

Writing Résumés and Cover Letters

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This brief introduction to résumé writing is just meant to get you started. The Career Development Center library contains several comprehensive treatments of the subject, as well as many illustrative samples. There are also plenty of résumé resources on the Internet—just remember to be a discriminating consumer of these resources, and to question all advice and its applicability to your particular situation. Please bring your specific questions and draft résumés to Career Center staff for one-to-one consultation. Below are just a few fundamentals of résumés and cover letters.

Getting Started

It's important to note that a résumé is a brochure used to pique curiosity and advertise one's abilities with the intent of securing an interview. It needn't be a comprehensive work history—just include what you think would interest your particular audience. Remember also that audiences vary, and that you'll likely be applying for many opportunities, so the odds are you'll maintain more than one version of your résumé, tweaking it as needed for different situations. A curriculum vitae is a slightly different version of a work history, and more comprehensive in scope—contact us for more information on cv's vs. résumés.

What's prompted you to prepare a résumé?

- A specific opportunity.
- An upcoming job fair with unknown opportunities.
- The urging of an employee or hiring manager.
- Your hunch that you need a résumé for your job search.
- Dismayed looks from those knowing you lack a résumé.
- A graduate school application.
- Parental or spousal pressure.
- Some other scenario?

It's easiest to write a résumé when you're aiming for a specific opening or know exactly what you want, but in any case the key to getting started is to think about your situation as it relates to the scenarios listed above, or perhaps some alternate one. The circumstances of the situation will then influence how you ought to approach the task. Before getting into the details of writing, then, let's consider these various scenarios a bit more.

Crafting a résumé in response to a specific position opening.

This is a common situation, and perhaps the easiest to handle. Begin by doing everything possible to discover what the organization's looking for. The ad or job description will reveal the initial clues. Read whatever information they supply carefully, maybe asking someone you know to read it and verify your understanding. Then discuss your impressions together, or with someone from the Career Development Center to arrive at a clear understanding of what the employer is seeking. Remember to read between the lines. Then dig deeper:

- Study the organization's Web site.
- Research the organization using directories, periodicals, newspapers, databases, etc. (Ask Career staff for help.)
- Discover whatever insider information you can via people you know. This is often the **most** useful source of information because you'll get the real scoop, not just the party line.

Once you have a pretty clear idea of what they're seeking, your mission is clear: Address every aspect of the job requirements in your résumé (and cover letter), and convince the reader to conclude that you definitely ought to be invited in for an interview. Another way to look at it: Don't give them a reason not to call you.

Remember: Many résumé readers approach the task of sifting through sometimes hundreds of résumés by looking for red flags—instant disqualifiers such as lack of basic requirements, atrocious writing, sloppy mistakes, etc. These jump off the page in a few seconds and prevent good points from being taken seriously. So, the harder the readers have to search for red flags, the longer they'll end up spending on your résumé and the greater the chances you'll make a favorable impression.

Preparing a résumé for a job fair.

Job fairs are tough since you're writing for several audiences. Keep in mind that you might need to prepare more than one version of your résumé. Again, do your best to research the companies via the avenues listed above. When viewing company web sites, pay particular attention to job postings to get a feel for the types of jobs you might be applying for, and then prepare your résumé(s) accordingly. Even if you can't access particular position descriptions, do your best to get a feel for the organization to know how best to advertise your skills and experiences. It's probably best to review a list of the organizations that will be represented at the fair, narrowing it down to the ones that especially interest you. Then commence with more detailed research to inform your résumé writing process.

Sending your résumé out uninvited.

This scenario's similar to the job fair situation, though your audience might be a bit tougher to reach since they aren't necessarily inviting applications. The hope is that the timing of your application will coincide with some unfulfilled need in the organization. So the key is to present an eye-catching résumé that piques their interest in spite of the fact that they're not actively recruiting. And once again, doing your homework first is essential. Make it crystal clear that you understand their mission and have skills they need.

Writing a résumé when you're not exactly sure what you want.

Once you've decided you need to secure employment, it's tempting to dive right into résumé writing. This may be a bit frustrating, for you'll struggle not knowing to whom you're writing or for what you're applying. You'll probably just feel that you need to do something, and since working on a résumé is a concrete, easily identifiable project needing attention at some point anyway . . . This motivation's understandable and fine, and the process of working on your résumé even when you don't know what you're going to do with it can help to clarify your goals, interests, motivations, etc. These are all things you need to understand about yourself before you can adequately assess and apply for opportunities.

Completing a résumé as part of a graduate school application.

This is rather a different sort of résumé, and in this setting it'll frequently be called a **vita** (or **vitae**). You should still write it with an eye toward putting your best foot forward, but it's expected that it'll be a bit more comprehensive than a typical résumé. You'll probably want to include lots of the academic highlights of your college career that you might not necessarily mention in a résumé for a job application. Be sure to get help from professors and Career staff if working on a résumé or vita for graduate school applications.

Starting to Write

Once you're clearer on the challenges associated with your particular situation, it's time to get to the actual writing. Again, remember that you will write **several** résumés, so discard immediately the notion that your goal here is to produce the perfect résumé. It truly is a work in progress, and no matter how much effort you put into it now and how fantastic it may turn out to be, it'll be outdated in a few months . . .

You might find it easiest, as you start writing, to err on the side of overwriting, that is, including everything you can possibly think of in your background that falls under the categories listed below. It's not an exhaustive list, but should stimulate some thought as you read through it. (Don't let the content of your résumé be dictated by standard headings: Invent your own as needed.)

Computer Skills	Objective	Profile
Education	Relevant Courses	Leadership Skills
Continuing Education	Organizational Skills	Professional Experience
Training Experience	Technical Skills	Volunteer Experience
Community Service	Notable Achievements	Internships
Publications	Research Experience	Presentations
Teaching Experience	Health Care Experience	Languages
Certifications	Writing Experience	Memberships
Communication Skills	Special Interests	Special Skills
Special Projects	Project Management	Skills Overview

Once you've lots of material on the page, it's time to think about organizing it. There are many possibilities. The key, as mentioned previously, is to keep your situation in mind, including the needs and interests (and biases) of your potential readers. Varying situations will suggest various approaches.

Most top-notch résumés, however, include two vital sections right at the top, just below your name and contact information. First, an **objective** stating what you're seeking is listed, something like this:

Objective

Economics graduate seeking analyst position in small- to mid-size Oregon-based company seeking international business. Particular interest in facilitating crosscultural communications and partnerships. Enjoy providing research and analysis to support business decisions.

Next, a **profile** is provided, highlighting the assets you're offering:

Profile

- Graduated *magna cum laude*. Able to sift through large amounts of data and competing priorities to deliver top-notch results.
- Speak Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese with native fluency. One-year of study at East China Normal University, plus extensive travel experience in Asia.
- Facility and interest in using technology to maximize results. Experience using pivot tables and other advanced Excel functions, as well as with using Access and SPSS to analyze data. Fluent with MS Office.
- Outstanding communication and presentation skills. Experience distilling complex information into readily understandable and compelling conclusions for general and specialized audiences alike.

Educational Background would typically be listed next:

Education

BS, Pacific University, Forest Grove, OR May 2003

Major(s): Economics, Chinese

Minor: Philosophy

Study Abroad, East China Normal University July 2002 – April 2003

Courses in language, culture, economics, and business.

Of course a key ingredient of your résumé must be related work experience, which is typically next in the line-up:

Related Work Experience

First Technology Credit Union, Beaverton, Oregon August 1999 to Present

Human Resources Assistant

Responsible for recruiting process, from initial interview through orientation. Also coordinate and administer benefit packages for 175 employees. Oversee and maintain Human Resource Information System. Assist with dispute resolution.

- Recently coordinated hiring and orientation process of 8 branches as credit union assets increased from \$280 million to \$520 million.
- Administered transition from defined benefit retirement plan to 401K plan. Developed 401K education program and increased participation by 7%.
- Organized first annual professional development conference among Portland area credit unions. Received 2003 Regional Achievement Award.

A compelling job description is harder than it looks, but it's not difficult either. The key is to convey these three messages:

- 1) **The facts:** your title, employer, location, dates of employment.
- 2) **Your job description:** a clear sense of your role and responsibilities, including enough information about the work setting itself to allow the reader to grasp the nature of the organization and where you fit in.
- 3) **Your accomplishments:** things you accomplished for your employer, and for yourself. Even if all you did was pump gas at Chevron, you should be able to articulate things you learned and gained from the experience such that the reader can see that it developed skill and capacity in you. (If you feel that it didn't, then why list it on your résumé?)

Hopefully you've plenty to list under the heading of Related Work Experience—and be sure to think broadly about what's "related." Think about skills and accomplishments and how they relate to your objective—don't just think in terms of job titles. Also, list related experiences of all sorts, not just paying jobs. For instance, perhaps some volunteer and internship experiences are related: list them here. Finally, if volunteer or other experience is related, it's better described fully in this section than sequestered off under the heading of Volunteer Experience.

Employers like to gain a clear sense of your work history also to verify that you have been working and developing a set of references. Plus, you likely have other work experiences that round out your background, even if they don't fit neatly under "related experience." Therefore consider adding such a section:

Additional Experience

Barista, Starbucks Coffee, Beaverton, OR May 1999 – December 1999

Checker, Albertson's Grocery, Hillsboro, OR May 1998 – September 1998

If listing additional experience that you feel doesn't need to be elaborated upon because your Related Experience conveys most of your key points, it's fine just to list the facts of your additional experiences—especially if they're jobs whose functions are readily discernable through the job title. (However, if you lack "related" experience, then it's important to describe fully whatever experience you do have; that is, just list Work Experience, and don't distinguish between related and additional.

Résumés can include many other components, such as Related Courses, Research Experience, Project Experience, Honors and Awards, Committees and Memberships, etc. Visit the Career Development Center for more complete information on incorporating these elements into your résumés.

General Résumé Tips

- Remember that you're advertising valuable skills, not merely recording history.
- Include what will help you land an interview, not just what you think you're **supposed** to say. (Try to put yourself in the employer's shoes.)
- Make job descriptions clear and succinct, precise and informative.
- Good job descriptions indicate the scope of the position **and** your specific accomplishments and victories—a sense of what you were supposed to do **and** what you actually got done. Pick meaningful verbs (e.g., "designed Web pages," "wrote training manuals," "sterilized instruments," "analyzed statistics"). Note what you learned and gained from each work experience.
- Specific details are more compelling than generalities (e.g., "Word, StatView, Excel, FileMaker Pro" is better than "computer skills").
- Quantify your accomplishments where possible (e.g., "taught CPR to 30 staff members" or "managed a budget of \$7,500").
- Use key words wisely (especially important if your résumé is going to be scanned into a database).
- Keep to one page if possible—two only with good reason.
- Proofread. Proofread. Proofread.
- Use formatting flourishes (**boldface type**, underlining, ALL CAPITAL LETTERS, *italics*, bullets, spacing, etc.) tastefully and consistently. Really **use** these tools to organize your material; don't just throw them around haphazardly.

Writing cover letters

Though you should make your cover letter your own, avoiding clichés and stale phrasing, here's a conventional structure:

First Paragraph

This should be brief, one or two or three sentences indicating the specific job for which you're applying and how you found the lead. (If someone familiar to the reader has provided you with a lead or an introduction, mention his or her name.)

Middle Paragraph(s)

Prove you've done your homework on the organization. Let them see you know something about their business and the field in general—speak like an insider without sounding like a know-it-all. This is a chance to distinguish your application from the rest.

Indicate exactly how you meet the qualifications for the position, paying careful attention to the job description. Outline the specific skills and experiences you'd bring to the job. Convince them that they need you, not that you need them. (All too many job seekers forget this crucial point and prattle on about their own wishes, aspirations, delusions, etc.) **Make them want to interview you.**

Final Paragraph

Stress your enthusiasm, but don't sound desperate. Indicate your plan of action, for instance that you'll call the week of March 10 to verify receipt of your application. (This follow-up call is appropriate after sending an unsolicited letter and résumé. If responding to an ad, stress your interest in an interview to further discuss their needs.) Thank the reader for consideration.

Remember: Audiences and situations vary, so use the above suggestions as *guidelines*, not a formula. Do your best always to write a fresh, energetic, pointed, and technically correct letter.

Cover Letter Tips

- Include the date, your address and phone number, and then (below yours) the recipient's name and address. It's also a nice touch to use the same header as appears on your résumé.
- Address the letter to a specific person, preferably a hiring authority in the department where you'd be working. Don't rely on Human Resources to forward your letter and résumé.

- Stick to one page, single-spaced with reasonable margins and font. Keep the letter short —fewer opportunities to blow it!
- If responding to an ad that outlines specific requirements, address each one in order.
- Ask someone whose writing skills and overall judgment you trust (and who preferably owes you a big favor) to review your letter (and résumé).
- Remember to sign the letter.