



Resume Writing

Guidelines, Style, Advice & Opinions

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Overview

Anything I say here is to enhance your current resume. You're the expert on you – feel free to take whatever advice you like and leave whatever you don't.

Resume conventions have changed a lot over the years – they seem to be changing all the time! People all have different preferences, and while there are current trends, there are no hard and fast rules.

The current guideline is to write your resume as a concise marketing document of no more than two pages tailored to the role you're applying for. You don't have to write down every single thing you've ever done. Instead, it should only include the things that support your candidacy. Focus on your accomplishments instead of listing your responsibilities.

Tip: Create a “master” resume with all of your jobs, volunteer work and every responsibility and achievement written out. Then, when tailoring your resume for a specific type of job, you can pull out the relevant bits.

Aside from the universal “no typos!” edict, everyone has a different opinion on how a resume should look and be written. This means that job seekers have to use what they know about their industry and their discretion to decide which conventions they want to follow. Think about the type of document you would like to receive if you were hiring for this role and go from there.

Ultimately, unless the hiring manager is a real stickler (and who wants to work for one of those!), you are not going to get marked down for having too small margins or using the wrong font. They are judging you primarily on the content.

The most important thing to do is to follow the application instructions *exactly*.

Style

As someone who has read thousands of resumes, I think the style of your resume should be centered around making it easy on the person reading it. That person really wants your resume to go in the Yes pile. Your job is to make it as easy as possible for them to get the information they need so they can put you in the Yes pile. And they want their eyes not to hurt! You will win points with this person if your resume is nice to read and doesn't make them squint and strain. Simplicity is the name of the game.

Things to do to make your resume simple:

- Use a common font. Fancier fonts might not look the same on another computer, so it's best to stick to the basics. Calibri is the current standard and easy on the eyes. Other good ones are Cambria, Georgia & Verdana.
- 11 point font
- Stick to black font colour
- Use bold sparingly and skip the underlines & italics
- Lots of white space
- No long, bulky paragraphs; bullet points are your friend
- Clear headings
- The dates are easy to find – use month & year.

Wrangling the Applicant Tracking System (ATS) robots

Keywords are key (ha) for both robot and human resume readers. The right keywords will help your resume be filtered into the candidate pool and will make it searchable in the database for future roles.

- Pull out the main keywords from the job spec and put them into your resume – once in the profile and once in the work history section. Use the exact wording from the job spec. The main keywords will be the 2-4 terms that sum up the job requirements best.
- Keep your template and design as simple as possible. Tables, graphics, columns – anything remotely fancy will get garbled.
- Test what your resume will look like after it's been parsed into the ATS: save and open your document as a plain text file. Then you can make any changes to make sure nothing goes wonky.
- Use both long-form and acronym versions of keywords, e.g., “Master of Business Administration (MBA)” or “Non-profit organisation (NGO).”
- Don't use headers or footers
- Use traditional fonts
- Use standard headings, i.e., Profile, Work/Professional Experience, Volunteer Experience, Education.
- Don't load your resume with keywords out of context. You might get through the ATS that way, but not the human. The robots aren't good enough to do all of the resume sorting – a human *will* read your resume.

Writing the Profile Section

Your profile is a 30-second “elevator pitch” where you sum up your experience and expertise as though you only had 30 seconds to explain to someone what you do - and get them to ask you for more. It should be about 3-4 lines in paragraph or bullet point format.

You also want to tailor this section to the role you're applying to by addressing the main qualifications. It should show the hiring manager *how* you're qualified for the role.

E.g., Systems/Operations & Finance Director with five years of strategic leadership experience. Expertise in designing and implementing operational strategies to deliver cost-effective country programmes and optimise donor funding.

Skills & Keywords

A skills section is entirely optional. Personally, I tend towards not having one. You only really need a profile section before getting into your professional experience. Anything else is extra and should only be included if it really strengthens your candidacy.

It's important to have keywords from the job spec in your resume. If it goes through an ATS, the keywords will be picked up. However, if they are only listed in a skills section with no context, they are likely to be disregarded by the human reading your resume, especially if the list is long.

It's much more effective if you choose a few main keywords from the job spec and use them in a sentence no more than twice in the whole resume. The rule of thumb is once in the profile and once in the body.

If you do decide to have a skills section, keep it short (3-6 bullet points) and only include the “hard” skills that are provable, directly relevant to the role you’re applying for, and not likely to come up organically in the rest of the resume. You can use a separate section and heading or write them as bullet points after your profile paragraph.

Examples of things to include in your skills section:

- Languages you speak
- Credentials you have
- Software you know how to use well
- Right to work/visa
- Countries you’ve worked in
- Any specific technical skills required by the role

Key Achievements

This section is also a bonus and totally optional. It is a good way to highlight your main, relevant to the role achievements, and make sure the reader sees it.

Highlight 2-3 of your most impressive accomplishments that are directly relevant to the main criteria of the job spec. Keep it brief. Give them just enough to spark their curiosity – make them want to bring you in for an interview to ask you about it.

Professional Experience: The Dreaded List of Accomplishments

For each role over the last 10-15 years of your career, write around six bullet points outlining your major achievements at each role. Write only the bare bones of the information – keep it short and punchy. Your resume is meant to summarise your career and top accomplishments and show how you meet the role criteria. Your cover letter is where you expand and contextualise.

How to Write Accomplishments

The key to writing achievements is to strike a balance between specific and brief. For instance, instead of saying “experience managing teams,” write about something impressive your team did under your leadership. What projects was your team working on? What did your team accomplish? What organisational goals did you reach? What challenges did you triumph over? Did you do something different that had a positive impact?

- Show the *results* of something you worked on, i.e., what happened after you did the thing? If you have any relevant quantitative & qualitative data, so much the better. For example
 - Increased donor contributions by 75%
 - Implemented [specific] change in hiring strategy that led to a decrease in staff turnover.
- Put the most important and relevant bullet points at the top, so if the person is just skimming, as they will do on the first read, you catch their attention right away. All the points should be relevant to the role, but the top bullet points should correspond with the top criteria in the job spec.
- Give the reader a sense of *how* you performed at the job and what you’re like to work with.
- Don’t be afraid to brag a little!
 - What are you really good at?

- Where have you excelled?
- What are you the proudest of?
- What positive feedback have you gotten from your colleagues, bosses, donors, clients, vendors, etc?
- Have you won any awards or received any commendations?
- Have you been promoted? Why?
- Tailor your resume: choose the accomplishments that explain how you meet the job criteria.
- Ditch passive language like “experience in” and “responsible for” and use action words.

Many of us really struggle with this part, and for good reason: it’s hard. It’s a thousand times easier for me to tell you to go ahead and brag a little than it is to actually do it. I’m terrible at it myself!

Bragging is actually the wrong word; it has too many negative connotations. And of course, you don’t want to misrepresent yourself, exaggerate, or come across like you’re full of yourself. It’s really important for your resume to be in your own words and style.

Try thinking of it as though you are describing yourself in the same way that you would recommend a trusted colleague to a prospective manager. Tell them what they need to know to determine if yours is the skillset and approach they are looking for. That’s the goal here - to see whether there’s a good match between you and the role.

Resume Action Words

Technical Skills: Adapted, Applied, Assembled, Built, Conducted, Configured, Designed, Developed, Diagnosed, Engineered, Implemented, Installed, Maintained, Operated, Performed, Planned, Provided, Remodeling, Solved, Standardized, Upgraded

Consulting Skills: Advised, Aided, Analyzed, Clarified, Coached, Contributed, Consulted, Demonstrated, Educated, Evaluated, Facilitated, Guided, Informed, Instilled, Persuaded, Planned, Recommended, Resolved, Simplified, Supported, Taught, Trained, Volunteered

Leadership: Acted, Administered, Aligned, Analyzed, Appointed, Approved, Assigned, Assisted, Attained, Chaired, Coordinated, Decided, Delegated, Directed, Established, Led, Managed, Mentored, Motivated, Organized, Oversaw, Planned, Prioritized, Reviewed, Supervised

Communication: Arranged, Authored, Collaborated, Communicated, Consulted, Corresponded, Defined, Drafted, Edited, Explained, Interpreted, Interviewed, Joined, Negotiated, Recommended, Reported, Responded, Translated, Wrote

And the Rest

Education, Courses & Publications

- List from most recent, degree obtained, institution, date graduated or projected graduation date.
- Include any awards, honours, scholarships.
- Unless you’re a very recent grad and it’s really impressive, no need to include your GPA.
- Select which courses, training, workshops, credentials are relevant to the role and list as simple as possible. Don’t make it a long list; include only a handful of the most recent and/or most applicable.
- Publications can be listed here or in a separate document if there are a lot of them.

Do you include hobbies?

I would err on the side of nope. But it's up to you. If you do something really cool or if it's related somehow to the role you're applying for. For instance, if it's a job in agriculture and you're an amateur beekeeper.

Other things you do not need to put on your resume

- References available on request (it's implied)
- Any information about your religion, ethnicity, age, gender, marital status, children, political alignment, sexual orientation, etc.