

Optimizing your Content-Development Resume

I'm often asked to review and comment on content-developers' resumes. As the job market heats up, I've got less time to do that. I hope you'll consider the following advice a helpful compromise.

- 1) **FORMAT** – Please create your resume as a single-column document (not one large table) and send it in MS Word format (any version). It's much easier for me to work with that way, and results in your getting faster consideration by my hiring managers. If you're worried I won't have the fonts you used, include a PDF version, but the Word variant is what I'll open first. One reason: you'd be surprised what I can learn by displaying Word's ruler (Alt-V, L), paragraph and tab symbols, real-time spell/grammar checker, and even Track Changes. Hint: take the time to learn the tool so that you make a good first impression. For examples of effective resume formats, see Synergistech's [Resume Gallery \(www.synergistech.com/resume-gallery.shtml\)](http://www.synergistech.com/resume-gallery.shtml).
- 2) **CONTACT INFO** — At the top of your Word resume (but – please – not in the document's header or footer) include your name, city, state, ZIP code, daytime phone number, personal (non-work) email address, your private portfolio URL, if any, and – if you've populated it with your clients/employers, dates, experience, and recommendations – your LinkedIn profile URL. Ensure your email address is professional (i.e., not “cute-n-cuddly@aol.com”), never include a picture, and if you include a portfolio URL make sure the *entire* site's content is purely professional (i.e., no candid, opinions, or humor).
- 3) **PROFILE** — Begin with a **Profile** statement that distils your relevance for a given opportunity to a maximum of three sentences. **DO** summarize your applicable skills (e.g., 20 years' experience writing API reference documentation for software developers, with strong understanding of databases, virtualization, and mobile application development”). **DON'T** cite irrelevant skills and experience (e.g., “acclaimed horticulturalist, D&D player, Society for Creative Anachronism regular”). Omit vapid Objective statements. Your goal: efficiently answer the question “why hire me?” If you're serious about getting hired, customize your **Profile** for every job — even quoting liberally from the posting — and ensure your entire resume supports this statement.
- 4) Next, include either your **Technology/Tools** or your **Professional Experience** sections, depending on how significant you feel their contents will be to the hiring organization.
- 5) **SKILLS** — Under **Technology/Tools**, cite the Operating Systems, Authoring Tools, Graphics Applications, Databases, Networking Protocols, Programming Languages, and any other relevant environments, applications, or tools with which you have experience (on-the-job or through classes and your own research). If you're a content creator, consider including separate categories for Audiences, Deliverables, Industries, and Natural Languages. For bonus points, arrange all these as a table (with or without borders).

For example:

Operating Systems	Windows 7, UNIX/Linux, Mac OS X, Cisco IOS, Apple iOS, Android
Authoring	Adobe FrameMaker 12, RoboHelp, InDesign, Dreamweaver; MadCap Flare, XMetaL Author, Arbortext Editor, Author-it, oXygen XML Editor, MS Word 2013, HTML 5, MediaWiki, Confluence, WebWorks ePublisher, Doxygen, Javadoc
Graphics	Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, Paint Shop Pro, CorelDRAW, Snag-It
Databases	Oracle 12, MySQL, SQL, NoSQL, DB2, MS Access, Hadoop
Networking	TCP/IP, IF-MAP, SNMP, NMS, RIP, OSPF, BGP, CLI
Programming	Read and write C++ and Java. Familiar with csh, XML:FO, XSL, Python, Perl, LISP. Learning Ruby, JavaScript, PHP. Expert with vi,

Other Tools	VMware, Parallels, Documentum, JIRA, Perforce, Subversion, Eclipse, MS PowerPoint, WordPress, Acrobat Pro, WebLogic, DITA, Quicken, QuickBooks Pro, Acrolinx
Content Audiences	Open source developers, small business owners, consumers, CTOs, database administrators, financial analysts, academics
Content Deliverables	API references, developer tutorials, HTML help, PDF, eBooks (ePUB), hardcopy, user's guides, system/network administration guides, tuning guides, operator's guides, Getting Started guides, indexes, glossaries, doc plans, style guides, blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, white papers, press releases, brochures, logos, websites, data books, run books, functional specs
Industries	IT analytics, IT infrastructure (esp. virtualization), SaaS/PaaS/IaaS, data security, mobile networking, storage, consumer appliances, EDA, financial, insurance, medical, bioinformatics, legal, education, content localization
Natural Languages	Speak and read French, Spanish, and Mandarin; translate all to US English
Related Skills	Project management, localization, quality assurance, Agile team leadership, editing, proofreading, structured-content authoring

Note: 1) only citing tools and technologies in this section, and failing to make clear elsewhere how or where you used them, gives these terms substantially less weight. Beware the context-free catalog. 2) Omit obsolete technologies (e.g., Interleaf, Ventura Publisher, PageMaker, WordPerfect, DEC VAX/VMS) unless you've used nothing more recent; 3) Omit everyday tools such as browsers, email clients (Outlook, Thunderbird), Google, social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), photo services, and Craigslist; 4) When applying online, prepare a text-only version of your resume with a blank line before the category's name and a line break after it.

- 6) **WORK HISTORY** — Under **Professional Experience**, present your work history beginning with the most recent job or contract engagement. This is known as a "reverse chronological" resume, by contrast with a "functional" one. Don't separate contract employment into its own section; hiring managers want to see professional progress over time as well as employment gaps.
- 7) **COMPANY + DATES** — For each job or contract engagement, cite (in this order) the company name, city, state, and your dates (month and year, not just year) of employment or engagement. Mention any promotions and contract extensions or call-backs. If the company has since been acquired, include the name of the acquiring company in parentheses (e.g., "Compaq (now Hewlett-Packard)"). If the company is obscure, outline (in no more than 10 words) what it does/did. Specifically, how does/did it make money and who are/were its clients and partners? If the company is vast, indicate in which division you work(ed) and, very briefly, what it does/did (e.g., "Oracle Corp, Minicomputer Products / support RDBMS on proprietary operating systems and networks"). On the next line, state your title (e.g., "Contract Instructional Designer").
- 8) **ACCOMPLISHMENTS** — In a bullet list, or a short (three lines maximum) paragraph, present your accomplishments – *not* your responsibilities. If your efforts generated income for your client or employer, or reduced expenses, cite that information first. Dollar signs, percentage, and even very short quotations (e.g., "beyond my expectations") are priceless. Acronyms grab readers' attention, too. Restrict bullet lists to fewer than seven (7) items; if necessary, group them by categories (e.g., project, role, deliverable, dates) and/or nest a few of the items. In general, draw attention to any (or, if you have lots, the top 2 or 3) achievement in which you

met goals, completed projects, solved problems, positively impacted your department or team, generated new ideas or projects, fulfilled tasks, gained knowledge, exceeded expectations, or received kudos from clients or co-workers. The only exception: responsibilities you never want again. Omit these entirely. If you include them, it'll look like you seek recognition for them or, even worse, that you'll be a flight risk if you don't get to use them. That's the main reason to customize every resume.

- 9) BE DYNAMIC — For all entries, begin with an action verb such as *led*, *earned*, *built*, *created*, *developed*, *delivered*, *directed*, *conceived*, and *managed*. Avoid or bury weak verbs such as *helped*, *coordinated*, *facilitated*, *participated*, *represented*, *communicated*, *worked*, *planned*, *provided*, *served*, *acted*, and *assisted*. Remember parallelism; every entry must start with a hard-hitting verb. No limp “Responsible for...” or “As a member of...” entries. And no verbatim repetition, anywhere. Also, don't forget to put these verbs in the past tense when the job's over.
- 10) BE SUCCINCT — Highlight the essence of each accomplishment within the first five (5) words of each entry. Otherwise your reader will skip the rest and scan for the next acronym, number, or heading (e.g., good: “Delivered original 200-page API reference manual ahead of schedule” bad: “Assisted colleagues with various projects including arranging holiday events, team offsite”). Crystalizing your value requires you to know what matters to your audience; if you don't, you can't. And if you can't, you'll starve. To avoid natural selection, re-read that job ad. Tighten your prose; omit pronouns and articles. Specifically, strike instances of “I”, “me”, “my”, “their”, “our”, “a”, “an”, and “the” whenever possible. Italicize document names. Don't write complete sentences. Also, unless your entries include multiple sentences – e.g., “Rebranded main product. Company later acquired for \$200M profit.”) – they shouldn't end with a period.
- 11) CITE RESULTS — Even if you don't know the related numbers (profits, savings, percentage improvements), stress the results of your efforts (e.g., “improvements saved money and reduced time to market”, “new features dramatically improved customer satisfaction”). That “how can I help you?” mindset is invaluable, especially with those who don't truly understand what you do. Those who get into content development because they love to write or love to learn often overlook this, but people don't care about your craft — just your impact.
- 12) TOOT YOUR HORN — Include **Awards**, **Affiliations**, and **Professional Development** sections if you can populate them. Include details of formal training (MOOCs, workshops, seminars, even webinars) and any self-study that's relevant to your goal. It gives you the chance to include buzzwords, and can demonstrate that you're current even if you've not used the skill(s) on the job. Draw attention to any leadership roles you've held; as self-sufficiency, resourcefulness, and goal-orientation are key intangible traits any hiring manager prizes.
- 13) EDUCATION — Conclude with an **Education** section that cites degree(s) and relevant degree-related coursework, major (if undergraduate), institution, and state. For all but post-graduate education, always omit dates. Your goal: avoid hinting at your age. Only if you know your degree is the most valuable aspect of your candidacy should you move it above your **Professional Experience** section. Don't forget internships and group/individual projects, if you're just starting out or are transitioning careers.
- 14) WHAT ELSE TO OMIT — Skip the “references/portfolio available on request” statement. And don't include a **References** section; disclosing these people's identities and contact info leads to their being contacted by less-scrupulous recruiters and getting burnt out. Skip the **Personal Interests** section – they're irrelevant at best, a liability at worse – and always omit marital status, family, ethnic, age, citizenship, or location-related data. This is none of the hiring organization's business but, if you volunteer it, they can and will use it against you. Finally, a **Keywords** section (especially if it's tiny text or set to white/invisible) is a big no-no; it's a blatant

attempt to mislead those searching for relevant content, and suggests that you're out of touch with the current nomenclature for what is marketable.

- 15) **LENGTH** — As long as it's all directly relevant, a long resume does no harm, whereas a short resume that skips crucial details does. The cardinal sin of most experienced candidates' resumes — even worse than typos — is making the reader *think*. If your reader has to guess what you've done, they almost certainly won't call. If your concern is making yourself look too old relative to the average applicant, exclude professional experience older than ten (10) years unless it's directly relevant. When it is, put it under **Additional Experience** and cite only your role, client/employer, location, and dates along with no more than a line about the relevant activity.
- 16) **VALIDATE** — To improve your credibility, anticipate a really picky recruiter's or hiring manager's queries. Ask yourself "why" about every fact and opinion, especially those in your **Profile** and **Professional Experience** sections. Why include a specific accomplishment, why mention a given skill, why make a certain (subjective) claim, and — not least — why did you leave? If not already self-evident, answer these implicit questions inline.
For example, you claim you're "resourceful" and "diligent" (highly subjective); provide empirical evidence. Validate your opinions with facts, preferably quantified ones. You might say "Implemented full-featured test bed to verify installation procedures for seven products under six operating systems; became pre-sales' go-to resource for client site troubleshooting and saved \$4M worth of deals."
Or, if you transitioned to an unrelated field, explain that you were helping out a friend (or, better yet, a former boss).
Or, if you had an unusually short tenure somewhere, mention that it was a contract cut short by the company's bankruptcy or a natural disaster.
If you don't volunteer a good (true) reason, you'll face the consequences of having made the decision-maker think. (Note: they won't, and nor will your phone ring.)
- 17) **APPEARANCE** — When you're happy with your resume's content, use Word's Print Layout view and tidy up page breaks (Control-Enter, not Enter-Enter-Enter...), misaligned text (left-justify all body text except perhaps your contact info, and use Word's ruler to set indents, exdents, and tabs), inconsistent inter-line and inter-word spacing, chaotic use of bold, italics, and underlining (please, avoid the latter), page numbering, and margin settings. Then spell-check it.
- 18) **REST, EDIT, PROOF, REPEAT** — Before you send your resume anywhere, walk away from your screen and clear your mind. Then review your first-impression-maker with fresh eyes. Or call in a favor with a ruthless editor and let her bleed (red ink) on it. Spell-checkers can only do so much to rescue your reputation. It's scary, but almost 99 percent of the resumes I receive (including from experienced writers) contain skipped words, homonyms, inconsistent punctuation, parallelism problems, basic errors of grammar, and egregious formatting. Be part of the One Percent and you'll get special treatment — and not just from me.
- 19) **PRIVACY** — Word stores metadata in your document that you probably don't want to share, including the name, initials, and company of the Word license owner, comments, hidden text, the name of any previous contributors, and the details of all revisions made. There's a quick way to purge most of this content; in Word pre-2010: Tools menu → Options → Security → Check "Remove personal information from file properties on save" and in Word 2010 and 2013: File menu → Info → Check for Issues (in Prepare for Sharing section) → Inspect Document → select types of data → Remove All. Then, regardless of your version of Word, save your document.
- 20) **UPDATE** — You're not "done" writing your resume until you accept a new position. Even then, it's wise to keep it fresh. Every time you read an intriguing job ad or talk with someone you might enjoy working for someday, think about relevant new details, terminology, and skills to include in your resume. Then jot them down. Ditto when you learn new skills. It's much easier

working from notes than memory, and your next iteration will be both more accurate and compelling.

When you're ready, send me the result. I'm at synergistech@gmail.com, ready to deliver ROI.

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