What Makes a Great Resume: Your Key to Career Success

A great resume is your ticket to landing that dream job. It's often the first impression you make on potential employers, so it's crucial to get it right. Let's explore what makes a resume stand out, how to catch the eye of hiring managers and recruiters, and what pitfalls to avoid.

Key Elements of an Outstanding Resume

1. Clear, Concise Format

A well-structured resume is essential for making a strong first impression. Use a clean, professional layout that guides the reader's eye smoothly through your information. Stick to standard, easily readable fonts like Arial or Calibri, in a 10–12-point size. This ensures your resume looks professional and is easy to read both on screen and in print. Effectively utilize white space to improve readability and prevent your resume from looking cluttered. A balanced layout with clear sections and consistent formatting will make your resume visually appealing and easy to navigate.

2. Compelling Summary or Objective Statement

Start your resume with a powerful summary or objective statement that quickly captures the reader's attention. This section should briefly highlight your key skills, experiences, and career goals, tailored specifically to the job you're applying for. Think of it as your "elevator pitch" – a concise overview of what makes you an ideal candidate for the position. Use strong, action-oriented language and focus on what you can bring to the role rather than what you hope to gain from it. This section sets the tone for the rest of your resume and can encourage the hiring manager to read on.

3. Relevant Work Experience

When listing your work history, use a reverse chronological order, starting with your most recent position. Focus on achievements rather than just listing job duties. Use action verbs to describe your accomplishments, making your contributions clear and impactful. Tailor this section to the job you're applying for by emphasizing experiences and skills that are most relevant to the position. For each role, include the company name, your job title, dates of employment, and 3-5 bullet points highlighting your key achievements and responsibilities. Remember, quality is more important than quantity – focus on your most impressive and relevant accomplishments.

4. Quantifiable Results

Whenever possible, include specific metrics and numbers to demonstrate your impact in previous roles. This adds credibility to your claims and helps the employer understand the scope of your achievements. For example, instead of saying "Increased sales," you might say "Increased sales by 25% over six months, resulting in $500,000 additional revenue." Quantifying your achievements not only makes them more impressive but also shows that you understand the importance of measurable results in the workplace. Even if you don't have exact figures, try to provide estimates or ranges to give context to your accomplishments.

5. Skills Section

Include a dedicated skills section to highlight your relevant hard and soft skills. For technical or hard skills, consider including your proficiency level (e.g., "Expert in Adobe Photoshop" or "Proficient in Python programming"). For soft skills, focus on those most relevant to the job and back them up with examples from your work experience. Tailor this section to the job description, ensuring you include keywords and skills specifically mentioned in the posting. This section not only helps you pass through Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) but also gives the hiring manager a quick overview of your capabilities.

6. Education and Certifications

List your educational background, including degrees, relevant coursework, and any professional certifications you've earned. Start with your highest level of education and work backwards. Include the name of the institution, degree earned, and graduation date (or expected graduation date for current students). If you're a recent graduate or your education is particularly relevant to the job, you might want to place this section higher on your resume. Include honors, awards, or relevant academic projects if they strengthen your candidacy. For professionals with significant work experience, this section can be brief, focusing on degrees and certifications most relevant to your career goals.

Tips to Get Your Resume Noticed

1. Customize for Each Job
- Tailor your resume to match the job description
- Use keywords from the job posting

2. **Use Industry-Specific Language**
- Demonstrate your knowledge of the field
- Avoid jargon if applying to a different industry

3. **Optimize for Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS)**
- Use standard section headings
- Avoid complex formatting or graphics

4. **Keep It Concise**
- Aim for one to two pages, depending on your experience level
- Begin cutting unnecessary information

5. **Proofread Thoroughly**
- Eliminate all spelling and grammatical errors
- Ask a friend or professional to review your resume

6. **Use a Strong File Name**
- Include your name and the position in the file name
- Example: "John_Doe_Marketing_Manager_Resume.pdf"

What Will Make Hiring Managers Stop Reading

To ensure your resume doesn't end up in the rejection pile, avoid these common mistakes:

1. Typos and Grammatical Errors

Attention to detail is crucial when crafting your resume. Use spell-check tools as a starting point, but don't rely on them exclusively. Reading your resume out loud can help you catch awkward phrasing and subtle errors. Pay special attention to commonly confused words like their/there/they're or your/you're. Punctuation is equally important, especially in bullet points and job descriptions. A single error can cast doubt on your professionalism and attention to detail, potentially costing you the opportunity.

2. Generic, One-Size-Fits-All Content

Tailoring your resume for each application is essential. Before applying, thoroughly research the company and role. Highlight skills and experiences most relevant to the specific job, mirroring the language used in the job description. Adjust your career objective or summary for each application to show how your goals align with the

position. This customization demonstrates your genuine interest and helps you stand out from applicants who use a generic approach.

3. Irrelevant Information

Focus your resume on professional qualifications and achievements. Remove personal details like age, marital status, or religious affiliations unless they're directly relevant to the job. Only include hobbies if they showcase relevant skills or relate to the position. Instead of listing every job you've ever had, concentrate on experiences that demonstrate your qualifications for the role. Your resume should paint a picture of you as a professional, not provide a complete life history.

4. Outdated or Irrelevant Work Experience

Generally, limit your work history to the past 10-15 years, as older experience may not reflect your current skills and capabilities. If older experience is highly relevant, summarize it briefly. For career changers, emphasize transferable skills from previous roles rather than job titles. Consider using a functional or combination resume format to highlight relevant skills if your direct experience in the field is limited. The goal is to show how your background makes you an ideal candidate for the current opportunity.

5. Accuracy and Truthfulness

Maintaining integrity in your resume is crucial. Present your qualifications and achievements honestly and accurately. Avoid embellishing job titles, responsibilities, or accomplishments. Be prepared to discuss and substantiate any claim you make during interviews. If you're uncertain about exact dates or figures, use approximations and clearly label them as estimates. Resist the temptation to claim skills or proficiencies you don't possess, even if they seem minor. Remember, employers value honesty and authenticity, and any discrepancies discovered can severely impact your candidacy or future employment.

6. Unprofessional Email Address

Your email address is often the first point of contact for employers, so ensure it projects professionalism. If your current email address is inappropriate or too casual, create a new one specifically for job applications. Ideally, use a combination of your first and last name. Avoid using numbers that could be mistaken for birth years, as this might inadvertently reveal your age. For an extra touch of professionalism, consider obtaining

a domain name (e.g., firstname@lastnameconsulting.com). A polished email address demonstrates attention to detail and career seriousness.

7. Excessive Length

Conciseness is key in resume writing. Be ruthless in your editing, ensuring every word earns its place. Use clear, concise language and bullet points to convey information efficiently. For longer careers, focus on the most recent and relevant experiences. Consider creating a separate "Career Highlights" section for older but significant achievements. Aim to keep your resume to one or two pages, depending on your experience level. Remember, hiring managers often spend mere seconds scanning each resume, so make every word count.

8. Poor Formatting

A well-formatted resume is crucial for readability and professionalism. Stick to one or two easy-to-read fonts throughout the document. Use consistent formatting for headings, subheadings, and body text to create a cohesive look. Ensure adequate white space to avoid a cluttered appearance and make the resume easier on the eyes. Use bold, italics, and underlining sparingly and consistently to highlight important information. A clean, organized layout will help your resume stand out and make it easier for hiring managers to quickly find the information they need.

9. Lack of Specifics

Vague descriptions and generalities fail to showcase your true value. Use the PAR (Problem-Action-Result) method to describe your achievements, providing context for your contributions. Include specific metrics wherever possible, such as percentages, dollar amounts, or time frames, to quantify your impact. Describe the scope of your responsibilities, including details like team size or budget managed. Incorporate industry-specific terminology to demonstrate your expertise and familiarity with the field. Concrete examples and data points make your accomplishments more credible and impressive.

10. Inclusion of Salary Information or References

Keep your resume focused on your qualifications and achievements. Avoid including salary history or expectations unless specifically requested by the employer. Similarly, don't list references or use the phrase "References available upon request" – this is generally understood and wastes valuable space. Instead, prepare a separate reference

sheet to provide when asked. If you must address salary, do so in the cover letter rather than the resume. By omitting this information, you keep the focus on your skills and experience and leave room for negotiation later in the hiring process.

By focusing on what makes a great resume and avoiding common pitfalls, you'll significantly increase your chances of landing an interview. Remember, your resume is a marketing tool designed to sell your skills and experience. Make every word count, and you'll be well on your way to career success.

For more career advice, check out the articles in our Resource Center or advice on job seeking, interviewing, resume writing and more! Also, don't miss out on the latest from our News & Insights blog for workforce trends, recruitment news and navigating the job market. Looking for a new opportunity? Take a look at our job openings.