

Avoid These 10 Resume Mistakes

by Katharine Hansen

As a resume writer, I see hundreds of resumes, and the vast majority of them are much weaker than they could be. I see the same mistakes over and over. This article describes the 10 I see most often. All are easy to fix.

Don't make these resume mistakes:

1. Resume lacks focus.

A sharp focus is an extremely important resume element. Given that employers screen resumes for between 2.5 and 20 seconds, a resume should show the employer at a glance what you want to do and what you're good at. In a recent study by Career Masters Institute, employers wanted resumes to show a clear match between the applicant and a particular job's requirements. A "general" resume that is not focused on a specific job's requirements was seen as not competitive. In an even more recent study by CareerBuilder.com, 71 percent of hiring managers preferred a resume customized for the open position.

One way to sharpen your focus is through an objective statement. Your objective statement can be very simple and straightforward; it can be simply the title of the position you're applying for, which can be adjusted for every job you apply for. Or you can embellish your Objective statement a bit with language telling how you'll benefit the employer. Something like:

Objective: To contribute strong _____ skills and experience to your organization in a _____ capacity.

In this day of being able to manage our own computer files, you could have several versions of your resume that are essentially the same except for the objective. A specific objective is always better than a vague or general one. You can read more about resume objectives in our article, [Should You Use a Career Objective on Your Resume?](#)

To sharpen your focus, you can also add a section called something like "Summary of Qualifications," "Profile," or the like. Such a section can contribute to powerful resume opener that draws the reader in; it can be part of the top third of your resume that showcases your best selling points, catches the prospective employer's attention, and immediately demonstrates your value as a candidate. "Think of this section as an executive summary of your resume," writes my partner, Dr. Randall Hansen. "Identify key accomplishments that will grab the attention of an employer."

You can use your Profile/Summary section to position yourself for each job you target by tweaking the wording to fit each type of position.

2. Resume is duties-driven instead of accomplishments-driven.

Resumes should consist primarily of high-impact accomplishments statements that sell the job-seeker's qualifications as the best candidate.

Never use expressions such as "Duties included," "Responsibilities included," or "Responsible for." That's job-description language, not accomplishments-oriented

resume language that sells. After all, if you were an employer and wanted to run a successful organization, would you be looking for candidates who can perform only their basic job functions, or would you want employees with a proven track record of accomplishments? In these days in which most resumes are placed into keyword-searchable databases, you won't find employers searching resumes for words like "responsibilities," "duties," or "responsible for."

Instead, focus on accomplishments that set you apart from other job candidates. In each job, what special things did you do to set yourself apart? How did you do the job better than anyone else? What did you do to make it your own? What special things did you do to impress your boss so that you might be promoted? What were the problems or challenges that you or the organization faced? What did you do to overcome the problems? What were the results of your efforts? How did the company benefit from your performance? How did you leave your employers better off than before you worked for them? How have you helped your employers to:

- make money
- save money
- save time
- make work easier
- solve a specific problem
- be more competitive
- build relationships
- expand the business
- attract new customers
- retain existing customers

Accomplishments are the points that increase reader's interest, stimulate a request for a job interview, and really help sell you to an employer -- much more so than everyday job duties. In the above-cited study by Career Masters Institute, content elements that propel employers to immediately discard resumes include a focus on duties instead of accomplishments, while documented achievements were highly ranked among content elements that employers look for.

For more about how to identify your accomplishments, see our article, [For Job-Hunting Success: Track and Leverage Your Accomplishments](#). You may want to use our [Accomplishments Worksheet](#) to help you brainstorm your achievements.

Some job-seekers list accomplishments in a separate section or isolate accomplishments from duties/responsibilities when describing their job functions. I don't support this practice because *everything* on your resume should be accomplishments-driven. If you label only certain items as accomplishments, the reader's assumption is that the other things you did were *not* accomplishments.

Be sure also that the accomplishments you list support your career goals and that you tailor them to the job you're targeting with this resume.

3. Resume items are listed in an order that doesn't consider the reader's interest. "The Resume Ingredients Rule," set forth by Donald Asher, author of numerous resume books (see our [Q&A with him](#)), says that information on a resume should be listed in

order of importance to the reader. Therefore, in listing your jobs, what's generally most important is your title/position. So list in this preferred order: Title/position, name of employer, city/state of employer, dates of employment. I can't tell you how many resumes I've seen that list dates first. Dates can be important to some employers, but they're generally not as important as what your position was and whom you worked for.

Education follows the same principle; thus, the preferred order for listing your education is: Name of degree (spelled out: Bachelor of _____) in name of major, name of university, city/state of university, graduation year, followed by peripheral information, such as minor and GPA. If you haven't graduated yet, list your information the same way. Since the graduation date you've listed is in the future, the employer will know you don't have the degree yet.

By the way, the Resume Ingredients Rule is also the reason that experience and education are listed in *reverse* chronological order on your resume; it's assumed that your most recent education and experience are most important and relevant to the reader.

Also consider whether your education or your experience is your best selling point and which should therefore be listed first. Generally, brand-new graduates list education first, while job-seekers with a few years of experience list experience first. When job-seekers add value to their education by attaining an MBA or other graduate degree, they often switch education back to the more prominent position because it now becomes the hot selling point. In fields such as science and higher education, in which education remains a more important selling point than experience, education tends to be listed first consistently. In many countries outside the U.S., education is also considered more important than experience.

4. Resume exposes the job-seeker to age discrimination by going too far back into the job-seeker's job history.

The rule of thumb for someone at the senior level is to list about 15 years worth of jobs. Age discrimination, unfortunately, is a reality, and even more likely, employers may think you're too expensive if you list too much experience on your resume. Similarly, don't provide the date of your college graduation if it was more than about 10 years ago. Read more in our articles, [Resume, Cover Letter, and Interview Strategies for Older Workers](#) and [Positive Attitude is Key When Fighting Prejudice Against Older Workers](#).

5. Resume buries important skills, especially computer skills, at the bottom.

There are few jobs today for which computer skills are not important. Yet many job-seekers, even those in technology fields, tend to tack a "Computer Skills" section to the end of their resumes. If computer skills are relevant to your field, list them in your Summary or Profile section. That way, they'll catch the reader's eye in the first third of your resume. If you are in the technology field, list your technical skills in a separate section called something like "Systems Proficiencies," but be sure it's on the first page of your resume. You may want to set your skills up in a reader-friendly table, as in these samples: [IT Resume](#) and [New Grad IT Resume](#).

Similarly if language and international-business skills are important in the type of job you seek, list them in your Summary or Profile section, not at the end of your resume.

6. Resume is not bulleted.

Use a bulleted style to make your resume more reader-friendly. In the above-cited study by Career Masters Institute, use of bullets was the 2nd-highest ranked preference by employers, and density of type (paragraphs rather than bullet points) was ranked highly as a factor that would inspire employers to discard a resume.

Use bullets consistently. Some job-seekers bullet most of their resume but don't bullet the Profile/Summary section, for example. Or they will list the overall scope and responsibilities for each job in an unbulleted section before beginning a bulleted section describing accomplishments. Given that the reader can't easily discern a rationale for why some material is bulleted and other material isn't, it's best to bullet consistently throughout the resume.

7. Resume uses a cookie-cutter design based on an overused resume template.

Most resumes created from a Microsoft Word template are instantly recognizable to employers as such. There's nothing wrong with that except that employers have seen a million of them, so they don't stand out. The employer immediately senses a certain lack of imagination in the job-seeker. These templates are also somewhat inflexible and contain problematic formatting. "Using a template or any kind of boilerplate to demonstrate your value to a company is the worst thing you can do to yourself when job hunting," says Nick Corcodilos of Ask The Headhunter. "You're supposed to be uniquely qualified so the company will choose you instead of some cookie-cutter drone -- right? Do you really want a template?"

8. Resume lacks keywords.

Job-hunting today increasingly revolves around the mysterious world of keywords. Employers' reliance on keywords to find the job candidates they want to interview has come about in recent years because of technology. Inundated by resumes from job-seekers, employers have increasingly relied on digitizing job-seeker resumes, placing those resumes in keyword-searchable databases, and using software to search those databases for specific keywords that relate to job vacancies. Most Fortune 1000 companies, in fact, and many smaller companies now use these technologies. In addition, many employers search the databases of third-party job-posting and resume-posting boards on the Internet. Pat Kendall, president of the National Resume Writers' Association, notes that more than 80 percent of resumes are searched for job-specific keywords.

The bottom line is that if you apply for a job with a company that searches databases for keywords, and your resume doesn't have the keywords the company seeks for the person who fills that job, you are pretty much dead in the water. To read more about keywords and how to identify the best ones for your field, see our article, [Tapping the Power of Keywords to Enhance Your Resume's Effectiveness](#).

9. References are listed directly on your resume.

Never listed specific references directly on your resume. List them on a separate sheet, and even then, submit them *only* when specifically requested by an employer.

Even the phrase, "References: Available upon request," is highly optional because it is a given that you will provide references upon request. If you couldn't, you would have no

business looking for a job. The line can serve the purpose of signaling: "This is the end of my resume," but if you are trying to conserve space, leave it off.

10. Resume's appearance becomes skewed when sent as an e-mail attachment and/or resume is not available in other electronic formats.

Have you ever noticed that when you send a resume (or any document) as an attachment from your computer to someone else's computer, it sometimes doesn't look the same on the other person's computer as it did on yours? Maybe it has more pages on the other computer, or maybe Page 2 starts at the bottom of Page 1, or maybe the fonts are different.

If you are regularly sending your resume as an e-mail attachment, you may want to experiment with sending it to friends' computers to ensure that the formatting appears consistently from computer to computer.

Beyond a resume that can be sent as an e-mail attachment, it's crucial these days to have at least one type of electronic version of your resume for sending via e-mail and posting to Internet job boards. It's an absolute must these days because, as noted earlier, 80 percent of resumes today are placed directly into keyword-searchable databases. Read more in our article, [The Top 10 Things You Need to Know about E-Resumes and Posting Your Resume Online](#). A text version of your resume is the most common and preferred format for electronic resumes. Read more about them and about other electronic formats you might need in our article, [Your E-resume's File Format Aligns with its Delivery Method](#).

Questions about some of the terminology used in this article? Get more information (definitions and links) on key college, career, and job-search terms by going to our [Job-Seeker's Glossary of Job-Hunting Terms](#).

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