

THE “DOS AND DON'TS” OF RESUME AND COVER LETTER WRITING

By Ralph R. Donald
Revised April, 2012

RESUMES

1. Do collect pertinent facts about yourself, including all the positive things about your education here at SIUE. When you list your degree, include your GPAs [overall, major and minor] if they are 3.0 or better, plus any honors or endorsements on your diploma. eg., cum laude). Also, under job experience, don't forget to feature the work you did on student publications, web work, video and radio productions and especially what you accomplished on your internship. Also list a full employment history (you never can tell when the boss who's doing the hiring also started out schlepping burgers at McDonald's), special skills, foreign language fluency (an advantage in the job marketplace), and other college honors and distinctions. If you have enough information for a second page, use it to list mass communications courses you completed that might be appropriate for the job you're seeking, along with names and contact information for at least three references. Lastly, add a line to let them know that you have a portfolio of your work available upon request. If you have a website with samples of your work on it, be sure to mention it. You can show them what you can do!

2. Put your name at the top of the resume page, displayed prominently in bigger and bolder type than the rest of the page. If you choose a distinctive type style, make sure it's also easily readable. Include a current address, your cell phone number, your personal website, if any, your e-mail and facebook/Twitter addresses. The most important contact number is the cell phone. Keep your cell phone mailbox functional, and during the time you're searching for a job, check it a few times per day. As few as an hour or two can sometimes be critical in an employer's quick hiring decision. Change the SIUE address you're living at here at SIUE for your post-graduation address just as soon as you move away from here. You simply must have good phone mail service with your cell phone company. Record a short, courteous, professional-sounding outgoing message! The same professionalism is required on facebook and Twitter. Expect them to Google you, so make sure your website, facebook and Twitter accounts show you as the kind of person they'd like to hire. Think about this.

3. On a resume, do not bother including a statement of objectives. There's no such thing as a general statement of objectives on a resume that isn't boring, uninformative and hackneyed. One television station manager laughingly calls a statement of objectives the applicant's "Miss America speech." If you feel you must say something about specific objectives, put it in your cover letter, or better yet, save it for the interview. Objectives are meaningless and take up valuable front space on your resume.

4. When you cite your educational record, omit the high school you attended. Employers want to know what you've done recently. Include other relevant schools or training courses from which you've graduated (e.g., Army tech. schools, etc.) and professional certifications (e.g., FCC Radiotelephone License, Microsoft IT Certifications). All these show your versatility and experience.

5. List all previous employment in reverse-chronological order (most recent first), unless

there are good reasons not to list something (eg., years spent making license plates in prison, etc.). Discuss such omissions with your advisor or the internship coordinator. Remember, a sharp interviewer will ask you why there's a gap in your employment record for, say, four years. If this corresponds to when you were in college, you have a good answer. If not, be prepared to provide a reason.

If there are many jobs you could list, select only the most recent, or the most interesting ones. In listing your work and professional experiences, prominently display the ones that are most compatible with the kind of job you are currently seeking. But begin with the most recent job you've held and list the rest in reverse chronological order. Just list the beginning and ending years (e.g., "2001 to 2003") for each job. Do not list why you left any of these jobs. You may have to do this when you fill out a personnel form, but for now, it takes up space on the resume. Include your time in the military. In most employment situations, being a veteran is a big plus. If you are older and more experienced and have had many kinds of jobs over the years, you can create two reverse-chronological lists, one for communications-related jobs (which you should list first) and one for earlier, non-communications-related employment. Older grads don't need to worry so much if the main content of their resumes goes longer than one page.

6. Low priority (down toward the bottom of your resume), you can list your major memberships and activities in any professional organizations (e.g., SPJ, PRSSA, Mass Comm.'s Ad Club, etc.).

7. Use active voice verbs (e.g., "I supervised,"), not passive voice ("supervised by me"). Look up URLs for "good resume words" or "powerful resume words" on Google for tips on supercharging your resume language.

8. Keep your resume current. An employer will consider an applicant careless if he/she uses an outdated resume or a cover letter he/she forgot to update. Think about it: If a person is careless or lazy about selling him/herself, how careful will he/she be when working for the company?

9. Most employers will trashcan a resume with any typos, spelling or grammar errors! This is especially true for applicants right out of college. Employers assume that if you can't produce as important documents as your resume and cover letter without errors, you won't create careful, responsible work on the job, either. Use the dictionary and the spell-checker. After you've proofread your resume thoroughly, get someone else you trust to read it.

10. Some say that you should keep the length of your resume to one page. Although some employers prefer this, many others think that your resume should be as long as you need to fit all the relevant information you should share with them. Here's a working compromise: Your resume is usually accompanied by a cover letter. If you're close to being able to fit everything on one page, move something like your three references to the end of your cover letter. For those employers who read only page one, list the most important, most impressive facts first on your resume. Most SIUE graduates need two pages, one for all the important stuff, and the second for references, specific skills and mass comm. courses relevant to the job you're after. Download and check out the sample resume on the department website for how you might organize it. Don't get hung up in layout: The one provided is just an example. The main thing is to make the layout visually clean, easy to read, and well-organized.

11. Put the following information toward the end of your resume (or cover letter):
 - a. The names, titles, addresses and phone numbers of no less than three references. If possible, name one or more media professionals along with the professor/s you may have asked to list as a reference. Never say, "References available upon request." Many employers want to know who supports your candidacy before they contact you further. They might know them. Other employers don't bother with hanging on the phone with you, phone propped between ear and shoulder, while they write down all the contact information for your references. Give references upfront. Also, a red flag goes up if you list an internship but don't list your internship supervisor as a reference.
 - b. Be sure to mention that "Portfolio [or a portfolio and resume tape/disc/website] is available upon request." If it's on a website, follow this statement with your website URL. In addition, News-Editorial or P.R. hopefuls should send neat photocopies of five or six byline clips of their best-published stories along with any resumes, and mention that there's more available in their portfolio. You may, of course, post them on your website and just give the editor the URL. For news-editorial and P.R. types, clips are as important as good cover letters and resumes.
12. Be sure to use good quality bond paper on your resume. Print them on a good laser printer. Personalize each copy of your resume for the kind of job you apply for. One homogenous resume for all kinds of jobs you're applying for won't do the job.
13. Do not list your birth date, your family situation (married, three children, divorced, etc.), and other personal things such as your state of health, your religion or political affiliations. These items are inappropriate and often illegal for employers to consider as an employment factor in this day and age. Exception: You're applying for a church P.R. or A/V job, or to work on the campaign of your favorite candidate. Then, if you're of the same denomination, mention it; if you're a faithful member of the same political party, mention that. Also, do not attach your photograph to your resume. Your good looks should have nothing to do with your candidacy. If they do, you may not want to work there. Where it usually matters is if you're a TV journalist. Let's face it: some of us have a "face for radio." But they'll see your face in your TV resume tape, anyway. Sending an 8 x 10 glossy reeks of egotism, too. Also, leave off your hobbies, etc., unless it's directly relevant to the job you seek, e.g., you're applying for a correspondent job at *Golf Digest* and you happen to be a zero handicap golfer and were voted All-American on your college golf team. Bosses usually don't care how you spend your spare time. It's all about what you can do for them on the job.
14. Do not include a discussion of salaries, past or present or desired, in either your resume or cover letter. Wait for the interview to play "let's make a deal."

Download sample one- and two-page resumes from this website.

COVER LETTERS

1. Before a potential employer ever reads your resume, he/she reads your cover letter. If all you send in the mail is your resume, don't plan on an employer even reading it. Therefore this very important document should be just as flawlessly written and proofread

as your resume. Many media employers have told me that if they notice a typo, grammar error or misspelling in the cover letter, they toss the whole package into the trash without ever reading the resume. These employers don't have to settle for second-best: Your top competitors' paperwork will be flawless and stylishly written.

2. Use this letter to briefly state your intention to apply for a specific job you've seen advertised, or as a query letter to a company you'd like to work at that has no openings now. In a query letter, say you'd like to apply for any openings now or in the near future in your specialty area.

3. Cover letters are also used to summarize the strongest elements of your resume in a few paragraphs.

4. Don't send a form letter! Personalize each and every one with the name and title of the employer. Depending on the kind of media organization and the kind of job, say different things about yourself that reinforce why they should hire you for work at their company. If you send out hundreds of resumes and cover letters (and you probably will), you may carefully formularize certain key sentences or even paragraph blocks for certain kinds of employers. But ultimately, each letter should be as specific to their particular job opening as possible. Employers often say, "If he/she doesn't take the time to learn who's in charge and what we do here, he's not right for us." So if you begin your cover letter with "To whom it may concern," or "Dear Sir or Madam," don't plan to ever hear back from them. In fact, bad cover letters and resumes often end up posted on office bulletin boards as objects of derision.

4 1/2. On this same subject, don't begin to write an employer a cover letter until after you have read every word on their website. Drop a few sentences in your cover letter to show you have done this homework.

5. Use the same quality and color paper for your cover letter that you used in creating the resume. Same with envelopes. Look classier than the rest. The more conservative the employer, the more conservative the stationery should be. The reverse is true for applying for a creative job, such as a copywriting or design job at an ad agency. Then you must be creative and exciting in making your cover letter and resume for them.

6. Start with a self-introduction and what specific job or kind of job (don't use the word "position" -- some employers don't like the term) you seek. Briefly and persuasively explain how the skills you possess, found in more detail in your resume, are spot on for the job they have just advertised. Provide here some examples of relevant achievements if you can, and explain how you produce results. Remember, the job search is about showing them how you can help them, not the reverse. Never write, "This job would really be great for my career," and so forth. They couldn't care less. Tell them how they will benefit from hiring you.

7. Close each letter with the statement that a portfolio of your written and/or published work (and, if you're a broadcaster, a resume tape/disc) is available on-line, or, if you don't have a website yet, upon request. But you will be MUCH more competitive if all your portfolio work is on-line and available to the employer. Put this statement on both your cover letter and your resume. Then state your hope that soon you and the employer can meet to discuss how you can contribute to their organization.

8. Don't tell them that you will call them in a few days to arrange an interview. That's much too presumptive -- it's as if you're arrogantly saying, "Of course you'll want to interview me; I'm a control freak, too, and I want to manage when and how you'll see me." Instead, they will decide whether or not they want to call you in for an interview. But since you still want to aggressively pursue leads, wait a week or so and then pick up the phone and call the employer to make sure that he/she has received your cover letter and resume. This may result in an impromptu phone interview, which can give you a slight edge in finalist selection, and perhaps an invitation to visit. Getting face time in a visit may be especially helpful, even if they don't have any openings right now. Bring your portfolio and get to know the boss, and who knows? When they do have an opening, you may be the first person he/she thinks of.

9. Adjust the tone of your cover letter so it doesn't sound too formal (you almost can't be too conversational when writing to Ad and P.R. types or to many broadcasters (use broadcast style with these folks), and you can't be too journalistic-sounding when writing to a newspaper editor). Also, make sure you don't come off as desperate. Like dogs and bees, employers can smell fear.

10. Never use a cover letter to request information about the organization! Research this on your own on their website and other sources, so when you come for your interview, you'll impress them with your preparation. Other candidates will do this, so you want to come off as the most prepared.

11. Finally, remember that like the frosting on a cake, the clothes you wear, or the cover of a book, your cover letter is what they see first, and makes that all-important first impression. The cover letter represents you and your resume until you have sold the employer on the importance of reading that resume. So make that cover letter look beautiful and read like Shakespeare.

12. For more ideas about how to organize and do a good job search, buy (on Amazon used for \$5) a copy of *Naked at the Interview: Tips and Quizzes to Prepare You For Your First Real Job*, by Burton Jay Nadler, John Wiley and Sons Publishing, 1994.