



THE JOB PROCESS:

Cover Letters and Resumes

Writing a Cover Letter

The cover letter is perhaps the trickiest element to put together when you are preparing your application package. In your letter, you must highlight the specifics on your resume that are relevant to the job you are applying for, communicate your most important skills, and show your potential employer how well you can express yourself in a written format. Resumes often follow a standard form, but the cover letter changes. **It is important to customize the cover letter specifically for each position to which you apply.** It is very important to target your cover letter to the organization, and to link your unique interests and nursing skills to the specific job. The thought of writing a new letter for every position may be daunting, but it is one of the most important rules in writing your cover letter.

The secret for constructing a successful cover letter is outlined below. If you follow this paragraph by-paragraph guide, you will have a great advantage when your application package lands on the desk or in the online system of a organization's human resource department.

First Paragraph

The first paragraph of your letter should identify the job you are applying for and how you learned about it. Indicate that you have attached your resume with the letter (i.e. it is helpful to include the competition number or file number which is unique to every job posted in the first paragraph). This paragraph should be brief; no more than two or three sentences.

Second Paragraph

The second paragraph should state your qualifications for the position including nursing degree or diploma. Deconstruct the job description and list the required skills, duties, and responsibilities. Focus on relevant qualifications listed in your resume and discuss them in detail, demonstrating how your background and experience qualify you for the job.

Be as specific as possible, and refer the reader to your resume for additional details. Stick to the facts about your competencies, skills, and attitude. Never dismiss the skills of others.

Third Paragraph

In the third paragraph of your letter, refer to research you have done about the organization and how it relates to your interests. This is a good place to illustrate your knowledge about the employer, key projects they have underway, their corporate culture, or any unique working conditions. Be sure to indicate your willingness to meet for an interview. Remember: **the goal of the cover letter is to secure an interview. An excellent cover letter will ensure you get the interview.**

Fourth Paragraph

Close with a one- or two-sentence paragraph thanking your reader for his or her time and consideration. Also state why you want the position and that you would be available for an interview. End the letter with "Sincerely" or "Yours truly" with your name signed with professional designation (i.e. R.N., RPN) Remember that your cover letter is your personal ambassador. It reflects your personality, your attention to detail, your communication skills, your enthusiasm, and your intellect. An employer will decide whether or not you will reach the next phase in the employment process - the interview - based on the information in your application package.



Sample Cover Letters

Sample Cover Letter #1 - Experienced Nurse

Date

Nurse Recruiter
Health Sciences Centre
Employment Office
60 Pearl Street
Winnipeg, Manitoba
B3E 1X2

Dear Ms. Kellas,

I am applying for the position of Unit Manager for the Rehabilitation Unit of the General Site, as advertised on the hospital's career website.

I am currently employed as a Registered Nurse on the Rehabilitation Unit (please see attached resume). In my seven years in the nursing profession, I have enhanced my communication skills by direct consultation with the interdisciplinary team, patients and their families and para-professionals. Other assets I believe would be important in this position is my experience as a resource nurse and the development of a staff teaching packages for new nurses.

I am currently enrolled in a masters program and hope to continue my education. I understand that this position can prove to be challenging and stressful at times, however, I feel that I am prepared. I feel that these skills, plus the knowledge gained in my formal education enable me to a positive contribution to the position of Unit Manager.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss how I would contribute to the continued success of the Rehabilitation Unit.

Sincerely yours,

Jane Smith, RN, BScN

Sample Cover Letters

Sample Cover Letter #2 - New Graduate

Date

Jane Doe
Program Director
Maternal-Newborn Program
General Health Centre
Best City, Ontario, L1L 1L1

Dear Ms. Smith,

I am writing in response to the advertisement posted on Workopolis for the position of registered nurse maternal-newborn program.

I am a new graduate from {insert School of Nursing}. I have completed a large component of my clinical nursing placements at your facility. I am excited about the opportunity to work as a part of the maternal-newborn team. As a student, I enjoyed working with new families. As part of my clinical placement I helped to revise a breastfeeding fact sheet to give to new parents. Patients found it quite helpful in providing quick answers to common breast feeding questions. My attached resume provides more details about my qualifications, skills and accomplishments.

I look forward to an opportunity to discuss my potential contribution to your maternal-newborn team.

Sincerely,

Jane Smith, RN, BScN



What is the difference between a resume and curriculum vitae (CV)?

Are you confused about the difference between a resume and CV? Do you wonder whether you should submit a resume versus a CV when applying for a job? The terms resume and CV are often used interchangeably however; they are actually two different documents. When applying for a job and you are unsure as to which document the employer is looking for, you can always call to clarify. The following chart also highlights the major differences between the two:

Differences Between A Resume and Curriculum Vitae (CV)	
Resume	Curriculum Vitae
Summary document	More detailed document
Usually 1 to 3 pages in length	Generally lengthier
Highlights your education, professional background and accomplishments	Describes your professional and academic interest and accomplishments including publications, research and presentations
	A formal CV is used to apply for grants, scholarships, awards and academic appointments

Resume Tips

This article will describe some of the basic principles to be used when putting your resume together. These are general guidelines to follow and can be individualized to meet your specific needs.

What is the purpose of a resume?

A resume is a marketing tool to promote your knowledge, skills and talents to a potential employer. It provides the reader with an immediate sense of who you are and what you can do for them. A resume creates a first impression and its main purpose is to get you an interview for a job. (Pearlman, 1998)

Where should I begin?

Before constructing a resume, it is important to think about a number of things. First, what type of work are you looking for? Are you interested in a specific area of nursing or are you interested in a variety of areas? What skills and knowledge have you acquired that meet the job requirements? How do you describe your most significant accomplishments to this point in your career? All of these questions are important in determining what information you will include on your resume. Knowing yourself well and identifying career goals can assist you in developing your resume and the job search process.

How do I put a resume together?

First of all, you need to choose a format that fits with your personal style and career goals. There are two basic resume styles, the chronological and the functional styles. The chronological format is the most common and more traditional type of nursing resume. In a chronological resume, work history and education are described in reverse chronological order with the most recent experiences appearing first. Chronological resumes highlight dates, position titles, responsibilities, and the names and locations of employing organizations (Pearlman, 1998). This style is most often used to indicate career advancement by showing positions of increased responsibility or preparation. Chronological resumes may include headings such as:

- career objective
- employment history
- education
- professional memberships
- publications
- continuing education or professional development
- community activities or other interests

A functional resume highlights an individual's skills and accomplishments using various categories. This format is often used when making career changes or if there are large gaps in employment history. This format allows the opportunity to emphasize transferable skills. Less emphasis is on the positions held and more on the skills acquired. Headings for a functional resume may include:

- career objective
- achievements/key competencies/skills
- work experience
- education
- professional memberships
- publications
- continuing education or professional development
- community activities or other interests

Choosing a format is important as your resume will reflect who you are. It is important to think about how you want to market yourself and also to choose a style that you feel comfortable with. In other words, how do you want to present yourself to potential employers? Sample resumes are available in many career planning books and various internet websites. Remember that samples are only guidelines and you should modify components to fit with your individual needs and preferences.

Can I send out the same resume to 20 different employers?

The simple answer is yes, however, you will likely have more success if you tailor/customize your cover letter for each position. Mass mailing resumes is not considered to be an effective job search strategy (Hacker, 1999).

References:

Hacker, C. (1999). *Job Hunting in the 21st Century: Exploding the Myths, Exploring the Realities*. Washington: *St. Lucie Press*.

Pearlman, L. (1998). Using self-marketing strategies to achieve your career goals. In. G. Donner and M. Wheeler (Eds.). *Taking Control of Your Career and Your Future: For Nurses by Nurses*. (pp 73-95). *Ottawa: The Canadian Nurses Association*.



Resume Do's and Don'ts

by Katharine Hansen, Ph.D.

Here are the keys to successfully preparing and writing a resume. Follow these simple rules and you should achieve success in this important phase of job-hunting.

Do consider a bulleted style to make your resume as reader-friendly as possible.

Don't get overwrought about the old "one-page resume rule." It's good to keep your resume to one page, if possible, but if you have a lot of experience, two pages may be more appropriate. If your resume spills beyond one page, but you have less than a half a page of material for the second page, it may be best to condense to one page. But don't go beyond two pages with your resume.

Do consider a resume design that doesn't look like everyone else's. Many jobseekers use Microsoft Word resume templates and wizards. There's nothing wrong with them, per se, but your resume won't look distinctive if you use one; it will look like the resume of everyone else who used a Word template. These templates and wizards can also be a bit inflexible to work with.

Don't use justified text blocks; they put odd little spaces between words. Instead, make your text flush left.

Don't ever lie on your resume. This is not professional and can be cause for termination.

Do give your resume a sharp focus. Given that employers screen resumes for between 2.5 and 20 seconds, you need a way to show the employer at a glance what you want to do and what you're good at. One way to sharpen your focus is through an objective statement. The objective statement can be very simple and straightforward. It can be simply the title of the position you're applying for, which can be adjusted for every job you apply for. Or you can embellish the objective statement a bit with language telling how you'll benefit the employer. Something like: "Objective: To contribute strong _____ skills and experience to your organization in a _____ capacity."

Don't use personal pronouns (I, my, me) in a resume.

Do list your job information in order of importance to the reader. In listing your jobs, what's generally most important is your title/position. So list in this preferred order: Title/position, name of employer, city/state of employer, dates of employment.

Don't leave out the locations of your past jobs (city and state). This information is expected, but many jobseekers unwittingly omit it.

Do avoid the verb, "Work" because it's a weak verb. Everyone works. Be more specific. "Collaborate(d)" is often a good substitute.

Do think in terms of accomplishments when preparing your resume. Accomplishments are so much more meaningful to prospective employers than run-of-the-mill litanies of job responsibilities.

Do emphasize transferable skills, especially if you don't have much experience or seek to change careers.

Don't list too much experience on your resume. The rule of thumb for someone with many years of experience is to list about 15 years worth of jobs.

Don't emphasize skills and job activities you don't want to do in the future, even if they represent great strengths for you. In fact, you may not even want to mention these activities. Why describe how great your clerical skills are if you don't want to do clerical work in the future?

Do remember that education also follows the principle about presenting information in the order of importance to the reader; thus the preferred order for listing your education is: Name of degree (spelled out: Bachelor of _____) in name of major, name of university, city/state of university, graduation year (unless you graduated more than about 15 years ago). If you haven't graduated yet, list your grad year. Simply by virtue of the fact that the date's in the future, the employer will know you don't have the degree yet.

Don't include on your resume your height, weight, age, date of birth, place of birth, marital status, sex, ethnicity/race, health, reasons for leaving previous job(s), names of former supervisors, specific street addresses or phone numbers of former employers, picture of yourself, salary information, the title "Resume," or any information that could be perceived as controversial, such as religion, church affiliations, or political affiliations.

Don't include hobbies or other irrelevant information on a resume. In most cases, they are seen as superfluous and trivial. An argument can be made that hobbies are interview conversation starters or that they make you seem well-rounded, but they are generally seen as fluff or filler.

Don't list references right on your resume. References belong in a later stage of the job search. Keep references on a separate sheet and provide them only when they are specifically requested.

Do realize that the phrase "References available upon request" is highly optional because it is a given that you will provide references upon request. If you couldn't, you would have no business looking for a job.

Do proofread carefully. Misspellings and typos are deadly errors on a resume.

Quick Tips List

Resume Do's

- Font size 10 or 12 point
- Times New Roman or Arial
- 2 - 3 pages in length
- Customize for each position

Resume Don'ts

- Do not attach a photo
- Do not include birth date, nationality or religious affiliations
- Do not mention salary
- Do not repeat job description verbatim
- Do not send on current employer's letterhead or via current employers email address
- Do not attach reference letters
- Do not send out your resume indiscriminately

Suggested Resume Outline/Headings

Career Objective or Summary

What type of position are you looking for? Be specific. i.e. Full-time RN in Medical-Surgical setting.

Professional Profile

Summary for experienced nurses - include strengths, accomplishments, expertise and career interests.

Education

Include all diplomas, degrees and certificates.

Work/Clinical Experience

Highlight your skills and accomplishments from your work or student clinical experiences.

Accomplishments are activities when you went above and beyond what you were hired to do, or what the expectations were. Situations where you identified a challenge, used a specific approach and had a successful outcome. Describe how you made a difference (Donner, 1998). Less focus on technical skills -- i.e. IV, medication administration, etc.

Professional Memberships and Affiliations

Involvement in professional associations -- i.e. RNAO, RPNAO, CNSA, etc.

Honours and Awards

Include honours/awards from your workplace, bursaries from your academic institution, professional association or volunteer work.

Publications and Presentations

Any written publications you have authored including newsletters, patient education materials or professional articles.

Community/Volunteer Experience

Include experiences that may be relevant for the type of work you are pursuing. (i.e. volunteering with the homeless when applying for a street health nurse position.)



Never Take Reference Letters for Granted

A number of factors influence a hiring decision but references certainly are persuasive. Here's a handy checklist you can clip and should give to reference writers.

- **BE PUNCTUAL.** Please provide the reference promptly because a job may be lost if you are late.
- **BE FACTUAL.** If you do not know the person well enough to give a reference, decline rather than be vague.
- **USE A RESUME.** Work from a list of the candidate's accomplishments, organizations and other relevant information. It will jog your memory, plus put your experience in perspective.
- **GET EXAMPLES.** As well as performance within your organization, categorize several different aspects of the candidate, identifying skills, attitudes, personal characteristics and growth. Instead of just saying the candidate is "responsible," give brief, concrete illustrations.
- **AVOID DISCRIMINATION DATA.** Do not make reference to characteristics that can be the basis of discrimination, such as race, colour, nationality, gender, religion, age, appearance, disability, marital or parental status, or political views.
- **CHOOSE WORDS CAREFULLY.** Avoid bland language, such as: nice, reasonable, good, decent, fairly and satisfactory. Use power words, such as: articulate, expressive, cooperative, dependable, effective, observant, creative, imaginative, significant, efficient and innovative.

Adapted from: D Joyce Lain Kennedy, Free Lance Star - 1995

Further Reading:

Donner, G. and Wheeler, M. (1998). *Taking Control of your Career and Your Future: For Nurses by Nurses.* Ottawa: The Canadian Nurses Association.

Enelow, W. (2002). *101 Ways to Recession-Proof Your Career.* Toronto: McGraw-Hill. Hacker, C. (1999). *Job Hunting in the 21st Century: Exploding the Myths, Exploring the Reality.* New York: St. Lucie Press.

