For many years, my colleagues have complained about the poor quality of applicants for athletic training jobs across the country. It was not that their education and experience were inadequate, but rather that the applicants had no idea how to sell themselves to the search committee. Regardless of whether a person was applying for a graduate assistantship, entry-level athletic training position, or faculty status (having just secured a doctorate), all had problems either getting the search committee to look past the résumé and cover letter or acting appropriately during the interview process.

The purpose of this article is to provide the reader with information needed to make an outstanding first impression—beginning with a good résumé, cover letter, and interview. It is an article based not on science or research but on 25 years of experience of listening to colleagues complain about good people being lost in the paperwork.

**The Job Hiring Process**

Typically, jobs in athletic training begin with a need that is articulated through the appropriate channels, and funding is then allocated for a specific type of position (staff, non-tenure-track faculty, tenure-track faculty). A search committee is formed, consisting of people familiar with the roles and responsibilities of the position. It is also common for each committee to have a person or two completely outside of the specialty area; for example a health educator, administrator, or coach might be on the search committee. The first charge of this committee is to produce a job announcement that forms a template for the hire. The purpose of this is to announce the institution’s desire to hire a person with specialized skills who will have certain responsibilities.

Position announcements detail specific credentials and job duties expected of an individual and can be viewed as legal contracts. A given announcement might call for a person who is Board of Certification (BOC) certified, state licensed (or eligible), and credentialed in teaching CPR and has a master’s degree in a health-related field and 2 years experience as a practicing athletic trainer. The institution is under obligation to review only people with these exact qualifications. Applicants with recent baccalaureate degrees would be wasting their energies applying for positions requiring a master’s degree in the situation just described. If, however, the announcement states “bachelor’s degree required, master’s degree preferred,” those holding any 4-year college degree would be qualified to apply and could be considered for the position.

After the creation of a position announcement, the institution collects résumés, cover letters, and, typically, letters of recommendation for applicants. Those deemed most
promising are invited to an interview, often after the search committee has called to check their references. An interview might be conducted via telephone. If it is on site, the expense of the interview (travel, lodging, meals) is usually borne by the hiring entity, but sometimes the cost must be covered up front by the applicant or is covered by the institution only if the applicant accepts the job (if offered). It is wise to understand the details before accepting a call for an on-site interview.

Once the interview process is complete, the search committee reconvenes and determines which candidates (and sometimes in what order of preference) are acceptable for the position. This information is forwarded to the person responsible for extending an offer, and negotiations begin (see Anthony Kulas’s article, following this one).

**The Cover Letter**

The purpose of the cover letter is to officially apply for the position and to inform the reader about qualifications you have for the specific job. When writing the letter, it is imperative that you address a specific person, with the correct credentials. A little research might be necessary, but typically the name is listed on the position announcement. Be certain that the salutation includes the appropriate form of address (e.g., Dr., Ms., etc.) and has a colon following the last name. There is no circumstance under which a person’s first name should be used in this letter (e.g., “Dear Bob”) in a professional communication such as this. This is your introduction to the search committee, where their first impression of you begins.

Because the purpose of the cover letter is to apply for a specific position, the letter must begin by telling the reader what the intent is. For example, instead of writing “I would like to apply for the job that is open,” write “Please consider this correspondence my application for the assistant athletic trainer position recently advertised in the Chronicle of Higher Education.” The latter sentence clearly states not only that the author is applying for a specific job but also where he or she learned of the opening. The former sentence is also weaker in that it states that the writer “would like” to apply for a job. It is better to be more assertive and actually apply for the position rather than use such a nebulous statement.

After opening the letter by stating a desire for employment in a specific position, it is common to state how the opening came to your attention. If the head athletic trainer or program director made you aware of it, include that person’s name and relation to you in the letter. Networking is critical in the athletic training world. Using a person’s name or title should be a positive step in letting the reader know that you have a connection with the person mentioned. It is important that the person referenced knows who you are, as well, and can speak in a positive manner about you and your qualifications for the position.

The remainder of the letter outlines qualifications the applicant has that match the position announcement. Most often, it is best to write about the qualifications in the order they appear on the announcement. Should you not yet be BOC certified, but have a plan for such, include this arrangement in the letter. An example would be to write that you have scheduled the BOC exam for X date and are confident that you will perform well on it. The same tactic is often used in the spring for students who have not yet officially graduated but who are applying for jobs that require a bachelor’s degree. Under no circumstances should an applicant state either on a résumé or in a cover letter that he or she is in possession of a degree or certification that has not yet been granted.

The cover letter is not merely a list of how you meet the minimum qualifications of the position but also an expansion of the résumé that allows space to highlight certain activities. Whereas a given sorority or fraternity might occupy only one line on the résumé, the cover letter can expand that to demonstrate your leadership, teamwork, and volunteerism in that organization. All of these traits are desirable to employers and should be highlighted to increase the odds of getting an interview. Additional characteristics that may become apparent in a cover letter are enthusiasm, dedication, and working well with others. None of these will be listed on a résumé, and if they can be tied to a job or experience highlighted to increase the odds of getting an interview. Additional characteristics that may become apparent in a cover letter are enthusiasm, dedication, and working well with others. None of these will be listed on a résumé, and if they can be tied to a job or experience in the cover letter, it will strengthen your chances of a second look.

In constructing the letter, be careful to not use a thesaurus when composing—plain language is often most comfortable to read and gets the point across just as well as more verbose phrases. Conversely, try not to use identical words too often in this short letter, and have a faculty or staff member read it over before you send it out to a prospective employer.

When concluding the letter, stress the qualifications held that you feel most strongly about. Highlight any aspect to tie you to the position, whether it is familiarity