

Tips for Electronic Resumes

Last Modified on 02/23/2021 8:31 am CST

How to Ensure that Automated Recruiting Software Can Read Your Resume

Your resume will not be read by a human until after it is read, parsed, and classified by a computer – and even then it will only be read by a human if it is a good match for an electronic search. It won't matter at all how pretty your painted Easter egg looks to a human, if it looks like scrambled eggs to a computer. And if it looks like scrambled eggs, it's not likely to get any search "hits".

Computers do not appreciate style or cleverness. Quirky, clever resumes will not be processed correctly by resume software and they will therefore end up in a cold dark place where no one can hear you scream.

But wait! Don't recruiters want to see very nicely formatted resumes with lots of "power touches"? YES, some do! But the problem is that, unless you are sending your resume directly to a recruiter at her specific request, you need to send in a resume that is oriented toward automated parsing and searching and matching. That way a recruiter WILL find you, and contact you, and at that point you can send the "looks cool and powerful" version. If that makes you nervous, just add a line at the bottom of your resume that says something like "This resume was optimized for automated systems. Please contact me directly for a more visually appealing resume."

So, we are going to have two versions of our resume: one for sending directly to a human being, and one for sending everywhere else (job board, corporate application portal, etc.). Everything that follows is about the resume that gets sent to non-humans.

The rules for computers are really simple when you remember that computers are not clever. They are like the really smart nerd in your high school History class – big on facts, clueless on how they all fit together and what they all mean. So, let's make it easy for the computer to like you.

DISCLAIMER: many of the "don'ts" in this memo are actually NOT a problem for our Resume/CV Parser, but we're not the only parser out there, and in any case, why take chances? Let's practice "safe submitting"...

Here are the rules:

1. NEVER USE PDF. NEVER USE APPLE PAGES.

Your resume should be in Microsoft™ Word format.

Recruiters want resumes in Microsoft Word, and they hate PDF resumes. Why? BECAUSE PDF RESUMES CANNOT BE EDITED. Many resume systems cannot convert PDF, HTML, Open Office, Apple Pages resumes and will discard them. If you do not want to use Microsoft Word, use RTF or "Save as Text" instead.

The PDF standard is a "broken" standard. Text cannot be correctly extracted from MANY, MANY PDF files. As a result, if you use a PDF resume, there is a non-trivial chance that your resume will be unusable.

If you use PDF so that a recruiter will not be able to edit your resume, you are guilty of incredibly bad thinking. Why? Because if a recruiter can sharpen up your resume and help you get hired, isn't that a good thing?

2. Looks are deceiving.

Plain is good. Fancy is bad. Therefore:

a. Do not use document Headers or Footers. Do not put *anything* into Headers or Footers.

Many resume software programs cannot read information in headers. If you put your contact information into a header, it may never get read by the software, and your resume will not contain information about who you are and how you can be reached.

Headers and Footers also present another serious problem. The problem with footers is that when the computer reads your resume, the footer data gets inserted into the middle of whatever text spans the two pages. That means that the footer text may be inserted as garbage into critical parts of your resume.

If you think about it, Headers and Footers are really a throwback to the days of paper resumes and black and white televisions. The purpose of Headers and Footers on a paper resume was to make sure that a recruiter always could put the pages together in order, and to make it obvious that there were supposed to be X number of pages. But that concept is completely unnecessary for electronic documents: unnecessary, and in the case of resumes, harmful.

b. Do not use graphics to represent data.

At best, graphics (clip art, photos, logos, anything that is a .bmp or .gif or .jpg or .png, etc.) will be ignored. Oftentimes, people put important contact data into a graphic. This data is invisible to parsing software, so their resume is useless.

Do not use pictures or graphics to convey any textual information. (If you are a graphic artist or other artistic type, you should definitely have your electronic resume created by a non-creative type. Yes, you want to keep the stunning isual gem of a resume that you created, but remember that it is for direct human consumption and not for submission to an automatic resume processing process.)

c. Do not use "tables" or multi-column formats.

Tables are neat and pretty. *To humans*. Unfortunately, most document conversion software cannot handle tables and will either scramble the text into an undecipherable mess, or it will space the data with extra lines that may confuse the software. Or, worst of all, all the data in the leftmost column will appear at the top of the converted resume. So this:

2010-2017 Manager, Smith Corp.
2005-2010 Assistant Vice President, NotSmith
 Corp.
2000-2005 Officer, Big Bank

will become this:

```
2010-2017 2005-2010 2000-2005  
Manager, Smith Corp. Assistant Vice President, NotSmith Corp. Officer, Big Bank
```

d. **Do not use "fields" in Microsoft Word.**

Most resume conversion software cannot read anything contained in "fields". So we don't want to use "fields". (If you do not know what a "field" is in Microsoft Word, don't worry, you are safe.)

e. **DO NOT USE ANY RESUME TEMPLATE, ESPECIALLY ANY RESUME TEMPLATE FROM MICROSOFT.**

Virtually all resume templates contain severe flaws such as tables (see "c." above) that will render your resume an undecipherable mess.

3. **Never mix different font types or font sizes for data.**

WRONG:

Jeff Perry

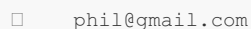
Never use small caps for lowercase letters. In Microsoft Word™, it is easy to do this by selecting "small caps" from the Format => Fonts menu. Do NOT do that.

WRONG:

Jeff Perry

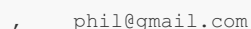
And, never use EXPANDEDSTYLES for anything, unless you want it to be a secret.

Do not use WingDings or other clever symbols. For instance, most document converters convert this:



□ phil@gmail.com

as this:



, phil@gmail.com

4. **Capitalization does matter.**

Do not use all caps unless there is a good reason to do so. A good reason to do so is when writing the section headers. A bad reason to do so is when writing a city name. Capitalize your name, your employer, your job title, school names, degree names, locations (city, region, country) etc.

5. **EXTREMELY IMPORTANT: Change the font size to 8 point or less and see if it still reads correctly. Now, save your resume as plain text (".txt"), and see if it still reads correctly.**

Resume systems do NOT read resumes directly. They first convert the resumes into plain text, and then they read and process that plain text. So, ALWAYS make sure that you save a copy of your resume as plain text and then open that plain text and make sure that it still reads like it should, with no funky formatting problems. You may be surprised...

6. **Contact info comes first.**

If you want a job, put your contact info FIRST.

Contact info should never be placed on just one or two lines, nor placed into columns.

WRONG:

Robert H. Smith • 13003 Myrtle Lane • Houston, Texas 77099 • 713.562.7009

RIGHT:

Robert H. Smith 13003 Myrtle Lane Houston, Texas 77099 713-562-7009 smithy@soupandmore.com

WRONG:

Robert H. Smith Phone: 713.562.7009 13003 Myrtle Lane Email: smithman@
mail.com Houston, Texas 77099 Male, unmarried, no children

RIGHT:

Robert H. Smith 13003 Myrtle Lane Houston, Texas 77099 713-562-7009 smithman@gmail.com

Also, NEVER provide more than one email address or one physical address or one phone number! ONE of each is all you need. More than that makes it LESS LIKELY that you will be reached by a recruiter.

7. Use common header terms to start resume sections, and put them on separate lines.

There is one exception to this rule: contact info. Contact info does not need a header. Everything else gets a header.

Your job objective section should start with a header that says: **JOB OBJECTIVE**

Your Work History section should start with a header that says: **WORK HISTORY**

Your education section should start with a header that says: **EDUCATION**

If you went to college, omit your High School data -- and regardless of your education level, listing your pre-High School experience is always a bad idea.

IMPORTANT: Do not use strange, unusual, or overly long headers. For instance, never use a header like "COMMUNITY INFUSION". Is that a new type of instant coffee, or is it something important?

SUPER IMPORTANT: Do not use other headers within a section.

WRONG:

WORK EXPERIENCE

2016-present VP, Johnson Controls, Inc., Dallas, TX. Managed a small group of highly skilled installers.

Achievements:

Reduced costs 20% Won "Best Coffee Maker" three months in a row

2012-2016 Intern, VP, Johnson Controls, Inc., Dallas, TX. Trained as an installer, then moved into an inside sales position for three months.

Achievements:

First place in "Job Well Done" contest Perfect attendance

Right:

WORK EXPERIENCE 2016-present VP, Johnson Controls, Inc., Dallas, TX. Managed a small group of highly skilled installers. • Reduced costs 20% • Won "Best Coffee Maker" three months in a row.

2012-2016 Intern, VP, Johnson Controls, Inc., Dallas, TX. Trained as an installer, then moved into an inside sales position for three months. • First place in "Job Well Done" contest • Perfect attendance

8. Do not use "columns" or "tables" for formatting anything. (related to 2. c. above, but important enough that it deserves a second treatment). IOW, all data must read straight across the page.

NEVER use columns or tables to format your education or work history or any other Important piece of data on your resume. (And by the way, if it's not important, it should not be on your resume.)

WRONG:

Jan. 2013 – Present
Superb Products, Inc. Parts Manager.
Reduced parts inventory by 10% while eliminating most out-of-stocks.

Mar. 2010 – Dec. 2012
Doug's Truck Sales, Inc. Repairman.
Fixed trucks and managed the parts inventory.

Here's how the computer may read that:

Jan. 2013 – Present Mar. 2010 – Dec. 2012 Superb Products, Inc. Parts Manager. Reduced parts inventory by 10% while eliminating most out-of-stocks. Dougs Truck Sales, Inc. Repairman. Fixed trucks and managed the parts inventory.

RIGHT: (uses tabs instead of columns or tables):

Jan. 2013 – Present Superb Products, Inc. Parts Manager. Reduced parts inventory by 10% while eliminating most out-of-stocks.
Mar. 2010 – Dec. 2012 Doug's Truck Sales, Inc. Repairman. Fixed trucks and managed the parts inventory.

And never, ever use newspaper column format, like this:

REFERENCES

Bill Smith	Jane Dough Customer Service Manager	Store Manager Dil
lard's Department Stores	Fredo's Groceries, Inc. 713-888-0998	76
5-999-9988		

RIGHT:

REFERENCES

Bill Smith Customer Service Manager Dillard's Department Stores 713-888-0998
Jane Dough Store Manager Fredo's Groceries, Inc. 765-999-9988

9. Keep like data in like order.

Each job that you list should be described in the same order. If one job is described as...

[Dates] [Position title] [Company][City], [State] [Description]

... then all of the other jobs should be written in the same style.

10. Do not combine sections.

Never combine several topics or sections into a single section. This is really important!

WRONG:

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS, COMMUNITY SERVICE, AWARDS, TRAINING

RIGHT:

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS I was involved with...
COMMUNITY SERVICE Chairman, United Way Campaign for Greater Okowekofobee County
AWARDS President's Quarterly Salesmanship Award, 2014
TRAINING YMCA CPR Training for Frogs and Small Reptiles, Level I, 2016

11. Always end company names with common company name words.

You know that J.M. Huber is an employer company name. Unfortunately, the computer probably does not know that. The solution is to always end a company name with a company word like "Inc." or "Co." or "Company" or "LLC" or "LLP" or "GmbH". So, write J.M. Huber as J.M. Huber, Inc. or J.M. Huber Co. You are not applying for a job at J.M. Huber, so they will not care.

And yes, this rule applies to big companies as well as little companies. If you worked for IBM, write IBM Corp. "Procter & Gamble" should be written as Procter & Gamble, Inc.

12. Use blank lines between sections/paragraphs, but do not use blank lines within paragraphs.

Always separate each Work History job and each Education school record with a blank line, and do not put blank lines within logical paragraphs. "Blank line" means an actual blank line placed there by your word processor program, not just visual spacing that looks like a blank line but really is not. Also, never use tabs or the space bar to move to the next line. Always use the Enter key.

WRONG:

Systems Integrator / Senior Systems Administrator (Contract)
May 2016 - Jun 2017 Ablest Technologies
Integrated Criminal Justice Info Systems, Maricopa County AZ
Provided Enterprise Systems Security and Audit needs analysis, methodology, education, product research and recommendations for Department of Public Safety, ICJIS, and Homeland Security.
Systems Integrator / Senior Systems Administrator (Contract) Nov 2010 - Mar 2014
SRA International Internal Revenue Service, Enterprise Systems Management Center, Austin TX & Washington DC
Provided security process and methodology, product analysis, and product implementation to comply with Treasury and IRS data security policies.

RIGHT:

Systems Integrator / Senior Systems Administrator (Contract) May 2016 - Jun 2017 Ablest Technologies Integrated Criminal Justice Info Systems, Maricopa County AZ
Provided Enterprise Systems Security and Audit needs analysis, methodology, education, product research and recommendations for Department of Public Safety, ICJIS, and Homeland Security. S
ystems Integrator / Senior Systems Administrator (Contract) Nov 2010 - Mar 2014 SRA Intern
ational Internal Revenue Service, Enterprise Systems Management Center, Austin TX & Washington
DC
Provided security process and methodology, product analysis, and product implementation to comply with Treasury and IRS data security policies.

13. Omit page numbers.

Page numbers can show up as garbage text in your resume, right in the middle of important data. The computer does not need page numbers. People that read your resume do not need page numbers. Your resume does not need page numbers, either. *Your electronic resume is not going to blow off the desk and scatter into disordered pages on the floor.*

Here's a typical way that page numbers look in your resume after it is converted (bold added for emphasis):

May 2016 - Jun 2017 Ablest Technologies Integrated Criminal Justice Info Systems, Maricopa County, AZ
Provided Enterprise Systems Security and Audit needs analysis,
Bob Smith resume (2017 version 1) - page two
methodology, education, product research and recommendations for Department of Public Safety, ICJIS, and Homeland Security.
Systems Integrator / Senior Systems Administrator (Contract)

See how your name pops up inside the job paragraph? Don't do that.

14. Put skills into Work History descriptions.

Why? Because really good resume systems can actually match your skills to the job dates and compute your total years of experience for each skill and the date that you last used each skill, and that is extremely important information. Should you put your skills into a separate SKILLS section? Sure, if you want to. But even if you do, make sure that you also put those same skills into the individual job position history descriptions.

NOTE: Do **NOT** put skills in work history sections under separate headers inside each job. Just list the skills as part of the narrative. So, do not do this:

May 2016 - Jun 2017 Ablest Technologies Integrated Criminal Justice Info Systems, Maricopa County, AZ Systems Integrator / Senior Systems Administrator (Contract)
Provided Enterprise Systems Security and Audit needs analysis, methodology, education, product research and recommendations for Department of Public Safety, ICJIS, and Homeland Security.
Achievements: blah blah blah Skills: blah blah blah
Software: blah blah blah

15. Never omit dates on your work history!**EVER!**

A resume that omits dates of jobs held is NOT going to get you hired. That type of resume is called a *functional resume*, and functional resumes have a very bad reputation in the recruiting community, because they are often designed that way in order to hide things.

If you have been unemployed for a significant stretch, it is understandably painful and scary to list dates of employment, but it is still the right thing to do, because otherwise your resume will NOT be taken seriously. Just go ahead and list the dates and explain the unemployment either in the resume, in a cover letter, or in an interview.

Dates should be written as Month YEAR. Omit the day of the month because *no one cares*.

Dates should be on the same line. NEVER split start and end dates onto two lines.

Do NOT omit the start or end date of the most current job. For instance:

WRONG:

May 2015 - Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ

WRONG:

Since May 2015 Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ

RIGHT:

May 2015 - Present Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ

Do not use all-number dates. Resumes may be processed in locales that differ from the locale that the resume was written in. In the US, 06/07 means June of 2007, but in many locales, it means July of 06. Oh, wait: maybe it actually means 2006/2007. Who knows? So, avoid all-number dates and use written months and four-digit years.

WRONG:

05/06 - Present Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ

RIGHT:

May 2006 - Present Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ

Do not use unusual terms as substitutes for "current" or "present".

WRONG:

Since 2005 Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ

RIGHT:

2005 - Present Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ

16. Do not nest data or omit company names on consecutive positions.

If you held several different positions for ABC Company, treat each position as if it were a separate, standalone position.

WRONG:

Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ
Dec 2014 - Present Systems Integrator / Senior Systems Administrator
Provided data integration services, blah, blah, blah.
May 2010 - Nov 2014 Programmer/Analyst
Wrote code, blah, blah, blah. I started with the company as a Junior Fall Guy. In Nov 2013, I was promoted to Programmer/Analyst.

RIGHT:

Dec 2014 - Present Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ Systems Integrator / Senior
Systems Administrator
Provided data integration services, blah, blah, blah.
May 2010 - Nov 2014
Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ
Programmer/Analyst
Wrote code, blah, blah, blah. I started with the company as a Junior Fall Guy. In Nov 2013,
I sprang forward and was promoted to Programmer/Analyst.

OR, at least provide an encompassing date range that helps us understand that all the jobs in that date range were for that employer:

ALSO RIGHT:

Dec 2010 - Present Ablest Technologies, Maricopa County AZ
Dec 2014 - Present Systems Integrator / Senior Systems Administrator Provided data inte
gration services, blah, blah, blah.
May 2010 - Nov 2014 Programmer/Analyst Wrote code, blah, blah, blah. I started with the co
mpany as a Junior Fall Guy. In Nov 2013, I sprang forward and was promoted to Programmer/Anal
yst.

17. Do not write explanatory data or company-specific data until AFTER you have listed dates, company name and job title.

WRONG:

If you want, you may simply state, as the last line of your resume, "References available on request." But really, that is not informative, so why not just omit that line, too? And if you really, really want, or have been asked to do so, send a *separate* references document. But in any case, only send references to a HUMAN, never to a machine.

Related Articles