

RESUME-WRITING AND JOB-HUNTING

ADVICE FOR GRADUATING USF STUDENTS

by Thorold (Tod) Roberts, Instructor of Professional & Technical Writing
University of South Florida, Sarasota-Manatee • Updated 4 April 2010

TO STUDENTS REQUESTING RESUME ASSISTANCE FROM MR. ROBERTS: Read and apply all the tips here before submitting your draft resume and cover letter. If you are graduating at the end of the semester in which you take a course from me, I will provide a resume and cover letter review to you free of charge as a graduation gift in recognition of your hard work. The value of this service on the open market ranges from \$500 to \$1,000. **(Note that this is a review, not a rewrite!)**

INTRODUCTION

The comments here are drawn from my own experience as a professional writer and editor who has prepared hundreds of resumes for clients at both early and mature career stages, and more immediately from messages to specific students who ask for help with these matters. If an item appears irrelevant to you, read again. The particular job responsibilities are not important; the impression you make on the reader of your resume is. **It is no exaggeration to say that you have 20 to 30 seconds to impress a reader of your cover letter and resume enough to read the remainder and to invite you for an interview.**

RESUME DO'S AND DON'T'S

1. ONE PAGE ONLY. Keep your resume to a single page, no matter how much you've accomplished. More than this will probably not be read, and in fact a second or subsequent page may tell the reader you're either an egomaniac or are ignorant of basic editing and communications principles. Your resume is not an autobiography; it is just a summary of important facts. Keep your resume and letter physically simple and easy to read. Don't use Microsoft templates -- the templates often get botched when sent electronically, and most of them look as if they were created by graphic-design novices. If possible, use Adobe Acrobat to create PDF documents that will be seen by the reader exactly as you intend them to be seen, regardless of computer platform. Also, beware the generic resume-writing advice you find on the internet and other sources. A generic resume format will usually produce generic results (it will likely land you in the "FILE BUT DON'T CALL" pile).

2. NO JOB OBJECTIVE. Don't list a "Job Objective." This limits you, and is not necessary in the first place. In your cover letter you will respond specifically to a prospective employer by talking about how your goals and achievements match those that are relevant to the reader's company. This match must be described in concrete, specific details. For instance, don't say "Extensive experience with human resources functions." Instead, write "Leader of 24 staff in preparing HR aspects of \$12 billion merger after only two months notice." Many companies use the Job Objective as a way to EXCLUDE, not include, an applicant.

3. COLLEGE COURSES AND GPA. If you must include "Relevant Course Work," put it in the same listing as your B.S. degree. Most employers are interested in what you actually can do, not what courses you've taken. Also, just listing courses says very little -- it would be more useful to include a sentence or two in your cover letter that specifically explains something you learned in a course which makes you well-qualified for the position. For instance, if you've actually done a full-fledged portfolio analysis, say that and say what you learned that is relevant. Nobody except people who've spent their entire working lives on a campus cares about the name or content of college courses because such courses vary so much in quality, grading standards, and instructor's ability. Also, your courses and grades are all listed on your transcript -- no need to duplicate this information on the resume. If referring to "Associate's Degree," write either A.A. or A.S. degree. (If you don't know the difference, you should go back to community college and take more courses!) You must also list the year you earned this and the school -- otherwise it will look as if you are trying to hide something. Include your Grade Point Average (GPA) only if (a) it is specifically required by the interviewing company or (b) it is exceptionally good (3.5 and above overall). Otherwise, leave it out.

4. INTERNSHIP. Under "Internship Experience," briefly describe your actual on-the-job experience. Formal education, except for the fact that you have a degree, is of minor interest to a prospective employer; what you CAN DO AND BE TRAINED TO DO is of great interest.

5. PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE. In this category, be specific with numbers and other facts. For instance, say “Ten years experience managing cash reconciliation in amounts up to \$300,000 per day.” Be specific about the size and dollar value of inventories you have handled. A prospective employer wants to know three things about you here:

- Have you been trusted with and able to carry out difficult, not trivial, responsibilities? If so, say how, when, and by whom.
- Have you shown an ability to take charge and perform not just your own job but others' as well, especially in a crisis? If so, describe one or two specific examples.
- Have you given evidence that you can and want to grow beyond what you have already learned how to do? Merely pursuing a B.S. degree is not evidence of this. An employer may see your degree as evidence not of your knowledge but of your ability to set a goal and stick to it. This is important, but it's just a first step.

Indicate specific dollar and/or percentage figures wherever you can so the reader can understand the significance of what you are describing; words alone are too vague. Also, say something about the overall size of your employer (number of stores or other facilities, locations, international dimensions, annual revenues, stock market symbol if traded publicly, etc. -- look this information up online and make sure it is absolutely accurate). Survey GOOGLE NEWS for articles about your employer and the company which is interviewing you. Don't let yourself be embarrassed when the interviewer refers to a week-old news story about your current employer of which you are unaware.

6. UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION. You are essentially trying to sell your skills and work traits in exchange for a salary. Thus, you should replace a phrase such as “Leadership Activities” with “Management Responsibility” and specify the numbers of people you've dealt with, in what dollar amounts (payroll), the kind of on-the-job mentoring you experienced (with names of actual mentors, if appropriate), and how you, for example, reduced theft of liquor in the restaurant where you work -- this will be of interest even to a company that sells mutual funds. The reader is a detective looking for hard evidence of your ability, character, curiosity, and strengths, not vague generalities. A category such as “Sales and Customer Service” is OK, but bullet points under that heading need to be specific. Describe a “difficult situation” you handled. Explain how you responded to a customer complaint or earned a complimentary letter from a customer.

7. JOB HISTORY. Under “Employment History,” list the city and state of each job, and the name of your supervisor in each position, along with that individual's phone number and/or email address. This saves a lot of time for the prospective employer. Make sure you have permission from a supervisor to list his or her name!

8. CUSTOMIZED COVER LETTER. Your cover letter is the place to discuss your overall professional objectives, your qualifications to perform the specific tasks called for in a job advertisement, and to say something personal if you wish (marital status, leisure interests, etc.). A cover letter should be the main document to interest a person in calling you for an interview, but the resume also plays a role in this process.

9. LEAVING YOUR CURRENT EMPLOYER. Be prepared to explain -- in clear, objective facts -- why you want to leave your current employer IF this company offers decent opportunities to college graduates. A person reading your resume will wonder about this, especially if you have listed increasing levels of responsibility. If it just for more money rather than professional challenge, let interviewers bring up this issue, not you. **Never bad-mouth your current boss or co-workers!**

10. USE YOUR OWN PERSONAL EMAIL. Don't use your current employer's email service -- get a free address through Yahoo or Google. A prospective employer might feel nervous about communicating with you through the email at your current company. Companies have -- and USE -- the right to intercept everything communicated through computer systems that they own. This includes the server(s) through which websites and email are transmitted.

11. MEMORIZE YOUR RESUME. Once you have created a flawless one-page resume, memorize it completely. I am serious about this. You might be shocked at the number of people I have met in interviews who don't even know what their resumes say. As a result, they sound like idiots or fakers or both. You never want to waste an interviewer's time by rolling your eyes at the ceiling while you try to remember what you said about some detail on the resume. You are competing with perhaps dozens

of well-qualified applicants, and the interviewer will be most impressed by those who are confident, poised, honest, and at ease. The rest will wait a long time for the phone to ring.

12. BRING EVERYTHING YOU NEED. Carry with you to the interview your own copy of the resume; make sure you have all the information (names, addresses, phone numbers, and email and website addresses) that you may need to fill out a background questionnaire. Turn your cell phone **off!**

13. USE THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE. As a USF student, you should take full advantage of the university’s career services, library, alumni, professors, advisors, and professional contacts.

See attached sample resume, sample cover letter, articles from the internet, and an excellent paper on interviewing. The paper was written by Ronald Collins, a former business executive and a student in my Spring 2006 ENC 3250 (Professional Writing) course at USF Sarasota-Manatee. The article “25 Words That Hurt Your Resume” is from www.cnn.com. The piece titled “Job Hunter’s Self-Marketing Glossary,” by Canadian consultant and writer Stephanie Clark, appeared originally in 2009 and was reproduced in the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* on April 4, 2010.

25 words that hurt your resume

Words don't tell potential employers as much as deeds

By Laura Morsch, CareerBuilder.com

<http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/Careers/01/20/cb.words.hurt.resume>

So, you're experienced? Before you advertise this in your resume, be sure you can prove it. Often, when job seekers try to sell themselves to potential employers, they load their resumes with vague claims that are transparent to hiring managers, according to Scott Bennett, author of “The Elements of Resume Style” (AMACOM).

By contrast, the most successful job seekers avoid these vague phrases on their resumes in favor of accomplishments. Instead of making empty claims to demonstrate your work ethic, use brief, specific examples to demonstrate your skills.

In other words, show, don't tell. Bennett offers these examples:

Instead of... “Experience working in fast-paced environment”

Try... “Registered 120+ third-shift emergency patients per night”

Instead of... “Excellent written communication skills”

Try... “Wrote jargon-free User Guide for 11,000 users”

Instead of... “Team player with cross-functional awareness”

Try... “Collaborated with clients, A/R and Sales to increase speed of receivables and prevent interruption of service to clients.”

Instead of... “Demonstrated success in analyzing client needs”

Try... “Created and implemented comprehensive needs assessment mechanism to help forecast demand for services and staffing.”

The worst offenders

It's good to be hard-working and ambitious, right? The hiring manager won't be convinced if you can't provide solid examples to back up your claims. Bennett suggests being extra-careful before putting these nice-sounding but empty words in your resume.

| | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| Aggressive | Determined | Hard-working | Motivated | Resourceful |
| Ambitious | Efficient | Independent | Meticulous | Self-motivated |
| Competent | Experienced | Innovative | People person | Successful |
| Creative | Flexible | Knowledgeable | Professional | Team player |
| Detail-oriented | Goal-oriented | Logical | Reliable | Well-organized |

Typical Resume-Writing Mistakes

Adapted from http://www.argus-tech.com/resume/d_d17.htm

Mistake #1. People down-play, water-down, and over-simplify their responsibilities and accomplishments. The result is that the potential employer thinks, "This person is lazy and doesn't do very much."

Mistake #2. People write about themselves, creating a mini-autobiography. The resume should be an advertisement **addressing the needs of the potential employer**. The employer should read the resume thinking, "Wow, this person has exactly what I am looking for."

Mistake #3. People use hard-to-read and confusing formats. A potential employer will spend approximately 20 seconds scanning each of the 50-100 resumes in front of him. An easy-to-read format enables him to read your whole resume in that 20 seconds.

Mistake #4. People provide more detail and depth in the job descriptions of older jobs than their present job. The employer who thus feels your career has peaked and is declining will interview other candidates.

Mistake #5. People submit resumes with spelling and grammatical errors, or formatting inconsistencies. The potential employer may think that a person representing himself so poorly on a resume will also represent the company poorly.

Mistake #6. Important information that the potential employer is looking for is buried in the text or layout. Prioritize the information that the employer seeks and simplify or omit information of minimal interest to the employer.

T. Roberts tip: If you have no clue what the employer wants, research the company through interviews, articles, websites, and news reports. Use Google and other search engines to find quickly the important facts. Memorize this information for use in the cover letter and the interview. Also in your cover letter, emphasize the match between your skills and the employer's needs (as discovered through your research).

JOB HUNTERS' SELF-MARKETING GLOSSARY

by Stephanie Clark (<http://www.newleafresumes.ca/>), © 2009
Sarasota Herald-Tribune, 4 Apr 2010, "Classifieds" section

Job hunters must realize that they are marketing their skills, experience and education in exchange for their salary. Familiarizing themselves with marketing-inspired terminology will help them jump the divide from job hunter to job holder! The following mini-glossary of terms provides a good start.

Accomplishment-based Resume. Perhaps 95 percent of applicants continue to submit resumes that read like a position description. Boring! "Sourced and landed new clients and brought in sales" is an ineffective statement. Here's a resume statement that is guaranteed to generate interest: "Delivered exceptional results: \$10K in average monthly recurring revenue, a 75 percent increase."

Branding. Expertise earns more attention and more salary. Develop a strong sense of what you offer, and distinguish yourself from the competition. Rather than presenting yourself as an operations manager, you can perhaps prove that you are a "Corporate ambassador who fosters teamwork and maximizes profitability"? Or perhaps you are a Business Analyst who "optimizes HRIS systems in alignment with business processes in support of corporate goals"? Branding must always be authentic, and must be proven in your resume's content.

Buying Motivators. It is precisely because an accomplishment-based resume addresses the employer's buying motivators that it generates interest. In marketing, buying motivators are commonly recognized as needs, wants and desires. The resume writer must keep in mind that employers' buying motivators are aligned with profits, performance and productivity. Address the employer's bottom line and you'll get noticed.

Cover Letter Pitch. Recruiters dread reading yet another cover letter that begins "Please accept my resume in application for the position of Sales Agent advertised in last Saturday's Record." In keeping with marketing strategies, wow the reader with a pitch in your very first paragraph. Sell the sizzle, not the steak. Seize interest at the outset. How about this:

"I love a good challenge, and have twice taken a company with little or no Human Resource functions from start-up to well-established. In fact, one of these won an award for Best Workplace in the Americas within three years' time."

Relationship Management. Avoid digressing into your hardships when chatting with receptionists as you drop off resumes; don't apply to jobs for which you have little or no qualifications; and keep good records of where you applied, for which position and when. Good people skills are usually required; prove you have these with active relationship management.

Self-Marketing Documents. As competition increases for the jobs available, strategies for getting noticed evolve. This is the time for self-marketing. Resume, cover letter, professional bio, major project profile, networking letter, personal website, and your LinkedIn presence are all self-marketing documents. Make sure all present a consistent and strong (branded) message.

Value Proposition (VP). Know your value -- the benefits that you offer in return for your salary -- and present it succinctly. It must refer to how you have impacted profits, performance, and productivity -- your audience's buying motivators -- in order to land you a job offer.

MELANIE J. STUDENT

7744 Circle Street • Anywhere, Florida 34201
(941) 555-5555 • mjs_usf@gmail.com

Month Day, 20xx

Firstname Lastname, Title
Taylor White Recruiters
c/o Monster.com
Online Application

Reference: Taylor White Recruiters, Position MAC 010707 (www.monster.com)

Dear Mr. Lastname:

I am a perfect match for the position of Staff Accountant that your company has advertised. I offer the skills, experience, and proven ability to learn that you seek. After completing my University of South Florida (USF) B.A. in accounting in May 20xx, I would like to begin my professional career in a position such as that described in your announcement.

I am well suited to serve in the Staff Accountant position because I offer the following: [match the language here with that in the job announcement; provide brief detail about your achievements -- these are the hooks that will help determine whether you are called for an interview or not]:

- **A strong foundation in everyday accounting problems, situations, and solutions:** have helped more than 50 clients save approximately \$130,000 through tax planning and compliance review
- **Teamwork with fellow professionals:** as member of Advanced Services Group, I work as staff accountant with senior managers as my mentors for six Fortune 500 companies
- **Skill at managing stress and work/life balance:** success as full-time staff accountant while earning high grades as full-time college student, parent of a young child, and caretaker for elderly grandparents
- **Knowledge of relevant software:** proficiency in multiple ledger systems, Quickbooks, ProSeries, and all Microsoft Office applications
- **Solid client communications ability:** recipient of two “Superior Performance” awards for exceptional workshop presentations resulting in acquisition of six new small-business clients last year; earned top grades in college writing and speech courses

Please call me at (941) 555-5555 or email me at mjs_usf@gmail.com. I look forward to meeting with you for an interview at a mutually convenient time.

Sincerely Yours,

Melanie J. Student

Enclosure: Professional Resume

MELANIE J. STUDENT

7744 Circle Street • Anywhere, Florida 34201
(941) 555-5555 • mjs_usf@gmail.com

Focus on your achievements, not your duties and responsibilities!

RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE

February 2006 to Present, NumberCruncher CPAs, PA, Sarasota, FL

Staff Accountant

Valuable experience in all areas of accounting and working with clients.

- Preparation of tax returns including 1040, 1065, 1120, and 1120S, accurately and on-time
- Efficient and accurate exchange of client information resulting in tax savings of more than \$150,000
- Thorough review and application of accounting rules, regulations, and code that helped 12 clients win protests to the IRS

January 2005 to February 2006, Pro Golf of Florida, Sarasota, FL

Sales Associate

Head of a retail team. Applied working knowledge of specifications and golf product features, maintained updated awareness of technological advancements in equipment, attire, and environmental conditions related to the field of play. Played lead role in innovative adaptation of technology to save the company more than \$250,000 in first year of implementation.

EDUCATION

May 2009, University of South Florida, Sarasota FL

Bachelor of Arts: Accounting, GPA: 3.55

- Recipient of the Brunch on the Bay Academic Scholarship for 2008-2009
- Officer of student Accounting Society; recruited 12 new members in first year
- Earned top grade in Professional Writing and gained valuable experience in communicating with clients and associates through memos, proposals, and reports

May 2004, University of Wisconsin, Green Bay WI

Bachelor of Science: Business Administration (Marketing), GPA: 3.0

Senior Thesis: Conception and development of a business model for an existing industry (available at www.myname.com/thesis). Active leader of project team; responsible for creation, supervision, and delegation of the overall business and marketing plans. Prepared and presented overall plan to professors and entrepreneurs on opinion panels. Received positive feedback.

PERSONAL ACTIVITIES

- Volunteer for American Diabetes Association and American Cancer Society
- Long-distance runner, aspiring triathlete
- Avid golfer, New York State Amateur Contestant

References available upon request.

Date of resume: xx Month 20xx

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS: AN EMPLOYER'S PERSPECTIVE

by Ronald Collins, ENC 3250, USF Sarasota-Manatee, 20 Apr 2006

Interviewing for a new job is a very difficult process, especially for recent business graduates seeking their first serious position. Without relevant work experience from which to draw specific examples that demonstrate their skills, those applicants often fail to convince interviewers that they have the right qualifications for the job. If, however, unseasoned applicants understand the interview process from an employer's perspective, they can meet the interviewer's needs and secure an offer of employment.

I have held a variety of managerial positions, at both large and small firms, that required me to hire many business professionals. It is my experience that interviewers use certain interview techniques to answer the central questions every employer has when evaluating an applicant:

- Does the applicant have the skills necessary to learn the job?
- Does the applicant have the personal attributes necessary for the job?
- In addition, is the applicant motivated to be productive?

While the interview process varies greatly among firms and positions, and may consist of one interview or a series of interviews, most business applicants will face one or more of the following interview techniques:

- Traditional Interview
- Case Interview
- Behavioral Interview
- Stress Interview

Traditional Interview

The Traditional Interview is by far the most common technique used and focuses on open-ended questions. Recent graduates without relevant work experience should expect questions like, "Why did you pick accounting/finance/ marketing as your major? Why did you choose to attend USF? Tell me about yourself."

I think you should know that from an interviewer's viewpoint, what you say during the traditional component is of little concern, but how you say it is very important. My top concern when hiring a business professional (and I think you will find this true of most employers) is to determine whether the applicant has superior communication skills or not. It is my experience that it simply does not matter how technically talented you might be if you cannot communicate with clients, colleagues and suppliers.

I used traditional questions to assess an applicant's communication skills because I believe if you are unable to communicate well about yourself, the one thing you know most about, your communication skills are inadequate for the job.

On the other hand, if you prepare for the most frequently asked questions by writing down your answers, rehearsing and refining them until they flow from you as naturally as breath itself, you will be able to respond with a concise, clear, complete and creative "sound bite" that will convince the interviewer to investigate your technical skills.

Case Interview

After using traditional interview techniques to screen out the poor communicators, many firms will use the Case Interview to determine your technical skills through several types of problem solving. Estimation questions and scenario questions are two types often given to recent graduates.

Business applicants should expect estimation questions such as, "How many gallons of exterior white paint do U.S. homeowners consume? How many golfers are there in the world? Estimate the total market for our company's services."

From an interviewer's point of view, the purpose of an estimation problem is not to see if you know the correct answer, but rather to see how you approach a problem. Estimation questions help the interviewer assess your analytical skills, your quantitative skills, and decision-making ability. If you quickly do some mental calculations before giving an answer to the paint question, you have failed to give the interviewer enough information to assess those skills. Even if your answer is correct, the

interviewer, rather than believe you are competent, is likely to believe you just made a lucky guess or knew the answer beforehand.

However, if you talk your way through an estimation problem by asking at least one clarifying question and restating the problem before giving a structured response that outlines the assumptions used to make the estimation, recognizes the limitations of the analysis, and includes a summary statement, it is easy for you to demonstrate your technical skills.

Other case interviews use scenario questions. An applicant might be given three years of balance sheets, income statements and notes to the financial statements, and asked to comment on the firm's financial health.

You should recognize that a scenario question has one dimension that an interviewer will evaluate by the same criteria as an estimation question to see how you approach a problem.

The other dimension, however, is evaluated much differently. You must get this part of your answer correct. You must use the proper terms, accurately compute quantities and appropriately apply fundamental principles in order to demonstrate a mastery of core business concepts. Employers expect to have to teach you a lot about their particular business, but they do not expect to have to teach you business basics.

In this example, I would expect the applicant to calculate some financial ratios, explain what the numbers mean and what the trends indicate using the structure suggested for an estimation response.

I will warn you to thoroughly read all the scenario material given to you before you begin, because many interviewers also use scenarios to reveal your attention to detail. Imagine how your analysis might change if half of the firm's assets were goodwill or significant off-balance sheet liabilities were buried in the notes.

Behavioral Interview

Some firms combine open-ended traditional techniques with problem-solving case techniques in what is known as the Behavioral Interview. Behavioral-based questions will typically begin with "Tell me about a time..." or "Describe a situation" Recent graduates without relevant work experience should expect questions like, "Give me an example of your ability to use analytic tools. Tell me about your presentation skills."

From an interviewer's perspective, a winning behavioral response demonstrates superior communication skills, technical competency and provides an example of your experience. To satisfy the communication portion, a sound bite is required. To satisfy the technical part, a structured response is required. To satisfy the experience portion, the first two components must be included in a relevant and true narrative. This is difficult to do.

Fortunately, the STAR method will allow you to form a compact, highly structured narrative from your own experiences that avoids vague and rambling answers. Follow the STAR outline to say:

Situation / Task Describe the situation or task. "I was part of a three-person economics project team that investigated golf course demand in Florida."

Action Describe the action(s) you took. "I collected the data on South Florida courses, and I used Excel's regression analysis tools to find the relationships between the predictor variables and the demand."

Result Describe the result obtained. "The final report showed that demand for super-premium private courses is increasing while demand for low-priced public courses is decreasing."

This satisfies the interviewer's need for objective evidence that the applicant possesses the characteristics that the firm has identified as desirable for the position.

Having a concise, clear, complete and creative STAR sound bite for each skill you have listed on your resume will ensure a high rating from the interviewer.

Stress Interview

After a firm determines that you have the requisite communication and technical skills, many employers will use a Stress Interview to determine your ability to handle pressure and adversity on the job by placing you in an awkward, tense, or uncomfortable situation.

In a stress interview, the interviewer may treat you rudely, viciously challenge everything you say, or even ignore you. Unaware and unprepared applicants will take it personally and react defensively and/or argumentatively. By contrast, those who recognize the situation and are prepared to respond, do so unemotionally and professionally.

The easiest way to recognize you are participating in a stress interview is the presence of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, where someone suddenly switches from being a professional to become a total jerk. I suggest you always be prepared because a stress interview is never announced in advance.

Conclusion

Preparation and practice are the pathways to interview success no matter which interview technique you encounter. Use the USF Career Center resources to learn how to prepare for the interview process. Then perfect your interview skills through practice, practice, practice by participating in mock interviews, career fair interviews, on-campus recruiter interviews, summer internship interviews, and co-op job interviews. Once you put yourself in the interviewer's shoes, I believe you will become a well-prepared and practiced job applicant who easily demonstrates the skills, attributes and motivation of a successful employee.