

Tips for a Better Resume

Remember the Goal

The purpose of your cover letter and resume is to get you an interview. It is important that you think critically about the position for which you are applying and shape your resume to fit the needs of that position. Remember that you will be competing with other seasoned practitioners, and you need to ensure that your resume includes all the key components that will appeal to the search committee and hiring authority (specific details on responsibilities and accomplishments, professional association involvement, campus committees and leadership roles, publications and presentations, etc.)

The Concept of Real Estate

While your resume can be several pages long (the one-page rule only applies to entry-level professionals), be sure to keep the most important and impressive information on the first one or two pages. Almost everyone who reads a resume is guilty of paying the most attention to the first few pages. Most committee members will want to quickly know that you meet minimum academic qualifications, so list those first. If there are key elements of past work responsibilities that are applicable to the job but are listed deeper in your resume (service on a university strategic planning committee, as an example), look for ways to move those elements to the fore.

Chronological vs. Functional vs. the “Combo”

It’s been our experience that committee members prefer chronological resumes, as they are interested in what candidates have been doing recently and how career responsibilities have progressed. Functional resumes also have the tendency to feel like a flood of information organized under general headings with no context for the reader.

Describe Your Institution

There are too many institutions for all of us to be familiar with every single one. Give your readers some scope by providing a brief statement describing your institution. Consider providing data such as the number of students, the number of majors and type of degrees offered, the location (urban vs. rural), institution type (private, public, research, liberal arts, AAU, HBCU, comprehensive, etc.), Carnegie classification, residential vs. commuter, etc.

Responsibilities vs. Accomplishments

Be sure you understand the difference between these two concepts. A responsibility is something that can be taken almost directly from your position description—it stays with you throughout your time in the position. An accomplishment is, by definition, something completed successfully—usually a concrete project or measurable assignment. Hiring authorities will have multiple candidates with similar responsibilities, and they often look for candidates who can demonstrate leadership skills in strategic planning, program development, and the ability to manage organizational change—accomplishments that go beyond day-to-day management responsibilities. Virtually every resume can be improved by listing key accomplishments in addition to major responsibilities.

Impressive Statistics

Quantify, quantify, quantify. Indicate the size of your staff (professional, administrative, union/classified, graduate/student), the size of your budget (and if you manage multiple revenue streams), and other position-specific statistics that will provide scope to the review committee. Please do not just indicate that you increased retention, or increased the size of the first year class, or increased learning outcomes—indicate *by how much* you increased them.

“We Want Someone Just Like Us!”

Remember that many hiring authorities and search committees are hoping to hire someone to whom they can relate, e.g., someone with the same credentials as the incumbent, someone from an institution similar to their own, etc. One way to address this issue is to draw connections in all your communications (cover letter, resume, interviews, etc.) between your background and experience and that of the people with whom you interact during the search process.

Be Aware of Layout and Design

Stay away from using capital letters, boldface, and underline type all together. Avoid justifying your text to the right margin—you will end up with odd “rivers” of space flowing through the document. Select a margin that is at least one inch all around so that the content is easily readable in MS Word and PDF. Sometimes, when documents are created in MS Word and then converted to PDF content outside a one inch margin will not be visible. Be consistent in tense and punctuation, and think about appropriate font size. While your skills, knowledge, and experience are key factors in the minds of the search committee, the overall presentation of your resume will enhance or detract from your candidacy. If resumes are confusing or unprofessionally presented, they will end up in the “no” pile.

Refer to Dictionaries and Style Guides

The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th Edition, is a great style guide, but there are others. Be especially careful to check if certain words are hyphenated; for example, micromanage (not hyphenated) and high-quality work (hyphenated). Pay particular attention to how you cite your publications, presentations, and research.

Do Not Include Information Unrelated to the Job

You may be a Renaissance person who does sculpting, has completed an Ironman Triathlon, coaches the youth swim team, and sings in the choir, but if volunteer activities do not pertain to the job, they become a distraction. Further, it is critical that you do not include any personal information in your resume that encroaches on the territory of protected information (age, marital/family status, etc.).

Have at Least One Person Proofread for You!

Our own eyes cannot catch every comma, misspelling, and grammatical error. Rely on others for a final review.