

The 10-Step Resume Fundamentals Checklist

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Whether going through the university admissions process, pursuing a scholarship or internship, or applying for a part-time job, you will need a solid resume. Your challenge, however, is to write yours so that it will catch the reader's attention.

Decision makers who read resumes don't have much time, and their first review of your resume lasts only 15 to 30 seconds, a minute at most. With that in mind, it is critical that your resume—your “paper handshake”—makes a positive first impression and motivates the reader to put your resume and other materials in the “yes” pile and possibly move you forward in the application process.

Before you submit your resume, you will want to ensure it incorporates the basic characteristics of a compelling, performance-oriented resume. When evaluating your self-written resume, you can follow the same basic steps as professional resume writers. This will increase the chances not only of getting it into that “yes” pile, but also of helping it rise to the top of the stack.

☑ Step 1: Ask yourself, “Is my resume in the correct format to best showcase my background?”

Is your resume the appropriate length, format, and formality for your purposes?

Length: If you are in high school, or are presently in college, one page may suffice. However, don't be afraid to go with two pages, particularly if you have significant work, internship, volunteer, or school project experience under your belt. For someone with five or more years of real-world working experience, a resume will typically be one to two pages.

Format: There are three common types of resumes: *chronological*, *functional*, and *combination*. A *chronological* resume calls attention to your background in reverse chronological order. It is most effective when your work, volunteer, or internship listings are notable (position titles and/or company names) and are directly relevant to your resume's purpose.

A *functional* resume de-emphasizes positions, job descriptions, and dates. It usually organizes qualifications by related skills or experience. Job seekers who have gaps in employment or who are making a career change commonly use *functional* resumes. But, think carefully before using this format because feedback from decision makers suggests that they don't like them—they know that *functional* resumes can be used to minimize, or even hide, flaws and inconsistencies in your background.

A typical *combination* resume is just that—a blend of the other two formats. It begins with a powerful Qualifications Summary or Professional Profile that clearly communicates your functional skills and summarizes your relevant background. This helps keep your resume focused toward particular schools, scholarships, positions, or industries, and it provides a platform to communicate your best qualifications. A reverse chronological listing of work and other experience follows. This should include responsibilities and, more importantly, relevant accomplishments. The *combination* format is a popular choice among professional resume writers as it is particularly effective in selling their clients to employers.

A fourth type of resume, which won't be discussed at length here, is the *Curriculum Vita*. A “CV” is a conservatively written and designed document that emphasizes educational credentials, academic research and projects, publications, presentations, awards, and honors. This format is typically used in scholastic, medical, and scientific fields.

Formality: A good rule of thumb is to write using the same level of language that you would be expected to use at the school or organization to which you are applying. A resume for university admissions, scholarships, internships, and entry-level employment can include brief sentences. In the future, when you reach management or executive positions, your resume will be more narrative—to draw a complete picture of your career successes and contributions.

☑ Step 2: Ask yourself, “Is my resume visually appealing and easy to read?”

Have you selected appropriate font types and sizes for your resume? Depending on the font choice, the size should fall somewhere between 9 and 11 point, 12 point at most. Section headings can be larger, of course. There are no rules for font choice, but generally *sans serif* fonts (such as Arial, Verdana, or Helvetica) are more common on entry-level resumes. The higher your level of responsibility, the more likely it is that you will use a *serif* font (such as Times New Roman, Garamond, or Palatino). It is acceptable to combine fonts, but never more than two (for example, Times for the section titles and Arial for the content).

Does your resume contain sufficient white space? Your challenge is to draw the reader’s attention to essential information. Using white space effectively can help you do just that. You’ll need to become familiar with some features of your word processing software that you might not normally access (such as the paragraph, line-spacing, and tab settings).

Does your resume implement appropriate design elements? Conservative use of lines, bolding, italics, and bullets can be very effective. When used consistently, they will help the reader along in your thought process and crystallize the organization of your resume.

For great ideas on contemporary formats, check out one or more of the recently released resume resource books at your local bookstore. One of the best out there is *Resume Magic—Trade Secrets of a Professional Resume Writer* by Susan Britton Whitcomb (JIST Works). And one of my industry colleagues, Louise Kursmark, has written a wonderful book entitled *Best Resumes for College Students And New Grads: Jump-Start Your Career!* Even if you are not yet in college, these are great resources to stimulate your imagination!

☑ Step 3: Ask yourself, “Does my resume contain a powerful opening section that draws the reader in?”

Is the most relevant information you want to communicate showcased in a powerful Qualifications Summary or Professional Profile in the top 1/3 of your resume? At a minimum, you’ll want to include your total years of work, volunteer, or school project experience and highlight relevant hard and soft skills. Keep in mind that the rest of your resume must support what you include in this section.

Is your resume focused? If it is for admission to a university, make that clear. If it is for an internship, does it communicate either the position (or type of position) for which you are applying, industry expertise, or future career target?

☑ Step 4: If the purpose of your resume is to find a part-time job, ask yourself, “Does my resume effectively communicate my value in one or more of the following ways?”

Does your resume demonstrate how you can help an employer make money? Save money or time? Solve a specific problem? Make work easier? Build relationships? Be more competitive? Attract new customers? Retain existing customers?

These are things that all organizations want their employees to help them do. Communicate your abilities to contribute in one or more of the areas mentioned and companies will want to talk with you.

If your resume is for college admission, you can think about your value as it relates to the particular school’s vision, mission, objectives, and goals. What makes you unique? How does your past performance show that you will perform and contribute in college academically and in extracurricular activities? How can you show that your value supports your career aspirations?

Schools will also be more interested than companies in your personal vision, goals, and objectives.

☑ Step 5: Ask yourself, “Does my resume contain powerful, concise, accomplishment-oriented writing designed to increase the reader’s interest and move me forward in the application process?”

Is your entire resume targeted? Does it support your application? Does it speak the reader’s language with relevant keywords? Did you use persuasive, high-impact statements that sell your qualifications as a potential student, scholarship recipient, or internship candidate?

Does your resume include specific accomplishments that highlight challenges, action taken, and results (quantifiable, if possible)? Most importantly, do the accomplishments support your target? In other words, do they represent *observable behaviors* that are associated with the best in your school or in the position for which you are applying?

☑ Step 6: Ask yourself, “Is irrelevant information excluded?”

There is no need to include any of the following: personal information (e.g. marital status and age), full address of employers (city and state is sufficient), personal pronouns (“I”, “He” or “She”), reasons for leaving jobs, reference information, and unrelated hobbies or interests.

However, if your resume is for university admissions or scholarship applications, readers will probably welcome information about personal interests and hobbies.

☑ Step 7: Ask yourself, “Does my resume present relevant content in an organized fashion?”

Are employment dates, if any, presented appropriately? There is no need to get specific—months and years are sufficient in most cases.

Did you include more than one source of contact information? At a minimum, list your home address, home phone number, and personal e-mail address. Listing your cell phone number is also OK.

Is your experience arranged in reverse chronological order? Does your resume make clear what were responsibilities and what were accomplishments?

☑ Step 8: Ask yourself, “Is my resume free of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammatical, and syntax errors?”

Feedback from decision makers is unanimous—a resume with errors is likely to end up in the “no” pile. They assume that your real-world performance will be sloppy and that you don’t pay attention to details. So, proofread your resume. Ask a friend or teacher to proofread your resume. Ask your mother to proofread your resume.

☑ Step 9: Proofread again.

☑ Step 10: Proofread again!

As I mentioned in the introduction to his article, your resume is your “paper handshake.” It is a marketing document—not a simple work history—that must sell you. It tells colleges and universities how you will perform, contribute to, and represent the school. It tells scholarship committees why you deserve to be selected. It tells companies how you can contribute to their success.

As you review your self-written resume, ask yourself the questions outlined in this 10-Step Checklist. If you've covered everything, you are well on your way to getting decision makers interested in you.

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