

Job materials tuneup

ENG 381, Fall 2013, Bradley Dilger

Here are some of the best practices I suggested most often when commenting on your job materials drafts.

First, letters:

- **Use conventional business letter format.** See relevant chapters in Anderson for details.
- **Use a common structure.** See the supplemental handout on the course web site for more.
- **Address a specific individual if you can.** If no individual is named, do some research and try to find one. If you cannot, address “human resources director” for a large company, “hiring committee” if you think there is one, or the company name.
- **Use topic sentences and signposting.** Readers may want to skim; these devices help. For example, “My three jobs offered me this experience. First, I worked” Avoid bullets and subheads; they can make your letter and résumé look redundant.
- **Close your letter in reader-centered fashion.** Be confident but not cocky. Anderson’s advice is subtle and detailed, so I’ll just refer you there: pp 55–56.

Now, items specific to résumés:

- **Adapt categories and order to meet your needs.** Rearrange to put your best stuff first. Create or collapse categories if it will still make sense to readers (ask someone else to check). See the course web site for a second handout with some ideas.
- **Objectives** should, as Anderson says (pp. 31–32), be aligned with the goals of your readers’ company or organization. Don’t put target company names in objectives; that looks insincere. If you use an objective, rewrite it over and over to get it right.
- **Use reverse chronological order** for most lists: ongoing items first (e.g. “Aug 2009—present”) then most recent after that. Indicate future milestones by adding “(expected)” after the date (e.g. “Aug 2009 (expected)”).
- **Don’t double-dip.** Each item should be listed only once—for example, “Deans’ List” can go under “Education” or “Honors”—but not both.
- **Differentiate headings and subheads** by making them bold and in large type. Headings should be 130–150% of the size of normal type; subheads 115–140%.
- **Use résumé style writing.** Use mostly past tense. Replace full sentences with clauses or phrases. Eliminate repeated noun/verb combinations in lists. Abbreviate dates.
- **Use all horizontal space.** Reformat vertical lists which take up space, or add details to use left–right as well as up–down.
- **Include three to five references.** Put this item last. Pick people who can speak to your professional experience. Include name, title, company or organization, phone number, and email. Ask all references beforehand: “Can you offer a *strong* reference for me?” If not, find someone else. When you send out applications, tell your references—and send them updated copies of your materials.

And for both documents:

- **Save multiple copies of your work.** Email backups to yourself or a friend.
- **Eliminate older things in favor of new.** As you accumulate experience and accomplishments, older things can be dropped: high school in favor of college, less-skilled jobs in favor of more skilled, etc.
- **Briefly describe specific items** so readers outside of local contexts understand them—course titles, acronyms, campus- or city-specific events, etc. For example, “Organizer, Take Back the Night (annual event protesting violence against women).” Add dates and locations if that context would help readers.
- **Never use templates.** Design your own layout using Anderson’s approach (pp. 40–42).
- **Check any graphics you use.** Avoid color, grayscale, thin lines, shaded backgrounds, or graphics which may not copy well. Make a photocopy of your materials to ensure any graphics are readable. If not, revise accordingly, moving toward black and white.
- **Use appropriate, contrasting fonts.** Put your headlines and subheads into a sans-serif font such as Helvetica, Univers, or Franklin Gothic. Use a serif font such as Garamond, Palatino, Times, or Utopia for the body copy. Don’t pick anything outrageous—keep it conservative, readable, and legible.
- **Don’t trust the screen.** *Always* print your résumé and cover letter to proofread them. Mark any errors or changes, return to the computer, and correct them, checking off each change on the hard copy as you go. *Then do it again.*
- **Never do this work alone.** Get someone else to look at your work—someone who will give you a strong, honest critique, not a simple “Oh, that’s great.” Advisers, professors, former employers, or co-workers often give more critical feedback than friends.