

How to Write an Effective Resume

In this guide, you'll learn how to create an effective resume. You'll learn strategies for tailoring your resume to the role you're pursuing, and how to effectively present your skills and experience—whether you're a new-job seeker or a mid-career professional switching to a new field. You will learn about templates and formats and understand the structure of every core section of a successful resume.

Strategy

An effective resume needs to present all the important information about you as a professional in a concise and clear way. Format and content are both important. Prior to diving into the details of resume structure, you'll first want to have a clear understanding of what you are trying to communicate. It's also important to keep your focus on what matters to the employer and do everything you can to tailor your resume to the role.

Focus on what's important to the employer

Before writing your resume, try to consider the employer's point of view. What do they want to know? Answering this question will enable you to focus on the information that is going to be relevant to the employer. This, in turn, increases your chances of getting their attention.

When applying to a specific role, carefully read the job description. This will help you understand specifically what the employer is looking for. If you want to gather additional insights, review multiple job descriptions to see what shows up repeatedly. This will help you gain a broader understanding of the role. Another great way to understand the needs of your potential employer is to schedule networking conversations with industry professionals who can share their experiences and insights.

Keep in mind that focusing on what's relevant to the employer might mean omitting details about your skills and experiences that are significant to you but are not directly relevant to the role. Deciding what to not include on your resume can be as important as deciding what to include. Irrelevant information might distract or confuse a reader, potentially making them more likely to discard your resume.

Tailor your resume to a role

It is essential that you tailor your resume to each job that you apply for. Even if your target roles have the same general set of requirements—and even if your skills and experience are broadly applicable—you should still adjust the order of your qualifications to match the order on the job description. In this way, you're putting what's most important to each employer at the top.

If you can, try to match the language of the job description. For example, if you have a resume built around recruiting, and you are applying for a talent acquisition role, replace “recruiting” with “talent acquisition” on your resume. Shifting to the employer’s terminology can help them relate to you. This approach can also help prevent you from being filtered out by automated software that relies on keywords to match your resume to the job description and to determine whether it should be passed on to a recruiter or discarded.

***TIP:** Keep in mind that resumes are traditionally written in the third person without the use of personal pronouns.*

Different Types of Job Seekers

Your resume strategy will differ at different stages of your career journey. Someone seeking their first role will need to use a different approach than someone looking to make a mid-career switch to a new field. In both of these scenarios, you have to communicate your value despite not having experience in the field, but your strategy will differ depending on what information you have available to share.

You can use the recommendations in this section to understand how to communicate your value to an employer in a way that’s appropriate to your skills and experience.

Career changers

If you are an experienced professional but are looking to start a career in a new field, your background can provide you with a unique perspective, and can potentially help you stand out as a candidate. At the same time, you will need to be conscious about clearly establishing yourself as a qualified professional in your new field. Remember that your application will most likely be reviewed alongside applications from people with directly relevant experience, so you need to make it clear to the employer why they should consider you for the role instead of those candidates.

Here are some key things to keep in mind as you build your resume:

Focus on your transferable skills and experiences and highlight the advantages of your diverse background. When describing your past experiences, focus on what’s relevant to your new career, and don’t over-elaborate on less relevant details. For example, if you’ve been managing a restaurant and are now shifting into IT support, your customer service skills will be crucial, while your ability to manage staff won’t be as relevant. If, as a restaurant manager, you maintained your computer network and electronics, that will be important to discuss on your resume as well—even if it was a minor component of your role. Finally, try to point out how your background—despite being in a different field—is actually an advantage. For example, you might highlight how the commercial awareness you developed as a restaurant manager can help you understand business needs when prioritizing your work as an IT support professional.

Adopt the terminology of your new industry. Get familiar with the language, terms, and jargon of your new industry and demonstrate this familiarity by using industry-specific words and phrases in your resume. This will make it easier for the reader to understand how your experience is relevant for them, and give them confidence about your engagement with your new field. For example, if you've run your own business in the past and are now looking for a role in marketing, use terms such as "marketing funnel" and "nurturing leads" when discussing your past marketing activities—even if you weren't thinking in those terms at the time.

New Professionals

People who are looking for their first job, and who don't yet have professional experience to describe, might struggle with how to fill their resumes. When this is the case, you can leverage non-professional experiences such as coursework, extracurricular activities, volunteer work, and life experiences (travel, caretaking, and more) as a means to demonstrate to the employer how you overcome challenges, solve problems, and achieve results.

It's important to remember that the employer only knows what's on your resume. If you think something will help you make your case to a prospective employer, you need to find a way to include that information on your resume. Use sections such as Projects, Volunteer Work, Relevant Experiences as alternatives to Professional Experience for that purpose.

Templates and Layouts

Now that you have an idea of what you want to communicate on your resume, you can start filling out the details. You can design your own resume or use an existing template. There are many templates available online, and you can access them by typing "resume templates" into your favorite search engine. You can also find Google Doc templates by going to Google Docs and clicking Template Gallery at the top right.

TIP: *Whether you actually use a Google Doc template or not, it's a good idea to design your resume in Google Docs. It will enable you to easily share, get feedback, and download your resume in a convenient format.*

You can use your personal taste and preferences when selecting a template, but it's also important to consider the following factors:

- **Ease of reading:** Your resume needs to make a great impression and communicate all your most important information in a very short amount of time. Make sure sections are clearly organized and that the font is easy to read, and use margins and white space to prevent the document from feeling cramped.
- **Simple design:** Your resume needs to be easily comprehended by both humans and applicant tracking systems (ATS)—the software that companies use to store and retrieve candidate information. ATS's vary, but many cannot parse graphs and other visual elements, meaning that information contained in them will be lost. Simple designs relying on well-organized text are best.
- **Length:** Your resume should be one page, unless you have at least 10-15 years of relevant (not total) experience. Two-column resume templates are appropriate for one-page resumes. Two-page resumes should use the entire width of the page.

Resume Sections

Before you start filling out your resume, you'll need to decide which sections to include, and in what order. There are core components that should be in every resume. There are also optional components you may want to include, depending on your skills and experience, and the roles you're applying for. Adjust your template by moving, adding, removing, and renaming sections as necessary.

Core resume sections include contact information, a professional summary, and details about your skills, experience, and education. Make sure to use section labels to help the reader easily navigate through your resume. In terms of order, this will often depend on what you want to highlight to your employer. A recent graduate might want to put their education first, whereas a working professional would lead with their experience. Optional sections could include information on projects, publications, volunteer experience, awards and honors, patents, languages, and more.

Let's take a closer look at each section of a typical resume.

Individual Resume Sections

Header

This is the section at the top of your resume that includes your contact information. Your name is the only part of your resume that should be spelled out in a larger font than the rest of your document. Your contact information should include:

- city, state, zip (no street address for privacy purposes)
- phone number, email address
- LinkedIn profile URL
- Optional: personal website, GitHub (for technical roles), portfolio (for creative roles)

Summary

The Summary section will always be located at the top of your resume immediately following the Header. It should be brief (3-5 lines) and clearly articulate what makes you a great candidate for the role, as well as what makes you stand out from your competition. The Summary sets the

context for the rest of the document by calling out the most important things for the reader to know about you.

While there are many ways to write a summary, consider the following format, focusing on your core expertise, strengths, and what sets you apart from others.

Sentence 1: Describe yourself by role and competencies. This is where you provide your professional introduction. Examples:

- Digital Marketing Manager with expert level knowledge of SEO, Social, PPC, and GMB.
- Talent Acquisition expert with 4+ years of experience in the medical device industry.

***TIP:** If you are changing careers, describe yourself using your desired title. For example, if you are shifting from QA Analytics to Project Management, describe yourself as a Project Manager. You can add “with a background in QA Analytics” to acknowledge that part of your career.*

Sentence 2: Connect your expertise to your value prop. This is where you define how your unique skills will make you a valuable asset to the company. Examples:

- Proficient in creating and editing graphics, figures, and illustrations. Consistently able to create high-quality marketing assets that drive conversions.
- Able to source for a full range of positions from administrative to executive level. Able to create a seamless recruiting and hiring process for managers, and consistently present top-quality candidates.

Sentence 3: Include a differentiator. You are likely to compete against other people with similar skills, so it's important to provide a clear reason why an employer should select your resume. Examples:

- Known for the ability to eloquently present point of view to clients, prospects, and colleagues with expertise, confidence, and clarity.
- Consistently noted in performance reviews as being able to present to clients, prospects and colleagues, with expertise, confidence, and clarity.
- Received 8 awards for customer service excellence.

***TIP:** If you are changing careers, describe yourself using your desired title. For example, if you are shifting from QA Analytics to Project Management, describe yourself as a Project Manager. You can add “with a background in QA Analytics” to acknowledge that part of your career.*

Skills

Immediately below the Summary, you should have a list of your core areas of expertise and your specific skills.

For a non-technical role, include 4-8 short bullets detailing your core skills (also known as Areas of Expertise) organized in two or three columns. To decide what goes on this list, think of what the employer would primarily hire you for. Focus on quantifiable skills like copywriting, agile project management, Google Analytics, or sales funnel management. Keep in mind that skills like communication, time management, and collaboration—which are harder to quantify, and are claimed by most people—are not as effective on a resume.

***TIP:** When tailoring your resume to a specific role, the Skills section is your first opportunity to line up with the job description.*

For a technical role, it's important to list out all of your relevant technical skills. If you find that your list is too long to list out each item in a separate bullet, then organize your skills by type—software, programming languages, hardware, data analytics, or any other categories that apply.

Professional Experience Section

The Professional Experience section is uniquely important because it tells the story of what you've done in your career. For employers, this is a strong indicator of what you will be able to do for them.

The Professional Experience section should list your roles (company, job title, location, employment dates) in reverse chronological order. If you have significant professional experience, limit your resume to the past 10-15 years, as that is what is most relevant to the employer.

Ideally, you want to list three to six roles on your resume that demonstrate progress on your career journey. Under each role, you should list your responsibilities and accomplishments in bullets. Responsibilities describe what you were supposed to do, and accomplishments are the specific outcomes that demonstrate how well you performed your role.

Your most recent role should feature the most detail, with four to six bullets of no more than two lines each. Older roles should provide less information. Begin each bullet with an action verb that puts you in control. Include numbers to show the scope of your role and impact—how many leads did you convert, how much revenue growth did you drive, how many new hires did onboard, how large was the team you managed, and more.

TIP: *Avoid chronological gaps in your Professional Experience. If you spent more than six months out of the workforce at any point—whether intentionally (for caregiving purposes or travel) or unintentionally (unemployment)—explain on your resume what you did during that time. Particularly highlight any activities relevant to your professional life, such as independent study, projects, and part-time or volunteer work.*

Example

Big Box Story, Service Associate, Middleton, CA

01/2015 - 02/2016

- *Provided customer service during checkout transactions and assisted customer questions and concerns in a big-box retail*
- *Earned 8 Employee of the Week awards in one year on a team of 100+ associates*
- *Enrolled over 200 consumers in new credit cards within a 15-month time frame (4x average rate)*
- *Received "Certificate of Excellence" for success at upselling to customers*

Education Section

In this section, include degrees beyond high-school in reverse chronological order (include your high-school information only if you don't have any education or training beyond it). For each entry in the Education section, list the degree, institution, location, and date of completion.

TIP: *You can include pending or incomplete degrees by marking them as “In progress” or “Incomplete”—if you do so, make sure to include information on the classes/work you did complete.*

Finalize Your Resume

Once you've completed your resume using the guidance in this document, try to have someone proofread it for you. Recruiters consistently say they will discard resumes with typos, even if the resume is in great shape otherwise.

TIP: *Consider asking a few people you trust—especially those familiar with your work—to provide feedback on the content. Don't feel obligated to incorporate all the feedback you receive, but be open to recommendations that can help enhance the quality of your resume.*

In conclusion, please keep in mind that, while there is no such thing as a perfect resume, you can use this guide to create an effective resume that avoids common problems and pitfalls. As you progress in your job search, remember that your resume is a living document. You can make revisions based on any feedback you receive, but try to avoid losing valuable time trying to over-optimize. Focus on your skills and experience, present yourself in the best light possible, and get ready to land that next role!