic experience has taught you to think in ways that are both nuanced and practical.
- Tailor your application to the position, but don't force it. If you have mainly looked at the Middle East through a security lens, but the position to which you are applying is not primarily focused on these issues, demonstrate that your interests extend beyond the frameworks on which you have focused. Don't try to be something you're not; instead, demonstrate how you are what your potential employer is looking for, and more.
- Highlight any experience you have had in the region, but do not inflate its significance. For example, spending 10 days in Cairo on a study abroad program before being evacuated should not be described as "experiencing the Arab Spring firsthand." If you have no experience in the region, what opportunities do you hope to pursue in the future to gain such experience?

- Know something about the research or advocacy conducted by the organization to which you are applying, and demonstrate that knowledge. Many entry-level jobs involve research, and if you come across as thinking that four minutes of searching on Google is thorough, people will assume that you do.
- If the job description suggests the position will involve a large amount of administrative work, discuss your ability to execute such responsibilities—do not only emphasize your interest in the research and substantive side of the job.
- Keep it brief—one page at a maximum, using a 12-point font and standard margins. The cover letter is intended to arouse interest, not represent an airtight legal brief.

Resume

- Focus on highlighting experience relevant to your desired job related to the Middle East: student activities, volunteer work, and formal work. For an entry-level job, it is important that you have had some relevant experiences that demonstrate your work ethic and keen interest in the region. Do not give a painstaking accounting of everything you've done with your time since you were 16.
- If you have foreign language skills, note them, but do not overstate your abilities. For example, non-Arabic speakers hear my Arabic and think I'm fluent, but native speakers certainly don't. You won't find me asserting my fluency anywhere. What my mother tells people is her business, but I'm committed to under-promising and over-delivering, on my resume and elsewhere.
- Ensure your resume is attractively formatted. Fonts, alignment, etc. should be consistent throughout. Don't use fonts smaller than 11 points, and don't squeeze the margins down to nothing. Make choices and show you have good judgment, because that's what your new boss will want you to do, too. Many entry-level jobs involve designing and editing materials for publication, and your resume presents an opportunity to demonstrate your attention to detail beyond avoiding typographical errors.
- Do not send anything over two pages long; for entry-level jobs, one page usually is sufficient.

Writing Samples

- Keep it brief initially—ideally 3-5 pages. Someone reading through hundreds of applications will not read a 30-page paper. If you do not have any short samples, take an excerpt from something you have written and add a note at the top explaining the context from which it was taken, or write something original. If you can, it's a good idea to have on hand a piece of writing around 1,000 words long for use as a sample.
- If you're sending an excerpt, analytical sections and conclusions often make the best samples. Pieces that demonstrate your ability to formulate an original argument rather than synthesizing others' arguments are best.

- The writing sample should communicate clarity rather than complexity of thought. You're not auditioning for an academic job, so leave the 50-cent words and hair-splitting at home.
- Ensure any citations are complete and correctly formatted. This is another opportunity to demonstrate your attention to detail. If you don't have correctly formatted citations in your application materials, how does the reader know that you are capable of compiling them?
- Put your name on every page.

Interviews

- If you get an interview, prepare well. Know the organization's website backwards and forwards. Have good questions. Demonstrate intellectual engagement. Show you've thought about the specific job available, and you have an idea how you'd fit into it. If you have questions, ask. Don't raise salary before the interviewer does.
- Part of the interview process is establishing some chemistry. If you meet in person, make eye contact, smile, and show you're a real person. Phone is harder, but you need to practice being warm when they can't see you.
- People with positive attitudes are force multipliers in organizations. Try to get your head in a space in which you are enthusiastic about what you've done, grateful for your opportunities, and raring for more.
- Before your interview, think about the specific points you want to make about yourself. People remember stories best of all, and if you can tie the characteristics you want to stress into anecdotes, you have the best chance of making an impression.
- Write a thank you note before 24 hours have passed. Email is OK here. The point is that people should know that you appreciate their time, and that you're still interested.

Communication

- If you hear nothing at all, assume that either the selection process has stalled or you were not selected. You can follow up with a human resources office to see if the job is still open, but it is hard to imagine a circumstance in which the thing between utter silence and employment is you nudging the process by sending follow up emails.
- You may be advised to go directly to a person with hiring authority whom you haven't met. Don't. That person's full-time job does not stop because he or she needs to hire someone, and random emails from any of the hundreds of job seekers makes that harder, not easier. If you have a recommender who knows someone at the organization personally, ask if they are willing to reach out on your behalf. The benefits to you are clear: the hiring person has a general interest in maintaining good ties with colleagues, and he or she may be franker with trusted colleagues than with legions of job seekers beating down the door.

There is no way to guarantee a job, especially with the job environment out there. Still, there are ways to guarantee that you're not eliminated preemptively because you made basic errors. The world of Middle East studies still needs energetic people with good minds, good attitudes, and a desire to learn more. Good luck!

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jon B. Alterman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Jon B. Alterman

Director, Middle East Program