

Résumés, applications, and cover letters

You have skills that employers want. But those skills won't get you a job if no one knows you have them.

Good résumés, applications, and cover letters broadcast your abilities. They tell employers how your qualifications match a job's responsibilities. If these paper preliminaries are constructed well, you have a better chance of landing interviews—and, eventually, a job.

Modern technology has added a new twist to preparing résumés and cover letters. The availability of personal computers and laser printers has raised employers' expectations of the quality of résumés and cover letters applicants produce. Electronic mail, Internet postings, and software that "reads" résumés help some employers sort and track hundreds of résumés. Technology has also given résumé writers greater flexibility; page limits and formatting standards are no longer as rigid as they were several years ago. "The only rule is that there are no rules," says Frank Fox, executive director of the Professional Association of Résumé Writers. "Résumés should be error free—no typos or spelling mistakes—but beyond that, use any format that conveys the information well."

However, the no-rules rule does not mean anything goes. You still have to consider what is reasonable and appropriate for the job you want. Advertisements for a single job opening can generate dozens, even hundreds, of responses. Busy reviewers often spend as little as 30 seconds deciding whether a résumé deserves consideration. And in some companies, if a résumé is not formatted for

computer scanning, it may never reach a human reviewer.

This article provides some guidelines for creating résumés and cover letters that will help you pass the 30-second test and win interviews. The first section, on résumés, describes what information they should contain, how to highlight your skills for the job you want, types of résumés, and formatting résumés for easy reading and computer scanning. The next section discusses the four parts of a cover letter—salutation, opening, body, and closing. A final section offers suggestions for finding out more about résumés and cover letters. The clipboard on page 5 provides advice on completing application forms.

Résumés: Marketing your skills

A résumé is a brief summary of your experience, education, and skills. It is a marketing piece, usually one or two pages long, designed to make an employer want to interview you. Good résumés match the jobseeker's abilities to the job's requirements. The best résumés highlight an applicant's strengths and accomplishments.

There are four main steps to creating a résumé: Compiling information about yourself and the occupations that interest you, choosing a résumé format, adding style, and proofreading the final document. You may also want to prepare your résumé for computer scanning, e-mailing, and Internet posting, especially if you are pursuing a computer-intensive field.

Gathering and organizing the facts

Start working on your résumé by collecting and reviewing information about yourself: Previous positions, job duties, volunteer work, skills, accomplishments, education, and activities. These are the raw materials of your résumé. This is also a good time to review your career goals and to think about which past jobs you have liked, and why.

After compiling this information, research the occupations that interest you. Determine what duties they entail, what credentials they require, and what skills they use. Your résumé will use your autobiographical information to show that you meet

Good résumés show how your qualifications fit the requirements of the jobs you apply for.

Most occupations require abilities like reliability, teamwork, and communication.

Good résumé objectives focus on the employer's needs.

Nonwork activities add experience to your résumé.

Tailor your résumé for each occupation or job of interest.

an occupation's requirements.

You will probably need to write a different résumé for each occupation that interests you. Each résumé will emphasize what is relevant to one occupation. Remember: Even if you do not have many specialized and technical skills, most occupations also require abilities like reliability, teamwork, and communication. These are particularly important for entry-level workers.

The next step is to organize the personal information you have assembled. Most résumé writers use the following components.

Contact information. This includes your name; permanent and college campus addresses, if they are different; phone number; and e-mail address, if you have one. Place your full legal name at the top of your résumé and your contact information underneath it. This information should be easy to see; reviewers who can't find

your phone number can't call you for an interview. Also, make sure the outgoing message on your answering machine sounds professional. If you list an e-mail address, remember to check your inbox regularly.

Objective statement. Placed immediately below your contact information, the objective statement tells the reviewer what kind of position you want—for example, "Seeking a position as an administrative assistant." Some objectives include more detail, such as "Seeking an administrative position using my organizational, word processing, and customer service skills."

Objective statements are optional and are most often used by recent graduates and career changers. "I like to see an objective on a résumé because it shows focus," says Jannette Beamon of Dell Computers' Central Staffing Division in Round Rock, Texas.

But writing objectives can be tricky. A vague statement, such as "Seeking a position that uses my skills and experience," is meaningless. And an overly specific objective can backfire, eliminating you from jobs you want that are slightly different from your objective. If you decide to include an objective statement, make sure it fits the job you are applying for. "Tailoring is expected," says Beamon. "A statement should show that you know the type of work the company does and the type of position it needs to fill."

Qualifications summary. The qualifications summary, which evolved from the objective, is an overview designed to quickly answer the employer's question "Why should I hire you?" It lists a few of your best qualifications and belongs below your contact information or objective statement.

A qualifications summary, like an objective, is optional. It can be particularly effective for applicants with extensive or varied experience because it prevents the important facts from being lost among the details. Most résumé writers choose either an objective or a summary, but some use both.

Education. List all relevant training, certifications, and education on your résumé. Start with the most recent and work backward. For each school you have attended, list the school's name and location; diploma, certificate, or degree earned, along with year of completion; field of study; and honors received. If you have not yet completed one of your degrees, use the word *expected* before your graduation date. If you do not know when you will graduate, add *in progress* after the name of the unfinished degree.

The education section is especially important for recent graduates. Include your overall grade point average, average within major, or class standing, if it helps your case. The general guideline is to include averages of 3.0 and above, but the minimum useful average is still widely debated. Graduates should also consider listing relevant courses under a separate heading. Listing four to eight courses related to a particular occupation shows a connection between education and work. College graduates need not list their high school credentials.

Experience. Résumés should include your job history: The name and location of the organizations you have worked for, years you worked there, title of your job, a few of the duties you performed, and results you achieved. Also, describe relevant volunteer activities, internships, and school projects, especially if you have little paid experience.

When describing your job duties, emphasize results instead of responsibilities and performance rather than qualities. It is not enough, for example, to claim you are organized; you must use your experience to prove it.

Use action phrases—not complete sentences.

Highlight specific achievements.

Include quantifiable results where possible.

Identify increases in responsibility.

Mention special work related skills.

Identify coursework relating to the employer's needs.

Job descriptions often specify the scope of a position's duties—such as the number of phone lines answered, forms processed, or people supervised. If you worked on a project with other people, tell the reviewer your accomplishments came from a team effort. Also, mention any promotions or increases in responsibility you received.

Use specific accomplishments to give your experience impact. Note any improvements you made, any time or money you saved, and any problems you solved—for example, were you praised for handling difficult customers? Were you always on time or available for overtime? Did you save time by reorganizing a filing system? Did you start a new program? Mention quantifiable results you accomplished, such as a 10-percent increase in sales, a 90-percent accuracy rate, a 25-percent increase in student participation, or an A grade.

Activities and associations. Activities can be an excellent source of additional experience. "A lot of students in high school or college don't have much concrete work experience," says Alicia Mallaney, a recruiter for a management consulting firm in McLean, Virginia. "They should list their involvement in school or extracurricular activities—employers look for those kinds of things because they show initiative."

Activities might include participation in organizations, associations, student government, clubs, or community activities, especially those related to the position you are applying for or that demonstrate hard work and leadership skills.

Special skills. If you have specific computer, foreign language, typing, or other technical skills, consider highlighting them by giving them their own category—even if they don't relate directly to the occupation you're pursuing. "At Dell, most of our applicants list programming and computer application skills in their own section," says Beamon. "But now, most occupations, even outside the computer industry, require computer skills. People in every industry are listing those skills separately."

Awards and honors. Include formal recognition you have received. Do not omit professional or academic awards. These are often listed with an applicant's experience or education, but

some list them at the end of their résumé.

References. Usually, résumés do not include names of references, but some reviewers suggest breaking this rule if the names are recognizable in the occupation or industry. Most résumé writers end with the statement “References available upon request.” Others assume reference availability is understood and use that space for more important information. Regardless of whether you mention it on the résumé, you will need to create a separate reference sheet to provide when requested and to carry with you to interviews.

A reference sheet lists the name, title, office address, and phone number of three to five people who know your abilities. Before offering them as references, of course, make sure these people have agreed to recommend you. At the top of the sheet, type your name and contact information, repeating the format you used in your résumé.

Other personal information. Your résumé should include any other information that is important to your occupation, such as a completed portfolio or a willingness to travel. Your résumé is your own, and you should customize it to fit your needs. However, some information does not belong on a résumé. Do not disclose your health, disability, marital status, age, or ethnicity. This information is illegal for most employers to request.

Choosing a format

There are three main résumé formats—chronological, functional, and combination. Each is defined by the way it organizes your experience. Choose the one that shows your experience to its best advantage.

Chronological. This résumé type is the most common. It organizes your experience around the jobs you have held. This format is an excellent choice for people with steady work histories or previous jobs that relate closely to their career objective.

To create a chronological résumé, list each position you have held, starting with the most recent and working backward. For each position, give the title of your job, name of the organization you worked for, and years you worked there. Next, relate

Chronological résumés organize your experience around the jobs you have held.

Functional résumés emphasize skills rather than employment history.

Sprinkle your résumé with language found in the position description.

Use a laser printer and keep the font size at 10 points or above.

Avoid mistakes by having several people proofread for you.

the duties and accomplishments of that job. When describing your jobs, use action statements, not sentences. Instead of writing “I managed a fundraising campaign,” write, “Managed a fundraising campaign.” Use strong verbs to begin each statement.

Be specific, but not overly detailed, in describing what you did. Employers say three to five statements are usually sufficient for each job. And no job should have more than four consecutive lines of information under it; large blocks of text are difficult to read. If you must use more space, find some way to divide the information into categories.

Your most important positions should occupy the most space on your résumé. If you’ve had jobs that do not relate to the position you want, consider dividing your experience into two categories: Relevant experience and other experience. Describe the relevant jobs thoroughly,

and briefly mention the others. If you have had many jobs, you probably do not need to mention the oldest or least important ones. Just be careful not to create damaging gaps in your work history. For a sample chronological résumé, see page 7.

Because the chronological format emphasizes dates and job titles, it is often a poor format for career changers, people with inconsistent work histories, or new entrants to the work force. For these applicants, the functional résumé is a better choice.

Functional. The functional résumé organizes your experience around skills rather than job titles. “I often recommend the functional format to students who have not had positions that relate directly to the job they want,” says Bryan Kempton, Program Director of the Career Center at the University of Maryland, College Park. “By organizing their experiences around skills, they can connect less relevant jobs to the career qualifications they need. For instance, a job waiting tables can be combined with other examples to show organizational or customer service skills.”

To create a functional résumé, identify three or four skills required for your target job. For each skill, identify three to five concrete examples to demonstrate that ability. Again, use action phrases—not complete sentences—when writing your list.

Arrange your skill headings in order of importance. If you

have a specific vacancy announcement, match the arrangement of your headings to that of its listed requirements. The closer the match between your skill headings and the reviewer's expectations, the more qualified you seem.

The last part of the functional résumé is a brief work history. Write only job titles, company names, and employment years. If you have gaps in your work history, you could use the cover letter to explain them, or you could fill them by adding volunteer work, community activities, or family responsibilities to your job list. For a sample functional résumé, see page 9.

Combination. This format combines the best of the chronological format with the best of the functional format. Combination résumés are as varied as the histories they summarize. One variation begins with a chronological format but then subdivides each job description into skill categories. Another variation uses a functional format but, for each example of a skill, identifies the organization where the example occurred.

Adding style

You will create a good impression if your résumé is attractive and easy to read. An inviting style draws attention to your qualifications. If you take pity on the reviewer's eyes, chances are better that he or she will spend more time reviewing your résumé—and will remember it better.

To make your résumé easier to read and copy, print it on white or lightly colored paper. Loud, garish colors may attract attention, but they risk creating an unprofessional impression. Also, use a laser printer and keep the font size at 10 point or above. The reviewer shouldn't have to struggle to read your words.

Design. Good résumé writers use design elements strategically. Boldface, large type, capital letters, centering, or horizontal lines can be used to make headings stand out on the page. Bullets or italics can draw attention to key accomplishments. One inch margins around the page and blank lines between sections will make all the information easier to see.

Any graphics you use should be consistent with your occupation's standards. Graphics appropriate for one occupation might be inappropriate for another. As Tom Harris, a manager at a marketing firm in Minneapolis, explains, "Small design elements are nice—a border or a name and address printed in letterhead style. But large graphics are distracting. They make me wonder if the person would rather be a graphic artist instead of an account manager."

To give your résumé a consistent flow, maintain the same style from beginning to end. Every section should have the same design elements. For example, if your education heading is bold and centered, every heading should be bold and cen-

tered. In the same way, choose one typeface, such as Arial, Courier, or Times New Roman, and use it throughout.

When you have finished, hold your résumé at arm's length and examine it. Make sure the type is easy to read and that the material lays out evenly on the page. You may need to experiment with different styles before deciding which you like best.

Length. A long résumé is difficult for a reviewer to digest and retain; and, given the volume of résumés many reviewers receive, long résumés are often ignored. Although rules about length are more flexible than they once were, general guidelines still exist. Most students and recent graduates use a one-page résumé, other workers use one or two pages, and the very experienced use two or three pages. If your résumé doesn't match this pattern, it probably contains unnecessary words or irrelevant information. Eliminate anything that does not help prove you're qualified for the job.

Proofreading

Take time to prepare the best résumé you can. You might not be the most qualified candidate for every job, but your résumé might be better than the competition. The most common mistakes are simple typographical and spelling errors. Computer spelling checkers do not catch correctly spelled words used incorrectly—"of" for "on," for example, or "their" for "there." You want your résumé to stand out, but not for the wrong reasons. Avoid mistakes by having several people proofread for you.

Before you send out a résumé, review the vacancy announcement and fine-tune your résumé to meet employers' specific criteria. Sprinkle your résumé with language found in the position description, paying special attention to your objective and qualifications summary if you have them.

Finally, consider how your résumé will look when it arrives on a reviewer's desk. Hastily stuffed, illegibly addressed, and sloppily sealed envelopes do nothing to enhance your image as a neat, would-be professional. If you are faxing your résumé, set the fax machine to fine printing mode, and always fax an original. Your résumé may have to withstand several trips through a copy machine, so you want it to transmit as clearly as possible.

Going digital

Résumés can be formatted for e-mailing, posting to Internet sites, or scanning. These digital résumés include the same information other résumés do, and they come in the same varieties—chronological, functional, or combination. But digital résumés use simpler, technologically friendly formatting, and they emphasize keywords. This section describes two types of digital résumés: Plain text résumés that can be e-mailed to employers or posted to databases and scannable paper résumés that can be

read by computer optics. To learn how to turn your résumé into a Web page, visit Internet sites, such as those listed at the end of this article.

Plain text résumés. Résumés that are e-mailed or posted to Internet databases are designed for computer use. These résumés must be written using the American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII), also known as plain text. Plain text contains no special formatting codes, so every computer can understand it.

To create a plain text résumé, open your existing résumé document with a word processing program, and save it as a text or ASCII file. This will eliminate formatting codes. You can use the computer's built-in text editor application, such as Notepad for Windows or Simpletext for Macintosh, to edit the résumé.

The success of your résumé depends, in part, on the number of keywords it contains—the number of times its words match the words requested by a manager. You can add keywords to your résumé by scrutinizing job announcements and, where appropriate, copying their exact words when describing your skills. Fill your résumé with important nouns the computer will recognize, such as professional organizations and industry jargon. Each abbreviation you use should be followed by the phrase it stands for, with the exception of B.S. and B.A. for Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Arts.

List every keyword that applies to you; do not expect the computer to infer. For example, don't simply write "word processing: Microsoft Office." Instead, write "word processing: Microsoft Office, WordPerfect, Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint." Rules about length are relaxed for digital résumés. Some career counselors even suggest adding a keyword paragraph to the top of your résumé, but others do not believe such paragraphs are useful.

Writers of plain text résumés should not use any characters or formatting not found on a standard keyboard. Boldface, italics, and underlining are unavailable, as are tabs, bullets, and multiple font sizes. But alternative attention-getting devices are still useful; asterisks and plus signs can replace bullets, rows of dashes can separate sections, and all capital letters can emphasize headings.

Résumés can be formatted for scanning, e-mailing, or posting to Internet sites.

Digital résumés use simple, technologically friendly formatting.

Digital résumés emphasize keywords.

Plain text resumes should not exceed 65 characters per line.

E-mail a plain text résumé to yourself and to a friend to test the way it transmits.

The word wrap function is also disabled when writing in ASCII. Words will not automatically move from one line to the next. Instead, you must hit the enter key at the end of every line. A line should hold only 65 characters, or it may not fit on the reviewer's screen. To be certain your line lengths are correct, count characters and use a standard-width typeface, such as Courier. Times New Roman is not a standard-width typeface, so 65 of its characters will not always translate to 65 of the reviewer's characters. For a sample plain text résumé, see page 11.

Before e-mailing your résumé to an employer, e-mail it to yourself and a friend to see how it transmits. That way, you may be able to uncover some formatting errors. When an employer asks for an e-mailed résumé, never attach a word-processed document unless specifically requested to do so. Employers may

not be able to open a word-processed document. Even if they can, they may not want to risk receiving a computer virus. Always send your cover letter and résumé as text in a single message. If you are responding to an advertisement or job posting, use that posting as the subject line of your message.

You can also post your plain text résumé to Internet databases and apply instantly to thousands of companies. When you do this, the posted résumé becomes public information. Take precautions, such as omitting your home address and the address of your current employer. The Internet can be part of a complete job search effort, but it should not be your sole job searching technique. Most companies still do not use Internet recruiting.

Scannable résumés. Many large companies, and a growing number of small ones, use computers to sort the hundreds of résumés they receive. These companies scan paper résumés into a computer database. When managers need to fill a position, they program the computer with keywords that describe the qualifications they want in a candidate. The computer then searches its database for résumés that include those keywords. The résumés with the most matches are forwarded to the managers.

This new technology is good news for jobseekers. Now when these companies put your résumé on file, your qualifica-

tions are ready and waiting to be electronically retrieved, not languishing in a desk drawer. Before you submit your résumé to a company, call the company to find out if it scans. If it does, you will need to make sure your résumé's design is computer friendly.

Stylistic touches that are easy on a human's eyes may not be so easy on a computer scanner. Résumés that will be scanned should be devoid of any graphics or formatting that a computer might misinterpret. The following steps will increase a scanner's ability to read your résumé:

- ◆ Use nontextured white or off-white paper with black letters.
- ◆ Choose a well-known font such as Helvetica, Arial, or Courier.
- ◆ Pick a font size of 10 to 14 points, and do not condense spacing between letters.
- ◆ Do not underline or italicize text, and do not use asterisks or parentheses. Modern systems can understand bold, but older systems might not. You can still distinguish headings by using capital letters.
- ◆ Avoid boxes, graphics, columns, and horizontal or vertical lines.
- ◆ Put your name on its own line at the top of each page. Also, give telephone numbers their own lines.
- ◆ Do not staple or fold your résumé.

Cover letters: Introducing yourself

Every résumé you send, fax, or e-mail needs its own cover letter. Sending a résumé without a cover letter is like starting an interview without shaking hands. The best cover letters spark the employer's interest and create an impression of competence.

Cover letters are an opportunity to convey your focus and energy. "If you don't have a lot of experience, use the cover letter to show you have enthusiasm," says Sharon Swann, manager of administrative services for a management consulting firm in Menlo Park, California. "Writing a strong cover letter and then calling to follow up shows the employer you have drive and interest." Although you should feel free to consult ref-

Every résumé you send, fax, or e-mail needs its own cover letter.

Every cover letter should fit on one page.

Send your letter to a specific person rather than to an office whenever possible.

The first few sentences tell which job you are applying for.

Briefly explain your qualifications without simply repeating your résumé.

erences and models, use your own words when writing a cover letter; don't mimic another person's writing style.

Parts of the cover letter

Cover letters should be written in standard business format with your and the reviewer's addresses at the top and your signature above your typed name at the bottom. (E-mailed cover letters do not include mailing addresses.) All letters should be single spaced, flush left, with each paragraph followed by a blank line. Use professional, polite words. Revealing your personality is fine, as long as your style conforms to business protocol. For a sample cover letter, see page 13.

Most cover letters are two or three paragraphs long. Every cover letter should fit on one page and contain the following four parts: Salutation, opening, body, and conclusion.

Salutation. Whenever possible, send your letter to a specific person rather than to an office. Consider how differently you respond to a letter addressed to you, as opposed to one addressed to "Occupant." If you do not know whom to write, call the company and ask who is hiring for the position. Check that the name you use is spelled correctly and the title is accurate. Pay close attention to the Mr. or Ms. before gender-neutral names. Finally, use a colon after the name, not a comma.

Opening. The first few sentences of your cover letter should tell the reviewer which job you are applying for and the connection you have to the company. If someone the reviewer knows suggested you apply, mention that recommendation. If you are responding to an advertisement, refer to it and the source that published it.

Your knowledge of the company might give you another opportunity to connect yourself to the job. You could briefly describe your experience with its products, cite a recent company success, or refer to an article written about the company. But don't go overboard; save specifics for the interview.

Body. The next portion of your cover letter is a brief explanation of your qualifications. Don't simply repeat your résumé; summarize your most relevant qualifications or provide addi-

tional details about a noteworthy accomplishment. Address the employer's requirements directly, and don't be afraid to use special formatting to your advantage. "One of the best cover letters I've ever received," says Tom Harris, a manager at a Minneapolis marketing firm, "included a chart with my requirements on the left and the applicant's matching qualifications on the right."

You can also use the body of your cover letter to address gaps in your work history or other problems evident on your résumé. But do not volunteer negative information unless you must. Always maintain a positive, confident tone.

Closing. In your final paragraph, thank the reviewer, request an interview, and repeat your home phone number. The closing is your chance to show commitment to the job. If you tell the reviewer you plan to call, make sure you do it. "It really impresses me when someone takes the step to call and follow up," says Vin Vu, former Director of Sales and Marketing for a company in Spokane, Washington. "You have to be aggressive and continue to keep your name in the interviewer's mind."

For more information

Learn more about writing résumés and cover letters by consulting the many sources of information available on both subjects. One of the best places to go is your local library, where you can read a variety of books that match your needs and preferences. Some books give general advice and instruction, some address specific problems or occupations, and others are a compendium of sample résumés and cover letters. Be careful to choose recently published books. Résumé standards change with time.

Look in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* for information about the job duties, working conditions, and training requirements of many occupations. The *Handbook* is available online at <http://stats.bls.gov/ocohome.htm> and can also be found in most libraries and career centers.

Visit the counselors at your school, career center, or State employment office. They have resources and advice to help you choose an occupation; write résumés, cover letters, and applications; and develop a job searching strategy. State employment offices offer free advice and computer access to people who are unemployed. To find your State office, call (202) 219-5257 or write:

U. S. Employment Service
200 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20212

The Internet is full of résumé writing advice—but remember, websites are not filtered for accuracy or timeliness. Some established sites are:

- ◆ JobSmart: Résumés and Cover Letters,
<http://www.jobsmart.org/tools/resume>
- ◆ The Riley Guide,
<http://www.rileyguide.com>
- ◆ Rebecca Smith's Electronic Résumés,
<http://www.eresumes.com>
- ◆ Putting Your Résumé On-line,
<http://titan.iwu.edu/~ccenter/resume>
- ◆ The Quintessential Guide to Career Resources,
<http://www.quintcareers.com>

Another option is a commercial résumé writing service. The Professional Association of Résumé Writers, established in 1990, has about 1,000 members. For a fee, professional résumé writers help jobseekers write résumés and cover letters. Many of these professionals offer student rates, but fees may be higher for people with longer work histories. For a list of association members, visit the association website at <http://www.parw.com> or write:

The Professional Association of Résumé Writers
3637 4th St., Suite 330
St. Petersburg, FL 33704

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