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# Australian Journal of Applied Linguistics

ISSN 2209-0959

<https://www.castledown.com/journals/ajal/>

*Australian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4 (3), 132–148 (2021)  
<https://doi.org/10.29140/ajal.v4n3.513>

## Constraints imposed on the creative cover letter writing by digital online job advertisements



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### Abstract

Genre studies on the job cover letter (letter of application) have focused mainly on linguistic analyses of the genre in terms of the generic structure and linguistic strategies commonly used by applicants. These studies have taken the view that the cover letter was an open-ended opportunity for favourable self-promotion. However, to date no study has provided a detailed description of the context in which these letters were written. This study examines one essential contextual aspect, the job advertisement, and its impact on the cover letter. It aims to determine if the cover letter is still of major significance in the application process in the digital era. Based on a genre-based analysis of a case study of an online job advertisement from an Australian-based recruitment website together with the response of an applicant, it is found that the open-ended and creative cover letter may no longer be the preminent genre of the job application process.

**Keywords:** cover letter, genre analysis, rhetorical move structure, online recruitment, automated screening, lexico-grammatical analysis

### Introduction

Genre analysis as an approach in language teaching is well established in the academic domain both in the English speaking and non-English speaking contexts (Swales, 1981, 1996; Bhatia, 1991; Thompson, 1994; Jacoby, Leech & Holten, 1995; Henry & Roseberry, 1996, 1998, 2001). In genre analysis, students are taught to relate the linguistic features of a particular genre and how they serve to communicate the purpose of that genre effectively. This communicative purpose and the context

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within this paper.

overriding the genre plays a significant role in a genre-based approach to language learning. A genre consists of a series of moves (Swales, 1981, 1990) in a text. Each move or part of the text conveys a particular purpose within the text which in some way contributes to the overall purpose of the text. Studies on genre analysis from various text types have been useful in helping students write better texts, such as tourist brochures (Henry & Roseberry, 1996, 1998) and specialised scientific genres (Gledhill, 2000). Perhaps one of the more well-established language teaching in genre analysis is the letter of application for a job (henceforth called the cover letter). The importance of being able to produce an effective letter of application for a job is particularly important to a job seeker as it is the first step to getting an interview. This paper argues that while studies on the cover letter are well documented in the research literature, studies on this genre within the current norm of digital online advertisements have been negligible. Moreover, focus has thus far been on the cover letter with very little consideration of its overriding context – the job advertisement. This paper seeks to fill this gap by (i) carrying out a move analysis of the online job advertisement according to Swales (1981, 1990) rhetorical move structure and (ii) to find out the extent to which such an advertisement allows for an open-ended cover letter.

### **Genre analysis and the cover letter**

Research into the cover letter (or letter of application) has been ongoing since the early 1990s (Bhatia, 1993; Bruthiaux, 1996; Henry & Roseberry, 2001, Al-Ali, 2004; Garzone, 2018; Saleem, Sharif & Shah, 2019). According to Bhatia (1993), the cover letter has a clear-cut communicative purpose and a predictable move structure, a kind of “planned text in which moves and strategies follow a recognisable format” (Saleem, Sharif & Shah, 2019, p. 856). Based on a corpus of forty cover letters from native and non-native English-speaking countries, Henry and Roseberry (2001) found eleven moves altogether. Included in the obligatory moves was the Promotion move where the job seeker “presents selected information demonstrating qualifications and abilities relevant to the desired position” (p.159). So important is this move in the cover letter that according to the Henry and Roseberry, “it would be hard to imagine an effective letter without it” (p. 159). Furthermore, the Promotion move appears to be “the most wide-ranging move in terms of linguistic features” (Henry & Roseberry, 2001, p. 158). As such, it allows the job seeker an “open-ended creative opportunity for favourable self-presentation” (James, Schofield & Yipsiladis, 1994, p. 325). What this means is that the applicant is allowed considerable freedom to self-promote their skills, talents and qualifications with regard to the desired position. Applicants use various strategies to promote their chances of gaining an interview. Henry and Roseberry (2001) show, for example, the use linguistic features such as “and” to co-ordinate two nouns or two verbs very much like what is seen on advertisements. Thus, the communicative purpose of the cover letter is to offer selected favourable information about the applicant by the applicant highlighting qualities, imagined or not, that are relevant to the position advertised (Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Bhatia, 1993). It serves “both as an introduction of yourself and as a strategy to interest employers sufficiently to read your resume and to grant you an interview” (Baugh, 1991, p. 125).

Based on this claim, most recent studies have followed Swales (1990) method of genre analysis to collect a corpus of letters, identify the move structures and then determine the language features of the moves (Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Gillaerts, 2003; Hsiao, 2004; Nkemleke, 2004; Al-Ali, 2004; Wang, 2005; Paramasivam & Muhammad Izzat, 2016; Thumngong & Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2017) with similar results across different cultures. In their analysis of a corpus of cover letters across ASEAN countries, for example, Thumngong and Tong-poon-Patanasorn (2017) found that application letters across ASEAN are similar in many ways. They conclude that there is still a degree of freedom in the genre of a job application letter consistent with previous studies. It would be interesting to find

out if this is still true in today's digital era where the online job advertisement is the new norm in the job application process.

This new norm highlights one serious limitation of the earlier and recent studies in that there is an almost complete lack of analysis of the context in which the letters are written. These studies appear to have taken James *et al.*'s (1994, p. 325) "creative opportunity" as the lens through which to analyse the genre rather than the more accepted genre analysis lens of a thick description (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 2019) which would include the sociocultural and institutional contexts that embeds the genre. Genre analysis in language teaching up to now in the twenty-first century is still very much focused on the decontextualised circumscribed move analysis (Garzone, 2018; Saleem, Sharif & Shah, 2019). While such analyses may be useful from a pedagogical perspective, by excluding an analytical description of the overarching context or situation embedding the cover letter, they do limit students' understanding of genre analysis and its usefulness in helping them understand and write better texts. A thick description of a genre would describe, wherever possible, how contextual features play important roles in influencing the way a genre is structured. Such analyses highlight variation rather than uniformity in language use, which is the case in reality.

The lack of consideration of the context of the cover letter is understandable since to compile a thick description of a corpus of private correspondence would be problematic due to privacy concerns. In addition, it might be difficult to obtain information from the actual letter writers themselves. Furthermore, some aspects of the context of the cover letter might be considered rather obvious. The communicative purpose of the genre being what it is, there is no doubt about the power relationship between the reader and writer of the genre in most cases: the reader or readers holding the more powerful position of being able to offer an interview. There is one aspect of the context that could be easily accessed, and which has yet to be empirically studied in the research literature - the job advertisement - the stimulus for the cover letter. Based on a case study of an online job advertisement and a job seeker's response to the advertisement, this study employs a combination of genre analysis (Biber & Conrad, 2009; Swales 1981, 1990) and analysis of the lexico-grammatical features based on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1984; Eggins, 2004; Ho, 2019) in an attempt to provide insights into whether the open-ended cover letter still plays a pivotal role in the online job application process.

### **Online recruitment practices**

An observation that has attracted a lot of attention currently is that companies the world over have changed their hiring practices dramatically in recent years (Stone *et al.*, 2013; Weber, 2012; Novak 2017). Driven by digital technology, newspaper job advertisements are now replaced by online recruitment practices, the newest recruitment tool used by employers to advertise for positions in their companies (Galanki 2002). The term itself is not new, and back in the 1980s, it was known by several other names such as e-recruiting, cyberrecruiting and Internet recruiting (Gentner, 1984; Casper, 1985), all implying some form of formal sourcing of job information online. Today, companies use the internet to recruit in various ways. They could add recruitment pages to their website (Scheyer & McCarter 1998) or use other websites as a resource for finding applicants (Rudich, 2000; Taylor, 2001). More recently, employers are using websites specialised in recruiting employees, such as online recruiters, job portals, online job boards or job agencies. These recruitment agencies act as the middleman to connect the company to its potential applicants and many go beyond this role to conduct remote interviews and assessments on behalf of the company (such as psychometric or aptitude tests online). In an important way, they help reduce the time-consuming business of reviewing applications by the employer.

It is also noted that online recruitment has changed the landscape of skill requirements in the job application process (Braddy, Meade, & Kroustalis, 2008; Bruyere, Erickson, & VanLooy 2005; Nakamura et al., 2009). Today, more and more, job seekers are required to complete and submit digitally multiple and lengthy application forms often with attached questions, quizzes and all kinds of tests as part of the selection process. The result is applicants are given fewer opportunities and freedom to write cover letters aimed at impressing potential employers. Moreover, to save the company's time in reviewing the applications, many recruiting systems use "keyword matching" algorithms (Lim et al., 2015, p. 3471) to select eligible applicants. Basically, the applicant's success depends on the number of matching keywords between their responses to questions asked in the application form and the list of selection criteria. Very often, applicants are analysed and scored by these screening devices before a human even gets to see them. There is thus often very little, if any, physical contact between the applicant and the recruiting officer during the entire hiring process. This paper puts forward the argument that these keyword matching algorithms may play a role in curtailing the opportunity for applicants to write a creative, open-ended cover letter.

The question then is how does online recruitment affect an applicant's opportunity to self-promote? In the era before digital advertisements became the new norm in hiring practices, the cover letter played a pivotal role in the selection process based on the extent to which a job applicant was allowed an "open-ended creative opportunity for favourable self-presentation" in the cover letter (James et al., 1994, p. 325). Applicants used various strategies to select and present information about their skills and qualifications in creative and novel ways aimed at self-promotion and therefore capture the attention of their prospective employers. It was on this basis that a huge interest in and attention was paid to the move analysis investigations in the genre where focus was on identifying the Promotion move in the cover letter and describing strategies used by applicants to favourably present themselves to employers. Today, however, selection for an interview may not be so much based on how well applicants "sell" themselves in their cover letters, but on how well they match the online recruiting screening systems. There are various strategies to help job seekers navigate and get a foot in the door to companies using the web-based application systems such as the inclusion of the keywords from the job description in the advertisement in their letter of application (Mohamed, Orife, & Wilbowo, 2002), writing a resume that is easy to digitally import into the company's applicant tracking system (Cappelli, 2012), responding to every section of the online application and regularly reviewing one's online profiles on social networks such as LinkedIn and Facebook (Mackelden, 2013). It is interesting to note that none of these strategies identify with the Promotion move described in earlier studies (Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001). Yet, recent genre studies (Garzone, 2018, Saleem, Sharif & Shah, 2019) appear to be still focused on the decontextualized step-move analysis in the letter of application and continue to consider the Promotional move to be central to writing a successful cover letter.

The question posed above is an important one because it raises pertinent questions about the continued focus on the cover letter in a genre analysis approach to language teaching, its moves and move order and a "thin" (Swales, 2019, p. 77) description of the analysis which does not take into account the contextual patterns surrounding and embedding the genre. Thus far, there has been no documented empirical study of the job advertisement in the research literature. And yet, the job advertisement is a very important aspect in the context of the job application process in that it is the stimulus for eliciting a cover letter in the first instance. This study seeks to highlight this gap in the literature by carrying out a move analysis to provide a detailed description of the online job advertisement. The purpose is to determine the effects it has on the cover letter as response from an applicant. In doing so, it hopes to provide new insights in the genre analysis of the cover letter in general and the Promotion move in particular and ultimately contribute to beneficial and useful pedagogy.

### **Purpose and research questions**

The purposes of the study are to (i) describe the move structure of the online job advertisement and (ii) to study the extent to which the move structure of the online job advertisement affects the cover letter in the application process. Two research questions are posited:

- (i) What are the components that make up the rhetorical structure of the online job advertisement?
- (ii) To what extent does the online job advertisement allow for the traditional open-ended or creative cover letter in the job application process?

### **Methodology**

The case study for this paper was an online job advertisement published in an established Australia-based recruitment website in 2019 (Appendix 1a). It was selected for the case study here as it was a typical representation of most other advertisements found in this particular job website in terms of structure and organisation of the text. Moreover, permission was sought by the researchers and granted by the applicant in this instance to use their response to the advertisement as data for analysis in this study. Moreover, it was thought that the responses of this successful applicant to the questions could provide insights into the expectations of an online advertisement from the cover letter. The vacant position was for an Administration Officer with a state police department in Australia. In the tradition of Swales' (1981, 1990) rhetorical move structure, the advertisement was divided into parts or stages. Each stage or part would be assigned a move label based on its function and purpose in the overall advertisement. Furthermore, each move was seen to serve a function that not only contributed to the overall purpose of the whole advertisement text, but also served a function that was quite distinct from that of another move in the text. Furthermore, the distinctions between the moves are made clearer via a lexico-grammatical analysis drawn from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994; Eggins, 2004). An analysis of the grammatical and lexical patterns would show that each move was associated with distinct lexico-grammatical choices even "...across different schematic stages." (Eggins, 2004, p. 66). What this means is that the grammar and lexical choices help to distinguish one move from another in the text. Thus, a detailed study of the lexicogrammatical choices of each stage of the genre could help to decide how many stages there should be and also acts as a boundary marker between one stage and another. The metalanguage for analysing the lexicogrammatical patterns was derived from Halliday (1994) and included analysis of their transitivity in terms of process types and participants, their mood structures and modality (declarative or interrogative utterances, the use of modal adjuncts, modal finites, etc), the patterns of clause combinations (independent or dependent clauses) and the thematic options (topical, interpersonal, textual, marked unmarked).

The second part of this study examined the responses of an applicant to questions attached to the application form (Appendix 1b). The respondent (in this case, the applicant) was a young job seeker and a highly proficient user of digital websites. She was required to answer the questions attached to the application form as part of the selection process and was subsequently successful in securing an interview for the position. Her responses to the questions were used (with her consent) as data to address the second research question about the constraints on the open-endedness of the cover letter in digital advertisements. Based on systemic functional grammar drawn from Hallidayan functional linguistics (Halliday, 1984; Eggins, 2004; Ho, 2019), an analysis of the grammatical and lexical features was carried out on the data in both the questions in the application form and applicant's responses to the questions. Specifically, attention was paid to the interpersonal dimension of the text or tenor of the discourse, where the interpersonal and interactive meanings expressed in both texts

could indicate the extent to which an open-ended and creative cover letter was allowed. Thus, the realization elements in each stage were subjected to a mood analysis in terms of mood class (declarative or interrogative or imperative) and modality and polarity (modalisation, modulation, negation); transitivity analysis (process types and participant configurations), clause complex analysis (independent clause patterns, dependent clause patterns) and thematic options (theme types).

## Results and Discussion

### The rhetorical structure of the online job advertisement

The move structure for the advertisement was carried out by the researchers separately before reaching an inter-coder agreement. After a few slight changes, the moves were presented in Table 1 below, which formed the basis for subsequent analysis.

**Table 1** Framework for coding the moves in the advertisement

Move labels with abbreviations	Function/Description	Purpose(s)
Vacancy (V)	stating the title of the position, e.g. <i>Administrative Officer</i>	to highlight the title of the position
Advertiser (A)	stating the name of the company/organization, e.g., <i>Martha's Kitchen</i>	to publish the name of the employer
Responsibilities (RR)	description/listing the expected roles and responsibilities of the position, e.g., <i>answering telephone enquiries</i>	to provide information about the position
Criteria (CR)	describing/listing the selection criteria, e.g., <i>proven ability in the prioritisation of work with minimal supervision</i>	to inform applicants of the expected workload of the position
Requirements (R)	stating a required condition, e.g., <i>applicants must be an Australian Citizen, Permanent Resident or hold a valid work permit or visa.</i>	to weed out unsuitable applicants
Application (AP)	explaining the application procedures, including the documents to be completed such as application form, etc., e.g., <i>completed application form - attached to the job advertisement.</i>	to inform applicants about specific questions to be answered e.g. What is your expected salary? Includes closing date.
Contact (C)	inviting the applicant to contact the company for further information either through a contact person or company website, e.g., <i>for further information...please email...</i>	to provide applicants an opportunity for face-to-face, email or personal contact
Notification (N)	stating a notice, e.g., <i>if you have a disability/medical condition and require a copy of this advertisement...</i>	to show that the company adopts an equal employment policy, employment where the position is also open to people with disabilities
Promotion (PC)	describing/ promoting the company/organization, e.g., <i>...provide support to the community 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.</i>	(i) to promote the company (ii) to attract applicants

There were altogether nine moves identified in the job advertisement in the following order: V→A→RR→CR→R→AP→C→N→PC. Each had a specific function and purpose in the overall text. The occurrence of moves V and A was not surprising as it was expected that the position advertised for and the name of the hiring company be stated clearly and at the beginning of the text. Both moves were realised by short nominal groups explicitly stating the vacant position (e.g., Administrative Officer) and company name was a Proper Noun.

The RR move served to provide information about the roles and responsibilities of the position. Thus, the realisation patterns in this move were common lexical items expressing material processes listing the roles and responsibilities expected from the successful applicant: *providing customer service; performing data entry; recording file movements.*

The CR move following from the RR move had the selection criteria spelt out in bullet points listing the requirements for the position explicitly in terms of measurable skills and qualities. In this advertisement the each criterion listed was expressed in terms of nominal groups such as *ability to maintain...; ability to work* and premodified nominal groups with epithets being the most frequent type of premodifier: *good interpersonal skills; proven ability; coping skills.* These lexical items may form the key words for the screening devices and algorithms often used by advertisers in the selection of applicants, evident in the case study presented in this paper. Moreover, the pronoun 'you' was frequently used with obligatory/ability modal verbs such as "will" and the possessive noun "have": *you will have proven ability in the prioritisation of work...; you will have coping skills to deal with...* It was noted that while the CR move appears to be similar to the RR move, both moves served quite different functions. While the aim of the CR move was to "select" successful applicants and "weed out" unsuccessful ones via the use of modal verbs of ability and obligation, the RR move served to provide information about the roles and responsibilities of the position. The differences between them were evident from their lexico-grammatical features. The common lexical items were material verbs giving information about the duties attached to the position via declarative utterances: *your duties will include answering telephone inquiries* while the CR move appeared to be more about the requirements expected from successful applicants. The realisation patterns were thus more imperative in tone: *you will have ability to work in a high performing team environment.* The lexico-grammatical differences found between the two moves supported Eggins' (2004) statement that the realisation patterns in each move help to distinguish one move from another.

The CR move was followed by the R move. It served to set out requirements in addition to and outside of the CR move. In contrast to qualities such as skills, qualifications and talents, the R move highlighted specific requirements such as status of residency: *applicants must be Australian citizens...* The R move also provided information about the location of the workplace: *the position is located at ...* perhaps to indicate that the company would not entertain applicants from outside the specified area or to give applicants an idea of the distance between their homes and the workplace. These are all important information as it helps in the selection process while at the same time they help ineligible applicants save time and effort in applying for the position.

The AP move followed from the R move. This move provided details about the application process. In this case, it included the completion of an application form and submission of a resume. It did not specifically ask for a cover letter or a particular type of resume. Incorporated into the application form, however, was a set of questions that applicants were required to answer. It is interesting to note the instructions to applicants in answering the questions: *You are only required to address the questions listed below. Individual responses to the selection criteria listed on the Position Description (PD) are not required. Your application must not exceed 5 pages* (bold print as in the application form). What this means is that the applicant should not provide their individual cover

letter but to only answer the questions listed in the application form. Another interesting observation was the details attached to the deadline for submission of application in terms of time: *Applications close midnight, Sunday 3 of February 2019* and the specific statement - *no applications will be accepted via email*. All these indicated that a type of “keyword matching” algorithm (Lim *et al.*, 2015, p. 3471) was being used to select eligible applicants that did not consider individual and email cover letters. Selection was based on a scoring system in such devices on the number of matching keywords between the applicant’s responses to questions asked in the application form. The questions were often related to the list of selection criteria which would be looked at in greater detail in the next section of this paper where responses from an applicant are incorporated in the analysis. But what these questions do is that they curtail considerably opportunities for an applicant to self-promote their skills and talents to gain an edge over others. This is in contrast to genre studies on the cover letter in the research literature where applicants used a number of linguistic strategies to “sell” their skills, talents and qualifications (Henry & Roseberry, 2001) or extol virtues on the employer to put themselves in a favourable light (Bhatia, 1993).

The C move provided a contact person or email for applicants who might have further queries about the position. This move consisted of a single clause and stated explicitly the name of the contact person and the necessary contact details such as a phone number and an email address: *for further information on this role please contact [name, contact number and email address]*.

A special notification move (N) followed from the C move. It was in the form of a conditional clause and applied to people with certain disabilities that prevent them from going through the standard application procedure. Here, the company offered such individuals an alternative application procedure. The conditional ‘if’ clause implied that the N move applied only to people with a disability: *if you have a disability and require a copy of this advertisement...please contact...*

The final move in the advertisement text was the PC or Promoting Company move. For this advertisement, the company has taken the opportunity to provide information on what services they offer to the public and also to attract applicants to apply for the position. As this organisation is in the civil sector, the PC move in this instance was not so much to promote or advertise the organisation, but contained a short paragraph stating its achievements, status and services in the community and also its objectives: *...provides support to the community 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year; our goal is for our workforce to reflect the diverse community we serve*. There was the prevalent use of the inclusive pronouns “we” and “our” in his move: *our goals; our workforce; we continually seek...* Such pronouns served to show a strong team spirit and solidarity among the employees within the company, and therefore could be good attractors for applicants. This move also contained a contact number for the public to make general inquiries not pertaining to the position.

In summary, this online advertisement did not appear to be very different from the standard job advertisement in terms of the move structure, with the exception of one move - the AP move. The distinguishing feature appears to be the questions attached to the application form. While the completion of an application form is a frequent feature in many standard advertisements, the list of questions attached to the form which applicants are required to answer appears to be an unmarked feature in the online job advertisement. It is further observed that there is a shift in focus from the cover letter to the applicant’s responses to these questions. The on-line advertisement in this case (and probably in many other online job advertisements too) did not ask for a cover letter from the applicants, but required them to answer the questions attached to the application form. This paper puts forward the suggestion that this feature may play an important role in changing the way cover letters are traditionally written and also their function(s) in the job application process.



### **The extent to which the online job advertisement allows for the traditional open-ended or creative cover letter in the job application process.**

To find out the extent to which the online job advertisement allows for the traditional open-ended or creative cover letter, both the questions attached to the application form and the responses of an applicant were subjected to a mood analysis based on Hallidayan systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1984; Eggins, 2004, Ho, 2019). This included looking at the mood utterances (e.g., declarative or interrogative) and the interpersonal meanings expressed in the texts via the lexico-grammatical features used to express the modality of the clauses. It is hoped that the analysis will provide insights into the effect(s) of the digital job advertisement on an applicant's cover letter.

To apply the applicant was asked to send, by snail mail, a resume and a completed application form attached to the job advertisement. Applicants were only required to answer the questions in the application form and not respond in an individual fashion to the selection criteria listed in the advertisement. It is quite clear that the organisation would not entertain individual cover letters. This could greatly curtail the opportunity for applicants to embellish their skills and abilities or extol the virtues of the organisation.

The application form had six sections. Of interest to this paper were the questions asked and the applicant's responses in Section 3 (three questions) concerning the applicant's capabilities in relation to the role, and Section 4 (one question) concerning the applicant's motivational fit and suitability. The other sections required candidates to provide factual personal information and agree to certain terms and conditions with no creative opportunities.

An analysis was carried out specifically on the mood structures, the use of pre and post-modified nominal and verbal groups, the adverbial group and occurrence of modality such as modal verbs found in both texts (the questions in the application form and the applicant's responses) to study their impact on the cover letter, which in this case was the applicant's responses to questions asked in Sections 3 and 4 in the application form. The first observation is that while the function of the questions were to seek information from the applicant, the form was in the declarative mood utterance, all beginning with "please": *please provide an example...*; *please explain...*; *please provide...* Although applicants are required to answer the questions, the declarative mood utterance and the use of "please" appear to be less direct and intimidating and more polite.

The candidate was asked to submit only a resume, the completed application form and answer the questions attached. Specifically, they are asked not to submit individual responses to the selection criteria listed in the advertisement. Essentially, the cover letter is now incorporated into the application form, a change from the thirteen and seven moves found in the cover letters in earlier studies by Henry and Roseberry (2001) and Bhatia (1993). Although the applicant was asked not to respond to the selection criteria, a study of the lexico-grammatical features in the questions shows repetition and reiteration of key words and phrases found in the selection criteria. Interestingly, focus appears not so much on nominal groups – *communication*; *experience*; *computer skills* or verbal groups – *to undertake and complete*; *to function*; *to deal* – but on the pre-modification and post-modification of these groups in the form of adjectival and adverbial modifiers: *demonstrated experience*; *acceptable timeframes*; *to deal appropriately*; *to deal competently*. It is quite apparent that the employer is more interested in finding out the degree of ability and competence of the applicant in performing the tasks than in them knowing how to perform. The first question in Section 3, for example, asked about the applicant's "ability to communicate clearly and concisely" corresponding to selection criteria 4 on the need to have "well-developed communication and interpersonal skills." The key words/phrases here being "clear", "concise" and "well-developed"

communication which the candidate picks up on and repeats them in the answer: *communicating in a concise manner...; to ensure my communication was clear and concise while training....*

The second question in Section 3 asks about the applicant's experience with having to "*learn a new process or system.*" The question corresponds to Item 2 in the selection criteria where the position requires a person with "*appropriate word processing and computer skills*" and "*the ability to develop and maintain appropriate work recording and monitoring system.*" Again, the key word/phrase in this question appear to be "*new*" process/system largely to do with "*computer skills.*" The applicant is able to reiterate these key words/phrases in their answer, claiming to be open to "*implementing new processes or systems*", the ability to "*grasp the new software fairly quickly and always willing to learn new processes or systems.*"

The third question in the section asks how the applicant can "*ensure that sensitive work is kept confidential.*" This relates to Item 5 in the selection criteria which requires from the applicant the ability to "*deal appropriately with sensitive and highly confidential information issues*" It is clear that the key words/phrases here are "*sensitive*" and "*highly confidential.*" In their response, the applicant addresses these key words by repeating them: "*sensitive work*", "*sensitive*", "*confidential*", "*confidentiality*" and using expressions that correspond to the key words, such as "*strict privacy and confidentiality laws and policies*" and "*legislation.*"

Section 4 consists of only one question that seeks to find out the strengths the applicant can bring to the position. Although the applicant is requested not to respond to the selection criteria, the three strengths that are listed do address the key words/phrases in selection criteria: "*administrative experience*", "*excellent verbal and written communication skills*" and "*strong work ethic*" referring to "*administrative support duties*" in Item 1", "*well-developed communication skills*" in Item 4 and "*proven record of ethical behaviour...Code of Ethics and Conduct...*" in Item 7 of the selection criteria.

The analysis of the texts show a high frequency of repetition or synonyms between the applicant's responses and the key words/phrases in the selection criteria. This may be because despite the instruction not to respond to the selection criteria, the applicant is aware in online job advertisements applicants' responses may be analysed and scored by one of those automated screening software devices that online recruiters use to filter candidates (Novak, 2017) to find the "best match" (Chala, Ansari, Fath & Tijdens, 2018, p. 1048). This awareness may have helped the applicant to tailor their responses to gain an interview.

So what does this mean for the various self-promoting strategies found in the Promotion move in the cover letter before the advent of digital hiring practices? Based on the applicant's responses to the questions, it appears that the circumscribed move analysis of Henry and Roseberry (2001) and Bhatia (1993) may not be applied here. Instead of realising moves, the focus appears to be on the reiteration or repetition of key words in the applicant's responses which will then go through a digital screening system before being selected for an interview. At first glance, the questions in sections 3 and 4 may be thought to be opportunities for the applicant to promote themselves in terms of well-developed communication skills, willingness to learn new things, ability to ensure confidentiality of sensitive work, and to talk about his strengths. A study of the lexico-grammatical features in the texts, however, presents a more complex picture, specifically in the use of tense, modal verbs and adjectives. First, the questions are not as "general" as stated in the form. The three questions in Section 3 require applicants to provide specific and clear examples of their communication skills, willingness to learn new things from their working experiences and their ability to ensure confidentiality of sensitive work. The presence of operative verbs in the verbal phrases in the

questions such as “provide an example”, “name three strengths,” and “how to ensure” serve to constrain the applicant’s responses to providing examples of real life working experiences rather than what the applicant could do to demonstrate their suitability for the position. This is evident in the more frequent use of the simple past and present tense in the applicant’s responses: “I *persisted*”; “I *earned*”, “I *understand*”; “I *am open*...” compared to the use of modal verbs of likelihood or ability such as “I can persist” or “I will be open.”

The applicant’s responses to the questions could be seen to be self-promotion, but not in the open-ended and creative sense. There is no opportunity, for example, for the applicant to suggest new ideas, or extol the virtues of the employer, or to project their skills and talents, imagined or real. These are all strategies found in traditional cover letters (Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001). This is evident in the absence of emotive and “flattering” adjectives in the applicant’s responses. And although opportunities to self-promote are presented in section 4 where applicants are asked to write about their strengths, the applicant in this case study decides to opt for “positive” rather than emotive or flattering adjectives to describe his strengths: “*excellent* verbal and written communication skills”; “*strong* work ethic” and “*hard* worker.” It is also interesting that the applicant did not offer alternative strengths but kept to the key words/phrases in the selection criteria. Perhaps, the knowledge that their responses would be filtered through some screening software has restricted the opportunity to be creative and open-ended in his response.

Certainly this case study shows how when the advertisement is incorporated in the analysis, a thicker description in the sense put forward by Swales (2019) becomes possible. In this instance, when the online advertisement is factored into the analysis, its regulating sociocultural, institutional and organisational expectations and conventions show how the information usually found in cover letter now take on new forms.

### Concluding Remarks

Our main conclusion from this case study is that through a detailed analysis of the online job advertisement, we were able to provide a thicker description of the cover letter. In particular, we have found that earlier genre studies on the open-ended and creative cover letter have been reduced in significance to be replaced by a series of specific questions requiring specific responses which may be read by software. This has led to our final conclusion that fewer opportunities now exist for applicants to be creative in their applications. It is also noted that this is a case study of one online advertisement and applicant response limited to the inner circle Australian English speaking context. It would be interesting to find out if the findings will be similar for online job advertisements in other non-native English speaking contexts. Nevertheless, this study has raised awareness among applicants when it comes to the global employment space. In order to participate successfully in the job market in the digital era, applicants need to have a firm understanding of the workings underlying the recruitment process.

### Pedagogical implications and recommendations

The main implication from this study is that the cover letter, while still being a necessary genre in many job sectors, needs to be complemented by the teaching of other types of writing. A second implication is that teachers cannot teach the cover letter in isolation; teaching needs to be done in response to specific job advertisements or more effectively in response to a range of online advertisements. Thirdly teachers need to unpack a range of job advertisements to uncover the types of questions job applicants may be required to answer and to prepare them for these tasks. For example, applicants may need to be prepared to effectively describe how they have performed certain tasks or how they have dealt with particular situations. For example, in a questionnaire which the

authors found for a job with a government agency, applicants were asked to answer the following question:

*In 250 words or less, can you tell us about a time when you had to decide which of two important, overlapping pieces of work to deliver on time? What was the situation? What did you do? What was important to consider? Who did you involve? What was the outcome?*

In order to prepare an applicant to answer this question a teacher could teach a situation, problem, solution, evaluation pattern in a narrative style. Thus, by investigating a series of advertisements, teachers can create a syllabus of language patterns and linguistic features to teach potential job seekers.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1a. The advertisement and the attached application form

## Administration Officer

Victoria Police - Melbourne VIC

#### **Your duties will include:**

Providing ongoing customer service to internal and external customers.  
Answering telephone inquiries.  
Receiving, recording and distributing mail.  
Performing data entry.  
Recording file movements.  
Recording brief of evidence movements.  
Tracking coronial inquest brief status.  
Administering property store records.  
Maintaining office registers.  
Collecting and reporting monthly status and statistics.

#### **As the successful applicant, you will have:**

Ability to work in a high performing team environment.  
Good interpersonal skills as the role requires taking telephone inquiries from victims, witnesses and other parties involved in road trauma.  
Ability to maintain systematic and accurate administrative records.  
Good computer skills, particularly in relation to word processing, data entry.  
Proven ability in the prioritisation of work with minimal supervision;  
Coping skills to deal with exposure to material dealing with road trauma and death.  
Good organisational skills with the ability to multi-task.

#### **Requirements and relevant information:**

The position is located at the Major Collision Investigation Unit, Road Policing Crime and Operations Facility, Notting Hill, 3168.

Applicants must be an Australian Citizen, Permanent Resident or hold a valid work permit or visa.

#### **Your application must include:**

Resume  
Completed application form - attached to the job advertisement.  
Applications close midnight, Sunday 3 of February 2019 - No applications will be accepted via email.

**For further information on this role please contact:** Gerard Clanchy on (03) 9565 9080 or via email [gerard.clanchy@police.vic.gov.au](mailto:gerard.clanchy@police.vic.gov.au).

If you have a disability/medical condition and require a copy of this advertisement and attached documentation in an accessible format or would like to discuss an access requirements/reasonable adjustment for the recruitment process, please contact VPS Recruitment via email [VPSRECRUITMENT@police.vic.gov.au](mailto:VPSRECRUITMENT@police.vic.gov.au).

#### **About Us:**

Victoria Police is a large organisation employing police, public servants and protective services officers. Victoria Police provides support to the community 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.  
At Victoria Police our goal is for our workforce to reflect the diverse community we serve. We continually seek to attract and retain a diverse workforce which includes people of all genders, ages, religions, disability, sexual orientation, family and caring responsibilities and cultures including people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage. Find out what it is like working as a Victorian Public Servant for Victoria Police:  
<http://www.policecareer.vic.gov.au>

## Administration Officer

Position Details	
Position Title	Administration Officer
Department/Command	
Division	
Classification/Grade	
Employment Status	
Position/Reference Number	
Position Contact	

Applicant Details	
Surname	
First Name	
Contact Email	
Contact Number	

**Please note:** You are only required to address the questions listed **below**. Individual responses to the selection criteria listed on the Position Description (PD) are **not** required. Your application must not exceed 5 pages.

General Questions based on capabilities/role
<b>Question: Please provide an example that demonstrates your ability to communicate clearly and concisely.</b>
Click here to answer
<b>Question: Please provide an example where you have had to learn a new process or system.</b>
Click here to answer
<b>Question: Please explain how you ensure that sensitive work is kept confidential.</b>
Click here to answer

General question based on motivational fit/suitability
<b>Question: Name three key strengths that you could bring to this role.</b>

Declaration		
Have you ever taken a Voluntary Departure Package (VDP) from the Victorian Public Service?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

## Appendix 1b. Questions and responses to Sections 3 & 4 of the application form

### Section 3

**Question 1** Provide one example that demonstrates your ability to communicate clearly and concisely.

**Response:** *In the last five years of my previous job I earned the responsibility of training new staff. This was a task that required clear communications skills as I was required to teach new staff how to use the practice's software, as well as the policies and procedures of the practice. It was a lot of information for a new employee to absorb so I also understood the importance of communicating in a concise manner in order to keep their attention and ensure the time allocated for training was utilised efficiently. To ensure my communication was clear and concise while training I always keep my target audience in mind when explaining concepts or delivering instructions. For example, when training a trainee who was new to the workforce or did not have any administrative experience I was mindful to explain processes from the beginning and careful to avoid medical jargon. However, when training new staff members with previous experience in medical administration, I first asked questions to gain an understanding of what exactly their previous experience was, and then adjusted my explanations and instructions to suit their skill level and knowledge. I always received positive feedback from my office manager, regarding my training technique and the new abilities of the employees I trained, demonstrating my ability to communicate clearly and precisely.*

**Question 2.** Provide one example where you have had to learn a new process or system.

**Response:** *I am always open to implementing new processes or systems that may make our workplace more efficient. At my previous workplace our practice manager decided to change the software system we use to perform all administrative tasks. This was a major change as the software was new to all staff. While we were provided with training, the roll-over was still stressful to begin with because it slowed us down and caused delays for our patients. There were constantly long lines at the reception desk and tasks I used to perform on 'auto-pilot', I had to stop and think about. I persisted and remained positive, however, as I knew the new software was tailor made for our specialist practice and would ultimately be more user-friendly. I am a fast learner so I was able to grasp the new software fairly quickly and then able to help my colleagues when they were frustrated or having difficulty. When problems arose that I could not solve on my own I took the initiative to ring the software's help line rather than giving up or leaving it up to my manager to fix. I am keen to be part of a workplace that strives for continuous improvement and am therefore always willing to learn new processes or systems*

**Question 3.** Explain how you ensure that sensitive work is kept confidential.

**Response:** *In order to ensure sensitive work is kept confidential I would first find out what work is classed as sensitive, and then gain an understanding of the organisation's policy regarding confidentiality as well as any relevant legislation. Once I understand these key elements I can follow protocol to ensure sensitive work is kept confidential. My previous job in medical administration also*



*involved abiding by strict privacy and confidentiality laws and policies. In order to ensure patient confidentiality I had to understand what information could/could not be released, who information could/could not be released to, how to obtain authority to release information, as well as laws relating to a patient's rights to access their information and mandatory reporting. I understand how crucial confidentiality is in the workplace and will take the utmost care to ensure any sensitive work I handle is kept confidential.*

#### **Section 4**

##### **Name three strengths you can bring to the role.**

**Response:** *1. Administrative experience – I have over 11 years of administrative and customer service*

*experience and am familiar with tasks such as maintaining physical and computerised records, preparing documents, communicating with internal and external stakeholders, dealing with confidential/sensitive information in accordance with company policy and relevant laws, minute taking, and booking appointments, travel and transport arrangements. I am also confident on the computer and have always been able to learn to use new software quickly.*

*2. Excellent verbal and written communication skills – In terms of written communication, at my previous job I produced documents for the practice to hand out to patients which explained their option of using private health insurance to pay for certain treatments at the practice and whether using private health insurance would benefit the patient financially depending on their individual circumstances. I have also created instructions and checklists for my colleagues to follow and taken minutes at staff meetings. In terms of verbal communication, I mentioned above my experience of training new staff and my ability to deliver instructions, provide information and explain procedures in a clear and concise manner. I am also confident that I can establish and maintain relationships with my colleagues, senior members of the organisation, external agencies and other personnel. I have always worked in a team environment and have learnt how to communicate in a mature and professional manner. In terms of dealing with members of the public, I have experience in dealing with difficult customers who are upset, stressed or angry. My aim is always to reach a positive outcome by listening to the customer and finding out*

*3. Strong work ethic – I am a hard worker with excellent time management skills. I have the ability to multitask and meet deadlines without compromising quality. In my previous role I was used to dealing with multiple customer enquiries, helping my colleagues and ensuring that other staff remained on task all at the same time. I understand the importance of completing tasks to a high standard and am someone my colleagues can rely on.*