

Professional Pearl: Writing a Pharmacy Residency Letter of Intent

By Calvin J. Ice, PharmD, BCPS, BCCCP

Writing a letter of intent is an essential part of most residency applications, and it's one of the most important tools you as the applicant can leverage to make yourself and your skill set stand out from the others. This article will discuss how letters of intent differ from cover letters and how residency applicants can prepare a well-written letter of intent.

Letter of Intent vs. Cover Letter

The content of a letter of intent and cover letter may be similar, but each has a slightly different purpose. Elements of a cover letter may be incorporated into a letter of intent and vice versa. Since they are similar, you would never need to submit both a letter of intent and cover letter.

The purpose of a cover letter is to briefly introduce yourself, your qualifications, your interest in the position, and to ultimately direct the reviewer to attached documents such as a curriculum vitae or an application packet.

Similarly, a letter of intent captures the elements mentioned above, but it is typically more comprehensive. It's an opportunity to put your writing skills to good use to demonstrate to the prospective residency program director your drive, ambition, and career goals. It also gives you the opportunity to showcase and explain some of your unique professional experiences, leadership potential, and other skill sets that may not be fully explained in the other portions of your application.

Letter of Intent Set-up

First and foremost, the letter of intent must be formatted appropriately and should be visually appealing. Even an exceptionally well-written letter of intent may find its way to the bottom of a review pile if it appears too cluttered.

Select a standard letter format as a model, and ensure your contact information is included clearly. Address the letter appropriately to the reviewer. For many residency programs, this will likely be the residency program director, but consider any special application instructions you receive from the program.

As with other professional documents, your letter of intent should have one-inch margins and font size 11 or 12. It's always important to review the program's application instructions to determine if there are any specific content or length requirements. In the absence of a long list of content requirements from the program, it is generally best to keep the letter of intent on a single page.

Always end your letter of intent with a signature. In the era of electronic submission of applications, it can be easily forgotten. Consider printing your final letter to sign and scan back to yourself, or keep a scanned copy of your signature on file to insert within the document.

Letter of Intent Content

Remember that this letter serves as your venue to declare your application intentions to the program director. Use action-oriented wording and the active tense. Be direct, and be concise. Remember that residency programs are reviewing increasing numbers of applicants, so writing a more focused and logical letter will help to keep your reviewer engaged.

Whenever I write a letter of intent, I have three main questions in mind that I want to answer for my reader.

1. What about the residency program interests me?
 - Consider including how you learned about the program, unique attributes the program offers, and explicitly state why you are interested in this particular program.
2. How is this residency program a good fit for me?
 - Demonstrate why you want to do a residency, how this program will help you meet or progress toward your career goals (both short and long term), and how it will help you develop within your area(s) of interest.
3. How am I a good fit for the residency program?
 - Demonstrate your value to the program and to the institution by describing some of your skills, experiences, personality, etc. in more detail than the reviewer will find in the rest of your application.
 - Detail how your experiences and achievements have prepared you to be a successful pharmacy resident.
 - Personally, I think it's also important to tie in how you can contribute to the institution or department mission.

This does not necessarily mean that each question needs an exclusively designated paragraph. You can include multiple short paragraphs, and you can blend your information for each of these questions into related content. The key is to ensure your content is clear, logical, and not duplicative.

In your concluding statement, be sure to thank your reviewer for his/her time and invite him/her to contact you with any questions.

Other Letter of Intent Tips

Although the letter of intent is certainly not a time you need to be modest, consider how many times you state "I, me, or my." If it seems excessive, consider how you can rephrase to capture the same meaning while eliminating some of those pronouns.

Avoid the mistake of writing a generic letter of intent to send to multiple programs. Although you may want to copy & paste portions of the letter, each letter should be individual and tailored to the individual program to demonstrate why you are interested in that specific program. This also may help you prevent making a careless mistake of sending a letter addressed to one program to the wrong program.

In addition to the personal intent this letter conveys, it can also demonstrate to the reviewer whether you can communicate professionally and clearly. Avoiding grammatical errors is critical. Consider reading your letter out loud and requesting a colleague to review the letter to help catch any errors before submission. During your review, also look for opportunities to cut down on excessive words by stating information more simply.

Resources

- *Get the Residency: ASHP's Guide to Residency Interviews and Preparation* by Joshua Caballero, Kevin Clauson, and Sandra Benavides
- *The Pharmacy Professional's Guide to Résumés, CVs, & Interviewing*, 3rd Edition by Thomas R Reinders
- PhORCAS – application instructions

Be sure to check out other career-related resources from the Pharmacy Student Forum and the New Practitioners Forum on the ASHP website!