

Dear Job Applicant,

If you're job hunting now, you have my sympathy. 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. I get that what you are doing feels really hard.

Young people like you 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: at CSIS, we often get hundreds of applications for a single position. 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, in 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.

But we wanted to help. What we've done here is try to channel the frustration we've felt at seeing potentially good people undermining themselves into something constructive.

General Advice

- There is no excuse for typographical errors in application materials. Check 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 help. Spell-check makes mistakes. We take errors in materials as a sign of ignorance, sloppiness, or lack of interest. You would be shocked how many people foil their own chances in the cover letter, before we even get 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 an example of 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.

- At some point in this process, a potential employer is likely to Google you. If you have a LinkedIn profile, it should be up to date. Be aware of what else might show up and what it will convey about you.

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. I've gotten a stunning number of letters that talk about the applicant's passion to work at the Council on Foreign Relations or the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. It doesn't promote a sense of confidence in the applicant's attention to detail.
- 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 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 looked at the Middle East mainly 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 overseas experience you have had, but do not inflate its significance. A two-week trip gives limited insights, and at an early stage in your career, it's probably more attractive to highlight the questions such a trip raised than the conclusions it validated.
- 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: 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. 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 told people was 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.
- Unless you are mid-career or later, do not send a resume over two pages long; for entry-level jobs, one page usually is sufficient.

Writing Samples

- Keep them brief initially—ideally 3-5 pages. Someone reading through hundreds of applications will not read a 30-page paper at the start of a hiring process. 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, the theoretical apparatus, and the hair-splitting at home.
- Ensure that 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

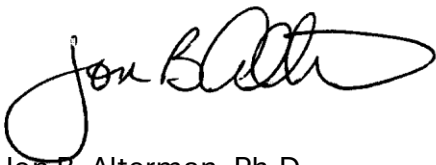
- If you get an interview, prepare well. Know the organization's website backwards and forwards. Follow the links and read the work, not just the summaries. Have good questions. Demonstrate intellectual engagement. Show you've thought about the specific job available, and you have an idea how you'd fit into it. If you have questions, ask.
- 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.
- Video interviews are becoming more standard. Go to a quiet place where you have some light in front of you and a reasonable background, and ensure your sound is good. Show up on time.
- Don't raise salary before the interviewer does.
- 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. People should know that you appreciate their time, and that you're still interested.
- Be attentive to how organizations address people; you'll often get a clue when interviews are being set up. You can always ask, but my advice is to err on the side of formality and let the other person correct you. When someone asks you to call them by their first name, it is a sign of warmth; if they have to ask you to stop calling them by their first name, there is going to be tension.

Following up

- 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.
- If you've met with a person with hiring authority (to whom you may have written after your interview), feel free to write to that person again for an update.
- 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 make 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 multiple: the hiring person has a general interest in maintaining good ties with colleagues, he or she may be franker with trusted colleagues than with legions of job seekers beating down the door, and your intermediary can put in a good word for you while checking in.

There is no way to guarantee a job, especially with the job environment out there. Resilience and perseverance remain necessary traits. The truth is this: there are very few straight lines in people's careers, and chance plays a much larger role in professional outcomes than most successful people are willing to admit. Still, there are ways to guarantee that you're not eliminated preemptively because you made basic errors. The world of policy still needs energetic people with good minds, good attitudes, and a desire to learn more. Good luck!

Best wishes,

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

Jon B. Alterman, Ph.D.
Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair