

PLANNING YOUR RÉSUMÉ AND PRESENTATION FORMAT

Just as with every other writing format, plan your document based on the twin concepts of goal and audience.

Consider your goal: Do you think it's to win you a job? Actually not—the goal is more modest: to win you an interview so you can make your case in person. That may not change the content of your résumé, but it may mean giving it a different slant. It needs to work as a self-contained document and position you as worth interviewing so you survive the initial filtering process.

Consider your audience: Defining those who will view your résumé as “audience” reminds you of the following:

- You should bring to bear everything you know or can ferret out about the organization. As always, the more you understand the recipient, the better you can gauge your message.

- Your application, if successful, will be read by a series of reviewers on different levels so your message of qualification must be clear to all.
- The typical reader sees the review assignment as tedious and probably overwhelming; he or she will happily trash your effort on the least provocation—typos, poor writing, poor appearance, content not on target, maybe even because it's boring.

Remember: You may get less than six seconds of a reader's time to make the cut.

What Do You Mean, Traditional?

When an employer requests a résumé, whether e-mailed, snail-mailed or delivered in person, assume a traditional format is in order. That means presenting your skills, experience, education, and related background in a standard order on a piece of paper—real or virtual—using a reverse chronology (most recent first).

The ground rule applies even if you're trying for a creative position. Someone hiring a staff art director, for example, wants to see a portfolio but still wants to know about a candidate's experience, track record, education, reliability, and so on. The trick for creative people is to demonstrate their originality within the restrictive standard format: a writer, for example, through terrific writing, and a designer by making the document look great.

The biggest exception to this rule of thumb is the social media résumé, which exploits online capabilities to deliver a multidimensional impression of a person. This usually involves creating a website and using video, podcasts and social media links to showcase multiple aspects of your abilities and personality. When is this a good idea? It depends on your skills, the type of job involved, the company, who will review your qualifications, and many other factors.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: A RECRUITER'S DOS AND DON'TS

A great résumé has flow, a presence. It captures the targeted industry. Its purpose is not to get the job but the interview, giving you the opportunity to sell yourself. So see it as a teaser and keep it down to one to two pages. Aim to speak about yourself with subtle confidence.

Based on my own peeves and what I hear from colleagues and employers, my advice is

1. Don't change the standard format. Keep it simple and chronological.
2. Put it in an easy-to-e-mail format like Word.

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3. No typos! That's the biggest complaint we get from employers, and it amazes me.
4. Don't clutter the layout, change fonts and vary the type size—keep it clean and easy for that 20-second capture, which is the most time you have to make an impression.
5. Use the industry's keywords throughout but omit words that aren't searchable, like abbreviations.

If you have time gaps, definitely mention and address them—otherwise it's a red flag. And everything is so easy to check on now by Googling someone's name. Remember that the Internet is also your résumé and an employer can immediately find out if you're part of any dark side of the world. Use the Internet to your benefit, and build a sub-résumé on sites like LinkedIn or Spoke.com, which people look at when hiring.

—Tina Ruark-Baker, senior vice president of strategic staffing at Access Staffing (accessstaffing.com)

Even with traditional résumés, you can take some liberties. The point is to present you at your best, so look for ways to adapt the format to what works. For example:

- To soften your job chronology if you jumped around a lot in a short period of time, or there are many gaps in your work history, put the dates of employment at the end of job descriptions rather than more prominently in a column on the left.
- Group brief jobs and generalize about them so they don't clutter up your landscape and make you look scattershot. Part-time or summer jobs, for example, can be grouped as such with a clear heading rather than listed separately:

Retail Sales Experience, Summers of 2010, 2011, and 2012

Salesperson for Macy's, Ben & Jerry Ice Cream, March Gift Shop.

Intensive customer interaction and problem-solving experiences. On-the-job training in customer relations, inventory management, large and small store operations.

- If a personal interest or pastime is relevant to the job and helps you stand out, find a way to cover it early on.
- If you're jumping careers or don't have a relevant job history for any reason, focus on "Skills" up front and make it clear why you can transfer them from whatever experience you do have.

Presentation: Formatting and Categories

Your goal is to present your information in a way that looks simple and accessible and is easy to absorb. Creativity is usually not called for, but use fonts, layout and white space to produce an inviting document. Usually it's best to use a standard format, such as the one on the next page, and adapt it to what shows you off best.

This is also true with choosing the categories to include.

The usual essentials after your masthead, contact information and overview are experience, education, professional organizations, and awards. "Skills" is another useful category. If you're at an early career stage, you may want to lead with this section. If you're experienced, you may want to put "Skills" at the bottom if not already covered—factors such as technical capabilities, software expertise, public speaking, foreign languages and so on.

But exercise some imagination to incorporate sections that let you include your strong points. Here are some to consider:

- Awards and recognition
- Strengths
- Social networks
- Technical training
- Clubs and associations
- Certifications
- Pro bono work
- Community service (better than volunteer activities)
- Catchall categories such as Additional Data, Related Experience, Special Qualifications or Career Highlights

Another good category is "Favorite Accomplishments," or something similar. If you've jumped around a lot, or want to highlight points of pride in a former job because it's more relevant to the one you want now than your current position, this is a good way to do that. (See the sample format on the next page.)

Do not waste space on the obvious, such as "References available on request" or "Available for interviews." And do not open with your job objective. Employers don't care about what you want. They care about what you can do for them. This is true even if you're applying for your first career job.

Vary the sample format based on your career status and industry. If you will be entering the job market with an MBA and a few years or more of work experience, then put the experience first because it will be of more interest to employers. If you're a business school student looking for a first or second job, or an internship, list education first.

The narrative "summary of experience" is in my opinion the most valuable part of a good résumé, but whether you need it "depends." You might prefer to include an overview of who you are and what you can do in your cover letter. But if the employer doesn't want a cover letter, the résumé should carry the summary.

Name

Address (City & State is sufficient)

Telephone, e-mail, website if you have one—perhaps LinkedIn profile or personal blog

Summary of Qualifications

Three to five lines putting your qualifications/experience in perspective

Employment

Dates, job title, name of company, location

Big-picture overview of your role and capsule description of the company

Bullet points representing accomplishments, up to six

For previous jobs, most recent first: Same format as current one but less detail (unless the earlier job shows especially relevant experience)

Career Highlights

Community service, special training, capabilities not covered by job descriptions, publications, speaking

Education

Starting with most recent:

Degree, name of school, location

For graduate work and college, any honors and strong focus

Any technical or professional training that relates to your career path

Include dates (unless you don't want to indicate age)

Distinctions

All awards, honors, recognition—including any given for character or time given to a good cause as well as academic achievement (if not covered under Education)

Skills

Technical, language, social media, certifications

Interests

Hobbies, community service (if not already covered), activities

Also, industries vary in their expectations. If you apply for a communications job, the summary is mandatory, but this is not true in the case of many business jobs. Where does a marketing or technical job fall? Use your judgment.

Definitely provide a summary of experience if you are changing careers or need to explain a break from the workforce.

Guidelines for creating summaries are given later in this chapter.

Opinions on whether to include activities and testimonials in the body of the résumé vary. Take into account also that a professional recruiter's viewpoint can differ from that of a human resources (HR) specialist or department head. Consider all the advice and apply what works best for you—always remembering goal and audience.

WRITING STRATEGIES TO OUTSHINE THE COMPETITION

A résumé must be crystal clear, concise, instantly understood and fast to read. It should be concrete, built on short words and sentences, and scrupulously edited. In other words, follow all the guidelines I've already set down for business writing in general. Don't shortchange the proofing process; borrow another set of eyes to double-check because one bad typo and poof! There goes your credibility no matter what kind of job you're applying for.

Do you need full sentences? No—you don't have room for that. Résumé real estate is at a premium. You can reduce some of the *I*'s and *a*'s and *the*'s, for example. But don't distill statements to fragments that may mislead or make you look illiterate.

For example, you needn't say,

I completed all the requirements for my Executive MBA in 18 months.

Nor should you say,

Exec. MBA, completed 18 mos.

Better:

Completed Executive MBA in 18 months

Do you need keywords? Yes! Many employers assign the preliminary review to people who have no idea what your experience means and depend on keywords, scanned for by eye or machine. Professional recruiters do the same. So build in the terms that characterize the industry and that denote required skills. Almost always you can glean these from the job posting and some online research, backed by your knowledge of the industry.

Do you need action verbs? Absolutely. Good résumés hinge on action verbs. If you want to come across as an active rather than passive person, someone who is outstanding rather than just capable and brings initiative and spark, make every verb zing. This is also how to take credit for your accomplishments. To find hundreds of great possibilities, just Google “action verbs” and scout out those that will work for you. (You might find this a good way to jump-start your résumé-think.)

For example, here are some strong verbs for describing management capabilities.

- Accelerated
- Consolidated
- Generated
- Piloted
- Secured
- Reorganized
- Steered
- Streamlined
- Strengthened
- Originated
- Launched
- Oversaw
- Instituted
- Rejuvenated
- Shepherded
- Mobilized
- Navigated
- Systematized
- Redirected
- Designed

You are entitled to use such words to convey a big-picture view of your work product. For example, don't say “I entered information into the database.” It's better to say, “I managed the customer database and upgrade system.”

Notice the different tone action verbs set, as opposed to when you depend on over-used and unconvincing words like experienced, dynamic and enthusiastic. Adopt the “show don't tell” mantra and your résumé will take you a lot further.

Do you need bullets? Yes, bullets are an excellent way to list skills or achievements in a short amount of space. But depending on bullets totally may not serve you well. Good narrative statements make sense of what otherwise come across as laundry lists, a disconnected collection of statements. This kind of disjointed rundown violates a fundamental principle—that it's the writer's responsibility to interpret the message, rather than letting readers draw their own conclusions.

If you choose to go the all-bullet route, be sure you compose strong statements that are easily absorbed and uniform in style. Remember that more than about six bullets makes readers sleepy.

Do you need to customize your résumé for every job application? Yes.

Writing successful cover letters is addressed later in this chapter. Review that section for more ideas on presenting yourself in writing.

Writing the Summary of Experience

It's very helpful to write a summary of experience even if you don't use it on your résumé, because it forces you to articulate who you are and what you're ready for.

You can begin with a clear definition of who you are professionally. At an early career stage, you have less to work with, so keep it simple. For example, if you're a recent graduate applying to a leadership training program at a multinational organization:

Business Honor Society graduate with BS focused on marketing and leadership. Related internship experiences with three global organizations. Four years part-time work in retail sales with progressive responsibility, culminating in position of Team Leader. Excellent writing and in-person communication skills, proven analytic abilities, fluent Spanish.

This statement puts the writer's assets right up front and establishes a set of competitive advantages. Scour your own background: If your degree is from a prestigious school, work that in. If you edited the newspaper, graduated in the top 10%, were honored as a volunteer, helped a professor with an impressive project, won three scholarships, earned your way through college, created a business while still in school, lived part of your life in another country—all such factors set you apart.

A Business Communications Example

In her original résumé draft, this writer began with an objective:

To obtain a challenging position in internal corporate communications that utilizes my prior experience in employee communications, internal web writing/editing, and executive communications/correspondence

Persuaded to begin with a summary of experience instead, she developed the following:

Employee Communications Specialist: Strong track record originating and directing programs to engage employees, build morale and generate a positive

work environment. Four years multinational Fortune 500 experience producing publications, video features, online material and executive speeches. Adept in balancing, print, digital and social media channels to achieve company goals. Written and oral communication skills enhanced by advanced training.

Notice that with more experience to work with, this writer is able to follow up the “who I am” first statement with a very broad view of what her work achieves: NOT her specific job responsibilities. Then she moves to her major credentials and some specific work products and ends up referencing some differentiating skills. This is a useful pattern to try, but shape your summary so it shows off *your* best selling points.

Here’s an alternative format you may prefer for your summary. It combines a short opening overview statement with a bulleted list of skills.

Profile

Hands-on, collaborative communications leader. Strategic thinker with a passion for helping organizations shape customer and employee perception to grow a healthy business. Recognized for:

- **Exceptional communications skills:** Can effectively simplify the complex to deliver clear, concise, and compelling communications
- **Trusted communications counsel to executives:** Have helped CEOs effectively develop and deliver their messages to multiple audiences
- **Equally strong left brain/right brain:** Ability to think creatively and execute effectively. Strong project management and analytical skills
- **High performance team-builder:** Track record of execution through teams, driven by a genuine desire to help others succeed

Your goal with the summary profile is to bridge between what you have done in the past and what you can do for a new employer. To simply list responsibilities qualifies you for the job you already have, and what’s the point of that? *In the summary statement, and the rest of the résumé too, try to avoid phrases like “responsible for” and “duties include.” Think about proven capabilities instead.*

An opening profile gives you a writing advantage: It tells you what content to focus on in the rest of the résumé. Everything you include should back up the summary with convincing detail.

Presenting Your Work Experience

Start with your most recent job, and follow with the rest in reverse chronological order. Logically, a current job merits the most description—but what if it’s a diversion

from your career path or you've only held it briefly? Then say as much as it's worth, and use fuller descriptions for one or more of your earlier jobs.

Try for a short narrative paragraph generalizing about the position and/or employer. For example:

2009–Present JFL Inc., Seattle, WA

Increasingly responsible marketing roles for Fortune 1000 firm, second-largest distributor of home repair supplies on West Coast, employing 7,000 people. Skills range from market research to program planning, project management, presentation writing and design, and customer relations.

The reason for describing the company is that either the reader (1) won't readily know what it is or (2) may recognize the firm's name but probably won't know its scope. In both cases, positioning the company—especially as significant in some way in size or standing—makes your experience look all the better.

Following up in the same pattern, name each position in reverse chronological order with a short narrative and three to six bullet points for each.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: WHAT A HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER WANTS

When I hire for a position like marketing, I get easily seven or eight hundred résumés. Realistically, you have 5 or 10 seconds. So don't tell me—sell me.

You don't have to include everything you've done, but put it in a way that makes sense. For example, one résumé I reviewed said, "Managed a variety of integrated marketing programs." I asked her to explain and she redefined it to, "Launched 1.5 million person direct mail piece with a response rate exceeding 20%." Similarly, a line that read "Managed creative and production processes to ensure budget delivery" is better as, "Created new internal budgeting process that kept more than \$700,000 worth of production under budget."

So write less, be more accurate and to the point. Try using the STAR approach: situation-task-action-result—to make a sentence or brief paragraph.

—Doug Silverman, general manager of human resources at Nikon Inc.;
former president of Society of Human Resource Managers/Long Island

To Stand Out From the Crowd

Here are some strategies that can give you the edge.

Cite accomplishments, not responsibilities. A list of responsibilities you've carried out is a lot less interesting than evidence that you performed this work in an outstanding way. Employers want to know how you made a difference to the organization.

To understand how to do this, note the contrast between A and B in each of the following.

Statement A

Manage, write and budget enterprise-wide employee contest for two company intranet sites.

Statement B

Invent ideas for employee pop culture contests to engage a diverse workforce, regularly drawing 2,000 to 3,000 entries per month and contributing to a positive culture aligned with the entertainment industry.

Statement A

Responsible for managing and improving inventory process and supplying regular reports to team leaders

Statement B

Revamped company's inventory process and introduced new controls that reduced shrinkage 17% and saved 24% in staff costs, earning a department commendation

Statement A

Redesigned a warehouse

Statement B

Transformed a disorganized warehouse into an efficient operation by totally redesigning the layout, saving an estimated \$50,000 annually in recovered stock

Notice in particular that the *B* statements

1. Use the industries' power words and action verbs to frame the work and energize the writing.
2. Relate *either* to major ongoing aspects of the position or to a project. Because project work has a beginning and end, think through projects you've handled to identify accomplishments worth citing.
3. Quantify accomplishments in terms of time or money saved, efficiency achieved, or other contribution to company goals—all music to every prospective employer's ears.

Numbers are magical and talk the bottom-line language of all business, so quantify everything you possibly can. This is challenging but well worth the effort. When you can't quantify, think about how to suggest a positive outcome in other terms. For example,

Launched knowledge management processes to promote better use of resources companywide, introducing new tools such as orientation tool kits and e-newsletters.

Created new process to streamline online purchasing, now being adopted organization-wide.

Another good technique for bringing your résumé alive is to look past the glib-type generalizations we tend to include and find the concrete facts behind them—what we do can be much more interesting than the generalizations. For example, I recently questioned a young woman whose résumé contained lines like

I monitor executive e-mail shadowboxes and manage the executive correspondence processes.

What did she mean? On a weekly basis, she scans about 300 e-mails in the Fortune 100 company's general in-box, assesses their importance, responds according to her judgment, and prepares a trend report.

This might be phrased something like

Monitor public input: Review hundreds of e-mails weekly, evaluate their importance, frame answers and report on trends to top management

Highlight promotions. Does your work history overall, or with a major job, demonstrate a steady advance in title or responsibility? Or fast progress? Make the most of it up front in your overview profile and in the way you detail the job. Recruiters will assume that impressing one employer means you're a good bet for their firms.

Cover personal attributes. Your "soft skills" can be very important to an employer: for example, leadership or facilitation abilities, good teaming, fast learning, consistent willingness to go above and beyond, ability to inspire others and so on. Are you unflappable under pressure? Good at training new staff members or mentoring? Able to handle multiple projects and deliver on tight deadlines? Play your strong suits but be specific and cite evidence as possible.

Use endorsements. Let others say it for you. This can be terrific if you're switching careers or are relatively new to the job market. Have a former boss or even coworker state how valuable you were to the team, how hard you worked and took initiative, how reliable you were. Endorsements need not come from employers. Your mother's word might not hold much weight, but a colleague's might, or the head of an organization for which you've done volunteer work. When including an endorsement, use quotation marks, italics, and a full attribution—the person's name, title, and affiliation. Put it at the top of your résumé or better, the bottom.

Include pro bono work. Especially in tough times, people on every level find themselves out of work and choose to give time on a nonpaid basis to a worthy cause or an organization they can learn from. Don't shrink from saying so—it demonstrates a mind-set that many recruiters will appreciate.

Include teaching and presenting. If you've taught anything that's career related—even remotely—use it. If you've given lectures, mentored others, coached a team, or taught a course even at your local high school, say so. Being able to teach shows mastery of the subject or at the least, a great sharing attitude. Presentation skills are highly valued in most fields.

Include your own business? Even if you didn't succeed with it, starting and running a business testifies to your initiative, courage, and big-picture thinking. Include it, and say what you learned from the experience. But be prepared to convince the recruiter that you're not looking for an opportunity to go back to entrepreneurial life anytime soon.

Create better job titles? If your official title is inaccurate, vague or unimpressive, take the liberty of generic titling, but keep it lowercase to be honest. For example, if you are Third Assistant Manager for Procurement Support, use a more descriptive title to set the stage—such as procurement specialist for recycled metals.

Play the social media card. In most industries, the people in charge recognize that social media is critical to their marketing, customer relations and employee communications. If you are adept with social media and your online presence bears this out, say so.

Mention other skills and talents? If you've raised championship bulldogs, grew up on a farm, lived in another country, won dance contests or chess tournaments, play in the community orchestra, captained the college soccer team—whatever:

It may or may not be worth mentioning in your résumé. A growing number of employers value social consciousness, so evidence of your commitment to something bigger than yourself may give you a plus. You must judge the value according to the job you're targeting. Always be aware of other people's sensibilities: Mentioning that you work for a particular political party or collect guns will probably not help your cause in some circles.

Make it look great. Take trouble with your layout; enlist the help of an artistic friend if you need to. Stick to one highly readable typeface and make it at least 11 point. Resist the temptation to make margins narrower than one inch. Make judicious use of bold, capitals and italics. Build in enough white space, even if this means cutting a bullet or two.

Use good paper if supplying hard copies. Don't depend on color for appearance or emphasis when you deliver a résumé online. The document will probably be printed out in stark black on white. And don't rely on special effects. One recruiter told me that when he prints out some résumés, graphic techniques like a shadowed font may not print at all—and if it's used for the heading, there goes your name.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: Q&A WITH A RÉSUMÉ CONSULTANT

What are the most common mistakes you see in business résumés?

Three things come up in any industry, no matter how senior the people are.

1. Listing responsibilities rather than impact. You need both: You managed a budget, but what did you do with it? Manage it within a 2% variance? Save money? Use the situation-action-result method: State what you were responsible for, the problem, the result. For example, I increased X by 23%.
2. Including laundry lists of everything you've done instead of everything that's relevant to the job you're looking for. Just use related things or interesting ones, to build a focus.
3. Too much jargon. MBA graduates and career changers especially tend to be saturated with jargon from their old world that people in the new world might not understand. If you're applying for a marketing job, discount the real estate jargon. If you're changing careers, you need to translate so readers will understand—you can't expect them to on their own.

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Which should you present first, experience or education?

If you've been in the workforce for years, place education at the bottom. But if by chance you're applying for jobs using your business school network, or for a posting you found on the alumni job board, you might want to keep it at the top because that is the point of connection you're leveraging.

Should you include personal information?

Yes, but it has to be interesting. Use something that's a hook with an interviewer, something you're passionate about, but it should be specific. For example, don't just say "traveling," but "travel in Mongolia." Think about what conversation could lead from it: "I love games" isn't as good as "I love Scrabble." It's something to talk about and puts the interviewer at ease, too.

How long should a résumé be?

Keep it to one page unless you have 10 to 15 years' experience that's related to the job. If you have that much experience but it's not related to the role you're applying for, it's best to be concise and not include detail. For a two-page résumé, be sure to include your name in the header or footer on page 2, because the pages can easily get separated.

—Stephanie Shambroom Boms, consultant for strategy, leadership development, and recruitment