

The Ideal Résumé: Thorough, but User-Friendly

Not much can be said for writing a résumé that hasn't already been said in hundreds of other articles. However, in this article, I'd like to focus on the résumé as a technical document, while offering some ideas for enhancing it and making it as user-friendly as possible.

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Carl Wiens/Laughing Stock

Generally Speaking

Below are some pointers I've gleaned over the years from (a) writing résumés for fellow students while an undergraduate, (b) writing résumés for CareerPro (a professional résumé-writing franchise), (c) interviewing résumé reviewers and managers from a variety of disciplines, and (d) reviewing résumés while hiring staffers for editorial positions at my scientific journal office.

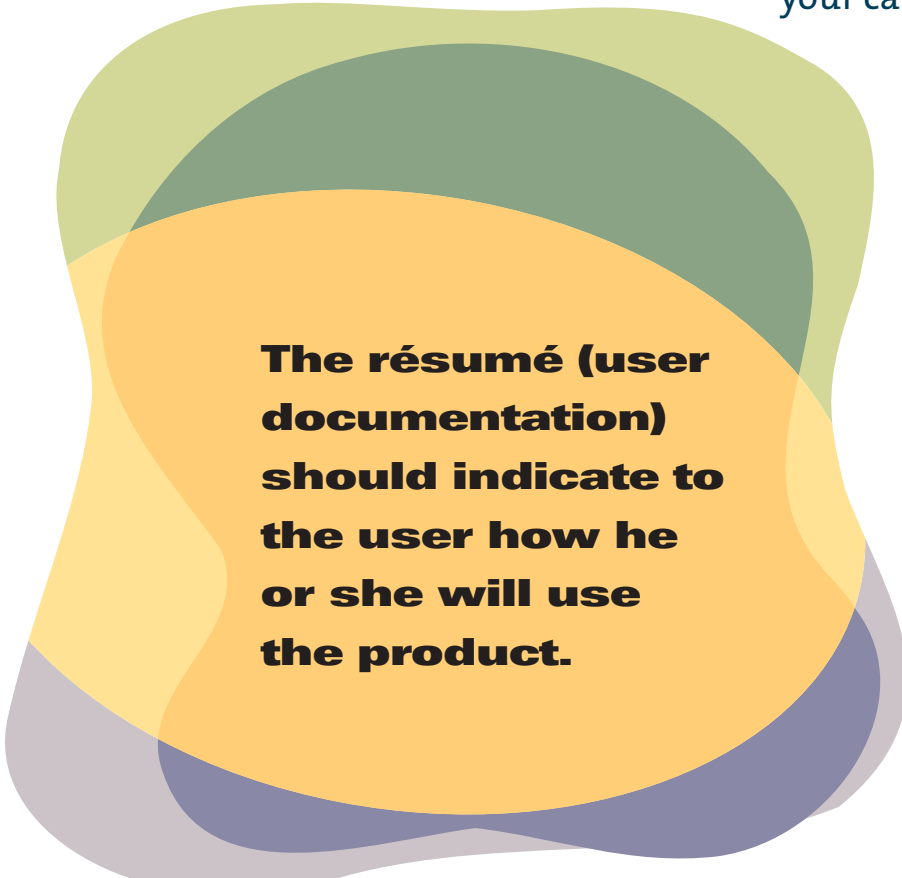
One thing I've learned is that it's sometimes helpful to think of a résumé as "user documentation." In this case, the user is the human resources employee or knowledge management department head, and you are the product. The résumé (user documentation) should indicate to the user how he or she will use the product. This point of view gets you away from the notion that a résumé is a personal history. It also allows you to apply some of your technical communication skill toward making the résumé user-friendly.

Emphasizing Skills as Opposed to Jobs

Writing for CareerPro, I discovered that I had to be quite creative in some cases. If someone had virtually no education or work experience, it was difficult to make him or her look good on paper. Difficult, but not impossible. My method for accomplishing this mission was to emphasize *skills* rather than job experience. Many jobs require certain skill sets as opposed to work experience per se, and even the veteran professional can benefit from this approach.

For instance, I once applied for a position as medical editor at a research institution. When I was contacted, the personnel administrator told me that the position had been filled but that another, higher paying position was being offered: that of managing editor for a scientific journal. Both the résumé reviewer and department interviewer recognized that I had the skill base they needed, even though I had no experience as managing editor of a periodical.

Even the high school student applying for a fast-food gig after school should put considerable effort into developing a résumé. In the case of the teenager, however, the emphasis may be on skills rather than experience or education.



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So even if you focus primarily on your experience, always include your skills in your résumé. They may pique the interviewer's interest enough to get you an interview.

Designing Your Résumé

Looking at your prized personal history as a technical document, you may decide that you need a number of sections covering a variety of information. You also may have attachments to supplement the document, such as references, a list of writing projects, a list of organization memberships, and so on.

As with any technical publication, you want to organize your résumé in a logical manner, using writing and layout conventions recognized and understood by clients—in this case, the personnel administrator who will review your résumé.

Section Headings

Depending on the length of the résumé, the type of experience listed, and the layout of the information (i.e., chronological or field of endeavor), you may want to consider using a system of section headings and subheadings. For instance, if your résumé features more

than one vocation, such as writing and editing, publishing, and video production, you may want to segment these different disciplines while keeping them in chronological order.

Always format a heading so it stands out from the text. Some people like to center their headings on the page, but IT professionals may find this technique distracting. Simple boldface or boldface and underlined text, in varying fonts or even in the same font, may be all you need. And don't go font crazy: As any layout designer will tell you, a good general rule is not to use more than three different fonts on a page.

Subheadings

For the more detailed résumé, subheadings may work well to differentiate various positions and skills within a certain discipline. Formatting should reflect the hierarchy of your headings and subheadings. For instance, if one heading is **Miscellaneous Information**, you might include the subheading **Freelance Editing**, formatted as in this sentence. To further delineate this category, you might add the sub-subheadings *Corporate Editing* and *Private Editing*. Just be sure that the formatting hierarchy you use doesn't confuse the reader.

Titling of Headings

Use short (two-word) primary headings for the main elements of your résumé:

- **Professional Objective or Objective Statement**—keep this short.
- **Experience Summary**—a good place to summarize your work background, even if it includes academic work such as assistantships.
- **Educational Background**—if you’ve completed college, no need to mention high school.
- **Employment History**—this is where you’ll reveal the nuts and bolts of your work experience. Include what you’ve done, how long you did it, and, if appropriate, the hardware and software tools you used.
- **Major Accomplishments**—should only be used if you have some. If not, don’t make them up, and don’t glamorize rudimentary tasks.
- **Miscellaneous Information**—this is the place to slip in noncorporate endeavors that apply to your professional aspirations. If you’re looking for a Web designer job and have designed sites for all your friends, yourself, and your cat, put that information here.

- **Organizational Appointments**—will include positions you’ve held in associations, societies, civic groups, or public office. Limit this list to high-profile roles rather than positions that anyone who can fog a mirror can hold, such as PTA member or neighborhood watch block captain.
- **Books and Articles Written and List of Presentations**—these should be included only to enhance a résumé if you believe the reader will care about such things. Proud as you may be of them, these accomplishments may not matter for certain positions. If you think the information will make a difference, by all means include it. Writing and public speaking skills are quite in demand in many professional circles.
- **References**—You might consider including these as a separate attachment, if you wish to conserve space on your résumé.
- **Reviews**—these should be used only if you have written books, screenplays, or theatrical presentations that were reviewed.

Writing Your Résumé

As with any publication, your résumé needs to be well thought out and well organized. The following sections cover some specifics about organization and presentation.

Length


You’ll hear much advice to the effect that “shorter is better,” but be wary of such guidance, in a professional environment, anyway. Keep in mind that your résumé is your first—and sometimes only—chance to get your foot in the door to that perfect job. You want the reader to get the whole picture.

What exactly is a résumé? The *Riverside Webster’s II New College Dictionary* defines it as “a record of one’s personal history, educational background, and employment experience.” It does not say “an abbreviated list of some things you have done in the past.” Remember that an underdeveloped résumé will only sell you short. Don’t expect the interviewer to ask in-depth questions during a phone or face-to-face interview. Try to provide enough information in your résumé to make the company want you; then the meeting will simply be a formality for making you an offer.

Your résumé should be as detailed yet as clear as possible. The old adage “Bosses are busy people” still rings true, but an effective boss will take the time—on a commute, in a meeting, in flight, during a solo dinner, or in a Jacuzzi—to review a résumé, no matter how lengthy.

Education or Job Experience First?

One general rule for the placement of information in a résumé is that if you have no experience (because you’re fresh from academia, for example), emphasize education. If you don’t have a college degree or any trade certification, it’s best to start with work experience. Also, consider the type of job. When I worked for the maintenance department of a hospital while in undergraduate school, the maintenance supervisor could have cared less about my educational background or academic aspirations. He just wanted me to be on time and to be willing to learn how to run a plumbing snake through a four-inch sewage line.



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Conversely, years later, when I interviewed for another position at a hospital—this time as managing editor for a scientific journal—the animal research scientists with whom I interviewed could have given a spontaneously hypertensive rat's behind about my sewer savvy. In other words, don't do the written equivalent of showing up in a suit at an interview for a roughneck's position on an offshore drilling rig. Use common sense and include what's appropriate on each of your résumé submissions.

How Far Back Should You Go?

The general rule is to avoid going back farther than ten years on your résumé, but it's only a general rule. If you're just out of high school, you shouldn't bother the interviewer with your accomplishments in the second grade—no matter how illustrious. On the other hand, if you're looking for a postretirement freelance photographer position with *National Geographic*, you probably want to emphasize what's important in your past, even if it happened thirty years ago.

Cover what's important to you and to the job for which you are applying. If your job experience only goes back three years, don't include ten years' worth of history that has nothing to do with the position for which you're interviewing (unless basic skills acquired in that period deserve attention). Some interviewers of young applicants may be interested in accomplishments, memberships, and extracurricular activities in high school, but it's wise for most working professionals to leave off such information.

Personal Information?

Many job seekers end a résumé with personal information such as marital status, number of children, and hobbies. Including such information on a résumé depends on the kind of job for which you are applying. Personally, I never include my preference for using a French foil over an épée in fencing.

A manager may want to hire a married person with children because of the perceived stability, while the director of a holistic medicine institution may like to see that the applicant enjoys reading Andrew Weil's tomes. But I'm guessing that these

facts will have a minimal influence on the selection process. You may do well to save this space in your résumé for information more applicable to the job.

Attachments/Addendums

This technique is the most effective way to include important information in your résumé while keeping the body of the text short. You can include your references in an attachment, along with information you deem pertinent to the particular position. For example, if you are applying for a writing or editing job, you may want to include an attachment listing all the books and articles you've written, contributed to, or reviewed for publication. A list of professional organizations or affiliations may be a good addendum if you are interviewing for a position that requires knowledge of society or association startup, development, or management.

How you present such information is up to you. You can mention the information where appropriate, then note that more detail is available on request. Or you can make the same mention and include the attachment with the résumé submission. I've always liked the idea of including references with the initial submission, as the names you present could influence the level of consideration you get from the employer.

If you decide to include attachments, either with the initial submission or on request, you'll probably want to use section breaks to separate them. This way you can change the headers and begin each new attachment as page 1.

If you are called in for an interview and are offered a job, you may be asked to complete an employment application on the spot. If you have a copy of your résumé with you, you will have readily available all the contact information for your references, which will be asked for in the application.

Different Versions of a Résumé

This practice can be dangerous, but if you like living on the wild side it can be quite effective. If you have ten or twenty years of experience in a number of disciplines, you may find yourself applying for numerous jobs in a variety of vocations throughout your career. You may find that

you have developed half a dozen different résumés tailored to different jobs. If you tire of a) trying to find the right résumé for each position, b) modifying your basic document yet again for a particular job, or c) having to modify every version of your résumé for each change, you may want to use what I call the "epic résumé"—an expansive version, the length of which is limited only by your willingness to write. I've seen résumés as long as fourteen pages, and they were quite effective.

Single Sourcing

Scary as it may sound to any manager reading this article, a fourteen-page résumé template can actually work quite well. You can include everything from your educational background and professional experience to freelance activities that carry weight in any field. You then can modify your résumé (usually by judiciously removing information) to include only data important to a particular position. Just be careful that, if you do add anything, you proof it thoroughly.

The beauty of this method is that you have only one résumé to contend with, so when it's time to update it, you have to update only one file. You can save the modified version under a different name to preserve the integrity of your template. This way you'll also have something to look at during a phone interview, and you can see at a glance what you submitted. It's not necessary to lug your entire fourteen-page résumé template into an interview when you submitted only four pages.

Whether you opt for the giant, economy-sized résumé or the traditional one-page format, your "user documentation" should demonstrate your ability to communicate. You shouldn't neglect to make it user-friendly, just as you shouldn't neglect to smile when you go in for that interview. **i**

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