

On Resume Writing

By: Michael Despeaux

As a career counselor, I see lots of résumés. Increasingly, students listen to us and begin building their first résumés during their first or second semester instead of waiting until graduation or the last minute. Many second- and third-year students will seek our assistance as they prepare to apply for internships or co-ops. Of course, proactive seniors visit Career Services before career fairs and as they enter their job searches.

Over the years, my recommendations for writing a résumé have evolved, and I've come to realize that there are exceptions to most "rules." For instance, while it's still true that most new college graduates should restrict their résumés to one page in length, in some science or health care professions, two or more pages may be acceptable, as long as the information is relevant. While it's usually conventional to avoid listing high school accomplishments, an increasing number of students begin interning, job shadowing and even seeking college-level credit before completing their secondary education. If these initiatives relate to their chosen field, describing them could show longevity of interest, or at least help them better compete for internships. Many "rules" are grounded in either convention or common sense, but exceptions are bountiful.

Because contradictions and counterexamples are so common, students often experience difficulty choosing a résumé format or effectively showcasing their experience, credentials, and skills. Based on the thousands of documents I've reviewed since I joined Western Carolina in 2002 (and many more before then, on various search committees), I offer some basic advice.

1. Your résumé is a strategic document. There is no "one size fits all" order or list of headings that you should follow or use. Think about the recipient and the job for which you are applying. Is it teaching? Then use the heading, "Teaching Experience" instead of something less specific. Did you intern in your field? Separate related experience and your internship and list them together under a specific heading, and then list unrelated but meaningful work beneath "Other Experience." Strategy also means thinking about what information is most relevant and how to describe job accomplishments. "Related Coursework" had better relate to the job you're seeking – that heading should not be seen as an invitation to recreate a transcript on your résumé. If two students majoring in history described their internships at the Mountain Heritage Center, and one sought employment in a museum, and the other chose to enter business or sales, the accomplishments and skills described by each might be very different. Take the time to think about your application, and customize your résumé to focus on that job and showcase the most relevant or transferable skills and experience, the ones that make you a better candidate.
2. Be consistent. Whatever format you choose, consistently present information and formatting. If you tab one date over toward the right, then do the same with them all. Use the same size and type of font for all headings and text. Use the same size margin on the left and right. Left-justify all headings, not just some. Italicize all of your job titles, not just one.
3. Avoid using an automated template. A simple Word document can be elegant and offers much more flexibility so that you can easily add experience throughout college (and beyond) and customize your résumé for different jobs.
4. Avoid overusing bold or other formatting. Too much bold font gives the same impression as an over-highlighted textbook. Just bold your name and section headings.
5. Tab things like dates and locations (city and state) over toward the right, and line them up with the first letter of the word, not the right margin. Using the space bar to position text on a page makes a mess, and right-justifying them looks choppy.
6. Not all résumés need an objective statement, and almost none need sweeping summaries or career objectives. If you write an objective, it should target the reader. It should "connect the dots" between who

she wants and who you are. It should specifically state the desired position or company and succinctly describe what you can contribute.

7. Use bullet points to describe your accomplishments beneath each job. Use plain, automated Microsoft Word bullets, not fancy bullets. Do not manufacture them yourself using your keyboard. Start each bulleted phrase with an action verb and make sure the verb tense is correct.
8. Leadership, service and campus involvement are important. Find ways to gain or do these things. Better yet, find ways to integrate your academic work, your experiences and your extracurricular activities. Your faculty adviser or a career counselor can help you identify related student organizations or professional associations, internships and service opportunities that allow you to get professionally involved or put theory into practice. And it looks great on your résumé.
9. Provide complete contact information. Use an email address that incorporates your name and avoids unprofessional phrases. As soon as your résumé is “in play,” be sure that callers do not hear music while their party is reached, and record a simple greeting.
10. Be accurate, honest and correct. Accurately state your degree – I regularly see things like, “bachelor’s degree in whatever.” This is incorrect – you may earn a bachelor of science or a bachelor of arts and so on, but make sure your terminology is exact. Be honest – do not round up your GPA, inflate your titles or claim to have done things you haven’t on a job. Lastly, proofread! Incorrect grammar, misspelled words and typos will get your résumé rejected.