How To Tell Dragon-Slaying Stories In Your Resume

Liz Ryan

Once you realize that all of your power to capture a reader's attention is in the story that you tell, you're going to view your resume differently. Your resume has to tell a story. A human being has to come through the page and grab your hiring manager's attention.

That human being is you, of course – vibrant, creative and full of ideas. You can't expect a manager to get excited about the fact that you did blah blah blah at one big company and blah blah blah at another. Why would they care? They are lonely in their pain. It's lonely at the top of every company and every department. The hiring manager carries a lot on his or her shoulders. If you were that manager, wouldn't you be excited to meet a sharp, enthusiastic and responsible person like you to help get things done?

You have to tell your story in your resume. In the Human-Voiced Resume approach we teach, you're going to tell stories in four ways:

- Your resume in itself tells the story of your career. We call this story your Career Arc. We want your manager in his or her mind's eye to see you as a young person finishing school, stepping out into the world and moving along your path.

- The Summary at the top of your resume tells a little story. It tells the reader, before s/he's glanced at your list of employers and job titles, how you see yourself and your career and what you plan to do next. Your Summary sets the frame for the rest of your resume.

- Each description of the jobs you've held so far tells a story – the story of you in that job! The story you'll tell includes what the organization does, and its size; your mission in the organization, and how you came to work there; and your success in completing the mission. This is about a million times more powerful for the reader as a dry listing of your tasks and duties, or a list of trophies and awards you won at past jobs that the reader has no way to evaluate. Give us the good stuff!

- Lastly, you're going to tell Dragon-Slaying Stories in your resume.

A Dragon-Slaying Story is short and to the point. It's bullet-length. A Dragon-Slaying Story has three parts – Problem, Solution, and Impact. First, you explain the context so we understand as readers why something needed to be done. What was going on, or what was wrong? Second, you explain what you did – your solution. Thirdly, you tell us why that was a good move.

Did you ever read a resume where someone shares an accomplishment, and you can't tell whether it was an important project or not?

Here's an example: "I updated the volunteer database."

When I see something like that on a resume, my cynical North Jersey brain instantly asks "Did anyone care? Did they even use that volunteer database? Does this person know what's important to do at work, and what's busywork?"

We have to get the context for every accomplishment. We won't know on our own whether the things you worked on were vital to the organization's success, or just less boring than whatever else you might have spent time on.

People say "I don't have any stories!" but of course they do. We just haven't trained our brains to think about our stories. Instead of stories, we think of our work longitudinally. That's so boring! We say things like "I've worked with C++ for seven years." Really, that's the least relevant or interesting part of your C++ story. Who cares how long you wrote the code? Inquiring minds want to know what you wrote code for, and whether the code you wrote did what it was supposed to do! But we haven't been taught to tell stories, so now we're learning on the fly. In case you're stuck for Dragon-Slaying Stories, here are 25 prompts that will get you thinking about some of the ultra-cool things you've done so far in your career.

1. When did you change a process to make it work better?
2. When did you train someone to do something he or she didn't know before you trained them?
3. When did you get people who weren't working together to collaborate on something?
4. When did you help a customer or outside salesperson and save the day?
5. When did you write a newsletter, a report, a presentation or a marketing piece?

6. When did you mentor someone who needed advice?

7. When did you design a report that was smarter than the one it replaced, or filled a need that hadn't been filled before?

8. When did you solve a sticky process problem at work, sorting out something that was really complicated and goofed up?

9. When did you suggest and keep pushing for a good idea that finally was put into place?

10. When did you conduct a survey or gather opinions about the best way to proceed or to get to a goal?

11. When did you sell or help sell something — a product or service, a new idea to the management team, or the concept of working for your company to a friend?

12. When did you fill a key role on a team that would have been in a bind without you?

13. When did you jump into a bad situation and fix it?

14. When did you go ahead without any direction, because there wasn't any direction available, and figure out the right answer on your own?

15. When did you represent your employer in a public setting — an association meeting, for instance, or a trade show – and help to burnish its reputation?

16. When did you develop a piece of training or instructional information that helped people understand their work better?

17. When did you save yourself or someone else time or expense by using your noggin?

18. When did you find a bug or a problem that no one else had spotted, and get it fixed?

19. When did you project-manage something, whether it was in your job description or not, so that the project got completed?

20. When did you deal with an emergency or an unexpected situation in exactly the right way?

21. When did you get somebody to talk about and allow for the resolution of a problem that had been hush-hush before?

22. When did you serve as a conduit between people who should have been collaborating but weren't?

23. When did you come up with a better way to think about and/or evaluate something — a better frame, as we would say — and sell that perspective to the rest of your team?

24. When did you advise your boss or somebody else's boss?

25. When did you feel like you were really alive and successful in your job? Every time you had that feeling, there's at least one Dragon-Slaying Story hiding!