

The Appropriate Length of a Well-Written Resume

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One-page? Two-page? Three-page? Four? What length of resume will get my foot inside the corporate door?

This question has challenged resume writers for years, and still there doesn't seem to be any definitive answer to what is perhaps one of the most frustrating questions concerning resume writing. Instead of pondering endlessly the ideal length of your resume, a better question to mull is *how much information is too much*. The answer will help determine the appropriate length of a well-written resume.

There are two things you need to do to find the ideal length of your resume. The first is to take personal inventory of your existing resume to determine just how strong your presentation really is. It is important to understand whom you are and what unique traits you alone have to offer the prospective employer. Ask yourself if you've communicated why you are the best candidate for the position.

Review your content to ensure that your resume doesn't just consist of a job description, but rather results you achieved on the job. Give your resume to a friend or a trusted acquaintance that is familiar with your career history, and ask them if you've clearly communicated your strongest selling points in your resume. You might be surprised at the answers you get!

The next step, once you have a good inventory of what you've accomplished is to compile all your accomplishments and weed out any irrelevant information that does not support your personal career objective. I'll cover this in more detail a little later on.

I mentioned taking a personal inventory of who you are and what makes you unique to your field/position. A good place to start is with a career objective that summarizes what you want to do. For example, if your interest lies in marketing communications, use this as the foundation for your revised resume and cull all information to support that objective. An example of a focused objective would be: "A senior level management position in marketing communications encompassing public and media relations, crises management, and product promotion opportunities."

A quick word of advice about career objectives. I do not recommend you list yours on your resume because specific job titles and descriptions can involve very different activities in different organizations or can limit you. In looking at my example above, let's say a company had only a marketing communications position that solely focused on product promotion. The reader might pass over my resume out of concern that I might get bored just doing product promotion (which by the way would be an accurate deduction in my case!)

In addition, an objective is too writer-focused. The goal of the resume should be to communicate to the reader what you can do for them, not what they need to do for you. For these reasons, I do not recommend including your objective on your resume. I will discuss a better alternative later on.

Understanding who you are and what unique traits you have is a little more complicated when trying to determine the formula for the right combination of information on your resume. Let common sense be your guide. If you are a newly graduated student or have less than five years' experience as a career professional, chances are you will be able to fit everything you need on one page. If you are a technical candidate or have more than five years' experience, typically a two-page resume (sometimes three or more depending on your background) is in order. Let common sense be your guide, and often you won't go wrong.

The second step is to gather information that supports your objective and weed out any irrelevant data. Here are five areas typically considered irrelevant.

Hobbies and Interests. Unless they specifically relate to a job you are seeking, they should not be included. No one really cares if you are interested in cooking unless you are applying for a chef position (and your interest in cooking will be reflected in your resume anyway, thus making this information a wasted entry).

Personal Information. At one time, it was acceptable to include personal tidbits such as marital status, health, citizenship, age, family, etc. Today, it is not only unnecessary, it is ill advised. While most companies tend to practice fair hiring policies, candidates who includes personal information leave themselves open to a possible discrimination situation.

Irrelevant Information. You are applying for a marketing analyst position, so does it really matter that you delivered newspapers or washed cars while working your way through college? Remember, you want to include information that supports your career objective.

References. Many candidates still include the line, "References available upon request." Nowadays, almost every corporation is going to request references anyway, so no need to make it sound like you're giving permission for the employer to obtain what they're going to need anyway.

Old Experience. The world tends to operate on a "what have you done for me lately?" philosophy, and this generally holds true for hiring managers. If you have a long career history (over 15 years), focus on what you did within the last 10-15 years. If your early career accomplishments are important to your objective, you may briefly mention them, but do not go into any detail.

Once you have stripped away any information that does not support your objective, you are ready to organize your experience and accomplishments (side note: I almost never use the sub-heading "Professional Experience" or "Work Experience", instead opting for the stronger "Professional Accomplishments.") Here are some tips to help get you on the right track.

Make your sales pitch early. Most recruiters quickly skim through resumes, and a vast number of them are looking for a strong qualification summary over an objective. I recommend you make this the first sub-heading right after your personal contact information.

Typically, a good summary of qualifications section includes anywhere from three to seven telegraphically written statements. (Telegraphic writing eliminates the use of personal pronouns, such as "I" and "me" and articles such as "the" and "a".)

Avoid lengthy job descriptions. One of the most common mistakes made by people who write their own resumes is they fill it with job descriptions rather than accomplishments. If you have held an unusual job title you feel needs explanation, keep your description brief – no more than two or three sentences. Remember: concentrate on your achievements and results.

Edit unnecessary verbiage. Phrases such as "responsible for" and "duties include" are redundant. Also unnecessary are full sentences; use the telegraphic writing style mentioned above (I always pretend I'm being charged for every word I write, which forces me to tighten my writing into a concise telegraphic style.)

Match your accomplishments so they support your goal. It is impressive to have doubled annual profits in your sales territory if you are applying for a sales associate position. However, if you want to get into information technology, it is unlikely that a hiring manager is going to get too excited over what you accomplished in sales.

Whatever your resume's length, one thing hasn't changed: you have at most 20 seconds to grab the hiring manager's attention, so it is important to include your most powerful selling statements right away. Burying your unique talents and accomplishments – or worse yet not including them at all – will bury your chances of getting the job you want.