

Fixing Common Resume Problems

by Jan Cannon

Writing a resume can be a challenge: how to arrange the information, what to include, whether or not to list a graduation date if it was a long time ago, etc. When I work with clients to improve their resumes, I often come across the same problems. Here are the three most common mistakes I find and how to fix them.

Mistake: When describing job experience, a dense paragraph-like list is made of every task.

Fix: Make it easy for the reader to learn about you. Create a list using bullet points. And don't list everything you can do. Remember, the resume is supposed to be a tool to get you an interview where you can wow them with your knowledge and skills. Let the resume reflect where you're headed. Use only those parts of your job experience that relate to the job you're hoping to land.

Mistake: Listing jobs from twenty-five years ago.

Fix: If you have a long job history and have worked at many companies, just list the positions you've held within the past ten years. Once again the object is to let the reader find out about you, but not to bore them with endless detail and information. It's likely that your more recent positions built on the work you did before, or you're in an entirely new field. In either case, if listing all those jobs makes your resume longer than two pages, drop the old positions or merely list the companies, job titles and dates.

Of course, if you've only worked in five companies for the past thirty years, listing jobs from this long ago won't be a problem. You'll still have a short, succinct resume that can mention these older positions.

Mistake: Arranging your resume so that education is at the top.

Fix: Employers are interested primarily in your work experience. Colleges, on the other hand, want to promote themselves. The result: new college grads with education listed first. Your resume is likely to get a maximum of 30 seconds of attention on the first read. Be sure to put the most important information near the top of the page. That means relevant work experience, not where you went to school.

What's even better is a profile or summary describing your skills and experience in three sentences, appearing just under your name and contact information. A targeted, information packed summary will get your resume onto the "to look at further" pile if there's an immediate recognition of a job match. Don't make the reader do too much work to find out that you're a good fit; you could end up on the reject pile when you shouldn't be.

A good resume is important for getting an interview. Make the most of it by making it easy for the reader to learn about you. Both format and content matter. For more tips on writing great resumes, visit the Getting Hired Section of the Career Center.