

11 Tips for the Entry-Level Resume and Cover Letter

by Liz Benuscak

Congratulations! You are ready to move into the work world and take it by storm. But are your resume and cover letter ready to do the same? These two documents are powerful marketing tools to getting that all-important first job. Make sure yours are top-notch with these tips that take the stress out of developing these effective career marketing tools.

The Resume

- **Highlight Your Education First**

If you just earned your degree, show it off! This is probably the main reason that you are a qualified candidate. Even without a degree, the courses you studied in school gave you skills that you can make you a good job candidate. Describe the coursework you completed, papers you wrote and skills you learned, including computer skills.

As your career progresses, you will change the format of your resume to a reverse chronological format if you are in a business field. If you are a medical or teaching professional, a curriculum vitae -- which focuses on study -- is appropriate regardless of whether you're a recent graduate or seasoned professional.

- **If Your GPA Is 3.0 or Better, Make Note of It -- Otherwise Leave It Off.**

The competition out there is fierce today, and you want to make the best impression possible.

- **Make Mention of any Curriculum Highlights.**

If you were on the dean's list, graduated with honors, received a scholarship, held office in a sorority, were a member of any professional associations, played sports or participated in other activities, let people know! These accomplishments can set you apart from the competition.

- **Ditch the Objective in Favor of a Summary of Qualifications.**

This section makes a statement to a potential employer about your skills, character and work ethic. Here's an example:

A results-oriented professional with experience in positions requiring superior interpersonal, communication and problem-solving skills. Demonstrated ability to function effectively under all types of circumstances while maintaining a clear perspective of goals to be accomplished.

In addition, don't forget to include software skills.

- **Highlight, Qualify and Quantify Your Accomplishments.**

It is not enough to create a laundry list of your past history -- you need to not only provide a succinct account of your previous experience but demonstrate how you positively impacted the environment you were a part of. If you worked on a project that streamlined operations in a class or developed an experiment that explained a scientific process, make sure that you get that down on paper. It will separate you from the pack.

- **Don't Underestimate the Importance of Summer Jobs.**

While it goes without saying you are going to list all of the great internships you've had, don't underestimate your less glamorous summer activities. The fact that you were a camp counselor may not seem like a big deal to you, but it shows a potential employer that you were out there honing your communication and relationship-building skills (not to mention achieving a savage tan!).

- **Skip the Embellishments.**

When you are putting pen to paper -- or fingers to keyboard -- the temptation to stretch the truth can be great. Believe it or not, a resume is considered a legal document, and if you get caught in a lie you can be terminated with no questions asked and no eligibility for unemployment benefits. Cast a cold eye over your descriptions to make sure they tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Proofread Your Resume, Proofread Your Resume, Proofread Your Resume.

Then have your friend, your mom, your dad, your neighbor and the postman proofread it, then proofread it again! A mistake on your resume will make you an automatic candidate for the circular file.

The Cover Letter

Cover letters provide additional crucial information about you beyond the what's on your resume. A cover letter can make or break the interview, so don't underestimate its importance.

- **Avoid the "Dear Sir or Madam" Opener.**

Find out the name of the hiring authority and address the cover letter to that person directly. This proves to the reader that you have done your homework, making a positive first impression. Even addressing the head of human resources is better than nothing.

- **Establish a Rapport.**

This is the best shot you are going to have at developing any type of relationship without a face-to-face meeting. It is a key component in getting that all-important interview and eventually the job. Allow your personality to peek through while still remaining professional. Mention recent news you've heard about the company, a product line you like or other information that directly relates to the organization. It shows that you've been paying attention and would be an asset.

- **Use the Format of: Introduction, Sales Pitch, Call to Action, Closing.** Who you are (a recent graduate with a degree in X, Y and Z); you would be the perfect candidate for the position because you have done A, B & C; you will be calling them next Monday to set up an interview at their earliest convenience; thank them for their time.

Keep in mind that you are a qualified candidate and that perfect job is out there waiting for you. Confidence is just as important as credentials. My mother always told me that looking for a job will be harder than any job you ever have so make sure you surround yourself with positive people, stay optimistic, and take a proactive approach to your search. Good luck!

Liz Benuscak is a certified professional resume writer and job career transition coach. She started her firm Bi-Coastal Resumes in 1997 after working with one of the country's most successful resume firms. With connections with recruiters and search firms, Bi-Coastal Resumes writes for professionals in all fields -- including hospitality, finance, legal, engineering, information systems, sales, education, and more -- and at all levels of experience, from college student to CEO.

"You have as little as 15 seconds to grab a potential employer's attention," she says. "In that short period of time, you must demonstrate how you will positively impact his firm. A resume is no longer just a list of where you've worked; it's a personal marketing tool."

Liz writes about career development and resume writing in business and industry publications and was a contributor to 101 Best .Com Resumes and 101 More Best Resumes by Jay Block and Michael Betrus.