

RESUME GROUND RULES: CONTENT, PHRASING, AND DESIGN

You can break a good resume down into three main factors. These are:

- **Content.** What is included on the resume and what is left out.
- **Phrasing.** The language used to describe the content.
- **Design.** Every part of the document's layout, from the order of sections to the font size.

These factors comprise a Holy Trinity of resume writing rules: None can be separated from the other two, and a good resume contains all three in perfect balance.

You might list some excellent accomplishments, but if they're described in too many words they'll be useless. Likewise, you might use some excellent language, but if it's clumped together in cramped, tiny bullets, no one will make the effort to read it.

We'll **start with content** and walk through everything that should be included on your resume, **then cover phrasing and design in the next chapter.**

HOW LONG SHOULD YOUR RESUME BE?

First, let's get something clear: **Your resume is not a book report. It's a sales pitch.**

The purpose of a resume is not to describe everything you've ever done in your career, no matter how long or accomplished it has been. It's to get your foot in the door and impress a recruiter enough to get you an interview with the hiring staff — *that's* when you can give a full history of yourself.

Your resume will not be **read** at first. It will be **skimmed**, for somewhere between six and twenty seconds by a recruiter whose first priority is to filter out the many unqualified candidates who applied.

That's why your resume just needs to give a *brief* overview of your most relevant qualifications for this particular job. There's no time to waste.

HOW TO LIST YOUR PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

—Include tangible accomplishments instead of general responsibilities.

“Provide evidence.” “Show your work.” Whether in history or math, this is one thing about job hunting that you actually did learn in school.

PSA: Brag on yourself!

This is no time for humility. Many job seekers are afraid of coming across as arrogant on their resumes.

“I didn’t really do that much work on the project...”

“It wasn’t even a big company...”

Silence that negative voice! As long as you stay honest and don’t overdo it with ridiculous language, you’ll sound confident rather than cocky.

A resume that just describes the basic day-to-day duties of your positions isn’t a resume at all. It’s, well, [a job description](#).

Your professional experience should focus on specific accomplishments. These will reference the **skills you used** and the **results you produced**, with **metrics wherever possible** (like dollar amounts, percentages, or numbers of people) to quantify your contributions.

You’ll show that you’re qualified by using direct evidence, not just general claims about your skills. Only briefly summarize your responsibilities if you need them for context or they’re not obvious from your job title.

—Definitely use bullet points.

Your experience looks best in concise, scannable bullet points. These will take up only one line, two at most. (*If you go over two, you need to either cut some details or filler words, rephrase some things, or split the accomplishment into sub-bullets.*)

To show off your accomplishments, use this time-tested formula to write out your bullets:

- **Active Verb + What You Did + How You Did It + So What?**

Let’s break this down piece-by-piece:

Active verbs like “led,” “collaborated,” or “created” are necessary to keep your language exciting, easy to read, and focused on the accomplishment. (Pop over to [Chapter 2](#) for plenty of examples of good active verbs.)

Use a readable font and font size

You don't have to get cute with your font – it's not going to score you any bonus points, and it could actually get your resume tossed. Just choose a font that's readable and standard across computer operating systems.

Some Serif fonts can look professional, but keep in mind that Sans Serif fonts are typically easier to read on a computer screen.

(Papyrus has been canceled. Sorry, guys, I know it's a big shock.)

Some beautiful fonts are not native to Microsoft Word, or they've only been added in the newer versions. If you submit your resume as a Word doc (*which you might want to do instead of a PDF – we'll discuss this in the next section*) and a recruiter has a version of Word that doesn't have your font, your formatting will be ruined!

Here are some elegant platform-standard fonts we recommend:

Sans Serif

Calibri

Arial

Verdana

Tahoma

Serif

Cambria

Georgia

Palatino

Plain ol' Times New Roman

Your font size needs to be small enough to conserve space but large enough to be easily readable. Every font is different, **but the readable range is typically 10 – 12 pt for your body content.**

Your section headers (“Education”, “Professional Experience”), however, should be **slightly larger than your body text**, usually at 12 - 14 pt, and **your name in the header should be the largest text on your resume.**

If you're not sure about the font size you selected, print your resume out and have someone else try to read it!

How does an ATS work?

There are many applicant tracking systems out there, but their essential function is the same. Basically, think of an ATS kind of like a search engine.

It collects and parses the text from all of the resumes and application forms that have been submitted, then organizes and filters them so they become searchable for the recruiter.

Just like Google parses data from websites to show you only Mexican restaurants when you search “mexican restaurant,” an ATS collects data from applications to show recruiters qualified Software Engineer candidates when they search “software engineer.”

But you wouldn’t just search “mexican restaurant” right? You’d want to use keywords like “5 stars,” “near me,” “cheap,” or “enchiladas” to save time finding exactly what you want.

In just the same way, ATS’s also let recruiters use keywords to search for only candidates who have experience in the key qualifications for the job, such as “Javascript,” “AWS,” or “Certified Scrum Master.” They can also only view candidates who have the minimum years of experience or live in the location they want to source from (all of which will be prominently featured in the job posting.)

So, this means when you apply online, you have to make sure the ATS can properly parse your resume and that it includes keywords from the job description. **If you don’t, your application is less likely to come up in a recruiter’s search results!**

Does this mean an automated program decides whether I’m hired?!

No! The concept of ATS can be scary, but please don’t let this freak you out. It’s important to understand that an ATS does not actually make hiring decisions. A human is still evaluating the resumes that they choose to (which may still be most or all of them), a human is still passing their top choice resumes onto the hiring manager, and a human still is calling the top candidates in for an interview.

An ATS is a **tool that’s used by a recruiter, not a replacement for the recruiter.**

It’s true that some ATS have advanced features like “knock-out” questions or assigning your application a percentage of how much you fit the job description. But a recruiter who wants to find the right candidate is still in control of how those features are used.

A cover letter kills any potential red flags.

Let's say you're coming off a career gap because you were a new parent, you had a long-term illness, or your last job was very short because of a toxic work environment. These are all perfectly fine reasons, but you probably want to explain them further than what you can list on your resume. "If only I could tell them about this in person," you think.

Your cover letter is a prime opportunity to describe those in the detail you don't have room for on your resume. It may not be an in-person interaction, but it gives you more space and full sentences to lay out those situations in your own voice.

PSA: How to Explain a Layoff in Your Cover Letter

So you were laid off — it happens! It's important to remember that this doesn't kill your chances at another job, especially if you were laid off due to COVID-19. (You're one of millions of applicants in the same boat!)

You may not need to address the layoff at all, but if it was not due to your performance, then you may want to explain the circumstances in your cover letter. Use these tips to do so carefully and tactfully without under-selling yourself:

- 1) Make it short**
- 2) Make it positive**
- 3) Make it forward-looking**
- 4) Don't dwell on it**

Mention the layoff briefly and early in a separate paragraph in your cover letter. Demonstrate that you were doing a great job up until that point (which will also be clear with your specific stories in the next paragraphs).

Then, just move on. Don't highlight the layoff any more than you have to. Simply answer the question "what happened?" and let it be. Here's an example for a hypothetical client in the service industry:

"Recently, Landry's Inc. announced a round of layoffs due to the COVID-19 crisis, and my position was eliminated. I was consistently rated as a top performer at my restaurant, and I plan on delivering that same level of service in my next position."

HOW TO USE LINKEDIN TO FIND A JOB

Growing your network

First, let's talk about building a network of virtual connections. Should you add everyone you know as a connection? Or just people who might have a job for you? And should you accept all those random people who request to be in your network?

Nope, nope, and nope. When it comes to adding or accepting LinkedIn connections, here's the biggest thing to remember: **ask yourself, "what can this person do for me, and what can I do for them?"**

Our partner Tom Powner of Career Thinker [spoke about this on our podcast](#), emphasizing that *having a lot of connections doesn't matter as much as having meaningful ones*.

So how do you find meaningful connections on LinkedIn? Tom has some tips for that.

—Search for fellow alumni.

Networking with someone is easiest when you have something in common with them. One of the easiest and most powerful of those commonalities to look for is attending the same school.

Whether you Hooked 'Em, Giggled 'Em, Forked 'Em, or Rolled Tide, search for a LinkedIn alumni group for your school or add people you encounter who went to the school. Getting a connection request from a fellow alumnus can be meaningful, even if they graduated ten years before you. (Tom even compares it to a "virtual hug.")

—Target people who have the position titles you want.

People who do what you want to do can certainly be relevant connections. Start with a simple search of the job title you've been considering — let's say "Digital Marketing Associate". Then choose some qualifiers to find people relevant to you, such as your geographic area or industry (e.g., Digital Marketing Associates in Austin, or in Healthcare).

—**Reach out to your target companies.** Remember those target companies we told you to research back in the introduction? Time to be even more of a stalker with them!