

How to Write a Résumé That Stands Out

by Amy Gallo

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Summary. It can be hard to know how to make your resume stand out. Start by accepting that it's going to take some time and effort. Don't try to sit down and knock it out in an hour – you're carefully crafting a marketing document. Open strong with a summary of your expertise.... [more](#)

The resume: there are so many conflicting recommendations out there. Should you keep it to one page? Do you put a summary up top? Do you include personal interests and volunteer gigs? And how do you make it stand out, especially when you know the

hiring manager is receiving tons of applications? This may be your best chance to make a good first impression, so you've got to get it right.

What the Experts Say

"There's nothing quick or easy about crafting an effective resume," says Jane Heifetz, a resume expert and founder of Right Resumes. Don't think you're going to sit down and hammer it out in an hour. "You have to think carefully about what to say and how to say it so the hiring manager thinks, 'This person can do what I need done,'" she says. After all, it's more than a resume; "it's a marketing document," says John Lees, a UK-based career strategist and author of *Knockout CV*. It's not just hiring managers who are your ideal audience. You might also send it out to people in your network who can help make introductions. "In a tough market, your CV has to get you remembered and recommended," he says. Here's how to write a resume that will be sure to win attention.

FURTHER READING

How to Write a Cover Letter

Article by Amy Gallo

Focus on why you're right for the job and how badly you want it.

Customize it

First things first: Don't send the same resume to every job. "You can have a foundational resume that compellingly articulates the most important information," says Heifetz, but you have to alter it for each opportunity. Of

course, you may need to write the first version in a vacuum but for each subsequent one, you need context. Heifetz recommends, as a first step, you carefully read the job description and highlight the five or six most important responsibilities, as well as a few keywords that you can then use in your resume. This exercise should then inform what you write in your summary, and the experiences and accomplishments you include. Each version doesn't need to be radically different but you should "tweak it for

the position, the industry, etc.,” says Lees. He suggests you might change the sequence of the bullet points, for example, or switch up the language in your summary.

Yes, you do need a summary up top

The first 15-20 words of your resume are critically important “because that’s how long you usually have a hiring manager’s attention,” says Lees. Start with a brief summary of your expertise. You’ll have the opportunity to expand on your experience further down in your resume and in your cover letter. For now, keep it short. “It’s a very rich, very brief elevator pitch, that says who you are, why you’re qualified for the job, and why you’re the right person to hire,” says Heifetz. “You need to make it exquisitely clear in the summary that you have what it takes to get the job done.” It should consist of a descriptor or job title like, “Information security specialist who...” “It doesn’t matter if this is the exact job title you’ve held before or not,” says Lees. It should match what they’re looking for. Here are two examples:

Healthcare executive with over 25 years of experience leading providers of superior patient care.

Strategy and business development executive with substantial experience designing, leading, and implementing a broad range of corporate growth and realignment initiatives.

And be sure to avoid clichés like “highly motivated professional.” Using platitudes in your summary or anywhere else in the document is “basically like saying, ‘I’m not more valuable than anyone else,’” explains Lees. They are meaningless, obvious, and boring to read.

You may be tempted to skip this part of the resume, but don’t, advises Heifetz. If you’re struggling to write it, ask a friend, former colleague, or mentor what they would say if they were going to recommend you for a job, suggests Lees. And then use those

words. Or you can ask yourself what you'd want someone to say about you if they were making an introduction to the hiring manager.

Get the order right

If you're switching industries, don't launch into job experience that the hiring manager may not think is relevant. Heifetz suggests adding an accomplishments section right after your summary that makes the bridge between your experience and the job requirements. "These are main points you want to get across, the powerful stories you want to tell," she says. "It makes the reader sit up straight and say 'Holy cow, I want to talk to her. Not because of who she is but because of what's she's done.'" Here's a sample mid-career resume that does this well (source: John Lees, *Knockout CV*).

After the accomplishments section (if you add it), list your employment history and related experience. See below for exactly what to include. Then add any relevant education. Some people want to put their education up top. That might be appropriate in academia but for a business resume, you should highlight your work experience first and save your degrees and certifications for the end.

And that ever-popular "skills" section? Heifetz recommends skipping it all together. "If you haven't convinced me that you have those skills by the end of the resume, I'm not going to believe it now," she explains. If you have expertise with a specific type of software, for example, include it in the experience section. And if it's a drop-dead requirement for the job, also include it in the summary at the very top.

Don't worry too much about gaps

One of the questions that Lees and Heifetz get asked regularly is how to account for gaps in a resume, perhaps when you weren't working or took time off to care for a family member. If you were

doing something during that time that might be relevant to the job, you can include it. Or you might consider explaining the gap in your cover letter, as long as you have a brief, positive explanation. However, the good news is that in today's job market, hiring professionals are much more forgiving of gaps. In a recent survey, 87% of hiring managers said that they no longer see candidates being unemployed or having an employment gap as a red flag.

Be selective

It's tempting to list every job, accomplishment, volunteer assignment, skill, and degree you've ever had, but don't. "A resume is a very selective body of content. It's not meant to be comprehensive. If it doesn't contribute to convincing the hiring manager to talk to you, then take it out," says Heifetz. This applies to volunteer work as well. Only include it as part of your experience — right along with your paid jobs — if it's relevant.

So what about the fact that you raise angora rabbits and are an avid Civil War re-enactor? "Readers are quite tolerant of non-job related stuff but you have to watch your tone," says Lees. If you're applying for a job at a more informal company that emphasizes the importance of work-life balance, you might include a line about your hobbies and interests. For a more formal, buttoned-up place, you'll probably want to take out anything personal.

Share accomplishments, not responsibilities

"My rule of thumb is that 95% of what you talk about should be framed as accomplishments," suggests Heifetz. "I managed a team of 10" doesn't say much. You need to dig a level deeper. Did everyone on your team earn promotions? Did they exceed their targets? Lees agrees: "Give tangible, concrete examples. If you're able to attach percentages or dollar signs, people will pay even more attention." Here's a sample senior executive resume that

does this well (source: Jane Heifetz, Right Resumes). Of course, you can't and shouldn't quantify everything; you don't want your resume to read like an accounting report.

Highlighting your accomplishments is especially important in today's tight job market. If you've been working through the pandemic, talk about how you've helped your team adapt, for example. "If you helped a demoralized, fragmented team come together during this crisis by implementing new processes and norms for working from home, say so," explains Heifetz.

Make it readable

Lees says the days of needing a one-page resume are over: "It used to be that you used a tiny font size, fiddled with the margins, and crammed in the information to make it fit." Nowadays, two or three pages is fine, but that's the limit: "Any more than three and it shows that you can't edit." Heifetz agrees: "If you're going to tell a compelling story, you'll need more space." You can supplement what's on the page with links to your work but you have to "motivate the hiring manager to take the extra step required. Don't just include the URL. Tell them in a brief, one-line phrase what's so important about the work you're providing," she says.

And stick to the most common fonts and avoid fancy layouts that may not be recognized by online application systems. "It's not how fancy it is. It's how clear, clean, and elegant it is in its simplicity," says Heifetz. Vary the line length and avoid crammed text or paragraphs that look identical. The goal is to include enough white space so that a hiring manager wants to keep reading. For example, the opening summary could be three or four lines of text or two or three bullet points. "It just needs to be easy to read," says Heifetz.

Ask for help

It can be hard to be objective about your own experience and accomplishments. Many people overstate — or understate — their achievements or struggle to find the right words. Consider working with a resume writer, mentor, or a friend who can help you steer away from questions like, “Am I good enough for this position?” and focus on “Am I the right person for the job?” If you do ask a friend for feedback, be specific about what you want them to look out for. Asking a generic question, like “Does this look OK to you?” is most likely going to get you a generic response (“Looks fine to me!”). At a minimum, have someone else check for logic, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Align your LinkedIn profile

Your LinkedIn profile is just as important as your resume. You want to make sure you’re presenting yourself in the same way. But don’t just cut and paste from your resume. LinkedIn is a different beast altogether so you want to make the best use of the platform’s features. “You don’t have to use bullet points; you can be more narrative, and even more casual,” says Heifetz. You also want to tweak the tone. “There’s a greater expectation that you’ll demonstrate personality,” she adds. “For example, the summary section should be written in the first person. It gives you the opportunity to present yourself as a living, breathing human being.” Here’s my colleague, Christine Liu’s LinkedIn profile, after she got some help revamping it from a professional.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Create a new version of your resume for every opportunity
- Start with a short summary of who you are and why you’re the right person for the job
- Emphasize accomplishments over responsibilities

Don’t:

- Use clichés — explain what makes you a good candidate in concrete, specific words
- Cram text in or use a small font size — it has to be readable
- Cut and paste your resume into your LinkedIn profile

Advice in Practice

Case study #1: Tailor your resume to each job

When Glover Lawrence was searching for his next job several years ago, he started by dreaming up the ideal position. “I asked myself what attributes, roles, and responsibilities I wanted,” he explains. He even crafted a job description for that made-up role using snippets of actual postings he’d seen, then drafted a resume to fit it.

As a senior executive, he doubted he’d find work through public job listings. “It was going to happen through my network,” he says. So he also created a one-page version of his resume to use in networking meetings and to send to contacts who had offered to help him. It included a one-line summary, five notable accomplishments, a list of the companies he’d worked for and the titles he held at each, one line about his education, and then a brief “Career Focus” section that described the types of jobs he was seeking.

He also developed a longer, more traditional resume to use when he formally applied for a position. “I tailored it to the company based on where I was in the process, what I knew about the people there, and the company culture,” he says. “Having the right resume for each specific opportunity, as tedious as it was, was important to me.” For his LinkedIn profile, he created yet another version, presenting the same information but in a more conversational tone. Over his months-long search, Glover sent out over 50 resumes and met with over 100 people. His hard work paid off and he landed a job very similar to the one he’d dreamed about.

Case study #2: Get an outside perspective

Several months into her previous job, Claire Smith* realized that she needed a change. “The job, the industry, and the institution were not the right fit for me. It just wasn’t where I wanted to be in my career,” she explains. She started to look at job descriptions, honed in on positions or organizations that were interesting to her, then decided to work with a professional resume writer. “I tried to do a little changing and reshaping on my own at first but it didn’t feel all that different from where I began,” she says. Working with someone else helped her see that the resume was not about explaining what she’d done in her career but why she was the best person for a particular job.

Claire started with one resume and then tailored it to each position. “You have the same raw materials — the accomplishments, the skills, the results you achieved over time — but you have to pick and choose to shape those things into a different narrative,” Claire says. The summary, which on her resume consisted of three bullet points, was the element she tweaked the most. For example, when she applied to be an editor, the first bullet point read:

*Versatile **writer** and **editor** committed to speaking directly to readers’ needs.*

But when she applied for a marketing position, she tweaked it to emphasize her ability to recruit customers and be a brand champion:

*Innovative **brand champion** and **customer recruiter** in marketing, product development, and communications.*

Then, before launching into a chronological list of her jobs, she highlighted “selected accomplishments” related to each point in her summary. For example, under “writer and editor,” she included three achievements, including this one:


Based on customer data and email performance metrics, wrote new email series to provide prospective students with more targeted information about Simmons and to convert more of them to applicants. Improved performance over past emails producing average open rates of more than 20%.

Claire equates collaborating with a resume professional to working with a personal trainer. She felt challenged to keep rewriting and improving. And the hard work paid off. She recently landed a full-time job, which she starts next month.

**Not her real name*

Editor's note: The author updated this article, which was originally written in 2014, to reflect the latest advice from the experts and the reality of job-seeking during the pandemic.

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review, cohost of the Women at Work podcast, and the author of two books: *Getting Along: How to Work with Anyone (Even Difficult People)* and the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Watch her TEDx talk on conflict and follow her on Twitter.

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