Resume Preparation Do's and Don'ts

by Katharine Hansen

Here are the keys to successfully preparing and writing a resume. Follow these simple rules and you should achieve success in this important phase of job-hunting.

- **Do** consider a bulleted style to make your resume as reader-friendly as possible.
- **Don't** get overwrought about the old "one-page resume rule." It's good to keep your resume to one page, if possible, but if you have a lot of experience, two pages may be more appropriate. If your resume spills beyond one page, but you have less than a half a page of material for the second page, it may be best to condense to one page.
- But **don't** go beyond two pages with your resume.
- **Do** consider a resume design that doesn't look like everyone else's. Many jobseekers use Microsoft Word resume templates and wizards. There's nothing wrong with them, per se, but your resume won't look distinctive if you use one; it will look like the resume of everyone else who used a Word template. These templates and wizards can also be a bit inflexible to work with.
- **Don't** use justified text blocks; they put odd little spaces between words. Instead, make your type flush left.
- **Don't** ever lie on your resume.
- **Do** include as much contact information as possible -- any information that would enable an employer to reach you during business hours.
- **Do** give your resume as sharp a focus as possible. Given that employers screen resumes for between 2.5 and 20 seconds, you need a way to show the employer at a glance what you want to do and what you're good at. One way to sharpen your focus is through an objective statement. The 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 the Objective statement a bit with language telling how you'll benefit the employer. Something like: "Objective: To contribute strong _____ skills and experience to your firm 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 exactly the same *except* for the objective. A specific objective is always better than a vague or general one. See our article *Should You Use a Career Objective on Your Resume?*

- **Do** consider a section such as "Summary of Qualifications," or "Profile," which can also help sharpen your focus. Here's an *example of such a section*.
- **Don't** discount the possibility of a functional format for your resume. This format can be strategic for career changers, students and others who lack experience, those with gaps in their employment, as well as those re-entering the workforce. A functional resume is organized around functional skills clusters. After listing three to four skills clusters and showing how you've demonstrated those skills, you provide a bare-bones work history at the bottom. Read more about functional formats and see samples in our article, *Should You Consider a Functional Resume?*
- **Don't** use personal pronouns (I, my, me) in a resume.
- **Do** list your job information in order of importance to the reader. 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.

- **Don't** leave out the locations of your past jobs (city and state). This information is expected, but many jobseekers unwittingly omit it.
- **Do** list your jobs in reverse chronological order.
- **Don't** mix noun and verb phrases when describing your jobs. Preferably, use concrete action verbs consistently.
- **Do** avoid the verb, "Work" because it's a weak verb. Everyone works. Be more specific. "Collaborate(d)" is often a good substitute.
- **Do** think in terms of accomplishments when preparing your resume. Accomplishments are so much more meaningful to prospective employers than run-of-the-mill litanies of job responsibilities.
- **Don't** use expressions like "Duties included," "Responsibilities included," or "Responsible for." That's job-description language, not accomplishments-oriented resume language that sells.
- **Do** emphasize transferable skills, especially if you don't have much experience or seek to change careers.
- **Do** quantify whenever possible. Use numbers to tell employers how many people you supervised, by what percentage you increased sales, how many products you represented, etc.
- **Don't** list too much experience on your resume. The rule of thumb for someone with many years of experience 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.
- **Don't** emphasize skills and job activities you don't want to do in the future, even if they represent great strengths for you. In fact, you may not even want to mention these activities. Why describe how great your clerical skills are if you don't want to do clerical work in the future?
- **Do** remember that education also follows the principle about presenting information in the order of importance to the reader; 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 (unless you graduated more than about 15 years ago), followed by peripheral information, such as minor and GPA. If you haven't graduated yet, list your grad year anyway. Simply by virtue of the fact that the date's in the future, the employer will know you don't have the degree yet.
- **Don't** list high school!
- **Don't** include on your resume your height, weight, age, date of birth, place of birth, marital status, sex, ethnicity/race, health, social security number (except on an international resume), reasons for leaving previous job(s), names of former supervisors, specific street addresses or phone numbers of former employers, picture of yourself, salary information, the title "Resume," or any information that could be perceived as controversial, such as religion, church affiliations, or political affiliations.
- **Don't** include hobbies or other irrelevant information on a resume. In most cases, they are seen as superfluous and trivial. An argument can be made that hobbies are interview conversation starters or that they make you seem well-rounded, but they are generally seen as fluff or filler.
- **Do**, however, list sports if you're a college student or new grad. Many employers specifically seek out athletes because of their drive and competitiveness, as well as teamwork and leadership skills. Collegiate athletes should even consider listing their sports background in the Experience section.
- **Don't** list references right on your resume. References belong in a later stage of the job search. Keep references on a separate sheet and provide them only when they are specifically requested.
- **Do** realize that 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.

- **Do** proofread carefully. Misspellings and typos are deadly on a resume.

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.