

36 Resume Rules for Software Engineers

Practice these rules and principles to skyrocket your chance of getting that all-important face-to-face interview

by Nick (Nipun) Singh

Nick (Nipun) Singh has helped dozens of people land jobs with high-profile companies, including Google, Lyft, Amazon and Facebook. He interned at Microsoft and Google as an undergrad and worked fulltime at Facebook after graduating. During this time, he reviewed hundreds of resumes. He knows which ones hit employers' sweet spot, and which ones miss by a mile.

In this article, you'll learn what he knows about building a resume that screams, "Get this guy/gal in here for an interview. I think we've found our next employee!"

Principle 1:

The Sole Purpose of your Resume is to Land an Interview

No resume results in an immediate job offer; that isn't its *role*. What your resume must do is convince its recipient to shuttle you past the company's gatekeepers and into their inner offices, so they can take a closer look at you.

It is during the first interview—and any subsequent ones—that your fate is determined by the powers that be at the company you want to join. It is during the interview process that your technical coding and people skills will carry you toward an offer. Your resume merely opens the door to the all-important interview process.

Tip #1: Present a Short Resume

Seriously. Keep it to one page. Even if you have more than ten years' experience, try for one page. Remember: you aren't going for a job offer in it. (Save whatever else you want to say for your in-person interview, when you'll be given ample time to get into the weeds and impress the interviewer with your breadth of knowledge, experience and communication and people skills. Keep your resume short and sweet. (If you believe you're the rare exception to this rule, see tip #2.)

Tip #2: The *Better* You Are, The *Less* You Should Put on Your Resume

Drowning your accomplishments in irrelevant information is counterproductive. Stick to the highlights. *They* are what determine whether you'll be invited through the door for an interview. Make the chief accomplishments on your resume as easy, and as obvious, as possible so the person who grants interviews can quickly consider you an outstanding candidate. (Extra filler doesn't help, unless you have absolutely nothing of substance in the first place. And resume readers are rarely fooled by fluff.)

Tip #3: Make Your Resume Target the Exact Role You're Seeking

What you throw a spotlight on during interviews changes, depending on the role you're seeking. In the same way—and for the same reason—your resume should be a living document, not a catch-all for everything you're good at. Throwing a bunch of stuff at a wall, hoping some of it sticks, isn't a sound strategy.

I've seen what I call “fence-sitting resumes” where candidates are doing their best to straddle two roles: Product Management and Software Engineering. But it's key to have two different resumes, so you can cast a spotlight on relevant experiences, depending on the position you're seeking. When I was in search mode for my next position, I had one resume tailored to back-end/ data infrastructure roles, and another tailored to product engineering & growth engineering roles.

Tip #4: Tailor Your Resume to a Specific Company

Alter your resume to reflect the exact company you're applying to. For example, when I applied to government contractors, I put 'U.S. Citizen' at the top of my resume so the recruiter would know I had the proper background to work on sensitive projects. Giving them what they need to know up front helps them know you recognize their screening process and that they aren't wasting their time talking to an unqualified person, so they can focus fully on your resume. But leading with 'U.S. Citizen' at many other companies wouldn't make sense.

Here's another example. Let's say you worked as a social media assistant part time three years ago promoting your aunt's restaurant. This experience isn't relevant for software engineering roles and can be left off your resume. But if you're applying to Facebook, and interested in ads, it's worth including. Tailor. That. Resume.

Tip #5: Omit Non-Relevant Jobs

Google doesn't care that you were a lifeguard two summers ago. Get rid of all non-relevant jobs. The exception to this rule is if you have zero job experience. If that's the case, leave the job in to prove you've held a position that required sobriety, alertness and responsibilities before.

Principle #2: Build your Resume to Impress the Recruiter

The person you most need to impress is a *non-technical* recruiter. The Senior Software Engineer at the company you want to work for isn't your target audience; *she'll* be impressed based on your coding ability later, during your technical interviews. The hiring manager isn't your audience; she'll be impressed by your GitHub project portfolio and behavioral interview answers during your onsite hiring manager interview. *Keeping your audience in mind, it's the non-technical recruiter that your resume needs to impress.*

Tip #6: Get To 'Yes' in 15 seconds

Recruiters are busy people. They meet candidates at crowded career fairs. They receive dozens of emails and LinkedIn requests every day from job hunters. They have brief moments to review your resume. So, ask yourself: "Is my resume understandable in 15 seconds?" If you can say "Yes, I should become a viable candidate within 15 seconds of reading this", your job is done. That's why the tips under Principle 1 are crucial; too many details make it impossible to get to 'yes' in under 15 seconds.

Tip #7: Your Resume Must Make Sense to A Non-Technical Person

Spell out technical acronyms if they aren't obvious. Give a little background; don't just assume the reader will understand. For example, a research project called "Continuous Deep Q-Learning with Model-based Acceleration" doesn't make sense to most people, but "Flappy Bird Bot Using Deep Learning" is memorable and more intriguing to the average non-technical recruiter.

Tip #8: Break Formatting Rules to Make your Resume More Understandable.

Bold any words that make your resume easier to understand so the reader can get to yes in 15 seconds. For example, I made the size of the companies I worked at bigger than other text so that, while scanning my resume, a recruiter could quickly see and say, "Microsoft Intern. Check. Google Intern. Check. Okay, let's interview this kid."

Tip #9: Report Usage Numbers If You Can.

People are interested in people. Consumer products are sexier than enterprise products. If your software served actual users, say so. Talking about user metrics shows that you were able to complete code and get it in front of real people who derived real value. Even if the project is technically simple, real user count goes a long way.

For example, in college, I made [RapStock.io](https://rapstock.io). It wasn't very well designed, and the code wasn't complex but, at its peak, it had 2,000 Monthly Active Users. This experience opened many doors in addition to giving me a great story to tell.

Tip #10: You're Applying to a Business So Talk Business

If you're applying to a business and your recruiter might be a business major, quantify your work in business terms. Write out the specific dollars earned, or dollars saved, as a result your work. Most recruiters would rather read about software you wrote that made \$2,000 in revenue than a side project where you solved P vs. NP because it's hard to explain P vs. NP and why it matters on a resume, unless you describe it with secondary results like 'Won a Nobel Prize'. But \$2000 cash is \$2000 cash; no explanation needed.

Principle #3: Your Resume Should Make You Look Good

Sounds obvious enough. But I've seen people volunteer negative information. A more common problem is volunteering neutral information. Remove whatever information subtracts from the positive content in your resume.

Tip #11: Remove the Summary / Objective

Your aim must be to look exceptional, not typical or neutral. How yawn-some is this: "I am a hard-working, innovative developer looking for a Software Engineering Job in Summer 2019". And this section is usually right at the top of a resume, taking up valuable real estate!

Tip #12: Break Section Order When Necessary to Stand Out

In English, we read from top to bottom. And since you have just 15 seconds to impress a recruiter, you need to look undeniably attractive as a candidate super-fast. To do this, put your strongest selling points at the top. Lead with your internship experience and then follow it up with your 'Education' section.

Here's a thumbs down example: I've seen people list 'Technologies' ahead of the cool projects they've made. Recruiters don't care that you know twelve programming languages. They just care about cool things you've made with the technologies you know.

Tip #13: Break Chronological Order When Necessary

Your resume doesn't have to be chronological. Order it based on importance and impressiveness. For example, I had a friend who interned at Google one summer, then at a small local startup part-time after that. It's okay to keep Google at the top of the resume, ahead of the small local startup, even though the startup was more recent. List **first what makes you look best to the recruiter you're targeting.**

Tip #14: To Show Highlights, Bend Formatting Rules

Good design principles aren't paramount. You just need to get results. So, break traditional formatting rules whenever doing so shows off your strengths faster.

For example, traditionally, you should bold only section headings and titles. But I bolded the user metrics for [RapStock.io](https://rapstock.io) on my resume. I wanted to quickly call out this information because it was sandwiched between additional information about my projects. So, use bold or italicized font to put a point across.

Tip #15: Don't Be Humble—But Don't Lie or Exaggerate

Your resume should make you shine so don't be humble or play it cool. If you *deserve* credit for something, put it on your resume.

But never lie or overstate the truth. It's easy for a recruiter or other company employee to chat with you about projects and quickly determine if you did it all or if it was really a 3-person group project you're passing off as your own.

Tip #16: Include Your High School?

Traditional advice says get rid of high school information on your resume. I disagree. If you attended a top high school like Stuyvesant, Phillips Exeter, or Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology, put it on your resume. This is especially true if the high school you attended is more prestigious than the college you attended.

Tip #17: Include Your SAT Score or Other High School Accomplishments?

Even though SAT scores don't matter after you get into college, an impressive score is an impressive score. If you achieved a high score (2350 or above), include it. Traditional career advice says to leave out high school stuff, but I've had recruiters & interviewers mention it and be impressed by it even six years after the exam was taken.

Other notable high school accomplishments that might be relevant: USAMO, USACO, ISEF, Siemens STS, or Coca-Cola Scholarship.

Principle #4: Offer the Right Resume to The Right League

Know the league of companies you're applying to. And be honest with how impressive your own resume is. Sometimes, something that looks good at one tier of companies is a negative signal at another tier of companies. PLEASE NOTE: The advice in this section is tailored for applying to top-tier tech companies like Facebook and Google. (You can ignore this advice if top-tier tech companies aren't your targets.)

Tip #18: List A GPA Only When it Helps

A 3.4 at MIT might be okay to list. But a 3.5 at a no-name easy college might not be something to volunteer if Google doesn't usually recruit at your college, since Google might be expecting you to be at the top of your class.

Tip #19: Not All Languages & Technologies Are Equal

When applying to top-tier Silicon Valley startups, ASP.NET / C# isn't super great to lead with, since you might be perceived as being a slow corporate I.T. developer rather than a startup 'hacker'. (It's an unfair bias, but I'm telling it like it is.)

Similarly, never list Microsoft Office. For a certain tier of companies, it can be a negative signal to write that you know Microsoft Office since it shows you didn't have anything better to list.

Tip #20: Remove Certifications

Being a certified Oracle Java programmer won't open any doors at top-tier companies. It might even hurt you since it's perceived that if you needed certifications to prove your competence, you aren't very competent since the bar for certifications is so low. Having projects that use Java, or open source contributions to Java packages, is a far better way to show Java proficiency.

Tip #21: Don't Over-Emphasize Technologies

In the right league, you don't need to do overemphasize specific packages and libraries you know. Good software engineers are expected to learn new languages quickly and be experts at software engineering in general, not specific languages. Mentioning that you know Python, PIP, Virtualenv, BeautifulSoup, Scrapy is a negative signal. It makes a recruiter think all you've done is downloaded a few Python packages and listed it on your resume.

Tip #22: The Higher the Company Tier, The Higher the B.S. Detector

The more prestigious the company, the less you need to rely on corporate B.S. speak. You don't need details about how you 'communicated with multiple teams and worked with teammates to problem solve solutions.' Similarly, writing that you followed an 'agile methodology' doesn't mean much. The higher the league of company, the more they care about actual specific details and substance.

Principle #5: Resumes: It's All About the Narrative

A good story is a powerful thing.

Tip #23: Humans Love Stories

Resume readers are relational human beings. If they like you better than they like other candidates, they will help you land an interview. People love a good story. By remembering that resume readers are human, you'll end up crafting a better story which leads to a better resume.

Tip #24: Break Resume Rules for the Narrative

You can break any of the tips I've listed for what makes a good resume for the sake of narrative. Earlier, I mentioned that listing irrelevant jobs—like being a cashier or waiter—won't help you land a software engineering gig. But go ahead and tell your story if, for example, you were a waiter who went on to build an app that helps restaurants donate leftover food to food banks.

Another example: people might advise you against linking to your hip hop mixtape on Soundcloud from your resume. But if you've made a few hackathon projects around hip hop music, it's perfectly fine to list it since it shows a recruiter that you took your passions and created software to further the interest. That's a great story.

Principle #6: Simple Resume Basics that People Get Wrong

I started with unconventional tips, since they're the most interesting, but let's cover the basics, too.

Tip #25: Make Your Name Prominent

Self-explanatory. Near your name, add a *professional* email address too. Also, not a Yahoo mail or Hotmail addresses. Tech folks are judgy.

Tip #26: Never Include your Mailing Address

Companies are biased toward hiring local candidates because they don't need to pay relocation fees. And recruiters are compensated based on the number of candidates they can close. So, put yourself in a recruiter's chair. Let's say you're a Silicon Valley-based company recruiter with two identically-skilled candidates, but one lives in the Bay area and the other lives in NYC. Which of the two are you more likely to close? The NYC candidate who needs to decide to move to SF and uproot her family before accepting your offer or the local person who can accept your offer and start next week? You get the picture.

Tip #27: Don't List Your Phone Number Unless It's Local

Because of the spam robocall epidemic, anyone who calls you will email you first to ask for your phone # and set up a time. So, there's no need to list a phone number. Remember: you have 15 seconds to rivet someone to your resume. Don't waste a second of that time on non-essential information.

Note: if yours is an international phone number, again, there may well be bias toward hiring local candidates. And people notice when your number has is a far-flung area code. (When I interviewed for a Silicon Valley position, I made a Google Voice number with the Palo Alto area code. I wanted to hide the fact that I lived 3,000 miles away as best I could.)

Tip #28: Include Your GitHub And Personal Portfolio Website Link

Your links don't need to be super prominent. It's okay if the GitHub is a bit messy. It's okay if the portfolio website is super simple. I made [mine](#) with a free default template from Bootstrap. Simply having a GitHub listed is a sign that you have coded out in the open and that you're aware of source control. And remember: since the first interview gatekeeper is a non-technical recruiter, he or she most likely won't be able to tell a messy GitHub from an okay one anyway.

Tip #29: Hyperlink to Outside Work Where Possible

Include links to your app store, or landing pages, or hackathon projects wherever possible. Linking to the outside world validates to the recruiter that you made something and published it to the real world. Even if the recruiter never clicks on a link, just seeing the [blue hyper link](#) will give him or her a sense that there's something more there.

Tip #30: You Don't Need Full Sentences

Your resume isn't a formal English paper, it's marketing collateral that will be skimmed for 20 seconds. Bullet points of your main ideas are fine.

Good Products Need Good Distribution. Same with A Resume.

PDFs maintain formatting better and lead to better viewing experiences on mobile.

When people name it “Resume.pdf” it shows lack of forethought. I have scores of files on my computer titled ‘Resume.pdf’ from random people and I can’t keep track of them. I bet a recruiter has far more. Plus, you should be making different resumes for different companies and roles anyway, as mentioned earlier, so saving them with a company name will help you be more organized.

You can change the width and height of your resume to give yourself more space and breathing room so you can use different font sizes and spacing to emphasize different parts of it. But—again—don't use margin changes to double the content on your one-page resume. If you do, you'll drown out your best content with less-good/neutral junk.

At a traditional career fair, print your resume on heavier paper. Doing this will make the resume stand out, and it will feel more professional. (And heavier paper is more crumple-resistant.)

Now that you have a good resume, bring a printed version to every interview, career fair, company info session, and hackathon. (Doing this one simple thing helped me land my internship with Microsoft. More on that later.)

Crumpled resumes look unprofessional. University bookstores usually sell a school-branded folio. Especially if you went to a top school, get a folio with the school logo front and center. It sure won't hurt to carry it with you to your interview.

Thanks for Reading!

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