



List of Common Résumé Mistakes to Avoid

(Michele Whetzel – Revise Résumé)

In my more than 20 years of résumé re-working, I always have my clients send me their old résumés because it is much easier to adapt what they already have than to start from scratch. I have found that many people make the same mistakes repeatedly, and I am sharing them so you can avoid the pitfalls and increase your chances of landing the interview – and the job!

1. Inventing details to try to make yourself sound better

- a. Of course, no one may know that you have done this – at first. But if you get the job, and it becomes clear that you do not possess the skills you claimed to have, it will become a messy situation for all involved.
- b. Be truthful – but present your actual experience in its best light. Lies about your education, experience, or accomplishments may get you the job, but they may come back to bite you later. You don't want to constantly be looking over your shoulder, waiting to be found out.
- c. Use a humble brag approach – list your achievements, but don't be overly boastful about them.

2. A résumé that is too long or too short

- a. No matter what your college job placement center told you, **your résumé does not have to fit on a single page.** If you have enough relevant experience (internships, projects worked on, relevant lab work, volunteer experience, etc.), do not try to squeeze it all onto one page that is unreadable. Recruiters and hiring managers scan your résumé for less than three minutes many times, so if they are not able to pick out the details they are requiring for the job listing, you will not get an interview.
Use a second page only if you can fill about 2/3 of it. You do not want a second page with only a few lines – it will look like you weren't competent to format it to fit it on one page. To round out a second page, add things like leadership roles, volunteer work, boards, committees, professional memberships, or international experience – especially if you have traveled to or speak the languages of countries where the company operates.
- b. **Two pages is the maximum.** No one is so "important" that they should require a hiring manager to read more than two pages of their résumé. **Even if you have decades of experience, your job is to pare it down to two pages that highlight the most relevant accomplishments.** If a job from 10 years ago is more aligned with the one you are applying for, but you have had a few other jobs in between, you can still list more recent roles briefly to avoid gaps, but focus attention on that earlier, relevant experience.

3. Writing descriptions in paragraph form rather than bullet points

- a. Recruiters skim résumés quickly. If they cannot easily gather the information about your experience and qualifications, you will not get a chance to interview, let alone get the job.
- b. Think like a hiring manager. **Can they easily spot your most impressive qualifications at a glance?**
- c. Use bullet points to list your accomplishments under each job.
- d. Bold your contact information, section headers, and job titles (not company names, unless they are well-known).
- e. Do not try to cram in every detail of your past ten years! Highlight some of it in your cover letter, **take out unnecessary details**, and be sure that a person reading your résumé can gather the important details in one or two glances.

4. Inconsistent formatting

- a. Use the same format throughout each section. If you list company first then job title, do that everywhere. **(I recommend bolding your job title and not the company name unless you have worked for some well-known companies that you want to spotlight.)**
- b. **Right-align your dates** consistently. Use tab stops to align dates cleanly. The right margin should be straight, not jagged, when looking at the overall page.
- c. **Maintain consistent use of type size, bold, and italics** for all headings and content.
- d. Your bullet points with your job experience/accomplishments should all be phrases (not sentences) that each start with an action verb. **Vary the starting verbs in each phrase** to avoid repetition, and **do not use a period at the end** because it is not a sentence.
- e. **Avoid using “I” (or first person)** in your résumé. The “I” should be understood. Instead of saying, “I managed three staff members,” say, “Managed three staff members...” This helps keep bullets concise, and it also prevents repetition.
- f. **Avoid using a standalone section.** You should have at least two separate items to make up a section (other than Education). If you only have one volunteer experience to list, either leave it out, or combine it in another section and rename that section. You could list it with your paying jobs and title the section, “Experience” instead of “Work History,” or combine it with other things you have done in your community and title it “Community.” Be creative but not too out-of-the-box.

5. Spelling and grammar errors

- a. **The past tense of “Lead” is “Led!”** So many people use “Lead” as the past tense in a previous job (e.g., “lead a team of ten staff members” two jobs ago). L-E-A-D either means the present tense (e.g., “I currently lead...”) or it is the heavy metal found in old paint.
- b. There are a number of other commonly misspelled words. **Use spell check, and also have a good editor read it before you send it out.** A typo that is a real word (e.g., “manger” instead of “manager”) won’t be caught by spell check.
- c. **Make sure your verb tenses are consistent.** Use present tense for your current job and past tense for previous roles. You can mix tenses within your current job if you’re describing both current and completed responsibilities.

- d. **Skip unnecessary adjectives.** Rather than “skillfully managed executive calendar,” say, “managed executive calendar” instead. Less is better here.
 - e. Be specific and measurable. Rather than “wrote **great** content for the nonprofit’s website,” say, “wrote and edited website content that increased visitor engagement by 40%.” In the first example, “great” would sound like it is subjective, but the second example speaks for itself as to why it was great.
6. **Using inconsistent verb forms in a list within a single bullet**
- a. Rather than, “researched grant opportunities, **submitting** proposals, and tracked outcomes” say, “researched grant opportunities, **submitted** proposals, and tracked outcomes.”
 - b. Rather than, “planned events, **manages** logistics, and coordinated with vendors,” say, “planned events, **managed** logistics, and coordinated with vendors.”
7. **Listing your job duties instead of accomplishments**
- a. People can most likely guess, from the job title listed, the types of day-to-day tasks that may be associated with that job. **What hiring managers really want to know is how you can add value to their company and/or to the end user** - this is the one thing that matters most to the hiring company.
 - b. **Start each bullet with an action verb and focus on outcomes** (increased sales by X%, decreased expenses by \$X, etc.) and/or the end user of the products or services (helped X number of customers overcome their specific problem, increased percentage of people who were helped by X amount, etc.).
 - c. **Use strong estimates** if exact dollar numbers or percentages are not available. This may require doing some calculations to determine this, but you don’t want to just throw out a crazy guess. **Avoid making up numbers you can’t defend.**
8. **Listing education at the top (unless you are a recent graduate)**
- a. Hiring managers care more about your experience and how you’ve contributed to past roles than about your degree. They want to know how you can help the company.
 - b. **Put education last** unless you graduated in the past year or two.
9. **Assuming everyone understands industry acronyms**
- a. Not every recruiter or hiring manager will be familiar with your industry lingo.
 - b. **Spell out the acronym the first time you use it**, and include the abbreviation in parentheses after the last word. [e.g., “National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)”]
 - c. After that, you can use the acronym throughout the rest of the résumé.
10. **Failing to have someone else review your résumé before submitting it**
- a. It’s hard to spot your own errors, especially after reading your résumé multiple times.
 - b. **Always have someone else review it** for spelling, grammar, clarity, and formatting issues. A second set of eyes can help ensure your résumé presents you in your best light.

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