

## Using a Resume to Showcase Your Talents

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Resumes. We know we need one. Most of us have one. The question is, are we using our resumes to showcase what we can do, and to put our skills and talents in the best light? Will our resumes help us move to the next level in our careers?

A common misconception is that employers use resumes to choose the best candidate for the job. As someone who has often sat on the hiring side of a desk, sorting through dozens, or hundreds, of resumes, a more accurate perspective is that resumes are used for the opposite purpose. Most often, they are used to pick a short list of candidates to interview for a job. In other words, resumes are used to screen out candidates that, at first glance, don't seem qualified enough to make the short list.

Traditional resumes rarely demonstrate a candidate's potential. Instead, a traditional resume is generally used to:

**Chronicle your history**—A particular type of resume, the curriculum vitae, contains a history of your life's accomplishments. For example, resumes for academics chronicle publications, research projects, awards, and so on. This type of resume, common in certain countries and job markets, does little to show potential. Presenting a curriculum vitae assumes that the screener, by reading about your history, can extrapolate your level of expertise in a given subject area and your likely level of performance in a similar position.

**Market yourself**—One of the most common uses of a resume, this is one of the least effective ways to use the document. Marketing yourself by sending resumes to organizations is similar to companies marketing themselves by sending flyers to your home. You bring yourself to the attention of the human resources departments of companies, along with hundreds of other hopeful candidates, but not to the decision-makers. When prominent companies estimate that they receive hundreds of unsolicited resumes every day, marketing yourself this way is not a very effective use of your time.

**Focus an interviewer**—When an inexperienced interviewer begins to meander, you can bring the focus back to your qualifications by making reference to specific points in your resume. This does help you point out what you need to interviewer to remember about you, and it also helps the interviewer remember you. However, the drawback is that the resume still focuses on the past.

Rethinking your resume strategy includes rethinking the use for your resume. The optimum way to use a resume is as a "leave-behind" after a successful networking meeting, to remind your contact about your capabilities. To use a resume this way, you need, first, knowledge of how to structure a networking meeting—also called an informational interview—and, second, an achievement-based resume to use during the meeting.

The most effective way to present a resume uses the networking technique. Using your resume as a basis for discussion helps your business contact understand your capabilities, to refer you to other contacts that may need your services, and helps the contact give you important feedback that you can use to improve your marketability.

Discussing techniques for conducting successful networking meetings is outside the scope of this article. However, articles by technical communicator Tom Murrell (<http://www.techwr->

[l.com/articles](#)) and career coach Emma Hamer (<http://www.hamer-associates.ca/>) are recommended reading as companion pieces to this article.

The discussion here focuses on the content of a quality resume, the differences between resume types, and optimum situations for each type.

### **What goes in, what doesn't**

No matter what type of resume you choose, certain information is expected. Contact information, a career objective, work and educational history, credentials, and accomplishments is all relevant information. Certain industries and professions have expectations around the specific types of information to be included. For example, academics list publications in their resumes, software developers list the coding languages they know, and professionals who need a license to practice list any licenses they hold.

What should be left off a resume is extraneous information that companies can use as part of the screening process. When a company is trying to reduce a stack of several hundred submissions to a short list of under ten, you don't want to give them any information that may help them sort you out; let the judging be done on your skills and abilities.

**Personal information**—Your height, weight, age, and marital status are nobody's business. In fact, many countries forbid employers to ask for this information. Your social security (US) or social insurance number (Canada) are also off limits, at least until you need to fill out forms, after you've been hired.

**Hobbies and interests**—For every person who claims they've been hired because they bonded over their love of gardening or music, there are an equal or larger number of people who have been sorted out, unbeknownst to them, because the resume sorters decided ahead of time that the person wouldn't fit into the team. The only exception to this rule is if your hobby or interest relates directly to the type of job you're seeking. For example, if the position needs budgeting experience, and your volunteer work includes important budgeting experience that can demonstrate your abilities, then find a way to describe your successes.

**References**—You may indicate that you can supply references upon request, but this should be the last step in an employer's hiring process before signing an offer. You don't want your references to be taken by surprise, and have to provide off-the-cuff answers to questions that may determine your future. You'll want to call your references and prepare them to receive a phone call from the employer. At the point where you are offered a position pending good reference checks, you can explain what you need to do, and offer to give them a list once you've had a chance to prepare your references to be called.

### **Resume structures**

You can structure your resume in four basic ways, each format sharing the characteristics of being one- to two-pages long, written in indicative voice, much of it in sentence fragments beginning with active verbs. Which structure you use depends on how much experience you have, what you want to emphasize and, most importantly, how you intend to use your resume. The basic resume types are listed here, with a brief description of their characteristics and the related advantages and disadvantages.

Traditional resume structures—chronological, functional, and hybrid—are meant for use in old-economy ways of job-hunting, that is, sending out a resume in response to a job ad where your resume gets compared against those of the hundreds of other applicants. This structure allows screeners scan, rather than read, the resume to check for prerequisites, and to pigeon-

hole candidates by arbitrary categories: position held, position length of service, software packages used, and so on.

The skills and achievement-based resume structure is ideal for new-economy job-hunting, that is, for use during a networking meeting to demonstrate your potential to a business contact who then recommends other contacts who will appreciate knowing about someone with your talents, or who might themselves decide that they really need someone like you on their team. This type of resume expects the reader to absorb the information to be able to process it, so must be read, not scanned.

**Chronological**—A chronological resume lists the positions you've held, in reverse chronological order. The information includes the position you held, the name of the company and location, and the year you started and left. The description is divided into the mandate—this is what you were hired to do—and your accomplishments—what you did above and beyond the call of duty, or what you did particularly well. When using this format, be sure to mention the industry, as it may not be obvious from the company name.

The advantage of this resume format is for strong candidates in a single functional area responding to job ads, and for those who show a steady career progression, such as junior writer, writer, senior writer.

The disadvantage is the tacit assumption that this is *the* work you do, and that you do best in a job like the one you've done before, so does not work well for career-changing, cross-functional promotions, or moving laterally into a new functional area.

**Functional**—A functional resume groups information by work function rather than by date. For example, a technician who wants to make a transition to a writing position would list positions with a writing component, highlighting the types of writing done and downplaying the actual position title.

The advantage of this resume format is for career-changers who want to demonstrate a particular skill when a chronological resume doesn't do so.

The disadvantage is that screeners and human resources staff generally don't react well to this format, and also want to see a chronological version, at which point, the candidate is usually screened out of the selection process for "lack of experience."

**Hybrid**—A hybrid resume groups information according to function, but also contains a chronological section. Structuring a resume this way helps to show work continuity, in cases where an employment gap could distract the reviewer from your skills and abilities.

The advantages and disadvantages of this resume format are much the same as for users of chronological and functional resumes. They serve to show consistent success in a functional area, and work only for staff with predictable career paths, where a screener can easily categorize candidates by their chronological or functional experience.

**Skills and achievement-based**—An achievement-based resume is two pages long—one sheet, front and back—with the second page providing a brief chronological work history of relevant positions and supplemental information. This type of resume uses the first page to demonstrate that what you've accomplished in the past, you can accomplish for a future employer. (See Fig. 1 for an example of an achievement-based resume.)

Achievements make up the substantive portion of the resume, and are chosen to match your skills to the expectations of a position. The achievements aren't tied to a particular position held in the past, nor to a primary job, supplemental work, or volunteer position. Instead, the achievements you include must demonstrate that you have the transferable skills to take on the task at hand. In fact, experienced networkers watermark their resumes with "DRAFT" when

conducting a meeting, in order to get candid feedback from their contacts that can be used to refine their achievements.

The advantage of this resume format is that listing achievements takes the focus off of the “circumstantial evidence” of your past, and turns attention to both what you have actually *accomplished*, and to what you can do for a future employer. Coupled with an informational interview, this resume format becomes a formidable tool for recent graduates, career-changers, generalists, and the promotion-bound. Achievement-based resumes, a staple of the executive set where demonstrating one’s potential is critical, have fast become the most effective marketing tool for job-seekers.

There are two disadvantages to this format. One is when the tools a candidate knows is valued more than how discerningly the tools are used. As well, recruiters and agencies are uncomfortable with this resume format because it does not lend itself to slotting candidates into the neat little categories that are used by human resources databases. For example, it’s easier for a recruiter to slot a person by the tools they know or by the number of years of team lead experience, than it is to ascertain that the skills and achievements of a candidate would make an excellent match to those required in a project management position.

### **Information categories**

A good resume has several categories of information, which fall into three basic types: contact, substantive, and supplemental information.

#### ***Contact information***

Include your basic contact information. This may seem self-evident, but you’d be surprised how many resumes don’t have enough information to get in touch with candidates. Include the basic contact information in your resume, not just in your covering letter; letters can get discarded or separated from the resume. Be sure to put your information into the body of your resume, as the software some companies use to process resumes won’t recognize text in headers and footers. name, address, phone number, and email address. An important point of etiquette it to use your personal phone number and email address, not the one at your place of work.

#### ***Substantive information***

The most important information you can include in a resume is a careful selection of your achievements. The format for writing achievements is to write three statements: what you did and for whom, how you did it, and the results.

The first statement concisely describes a company’s problem area or situation. The more that interviewers can identify with the problem, the better they can relate to how your services can help them solve problems they may have in their company.

The second statement identifies the transferable skills you used to tackle the problem. The ability to analyze, interpret, edit, and plan are examples of transferable skills, that is, skills that can be used in a variety of circumstances. Not only does this statement demonstrate how you approach situations, it reassures potential employers that you can use your skills to reproduce your process and results.

The third statement describes the outcome of your efforts, and should be written with a view to demonstrating how you’ve met a business goal. Ideally, you’ll have gathered enough

data to quantify your successes, and you can present your achievement in a way that will impress potential employers with your understanding of their needs.

The following example of an achievement is from an actual project undertaken in 1991, and expressed in a format that impresses upon potential employers what this technical communicator could bring to an organization. “Analyzed multilingual documentation for a large computer manufacturer to improve production methods. Identified schedule and cost efficiencies, oversaw production and translation coordination in over nine languages, developed modular documentation strategies and directed implementation of pilot project. Results: Reduced documentation turn cycle by 65%, initial production costs by 40%, and end documentation cost by 25%.”

It’s a good idea to create an achievements bank by spending a few days documenting all your achievements and rewriting them in a standard format. That way, you can tailor your achievements to suit each job, to highlight how your transferable skills apply to each specific situation. If you find yourself having trouble capturing your achievements, consider enlisting the help of a career coach with expertise in the area; it can significantly reduce the time and frustration of pulling together the material in an appropriate way.

### **Supplemental information**

The body of a resume begins with a career objective. Everyone wants “an exciting job in a progressive company,” so be specific enough to make your objective meaningful. State briefly what type of position you’re seeking, what you can contribute to the company you’re approaching, and what type of company you’d like to work for. Build in the “what’s in it for them” marketing statement. For example, an objective for a technical editing job could be: “To contribute to a technical writing team that uses my exceptional editing skills for a mid-size to large organization in the software development industry.” A well-written objective also helps the resume screeners determine which job in the company you are applying for.

Many resumes contain a section that lists skills and abilities, areas of expertise, or lists industry-specific information such as tools mastered. Such a list should not be so prominent as to detract from your skills. After all, listing the fact that you play the violin does not guarantee that you can play skillfully; neither does a list of software programs guarantee the quality of your writing, editing, or management skills.

Educational background, professional development, professional memberships, and any publications and awards should be listed, as well. However, unless you have a newly-minted, advanced degree in a sexy new discipline, don’t make this information particularly prominent.

Developing the right kind of resume is an important part of a job search. The resume is your public face, your marketing brochure, the “leave-behind” that gets passed around, and used to decide your suitability once you have left the premises. The most important aspect of your resume is not to show your *history*, but your *potential* to an employer. For savvy job-seekers who tap into the hidden job market, an achievement-based resume can bridge the gap between the past and the future, job history and job potential, function and talent. A great resume should show off your talents, and let employers give you a chance to use them.

## Resources

Transferable skills:

[http://www.d.umn.edu/student/loon/car/self/career\\_transfer\\_survey.html](http://www.d.umn.edu/student/loon/car/self/career_transfer_survey.html)

Achievements:

<http://susanireland.com/resumeguide/achievements.html>

Using networking as a job search technique:

<http://www.hamer-associates.ca/>

## About the Author

Rahel Anne Bailie has been in the workforce over 30 years, with 4 of those years operating a resume-writing business, and the last 20 years in technical communication. In the high-tech world of start-ups, downsizing, buy-outs, and outsourcing, Rahel has a great deal of experience crafting resumes for herself and others. Rahel is founder of [Intentional Design Inc.](#), a content development, content management, and usability micro-consultancy in Vancouver, BC, Canada.