

PREPARING RESUMES AND WRITING COVER LETTERS

I. UNDERSTAND THE POSITION

The Job Requirements

In order to target your resume and cover letters, it is critical that you invest some time in understanding requirements of the position.

Benefits

Two critical benefits of better job understanding include:

- Time savings and reduced frustration that results from applying for jobs not suited to your strengths and aspirations.
- Improved ability to position yourself to meet the needs of the hiring manager.

How to Better Understand the Position

Analyze the Vacancy Announcement

- What are the responsibilities, competencies and skills required?

Ask yourself:

- Do I meet the minimum qualifications?
- Do I have the skills, abilities or competencies for the position?
- Do I have a thorough understanding of the job mandate specifications and the experience required?
- Why am *I really* interested in the position?
- Am I interested in the job for the *right* reasons?
- What do I know about the Department or Unit?
- Does it make sense for me to apply now?
- Does it fit in with my future career goals?

What is the Hiring Manager looking for?

- Use your networking skills to ask/discuss what is critical for this position
- Ask/call the Hiring Manager to obtain further information.

Do an analysis of the position against your qualifications:

- This analysis will help you focus your application package, including your covering letter and resume, as well as help you prepare for a potential job interview;

This analysis can also:

- Highlight the strengths you have for the position, as well as identify any gaps for future development.

II. PREPARING THE RESUME

Section 1: Profile Statement

Put simply, the profile statement is your introduction. It describes the primary value you can offer to the organization through the answers to two questions:

1. Who you are
2. What are your key skills and strengths

The purpose is to give prospective hiring managers a quick, high-level, idea of who you are (professionally!) and what you can do for them.

Sample Profile Statements:

Experienced professional with key strengths in facilities management and team leadership. Accomplishments in volunteer coordination, training, and procurement. Motivated, analytical thinker with effective communication skills.

A motivated, energetic and outgoing individual with strengths in training, counseling and team management. Focused on bottom-line, well-organized and action-oriented problem solver who thrives on innovative challenges. Excellent interpersonal skills in a variety of working environments, including public service and research organizations.

In the past, resumes usually included an objective statement at the beginning. It was a way of summarizing the type of position you are seeking. The advantage of a profile statement over an objective statement is that it gives the opportunity to position yourself for the job more precisely. Put it this way: if you had 20 seconds with the director of the unit or department where you were applying,

would you spend it telling him/her what you want, or would you try to highlight your skills and experience? Think of your profile statement, then, as those 20 seconds with the director.

Section 2: Career History and Accomplishments

This section is the main body of your resume, demonstrating how you used your skills to achieve results and make positive contributions. Use the Skills Assessment to build key skills phrases and outline your accomplishments.

The two styles that are discussed most often are the chronological format functional format. Both have their own advantage and disadvantages when it comes to presenting your information. A third style, the combination, is a compromise between the two and has become more popular in recent years.

First here is an overview of the three formats. Then, on the next three pages, you can find abridged samples of the three formats.

Chronological

This is the most common resume style, and generally the easiest to write. In the chronological format, the emphasis is placed on employment experience. The applicant's job history is presented in reverse chronological order, with the most recent jobs placed at the top of the list.

Functional

In this non-linear format your skills and achievements are emphasized. Your employment history is summarized or avoided all together. Your skills and previous relevant experience (including educational experience) are presented at the beginning of your resume. They are organized so the employer can see how your skills relate to the job position you are applying for. It may take more effort to write a functional resume, but you are free to highlight your talents instead of your recent job experience.

Combination

The combination resume is simply a functional resume with a brief employment history added. Skills and accomplishments are still listed first; the employment history follows. You need to reveal where you worked, when you worked, and what your job position was. While most employers might still prefer a chronological resume, this is a good alternative to the functional resume.

Section 3: Education

This section is used to profile and highlight your education in terms of completed degrees, diplomas, certificates, or any of the above that are still in progress. Also include any evening programs that you are enrolled in. In other words, you are answering the primary question:

What academic qualifications do you have that are related to the position?

Section 4: Professional and Personal Development

This section is used to highlight any courses, workshops or seminars you have successfully completed to upgrade your skills and knowledge that are relevant to your career. In other words, you are answering the question:

What have you done lately to improve and expand your skill set?

III. WRITING THE COVER LETTER

A cover letter is a personal introduction that accompanies your resume; as such, it should augment your resume in a more personal manner. As a rule, the more personal your cover letter is, the better.

Think of your cover letter as an opportunity to distinguish yourself from other job seekers, by highlighting what makes you a unique applicant. Your cover letter also plays a critical role in creating a hiring manager's sense of you as a person. Use the cover letter to convey more fully who you are than your resume. Go into detail about your background instead of reiterating information on your resume. Remember, your cover letter provides a sample of your writing to a perspective employer.

Your cover letter should be kept to one page, personalized to an individual whenever possible, including his or her title (avoid "To whom it may concern," if possible), and always for a specific organization.

Your introduction should indicate how you came to apply for the position such as:

- Responding to a posting
- Referred by Jane Smith in Department Y.

Next, summarize your qualifications related to the position for which you are applying. It is important to address: your qualifications as they relate to the requirements of the position, if known, such as with an advertised position. Amplify or augment information contained in your resume, do not merely

repeat it. Include a few strengths or personal qualities related to the type of position you are pursuing.

End with an action appropriate to the contact. For example, if you are responding to an unadvertised position, indicate you will follow up in a few days. If you are responding to an advertised position, indicate you are looking forward to the opportunity to meet or talk further. If it is an advertised position you should still follow up in a few days unless instructed not to, however, it may be better not to state this in your letter.

It is important to balance the tone of your cover letter. You want to be professional, cautiously assertive, but not presumptuous or overconfident. Additionally, while a resume does not conform to standard writing styles, e.g., using personal pronouns, articles, and complete sentences with periods, a cover letter does!

Sample Cover Letter

<<Your Name>>

January 1, 2002

«Hiring Manager's Name»

«Department.

Address»

RE: «Position»

Dear Mr/Ms. «Hiring Manager's Name»,

I have spoken with Margaret Birk, with whom I once served on a CASE commission, regarding this opening, and she has urged me to apply. Please find enclosed my application and supporting documentation for your consideration regarding the «above opportunity».

I have a variety of skills that are ideally matched to the qualifications you are looking for. My key strengths are (list two or three key competencies related to the position requirements). In addition, my excellent interpersonal and conflict management skills have played a key role in providing outstanding levels of support.

My background and training, my xx years in public service administration, and my overall career in social services are also essential attributes I would bring to your organization.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss how my experience and skills can be of value.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Your name

/Enclosures

Cover Letter Writing Expert Advice

- Personalize the letter
- Be natural (avoid clichés)
- Be specific and get to the point
- Be positive
- Be confident but not arrogant.
- Be polite and professional.
- Be efficient
- Proofread
- Sign it, if possible
- Package it nicely
- Keep a copy for yourself

IV. RESUME TIPS

Avoid *I* and *My*

Because your resume is about you to begin with, you don't need to write the words *I* and *my*. Doing so for every statement is repetitious and clutters your resume with unnecessary words. Most recipients scan resumes in under 60 seconds before reading them.

One of the tricks is not really a trick at all, but a simple omission. Just leave out the words *I* and *my*. Some people might have a problem with this, because from grade school through college, we are taught to write complete sentences. But it is perfectly acceptable to construct your resume with incomplete sentences. In fact, it is the preferred method, which makes it relatively easy to avoid words *I* and *my*.

Keep it Concise

Employers have lots to do, so don't make the mistake of asking them to read through an unnecessarily long resume. A long, wordy resume will put off someone who is already short on time. Resumes should be one page if possible, and two if absolutely necessary to describe relevant work experience. A two-page resume is no advantage if it's full of information that isn't reasonably applicable to the position you're applying for. Use the space only if you need it to fully disclose your accomplishment.

Make Your Words Count

Your use of language is extremely important; you need to sell yourself to an employer quickly and efficiently. Address your potential employer's needs with clearly written, powerful phrases.

- Avoid large paragraphs (over six or seven lines) Resumes are often scanned by hiring managers. If you provide small, digestible pieces of information you stand a better chance of having your resume actually read.
- Use "action verbs" (see list at end of this section)
- Avoid passive constructions, such as "was responsible for managing." It is not only more efficient to say "Managed," it is stronger and more active

Make the Most of your Experience

Potential employers need to know what you have accomplished to have an idea of what you can do for them.

- Don't be vague. Describe things that can be measured objectively. Employers will feel more comfortable hiring you if they can verify your accomplishments.
- Be honest. There is a difference between making the most of your experience and exaggerating or falsifying it.

Don't Neglect Appearance

Your resume is the first impression you will make on a potential employer, and a successful resume depends on more than what you say.

- Check your resume for proper grammar and correct spelling- evidence of good communication skills and attention to detail.
- Make your resume easy on the eyes. Use normal margins (1” on the top and bottom 1.25” on the sides) and don’t cram your text onto the page. Allow for some breathing room between the different sections.
- Avoid unusual or exotic font styles; use simple fonts with a professional look.
- Label your resume sections clearly.

Target. Target. Target.

Emphasize what you can do for an employer. Be specific. If you are going after more than one job opening, customize your resume accordingly. It helps to tailor your resume for a specific position. Remember to only include the experience that is relevant to the job.

Eliminate Superfluous Details

Unnecessary details can take up a lot of valuable space on your resume.

Action Verbs

Use action words to describe your experience and accomplishments. Here are some action words to use:

- | | | |
|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| • Achieved | • Drafted | • Originated |
| • Acquired | • Edited | • Oversaw |
| • Adapted | • Eliminated | • Performed |
| • Addressed | • Enforced | • Planned |
| • Administered | • Established | • Prevented |
| • Analyzed | • Evaluated | • Produced |
| • Anticipated | • Expanded | • Programmed |
| • Assembled | • Explained | • Promoted |
| • Assisted | • Forecasted | • Provided |
| • Audited | • Formed | • Publicized |
| • Budgeted | • Founded | • Recruited |
| • Calculated | • Generated | • Reorganized |
| • Centralized | • Guided | • Reported |
| • Changed | • Hired | • Researched |
| • Collaborated | • Implemented | • Resolved |
| • Composed | • Improved | • Reviewed |
| • Condensed | • Informed | • Selected |
| • Conducted | • Insured | • Separated |

- Constructed
- Contracted
- Converted
- Coordinated
- Created
- Cultivated
- Demonstrated
- Designed
- Developed
- Devised
- Discovered
- Doubled
- Interpreted
- Interviewed
- Launched
- Maintained
- Managed
- Marketed
- Minimized
- Motivated
- Negotiated
- Obtained
- Operated
- Organized
- Set up
- Simplified
- Solved
- Surveyed
- Staffed
- Supervised
- Taught
- Tested
- Trained
- Used

V. THE ELECTRONIC RESUME

An electronic resume is simply your resume in a format that can be sent over e-mail or in the internet. The advantage to having an electronic resume is simple – you can respond via e-mail or the web to job openings posted all over the world.

If your resume is saved on a computer or floppy diskette, you already have it in electronic format; that is not to say, however, that it is in the most *useful* format. While it is true that most e-mail systems can accommodate document attachments—be they in Word, Word Perfect or otherwise—it won't be true that every person or organization to whom you would like to send such a document is to receive it in that format. Plain text files (also called ASCII or MS-DOS Text and recognized by its three letter file extension:.txt) however, are universally accessible and, in many cases, required.

To make your electronic resume universally accessible, follow these steps:

- Using a standard word processing application, compose a resume as you normally would. Note that plain text format is very basic—it does not recognize formatting such as bullets, bold-face or italics. Consider using asterisks (*), plus symbols (+) and capital letters to achieve similar effects. In any case, make sure your resume is legible in absence of these formatting features.
- If the word processing application permits, set your margin at 0 and 65 characters. (This means that your longest line, including spaces, exceeds 65 characters before wrapping to a new line.) This makes you resume easier to read and, just as importantly safe to print.
- Using the "Save" command (or, if you are converting a document from

another format, the “Save As...” command), save your document as an ASCII or MA-DOS Text document. Remember to append the proper extension on to the file name, e.g. “resume.text” or in Word “resume.doc”