How to write an ATS resume

If you want to make sure your resume is compliant with an ATS, follow the tips below to write and use an ATS-optimized resume.
Select the right file type for your resume: PDF vs Word

Contrary to popular belief, a PDF is not the most ATS-friendly file type. While PDF files are the best at preserving the design and format of your resume template, it's not compatible with all ATS software. If you're asked to upload your resume to an applicant tracking system and “PDF” is listed among the file formats you can use, feel free to send a PDF version of your resume. However, if the system does not specify which file types are compatible, play it safe and stick to a Word document in .doc or .docx.

While plain-text files are incredibly ATS-friendly, they limit your formatting options and can look unprofessional. Since your resume has to get past the ATS and impress a live human, it's best to stick to using a Word document for aesthetics's sake.

Don't put important details in the header or footer

Not all applicant tracking systems are able to properly read and parse information stored in the header and footer sections of a Word document. In fact, our study confirmed the ATS was unable to identify a portion of the job seeker's contact information 25% of the time. Avoid this same fate by placing important contact details (such as your name, phone number, and email address) outside the header or footer of your resume.
Optimize your resume with keywords

One of the best ways to ensure your resume is compatible with an ATS is to optimize your resume with the right keywords (also known as keyword optimization). Unlike a “buzzword,” which is typically considered to be a fluffy term such as “proactive” or “self-starter,” keywords represent the soft skills and hard skills you possess and the expertise you've acquired over the years that qualify you for your target job.

If you're unsure which resume keywords should be used, follow these steps:

Collect three to five job descriptions that represent the type of position you're pursuing

Copy and paste the job description into a free word and phrase frequency tool like Online-Utility.org's Text Analyzer to identify the terms that are regularly used in each

Incorporate those terms into your resume

Don't forget to match up your skills, experience, and education to the qualifications of the roles

When it comes to creating an ATS-optimized resume, you need to think about the frequency, as well as the placement of these relevant keywords throughout your resume. Some applicant tracking systems will determine the strength of your skills based on the number of

times a term shows up in your resume (aim to add the term two to three times throughout your resume), whereas others assign an estimated amount of experience for a particular skill based on its placement within the resume. To make your resume truly compatible with any ATS, you'll want to optimize it with both systems in mind.

Create a “Core Competencies” or “Areas of Expertise” section below your resume professional summary that lists your strongest hard skills and soft skills.

If there's a common abbreviation for one of your proficiencies, such as “SEO” (for search engine optimization), include both versions in your resume.

Then, pepper these same terms into your “Work Experience” or “Education” sections, where appropriate, to demonstrate when you leveraged that skill.

Some applicant tracking systems will associate the length of experience for a skill based on how long you held the job where that skill was leveraged. For instance,

If you worked at your past job for five years and you mentioned that you handled SEO for the company, the ATS will assume you have five years' worth of SEO experience from that job.

If a skill is listed on its own – such as within the professional summary or a core competencies section – then the ATS scan will assign a few months' experience for that skill.

This is why it's incredibly important to reiterate your skills throughout your entire resume rather than just in a skill section at the top.

Include a resume headline

Make sure your resume also includes a headline. This one-line heading should be located right after your contact information and before your summary statement. Companies that use an ATS to screen resumes will typically include the job title in their ATS assessment criteria. To create an ATS-friendly headline, simply:

Identify the job title you're applying for. It should be in the job posting or job description. For example, let's say that you're applying for a position as a Marketing Director. Those two words are keywords that need to be included in your headline.

Identify other key requirements that you may be able to highlight in your headline. It could be something as simple as a requirement that candidates have at least five years of experience in managing marketing teams. Take note of that job qualification since you may want to incorporate it into your headline, too.

Create a headline that includes the job title and some descriptive language that helps to immediately identify you as a qualified candidate. If you use our example keywords, your headline might look something like this:

Dynamic Marketing Director with over 5 years of experience in client success
Avoid images, charts, and other graphics

While resumes with embedded images may look nice to the human eye, they become a garbled mess after they pass through the applicant tracking system.

The ATS often converts any type of image or graph into funky characters (e.g., $&%#*)

The ATS could read this as an error on your resume file, indicating the file is corrupt

Your resume could be wholly rejected by the ATS

ATS rejection is one of the number one reasons job seekers get ghosted by companies.
Stick to simple bullet points

When used appropriately, bullet points are a great method for highlighting accomplishments and qualifications on a resume. However, if you choose an elaborate symbol for your bullets, your important selling points could get scrambled. Avoid using intricate characters when creating a bulleted list on your ATS-compliant resume. Stick to the simplest options, such as a solid circle, open circle, or square, to ensure your bullet points enhance your resume rather than make it incompatible with an ATS.
Use a clean resume design with a clear hierarchy

When it comes to your ATS-friendly resume design, less is more. Not only do complex resume designs or unusual formats confuse most applicant tracking systems, but they also annoy recruiters who are accustomed to quickly scanning a resume for specific information that they expect to find in specific areas within the document.

This means you should avoid those 2-column resume formats.

Yes, they're pretty.

No, they won't get past the ATS.

ATS-friendly resume template

Resumes are not like typical prose documents. If your resume is just one long story with different kinds of information spread across one or two pages like an essay, it won't perform well. And, even if it did, no human hiring manager would bother to read it.

Separate your career story into distinct sections to ensure that key details can be found by both the ATS and a hiring manager. This helps provide a structure that makes it easier for machines and humans to quickly scan for the information they want to see.

Below is a simple structure that you can use to ensure that your resume satisfies the needs of both the ATS and any hiring manager who sees it:

First and Last Name

Location | Phone Number | Email | LinkedIn URL | Portfolio URL (optional)

Resume Headline

A three to five-sentence elevator pitch designed to capture any hiring manager's attention. You can include keywords in this paragraph that highlight your most vital skills, experiences, and measurable achievements that showcase your potential value to the employer.

Core Competencies

This is where you list the skills that show you're qualified for the position. Depending on the job you're seeking, your skill section may be weighted toward either soft or hard skills – but you should try to include some mix of both.

Professional Experience

Otherwise known as work experience, this labeled section should include your relevant work history dating back 10-15 years. Start by listing your most recent position and work backward. For each position you've held, include the company name, job title, dates of employment, and up to five bullet point examples that demonstrate your achievements in each role.

Company Name | mm/yyyy-mm/yyyy

Title of your role

Achievement #1

Achievement #2

Achievement #3

Education

This section also needs to be labeled and should include the name of the college you attended, the years of attendance, your course of study and degree, and any relevant coursework that you need to show to demonstrate your qualifications. You can also include listings for certifications, continuing education, and other relevant training.