

# RÉSUMÉS, APPLICATIONS, AND COVER LETTERS

Olivia Crosby  
(updated by  
Drew Liming)

*Olivia Crosby wrote this article while working in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS. Drew Liming is an economist in that office and can be reached at (202) 691-5262 or [liming.drew@bls.gov](mailto:liming.drew@bls.gov).*

**Y**ou have skills that employers want. But those skills won't get you a job if no one knows you have them.

Good résumés, applications, and cover letters broadcast your abilities. They tell employers how your qualifications match a job's responsibilities. If these critical preliminaries are constructed well, you have a better chance of landing interviews—and, eventually, a job.



The availability of personal computers and laser printers has raised employers' expectations of the quality of résumés and cover letters that applicants produce. E-mail and online applications help some employers sort and track hundreds of résumés. Technology has also given résumé writers greater flexibility; page limits and formatting standards are no longer as rigid as they were several years ago. "The only rule is that there are no rules," says Frank Fox, executive director of the Professional Association of Résumé Writers. "Résumés should be error free—no typos or spelling mistakes—but beyond that, use any format that conveys the information well."

However, the no-rules rule does not mean anything goes. You still have to consider what is reasonable and appropriate for the job you want. Advertisements for a single job opening can generate dozens, even hundreds, of responses. Busy reviewers often spend as little as 30 seconds deciding whether a résumé deserves consideration.

This article provides some guidelines for creating résumés and cover letters that will

help you pass the 30-second test and win interviews. The first section, on résumés, describes what information your résumé should contain, how to highlight your skills for the job you want, and types of résumés. The next section discusses the four parts of a cover letter—salutation, opening, body, and closing. A final section offers suggestions for learning more about résumés and cover letters. The box on page 21 provides advice on completing application forms.

## Résumés: Marketing your skills

A résumé is a brief summary of your experience, education, and skills. It is a marketing piece, usually one or two pages long, designed to interest an employer. Good résumés match the jobseeker's abilities to the job's requirements. The best résumés highlight an applicant's strengths and accomplishments.

There are four main steps to creating a résumé: Compiling information about

yourself and the occupations that interest you, choosing a résumé format, adding style, and proofreading the final document. You may also want to prepare your résumé for e-mailing and for an online application form.

### **Gathering and organizing the facts**

Start working on your résumé by collecting and reviewing information about yourself: previous positions, job duties, volunteer work, skills, accomplishments, education, and activities. These are the raw materials of your résumé. This is also a good time to review your career goals and to think about which past jobs you have liked, and why.

After compiling this information, research the occupations that interest you. Determine the duties they entail, credentials they require, and skills they use. Your résumé will use your autobiographical information to show that you meet a job's requirements.

You will probably need to write a different résumé for each job that interests you. Each résumé will emphasize what is relevant to one position. Remember: Even if you do not have many specialized and technical skills, most occupations also require abilities like reliability, teamwork, and communication. These are particularly important for entry-level workers.

The next step is to organize the personal information you have assembled. Most résumé writers use the following components.

**Contact information.** This includes your name; permanent and college campus addresses, if you are in school and your addresses differ; phone number; and e-mail address. Place your full legal name at the top of your résumé and your contact information underneath it. This information should be easy to see; reviewers who can't find your phone number can't call you for an interview. Also, make sure the outgoing message on your voicemail sounds professional. And remember to check your e-mail inbox regularly.

**Qualifications summary.** The qualifications summary, which evolved from the objective statement, is an overview designed to quickly answer the employer's question

“Why should I hire you?” It lists a few of your best qualifications and belongs below your contact information. A qualifications summary is optional. It can be particularly effective for applicants with extensive or varied experience because it prevents the important facts from being lost among the details.

**Education.** List all relevant training, certifications, and education on your résumé. Start with the most recent and work backward. For each school you have attended, list the school's name and location; diploma, certificate, or degree earned, along with year of completion; field of study; and honors received. If you have not yet completed one of your degrees, use the word expected before your graduation date. If you do not know when you will graduate, add “in progress” after the name of the unfinished degree.

The education section is especially important for recent graduates. Include your overall grade point average, average within major, or class standing, if it helps your case. The general guideline is to include averages of 3.0 and above, but the minimum useful average is still widely debated. Graduates should also consider listing relevant courses under a separate heading. Listing four to eight courses related to a particular occupation shows a connection between education and work. College graduates need not list their high school credentials.

**Experience.** Résumés should include your job history: The name and location of the organizations you have worked for, years you worked there, title of your job, a few of the duties you performed, and results you achieved. Also, describe relevant volunteer activities, internships, and school projects, especially if you have little paid experience.

When describing your job duties, emphasize results instead of responsibilities and performance rather than qualities. It is not enough, for example, to claim you are organized; you must use your experience to prove it.

Job descriptions often specify the scope of a position's duties—such as the number of phone lines answered, forms processed, or people supervised. If you worked on a project

## Applications: Fitting yourself to the form

Many jobs require jobseekers to complete an application instead of submitting a résumé. But an application is a résumé in disguise: Its purpose is to show your qualifications. Assembling the following information about yourself in advance will make it easier to complete applications:

- **Identification.** Be prepared to give your name, address, phone number, and Social Security number. You may also need to bring proof of identification when you pick up and drop off the application.
- **Employment history.** List the month and year you started and ended each job; your supervisor's name, address, and phone number; your job title, location, salary, and major duties; and your reason for leaving.
- **Education and certification.** Know the name and city of the school you attended and the year you received your degree and the name, level, and award and renewal dates of certification.
- **Special skills.** List any special skills you have that are closely related to the job, such as computer applications, or equipment operation.
- **References.** Provide the names, phone numbers, and addresses of three or four people who have agreed to recommend you.

When you pick up an application, don't miss an opportunity to make a good first impression. Dress as you would for the job. Politely request two copies of the form, or make your own copies of the original before you start filling it out. Read the entire application before you begin. Then, use one copy as a rough draft and the other as the final product. Write neatly with black ink.

Answer every question on the application. Write "not applicable" or "none" if a question does not apply to you. Some reviewers suggest answering "will discuss in interview" if asked for information that might disqualify you.

Make a copy of your completed application. If you go back for an interview, take this record with you. Having a completed form will also make it easier to fill out the next one.

Although forms do not offer the same flexibility as a résumé, you can still find ways to highlight your best qualifications. For example, you can use strong action verbs to describe your duties. If you do not have paid experience, you can give job titles to your volunteer work or list relevant academic experience, substituting student for job titles.

**Computer applications.** If you are filling out an application for a computer database, you will want to use keywords and simple formatting. Put the most important information first. Include as much information as you can for each question without becoming wordy or repetitive. The more relevant details you provide, the better your chances of using a keyword that matches an employer's requirements. Before submitting the form, copy and paste your answers into a word-processing program so you can check the spelling.

with other people, tell the reviewer your accomplishments came from a team effort. Also, mention any promotions or increases in responsibility you received.

Use specific accomplishments to give your experience impact. Note any improvements you made, any time or money you saved, and any problems you solved—for example, were you praised for handling difficult customers? Were you always on time or available for overtime? Did you start a new program? Mention quantifiable results you accomplished, such as a 10-percent increase in sales, a 90-percent accuracy rate, a 25-percent increase in student participation, or an “A” grade.

**Activities and associations.** Activities can be an excellent source of experience, especially for students in high school or college who don’t have much work experience. Students can list their involvement in school or extracurricular activities as a way of showing a prospective employer their initiative.

Activities might include participation in organizations, associations, student government, clubs, or community activities, especially those related to the position you are applying for or that demonstrate hard work and leadership skills.

**Special skills.** If you have specific computer, foreign language, or technical skills, consider highlighting them by giving them their own category—even if they don’t relate directly to the occupation you’re pursuing. For jobs in information technology, for example, jobseekers may list programming and computer application skills in a separate section. But because most occupations now require computer skills, jobseekers in other fields also may list those skills separately.

**Awards and honors.** Include formal recognition you have received. Do not omit professional or academic awards. These are often listed with an applicant’s experience or education, but some list them at the end of their résumé.

**References.** Usually, résumés do not include names of references, but some reviewers suggest breaking this rule if the names are

recognizable in the occupation or industry. Some résumé writers end with the statement “References available upon request.” Others assume reference availability is understood and use that space for more important information. Regardless of whether you mention it on the résumé, you will need to create a separate reference sheet to provide when requested and to carry with you to interviews.

A reference sheet lists the name, title, office address, and phone number of three to five people who know your abilities. Before offering them as references, of course, make sure these people have agreed to recommend you. At the top of the sheet, type your name and contact information, repeating the format you used in your résumé.

**Other personal information.** Your résumé should include any other information that is important to your occupation, such as a completed portfolio or a willingness to travel. Your résumé is your own, and you should customize it to fit your needs. However, some information does not belong on a résumé. Do not disclose your health, disability, marital status, age, or ethnicity. This information is illegal for most employers to request.

## Choosing a format

There are three main résumé formats—chronological, functional, and combination. Each is defined by the way it organizes your experience. Choose the one that shows your experience to its best advantage.

**Chronological.** This résumé type is the most common. It organizes your experience around the jobs you have held. This format is an excellent choice for people with steady work histories or previous jobs that relate closely to their career objective.

To create a chronological résumé, list each position you have held, starting with the most recent and working backward. For each position, give the title of your job, name of the organization you worked for, and years you worked there. Next, relate the duties and accomplishments of that job. When describing jobs, use action statements, not sentences. Instead of writing “I managed a fundraising

# Sample chronological résumé

Elizabeth Smith

## Current Address

1016 Campus Drive, Room 312  
College Town, LS 41112  
(453) 555-5555  
Smith@LS.edu

## Permanent Address

1510 Park Street  
Hamlet, LS 41112  
(454) 555-5555  
Smith@somewhere.com

Horizontal lines help  
define different sections

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## Qualifications Summary

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Proven communications skills and experience creating promotions for wide audiences.

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## Education

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### University of Large State

Bachelor of Arts, English, expected 2010  
Minor: Business  
G.P.A.: 3.5/4.0, English Honors Society

Students often list  
education before  
experience

### Related Courses

Public Relations	The Language of Advertising
Marketing	Writing for Mass Media
Consumer Behavior	Writing for Business

Coursework relating to  
the position applied for

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## Experience

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### Program Coordinator

Campus Activities Council, Large State University

- Initiated and organized the Campus Run for Charity
- Promoted event with fliers, e-mail, newspaper ads, and campus radio station announcements
- 1,000 students participated

Show results

08-present  
Most recent job first

### Campus Tour Guide

Office of Recruiting, Large State University

- Led weekly tours for prospective students and parents
- Answered questions and addressed concerns
- Wrote information sheet explaining campus-housing policy
- Selected to train new guides

06-07  
Give approximate  
dates of employment

Bullets  
emphasize  
accomplishments

### Administrative Assistant

ABC Business, Harristown, Large State

- Drafted correspondence
- Prepared and edited reports
- Complimented for accuracy and attention to detail

summers, 05 and 06

Separate section  
for special skills

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## Foreign Language Skills

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Fluent in Spanish

References available on request

Statement sometimes omitted

campaign,” write, “Managed a fundraising campaign.” Use strong verbs to begin each statement.

Be specific, but not overly detailed, in describing what you did. Employers say three to five statements are usually sufficient for each job. And no job should have more than four consecutive lines of information under it; large blocks of text are difficult to read. If you must use more space, find some way to divide the information into categories.

Your most important positions should occupy the most space on your résumé. If you’ve had jobs that do not relate to the position you want, consider dividing your experience into two categories: Relevant experience and other experience. Describe the relevant jobs thoroughly, and briefly mention the others. If you have had many jobs, you probably do not need to mention the oldest or least important ones. Just be careful not to create damaging gaps in your work history. For a sample chronological résumé, see page 23.

Because the chronological format emphasizes dates and job titles, it is often a poor format for career changers, people with inconsistent work histories, or new entrants to the work force. For these applicants, the functional résumé is a better choice.

**Functional.** The functional résumé organizes your experience around skills rather than job titles. This format is ideal for students who have some work history, but not in positions that relate directly to the job they want. Organizing experiences around skills can connect less relevant jobs to career qualifications; a job waiting tables, for example, can be combined with other responsibilities to show organizational and customer service skills.

To create a functional résumé, identify three or four skills required for your target job. For each skill, identify three to five concrete examples to demonstrate that ability. Again, use action phrases—not complete sentences—when writing your list.

Arrange your skill headings in order of importance. If you have a specific vacancy announcement, match the arrangement of

your headings to that of its listed requirements. The closer the match between your skill headings and the reviewer’s expectations, the more qualified you seem.

The last part of the functional résumé is a brief work history. Write only job titles, company names, and employment years. If you have gaps in your work history, you could use the cover letter to explain them, or you could fill them by adding volunteer work, community activities, or family responsibilities to your job list. For a sample functional résumé, see the facing page.

**Combination.** This format combines the best of the chronological format with the best of the functional format. Combination résumés are as varied as the histories they summarize. One variation begins with a chronological format but then subdivides each job description into skill categories. Another variation uses a functional format but, for each example of a skill, identifies the organization where the example occurred.

## Adding style

You will create a good impression if your résumé is attractive and easy to read. An inviting style draws attention to your qualifications. If you take pity on the reviewer’s eyes, chances are better that he or she will spend more time reviewing your résumé—and will remember it better.

To make your résumé easier to read and copy, print it on high-quality white or lightly colored paper. Loud, garish colors may attract attention, but they risk creating an unprofessional impression. Also, use a laser printer and keep the font size at 10 point or above. The reviewer shouldn’t have to struggle to read your words.

**Design.** Good résumé writers use design elements strategically. Boldface, large type, capital letters, centering, or horizontal lines make headings stand out on the page. Bullets or italics can draw attention to key accomplishments. One-inch margins around the page and blank lines between sections will make all the information easier to see.

# Sample functional résumé

Sarah Jones  
1310 Rock Ledge Street  
Hamlet, Large State 41112  
(455) 555-5555

Leave adequate  
margins on all sides

## QUALIFICATIONS SUMMARY

Strong customer service, administrative, and communication skills to improve workplace efficiency.

## EDUCATION

Bold capital letters  
emphasize major headings

Large State Community College  
A.A. in Liberal Arts, expected May 2010  
G.P.A.: 3.6/4.0

Hamlet High School  
Diploma, May 2007  
G.P.A.: 3.3/4.0

## EXPERIENCE

### Customer Service

Selected for the express lane while working as a cashier  
Directed customers to product locations  
Served restaurant patrons and responded quickly to requests  
Handled food substitutions and special requests efficiently

Identify  
major  
skills  
required  
for the  
position

### Administration

Recorded meeting notes and maintained membership roster for College Outdoors Club  
Calculated restaurant customers' bills accurately

### Communication

Explained menu items to customers  
Relayed special requests to chef  
Received A's in speech and composition classes

Include specific  
achievements

### Computer Applications

Excel, Word, Windows XP

Begin statements  
with action verbs

## WORK HISTORY

Brief work history  
goes at the end

Table Server, Good Food Restaurant, Hamlet, Large State, 2008  
Cashier, Blue Skies Chain Store, Hamlet, Large State, 2006-2007

References available upon request



Any graphics you use should be consistent with your occupation's standards. Graphics appropriate for one occupation might be inappropriate for another. As a general rule, small design elements—such as a border or a name and address printed in letterhead style—are fine. But large, bold graphics are risky for an accountant who isn't applying for a position as a graphic artist

To give your résumé a consistent flow, maintain the same style from beginning to end. Every section should have the same design elements. For example, if your education heading is bold and centered, every heading should be bold and centered. In the same way, chose one typeface, such as Arial or Times New Roman, and use it throughout.

When you have finished, hold your résumé at arm's length and examine it. Make sure the type is easy to read and that the material lays out evenly on the page. You may need to experiment with different styles before deciding which you like best.

**Length.** A long résumé is difficult for a reviewer to read and remember; and, given the volume of résumés many reviewers receive, long résumés are often ignored. Although rules about length are more flexible than they once were, general guidelines still exist. Most students and recent graduates use a one-page résumé, other workers use one or two pages, and the very experienced use two or three pages. If your résumé doesn't match this pattern, it probably contains unnecessary words or irrelevant information. Eliminate anything that does not help prove you're qualified for the job.

### Proofreading

Take time to prepare the best résumé you can. You might not be the most qualified candidate for every job, but your résumé might be better than the competition. The most common mistakes are simple typographical and spelling errors. Computer spelling checkers do not catch correctly spelled words used incorrectly—"of" for "on," for example, or "their" for "there." You want your résumé to stand out, but not for the wrong reasons. Avoid

mistakes by having several people proofread your résumé for you.

Before you send out a résumé, review the vacancy announcement and fine-tune your résumé to meet employers' criteria. Sprinkle your résumé with language found in the position description, paying special attention to your qualifications summary if you have one.

## Cover letters: Introducing yourself

Every résumé you send, fax, or e-mail needs its own cover letter. Sending a résumé without a cover letter is like starting an interview without shaking hands. The best cover letters spark the employer's interest and create an impression of competence.

Cover letters are an opportunity to convey your focus and energy. Especially for students who may not have a lot of experience, the cover letter is a way to show enthusiasm. And following up with a phone call shows the employer drive and interest. Although you should feel free to consult references and models, use your own words when writing a cover letter; don't mimic another person's writing style.

### Parts of the cover letter

Cover letters should be written in standard business format with your and the reviewer's addresses at the top and your signature above your typed name at the bottom. (E-mailed cover letters do not include mailing addresses.) All letters should be single spaced, flush left, with each paragraph followed by a blank line. Use professional, polite words. Revealing your personality is fine, as long as your style conforms to business protocol. For a sample cover letter, see the facing page.

Most cover letters are two or three paragraphs long. Every cover letter should fit on one page and contain the following four parts: Salutation, opening, body, and conclusion.

**Salutation.** Whenever possible, send your letter to a specific person rather than to an office. Consider how differently you respond to a letter addressed to you, as opposed to one

## Sample cover letter

**John Ryan**  
**15 Spring Road**  
**Hamlet, LS 41112**  
**(545) 555-5555**

January 5, 2009

Mr. Brian Carson  
Hiring Manager  
Rest Easy Hotel  
Hamlet, LS 41112

Addresses are omitted for  
e-mailed cover letters

Letter is addressed to a specific  
individual, if possible

State position  
applied for

Dear Mr. Carson:

The management trainee position you advertised in today's *Hamlet Gazette* greatly interests me. The Rest Easy Hotels have always served as landmarks for me when I travel, and I would like to contribute to their continued growth. I have enclosed my résumé for your review.

Sell  
yourself

In May, I will be graduating from Large State University with a degree in business. While in school, I developed strong organizational and customer service skills. As a dormitory assistant, I organized events, led meetings, and assisted students. As treasurer of the Business Society, I maintained the budget and presented budget reports. My summer jobs also required extensive interaction with the public. I believe these experiences have prepared me for your management trainee position.

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss my qualifications more fully in an interview. I can be reached at (545) 555-5555. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Place your phone  
number near the end

Request an interview

*John Ryan*

Sign each letter

John Ryan

Enclosure

addressed to “Occupant.” If you do not know whom to write, call the company and ask who is hiring for the position. Check that the name you use is spelled correctly and the title is accurate. Pay close attention to the Mr. or Ms. before gender-neutral names. Finally, use a colon after the name, not a comma.

**Opening.** The first few sentences of your cover letter should tell the reviewer which job you are applying for and the connection you have to the company. If someone the reviewer knows suggested you apply, mention that recommendation. If you are responding to an advertisement, refer to it and the source that published it.

Your knowledge of the company might give you another opportunity to connect yourself to the job. You could briefly describe your experience with its products, cite a recent company success, or refer to an article written about the company. But don’t go overboard; save specifics for the interview.

**Body.** The next portion of your cover letter is a brief explanation of your qualifications. Don’t simply repeat your résumé; summarize your most relevant qualifications or provide additional details about a noteworthy accomplishment. Address the employer’s requirements directly, and don’t be afraid to use special formatting to your advantage. You might, for example, create a chart matching the employer’s requirements on one side to your qualifications on the other.

You can also use the body of your cover letter to address gaps in your work history or other problems evident on your résumé. But do not volunteer negative information unless you must. Always maintain a positive, confident tone.

**Closing.** In your final paragraph, thank the reviewer, request an interview, and repeat your home phone number. The closing is your chance to show commitment to the job. If you tell the reviewer you plan to call, make sure you do it. Making the effort to call and follow up helps to keep your name in the mind of your interviewer.

## Submitting your qualifications

You introduce yourself to prospective employers through both your cover letter and your résumé. Because first impressions are usually lasting ones, make sure yours is a good one by proofreading your cover letter as carefully as you do your résumé.

When sending your résumé through postal service mail, consider how it will look when it arrives on a reviewer’s desk. Hastily stuffed, illegibly addressed, and sloppily sealed envelopes do nothing to enhance your image as a neat, would-be professional.

When submitting a résumé through e-mail, it’s best to put the cover letter as the body of the e-mail. The résumé should either follow the cover letter in the body in plain text or be a separate attachment, depending on the reviewer’s preferences.

## For more information

Learn more about writing résumés and cover letters by consulting the many sources of information available on both subjects. One of the best places to go is your local library, where you can read a variety of books that match your needs and preferences. Some books give general advice and instruction, some address specific problems or occupations, and others are a compendium of sample résumés and cover letters. Be careful to choose recently published books; résumé standards change with time.

Look in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* for information about the job duties, working conditions, and training requirements of many occupations. The *Handbook* is available online at [www.bls.gov/ooh](http://www.bls.gov/ooh) and can also be found in most libraries and career centers. And for tips on preparing to re-enter the workforce, including how to explain gaps in work history, see “Getting back to work: Returning to the labor force after an absence,” in the winter 2004–05 *Quarterly* and online at [www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/winter/art03.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/winter/art03.pdf).

Also, it may be helpful to visit the counselors at your school, career center, or State employment office. They have resources and advice to help you choose an occupation; write résumés, cover letters, and applications; and develop a job searching strategy. State employment offices offer free advice and computer access to people who are unemployed. To find a State office near you, visit online at [www.servicelocator.org](http://www.servicelocator.org) or call toll free, 1 (877) 348-0502.

The Internet is full of résumé writing advice—but remember, Web sites are not filtered for accuracy or timeliness. Some established sites are:

- JobSmart: Résumés and Cover Letters, [jobstar.org/tools/resume/index.php](http://jobstar.org/tools/resume/index.php)
- The Riley Guide, [www.rileyguide.com](http://www.rileyguide.com)

- Rebecca Smith's Electronic Résumés, [www.eresumes.com](http://www.eresumes.com)

- The Quintessential Guide to Career Resources, [www.quintcareers.com](http://www.quintcareers.com)

Another option is a commercial résumé writing service. The Professional Association of Résumé Writers, established in 1990, has about 1,000 member companies. For a fee, professional résumé writers help jobseekers write résumés and cover letters. Many of these professionals offer student rates, but fees may be higher for people with longer work histories. For a list of association members, visit the association Web site at [www.parw.com](http://www.parw.com) or write:

The Professional Association of  
Résumé Writers  
1388 Brightwaters Blvd., NE.  
St. Petersburg, FL 33704

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