Writing a perfect cover letter

By Linda S. Smith, PhD, MS, RN, CLNC

MANY NURSES seeking new positions or employment sidestep an essential mechanism for attracting the attention of the hiring manager: the all-important cover letter. A well-written, well-considered cover letter positions you above other applicants and may mean the difference between getting no response and getting an interview. This article describes some essentials of cover letter writing for nurses, including the when, why, how, and what of the cover letter process.

Why write a cover letter?
A cover letter is a brief but formal message that’s usually attached to the applicant’s résumé. This cover letter lets nurse applicants explain why they seek a particular position and what they’ll offer the organization if hired. It’s more than just a sales pitch; the cover letter professionally “dresses” the application in an impressive, confident way. You should be sure to submit an individualized cover letter with each application, unless the job posting specifies résumés only.

The main purpose of the cover letter is to spark the reader’s interest, encouraging further exploration of the candidate’s résumé and increasing the
likelihood of an interview. In short, a good cover letter gets the reader’s attention by concisely displaying relevant skills, personality, and character.²

Who receives your cover letter?
Always take the time to discover the name of the person who will receive your application. The old standbys “To whom it may concern,” “Dear Hiring Representative,” or “Dear Sir or Madam,” suggest a lack of effort. Do all you can to learn the name of the hiring person, along with the name’s correct spelling and pronunciation. Peruse the job posting, facility website, and social media, or telephone the human resources department or nursing office secretary to obtain this information.

The do’s and don’ts of cover letters
Most of the following principles apply whether the cover letter is submitted by mail in hard copy or by digitized electronic attachment. In either format, cover letters are meant to demonstrate your writing and communication skills, and are typically written in a somewhat formal style but with a conversational tone. Do use concise, clear sentences with active verbs. Echo the job description when you choose key words and action statements; for example, if the job posting emphasizes leadership and critical thinking, you might use skill verbs such as delegate, supervise, prioritize, or design that relate to these qualities.

Don’t use informal language or devices, including emoticons, clichés, abbreviations, or acronyms (such as BTW, FYI, LOL). Be honest about your qualifications and don’t embellish them. Also beware of copying a cover letter sample; that’s plagiarism.³ Employers commonly check for plagiarism, and a plagiarized letter suggests a lack of honesty and integrity, which are critical values for a nurse.

Good cover letters are neat, with perfect grammar and spelling. Do proofread everything twice; check for spelling, grammar, and typographical errors. Then read it out loud for syntax errors. Finally, ask a colleague to proof and critique the letter. Whether hardcopy or electronic, it’s best to use black type, a conservative font, white paper, one inch margins, and an easy-to-read format that includes all contact information at the top.

Do read the application instructions. If the job posting specifies electronic delivery, save and send your cover letter and résumé in the format specified by the employer. Files that require conversion can be ignored or altered, and any change to a submission could introduce formatting errors.⁴ If you’re sending the cover letter and résumé via e-mail, spend the same effort proofreading the short submission message as the other application items. The same principles apply for hard copy; be sure that all items print without errors and you spell the addressee’s name correctly on the envelope.

What should the cover letter say?
A good cover letter demonstrates enthusiasm for the position. Consider the position from the potential employer’s point of view, and address the hiring manager directly. What kind of employee does the organization seek and why? How do your specific qualifications fulfill these expectations? Answering these questions helps you tailor the cover letter to the position.¹

Each cover letter should be unique, highlighting the education, skills, experiences, and competencies you have that match the needs of the hiring facility. However, be sure to keep it short: cover letters should run no more than a single printed page. A busy recruiter doesn’t have time to read a lengthy introduction. A cover letter also shouldn’t rehash your résumé; it should present only your most important characteristics in a conversational tone.²

For example, an experienced RN applying for a position as an assistant nursing director might reference his or her résumé, but provide further information that goes beyond a mere bullet point: “As you will see in my attached résumé, I have been working as an RN for ten years. What you seek. Indicate how you learned the facility’s name and the position you seek. Indicate how you learned the position (such as a job fair or online post). If you’re submitting an application in response to a posted position or job description, consider

For more information...
Charleston Southern University Career Center: Guide to creating a professional cover letter
www.csuniv.edu/careers/COVER%20LETTER%20GUIDE.pdf
Ohio State College of Nursing: Writing your nursing cover letter
http://nursing.osu.edu/assets/attachments/Student_affairs/Cover_Letter.pdf
Johns Hopkins School of Nursing: Guide to writing cover letters
http://nursing.jhu.edu/life-at-hopkins/career-center/resources/cover-letter.html
a two-column approach. You could list the major employment prerequisites (as posted) on the left with your qualifications for that position on the right. The first or left column heading could be labeled “Your Requirements” and the second column heading “I Offer” or “My Skills.” This format identifies for the employer that you’ve researched the job requirements, understand them, and possess the necessary qualifications. It also helps busy employment managers quickly assess your suitability for the job opening.

In your last paragraph, ask directly for an opportunity to interview at the employer’s convenience. Thank cover letter readers for their time and consideration and end with a friendly note such as “I welcome the opportunity to meet with you.”

**Make a perfect first impression**

Your cover letter is your opportunity to explain what you can do for this employer. Show the hiring manager who you are as a dedicated nursing professional and present a perfect first impression with a well-crafted cover letter.

**REFERENCES**

2. Gantner K. Create a killer cover letter. ONS Connect. 2010; 11:27

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