

Writing Your Own Resume

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All Write!

Writing your own resume might seem like a perfectly normal course of action. After all, who knows you better than you know you? And, let's face it: Most job-seekers wait until they absolutely *must* have a resume before they begin the process, so who can they turn to at the last minute? I'd like to convince you *not* to write your own resume, but if you're determined to do it, let me at least provide some sound advice.

On the strength of about 400 custom resumes I've crafted over the years, I can offer these sound guidelines. Don't think of them as "tips"; those are the quick little nuggets you can find on the Internet or in a popular magazine. I'd like you to consider my guidelines as a more fundamental type of help, perhaps a better *approach* to resume preparation.

CONSIDER YOUR RESUME YOUR PORTRAIT IN WORDS. Stop thinking of it as a list. That "list" mentality is what gets people off on the wrong foot. A resume is neither a list of the jobs you've held nor a list of your strengths and skills. Appropriately crafted, a resume is a picture of you, displayed in your best light, positioning you most attractively, playing up your finest qualities and downplaying your shortcomings. The overall effect of the resume should be an image of you, the employee, at your best in the past and available to repeat that stellar performance in the future.

MAKE YOUR RESUME AN ANALYSIS. Yes, that definitely undoes the whole "list" concept. In order to paint that portrait in words, you have to first perform an analysis. (That's what a resume preparation professional does during the interview stage.) Your resume must present conclusions about you. It must "add up to something." Think of it as the difference between *Chicken Cacciatore* and a list of the ingredients in chicken cacciatore: chicken, red wine, tomatoes, garlic, etc. You need to assess the skills and knowledge you've developed over the years and draw some conclusions for your reader. The description of a key job you've held should focus on a few accomplishments and demonstrated qualities rather than simply show how you put in your time from 8 to 5. Certainly your reader will draw some conclusions too, but it is your job to present the data in terms that show achievement, growth and professional evolution.

MAKE YOUR RESUME HONEST. I don't know what the current statistics for lying on resumes is today, but I can tell you this as an absolute fact: I have never knowingly lied on anyone's resume, and I would never advise anyone to do so. Once a young man named Mike proposed to me that we just make up a college degree for him, since he didn't seem to be getting anywhere in life without one. I refused, explaining to Mike that his resume was not about his lack of higher education. It was about all the good things he's accomplished, the skills he's demonstrated, the knowledge base he's built, the challenges he's met. I don't know of any employer who would rather hire a mediocre performer with a college degree than a prospect with a great track record for building his employer's business but without a college degree.

Remember, too, that your resume will almost surely be sitting right on the interviewer's desk when you go in for that interview. In most cases your resume will provide the outline for at least a large part of your interview. It will be the basis of many of the interview questions. Think of the cold sweat you'll endure, knowing those are lies on that paper—and now you have to defend them, face to face. No, don't lie about your education, your level of responsibility, the size of your budget or anything else; just don't lie on your resume.

FOCUS ON DEMONSTRATED SKILLS AND KNOW-HOW. Because most folks start out with that “list” mentality, they fall into the useless pattern of listing their tasks and duties for every job. Not helpful, especially if the people who will be reading your resume work within the industry in which you wish to be employed. A bank branch manager knows what a teller’s tasks are; you don’t have to tell her. A lawn service owner knows what a yard maintenance technician has been doing on the job. Your reader wants to know what problems you’ve solved for your employers, what challenges you’ve met head-on and addressed creatively, what hurdles you’ve jumped over. Start with a broad conceptual statement that captures the essence of your job, and then focus on the things you did that were *out* of the ordinary.

INCLUDE QUANTIFIABLE SPECIFICS. One man’s “big budget” is peanuts to another man. If you were responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of 32,000 square feet, don’t say it was a big building; say “32,000 square feet.” Quantify the budget you administered, estimating to the best of your ability exactly how many dollars you were responsible for each year. If you supervised 80 men and women, state the number; if you supervised 2 co-workers, say “2.” A claim to have developed millions of dollars in new accounts for your former employer sounds like a pipe dream. An assertion that you developed \$2.5 million dollars in new accounts over 5 years sounds more like a fact you’d be able to talk about. As long as your statistics are truthful, they are far more persuasive than generalizations.

LEAVE OUT THE STUFF THAT DOESN’T BELONG. Certain bits of information are simply not needed or wanted on a resume. Name each employer and his/her city and state, but leave out the street address. Provide dates of employment as month/year combos; don’t include exact starting or ending dates even if you know them. Don’t name your supervisor on your resume. If that information is wanted, you’ll be asked to provide it on an application. Don’t state your salary or wage for each job. If a salary history is requested, that’s a separate document. Don’t create a “personal” section. Nobody cares that you love to windsurf on weekends. Don’t state why you left a job. And, for heaven’s sake, don’t waste a line stating “References available upon request.” What’s that all about anyway? Consider the alternative: “No references available, so don’t ask.” Of course you’ll provide references when the time comes, but they have nothing to do with your resume.

CREATE A MEANINGFUL “CIVIC INVOLVEMENT” SECTION. You can name it something else if you wish, and you may leave it out altogether too, but if you have interests and community activities that reflect positively on you, this is the place to put them, not in “personal.” Now, don’t list the weekend windsurfing unless you are the elected chapter president of the regional Windsurfers Ward. Do you see the difference between civic contribution or demonstrated leadership and just plain leisure? If you founded a Dominoes Club and provided leadership for 6 years, that’s civic involvement; if you like to play Dominoes, that’s nice but not impressive. Singing in the church choir for several years is a contribution; singing in the shower is a quirk (a common quirk, but not resume material).

CREATE THE SECTIONS YOUR RESUME NEEDS. I’m always surprised when people discover there is no law about what subheadings a resume must have. It’s true, though—you can create whatever sections you need. If licensure or certification is important in your line of work, you’re surely going to want a “Licenses” or “Certifications” section prominent and near the top. If bilingualism is critical to your marketability, create a “Languages” section. On the other hand, if “Software Expertise” is not going to be a deciding factor in your employability, don’t create such a section just because you’ve mastered a lot of software programs. Now, you might say, “But I’m using a template, and the sections I need aren’t available.” What can I say? Don’t use a template, or at least don’t use that one.

USE THE PAGE SPACE WELL. Most resume templates waste a lot of space, which is another good reason not to use them. If you can manage margins and tabs, you can create your own resume layout. Have a nice balance between text and white space, but don't make the common mistake of writing a 1 ½ page resume. Your resume should be either one page or two pages—full pages. If you have too much for one page but too little for two, use more white space. If you have enough material for 1 ¼ pages, cut the fat and get it all on one page.

HAVE TWO OTHER PEOPLE PROOFREAD YOUR RESUME. Sure, you can and should proofread your own work, but your eye will miss mistakes that your own brain created. Get another set of eyes. And be aware, too, that mediocre grammar, usage and mechanics are not good enough on a resume. It's about more than spell-check; it's about a facility with words, concise expression, precise word choice, and really knowing for sure when to use "who" and when to use "whom."

Finally, I will say again: I do not recommend you try this at home. An experienced professional resume preparation specialist will probably create an entirely different document than what you had in mind—and you'll pay for that skill. If you absolutely insist on writing your own resume, though, please give my ten guidelines some serious consideration. Create an honest, analytical document focused on quantifiable achievements and designed to present the very best of YOU, the prospective employee.