In Search of Resume Writing Excellence

Say what you want to say with style and precision.

We've all been told to make ourselves memorable, to stand out from the crowd. But should this advice also be applied to the resumes we write? Yes, absolutely. Not only will you have more fun while writing a customized resume, but you will also achieve better results. You will be singled out by recruiters, make a great impression with employers at job fairs, and feel proud to present yourself on paper when responding to newspaper ads and Internet listings.

It's easier than you think to make your resume stand out. Employers rarely receive high quality resumes, even though mid-sized companies accumulate up to 200 of these documents each week. Typical resumes have not been proofread for basic spelling and grammar mistakes--and they include too much data or too little pertinent information. That's why most resumes are left unread, unacknowledged, and eventually discarded. If candidates can't take the time to construct a good piece of writing, then why should the employer waste valuable time considering their qualifications?

This leaves you with a great opportunity to gain a competitive edge in the job market by writing an error-free resume. Market your competencies in a clear and creative manner, summarize your experiences, and turn any opportunity into a bona fide offer. These three simple procedures will push your resume across the line from mediocrity into excellence.

1. Analyze Your Skills

First and foremost, distinguish yourself by examining what you have to offer. Do some soul searching and think about how your background relates to the skills, competencies, and qualifications that your target employers most want. Gather job-specific information by reading sample job descriptions and by interviewing others who already have these jobs. Now you are ready to develop "accomplishment statements" that match the job you really want.

Think about the self-analysis step in this way. As a student and a worker you have had countless opportunities to solve problems, utilize your favorite skills, and achieve results. Now is the time to recall and recount these experiences. Look at each job and/or school experience and prepare a list of your accomplishments. Accomplishments, by definition, are experiences that describe a situation that required your special attention. These were the action steps that you took to solve a problem--and the result you achieved. Write out these accomplishment "stories" in detail; then rewrite them so that they are concise enough for a resume, which should be limited to two pages or less. Begin each edited statement with a verb that reveals the specific skill that you want to emphasize. Consider these examples:

- "Launched and led a nationally-recognized corporate volunteer program, resulting in 17,000 employees contributing 95,000 hours of service on 900 projects in 21 sites throughout the United States." (From a MBA graduate seeking a position in Corporate Philanthropy.)
- "Organized and managed newly created school programs, including a school vacation camp and a parents' night out program. Both programs generated new revenue that was

used to strengthen student resources." (From a school program director seeking to develop curriculum for non-profit educational programs.)

- "Launched a product marketing campaign that resulted in $3 billion in sales over an 11-month period." (From a marketing professional who was changing industries.)

2. Showcase Your (Relevant) Accomplishments

Now you must position your qualifications in an effective, appealing, and professional way. To do this, you need to think outside of the resume style-and-format box. Resume writing guidebooks and articles mention two distinct types of resume formats: chronological and functional. Most employers prefer the chronological resume, because it emphasizes career progression and dates of employment. The functional resume emphasizes accomplishments and eliminates the details behind the job history. This may seem like the best option for most jobseekers--until they find out that employers are likely to disregard functional resumes. Why? Because companies always need to know your employment history facts.

In reality, you don't need to choose one format over the other. Instead, you can create your own resume format that integrates the best features of both styles. Experiment by organizing the pertinent and required information. Perhaps you might develop a summary or profile statement at the top of your resume, capturing in brief your distinctive characteristics. The resume could be structured in a typical chronological fashion, emphasizing real accomplishments at every past job. Or you could highlight the accomplishments that apply to your job target and include these at the beginning of the resume. Then balance the rest of your document with a chronological work history, including dates and job titles. In short, you should develop a personalized, comfortable format.

3. Create a Professional Visual Impression

Having settled content and style issues, you should now pay attention to the visual impact of the resume, especially if you are sending hard copies in the mail.

Graphic designers and professional resume writers advise you to settle on one font style. When using boldface type, be consistent and conservative. If you are not, the reader's eye will jump around, and the purpose of emphasizing one piece of information over others will be lost. Many experts recommend using boldface type for job titles and leaving the names of employers in plain type. Use upper case, or capitalization, in a consistent manner, always capitalizing your name and job titles.

Beyond a few graphic recommendations like these, feel free to experiment. If you are sending your resume electronically, then you need to keep it simple and match your stylistic additions to the field and industry that you are soliciting. And if you know that the resume will be scanned, ask the company if certain graphic limitations (boldface, bullet points, and so on) may apply.

Jobseeker, Know Thyself

You don't have to be a creative genius to write a memorable resume. Tricks and gimmicks usually don't work, because employers really want to know who their candidates are. Understanding and expressing your marketability, and presenting yourself in a professional and readable manner, will give you an extra edge.