

RESUMES

“If you’re trying to persuade people to do something, or buy something...you should use their language, the language in which they think.” – David Ogilvy

INTRODUCTION

Prospective employers often know you only as a resume and a cover letter. These documents must argue for you in your absence and, somehow, convince their reader that you can do a particular job very well. This single task is hard enough, but to make it even worse, you will be lucky if an employer spends more than 15–20 seconds reading your resume, and your competition can be vast. This chapter and the next will teach you—as Ogilvy suggests in the quote above—to use the employer’s words to make your job application persuasive, giving you a way of understanding resumes and cover letters that you can use throughout your life.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand the purpose of a resume and how it can be used as a customized personal marketing tool
- Be able to apply the standards of professional language and communication and traditional resume formats
- Know how to write accomplishment statements that clearly and compellingly promote your strengths and skills

THE PERSUASIVE RESUME

When writing any document, you must keep in mind the situation: To whom are you writing? Why are you writing? What words can you use to get what you want? For a student seeking a job or internship, answering these questions is easy:

- You are writing to a potential employer.
- You want this employer to hire you for a specific position.
- Your words must convince the employer that you are the best person for the position.

This seems simple, but people often misconceive the purpose of a resume. Keep in mind that a resume is simply your response to the job-hunting situation. A resume is not a complete history of your work, a whole representation of yourself and your interests, or a job application form. The purpose of the resume is to convince the reader that your past experience proves that you can do the tasks required by the present job or internship. If the resume succeeds, you will be offered an interview to prove it in person.

The most familiar analogue to a resume is probably an advertisement. If it's helpful to you, think of your resume as a marketing device with a single customer, the employer. Remember that marketing does not demand full disclosure. McDonald's doesn't include a calorie count or a history of the company in its ads to sell hamburgers. Your resume should include only the most relevant, persuasive information about yourself.

So what do employers find persuasive and relevant? The rest of the chapter will answer this at length, but the answer isn't complicated. Primarily, the employer needs to believe that you can accomplish all the individual tasks associated with the position. Beyond this, you must also prove that you are "professional," meaning that you know all the unspoken standards of language, presentation, and process. We'll go over these unspoken standards first, because they determine the formatting and general outline of your resume. You must, however, go beyond just these basics; a resume that is not customized for a particular position is less likely to persuade the reader to give you an interview.

Because your resume stands in for you until the interview, you need to understand all the elements that let you control how you are seen even when you aren't physically present:

- **The process.** To a certain extent, you choose how and when to contact your potential employer. You may be required to submit an email or letter, but you control the details of submission as well as the follow-up. You might include portfolio material, link to a website, and call or email periodically to remind the employer of your interest.
- **The format of documents.** In almost every case, you want to match the employer's expectations here. Your resume and cover letter should stand out for the qualifications they present, not because they look odd.
- **The choice of topics and content.** Although many students think their past experience is limited, in fact there is nearly always too much to choose from. Even a position as humble as a volunteer soccer coach offers many choices for a job or internship application: Would you emphasize the management or the mentoring aspect? Would you discuss your coaching methodology in depth or instead talk about where the position led you?
- **Style, word choice, and grammar.** Maybe your old bosses sucked and the job didn't do jack for you, but presenting yourself and your past in those terms won't improve things. One of the unspoken rules is to always appear businesslike, educated, and positive.

Resumes and cover letters are made and remade, over and over, and with striking transformations, from a single body of experience. Be aware of your raw material. All the coursework, volunteering, and extracurricular and paid work you have done can be selectively trimmed and shaped into a job application. Activity 4.1 in the APPENDIX will help you gather your information into one location so that it may be drawn upon when it comes time to create a customized resume.

Liberal arts students, especially, need to know how to market themselves. Your knowledge and experience are incredibly diverse and can be applied and useful to

almost any field. But because most majors don't have a direct job path (such as an accounting major becoming an accountant), it is up to you to make a persuasive case for yourself. With a carefully crafted resume, a history major can make a compelling case for a position in marketing, and a psychology major could land a position in information technology.

Before we go further, though, you need to know the standards of resume-writing. Your documents should follow some basic rules, and you can even tweak these to make your resume stand out and be more persuasive.

EVAN'S RESUME

It had been almost four months since he sent out his first set of job application materials. Since then, Evan, a senior double majoring in history and English, had sent well over 60 resumes and cover letters to various employers and posted his resume on several job board websites. His frustration was mounting and was compounded by the fact that his less-experienced friends seemed to be having more success with their job searches. "How are they getting interviews and I'm not?" Evan wondered.

Evan decided to seek advice from Pam, his former supervisor and now a mentor, from the internship he had last year with a local nonprofit organization. Upon sitting down in Pam's office, Evan said "Here is the resume I've been using."

"*The* resume?" Pam asked.

Pam was taken aback slightly. Evan was a very bright young man, so she was surprised he had not made the connection that a single resume was probably not the best strategy for getting interviews. She explained that every organization is different and with hundreds of candidates to sift through, organizations are more likely to invite candidates to interview who can translate their experience into the skills and knowledge needed for the particular position. After discussing his resume further, she recommended Evan visit his school's career center to utilize their career resources for research and to get more advice about creating targeted resumes.

With his career advisor's help, Evan was able to master the art of creating targeted resumes, which he came to realize involved a lot more research than he had been doing previously. Though the application materials for each position took longer to generate and resulted in his applying for far fewer positions, he was