

5.2.1: The Purpose of Résumés

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the purpose and contents of a résumé

A résumé is your first introduction to a potential employer. It is a written picture of who you are—it's a marketing tool, a selling tool, and a promotion of you as an ideal candidate for any job you may be interested in.

The word résumé comes from the French word *résumé*, which means “a summary.” Leonardo da Vinci is credited with writing one of the first known résumés, although it was more of a letter that outlined his credentials for a potential employer, Ludovico Sforza. The résumé got da Vinci the job, though, and Sforza became a longtime patron of da Vinci and later commissioned him to paint *The Last Supper*. You can see the letter and read the translation at [Leonardo da Vinci's Handwritten Resume \(1482\)](#)

Résumés and cover letters work together to represent you in the brightest light to prospective employers. With a well-composed résumé and cover letter, you stand out—which may get you an interview and then a good shot at landing a job.

In this section, we discuss résumés and cover letters as key components of your career development tool kit. We explore some of the many ways you can design and develop them for the greatest impact in your job search.

Your Résumé: Purpose and Contents

Your résumé is an inventory of your education, work experience, job-related skills, accomplishments, volunteer history, internships, residencies, and more. It's a professional autobiography in outline form to give the person who reads it a quick, general idea of who you are. With a better idea of who you are, prospective employers can see how well you might contribute to their workplace.

As a college student or recent graduate, you may be unsure about what to put in your résumé, especially if you don't have much employment history. Still, employers don't expect recent grads to have significant work experience. And even with little work experience, you may still have a host of worthy accomplishments to include. It's all in how you present yourself.

You don't need to be new to the employment world to struggle with what to put in a résumé. This is an important advertising tool that takes time and skill to demonstrate how your past experiences and education fit a new position. Remember the soft skills discussed earlier. They work in any résumé. From there, you demonstrate your successes.

The following video is an animated look at why résumés are so important. You can read a [transcript of the video “Why Do I Need a Resume?”](#) [here](#).



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Elements of Your Successful Résumé

Perhaps the hardest part of writing a résumé is figuring out what format to use to organize and present your information in the most effective way. There is no correct format, per se, but most résumés follow one of the four formats below. Which format appeals to you the most?

1. **Reverse chronological résumé:** A reverse chronological résumé (sometimes also simply called a chronological résumé) lists your job experiences in reverse chronological order—that is, starting with the most recent job and working backward toward your first job. It includes starting and ending dates. Also included is a brief description of the work duties you performed for each job, and highlights of your formal education. The reverse chronological résumé may be the most common and perhaps the most conservative résumé format. It is most suitable for demonstrating a solid work history, and growth and development in your skills. It may not suit you if you are light on skills in the area you are applying to, or if you’ve changed employers frequently, or if you are looking for your first job.
2. **Functional résumé:** A functional résumé is organized around your talents, skills, and abilities (more so than work duties and job titles, as with the reverse chronological résumé). It emphasizes specific professional capabilities, like what you have done or what you can do. Specific dates may be included but are not as important. So if you are a new graduate entering your field with little or no actual work experience, the functional résumé may be a good format for you. It can also be useful when you are seeking work in a field that differs from what you have done in the past. It’s also well suited for people in unconventional careers.
3. **Hybrid résumé:** The hybrid résumé is a format reflecting both the functional and chronological approaches. It’s also called a combination résumé. It highlights relevant skills, but it still provides information about your work experience. With a hybrid résumé, you may list your job skills as most prominent and then follow with a chronological (or reverse chronological) list of employers. This résumé format is most effective when your specific skills and job experience need to be emphasized.
4. **Video, infographic, and website résumé:** Other formats you may wish to consider are the video résumé, the infographic résumé, or even a website résumé. These formats may be most suitable for people in multimedia and creative careers. Certainly with the expansive use of technology today, a job seeker might at least try to create a media-enhanced résumé. But the plain-text, traditional résumé is by far the most commonly used—in fact, some human resource departments may not permit submission of any format other than a document-based, plain-text résumé.

An important note about formatting is that initially, employers may spend only a few seconds reviewing each résumé—especially if there are a lot of them or they seem tedious to read. That’s why it’s important to choose your format carefully so it will stand out and make the first cut.

As potential employers do that first review, they are looking to see the evidence that you match, at least, all the minimum specifications in their ad or job listing. (If you do not match 100% of the minimums, and list it in the resume, then do not apply.)

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