

How to Get A Job

How to communicate effectively with prospective employers
and how to make sure your resume is given the attention it deserves.

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Version 1.00

January 2009

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1 Forward

In reading this document, two questions are probably going to occur to you. Who's advice are you taking if you follow this document, and why did I write it? Not too coincidentally, the answers are very closely related.

At the moment, I'm a graduate student at the University of British Columbia, working on a PhD in Bioinformatics. Fortunately, that gives me the time and flexibility to tackle writing projects such as this, as well as my blog (<http://www.fejes.ca/blog.html>), which are both great ways for me to give something back to the scientific and student community when I can. Hence, a lot of the advice in this document is geared towards students, although not exclusively.

However, before I returned to graduate school, I spent a few years in a startup biotech company. As one of the founders, I spent a lot of time doing the Jack-of-all-trades thing in the beginning. I installed the dishwasher in the kitchen, painted the walls, arranged collocation hosting and – among other things – also took care of incoming resumes and participated in interviewing job candidates. A lot of the time, I found the process to be very rewarding, and it gave me the opportunity to meet some very bright people. However, I was often frustrated by seeing the same mistakes over and over again. Many bright people were sabotaging their own applications by not taking care of the details and not putting themselves in the employer's shoes.

On the other hand, I should also mention who I'm not – I'm not a life coach, I'm not a great public speaker and I'm not a veteran job hunter. While I have had many jobs in my life, most of them were before my time at the start up company, so the information included here comes from my time reading resumes and not from reworking my own. Still, I do know that my advice works. I've had several opportunities to put what I've learned to the test with my friend's resumes and cover letters – and all of them have been very pleasantly surprised with how quickly they were able to find jobs. I know that my advice works.

Getting a resume done well isn't difficult and writing cover letter should be a chore – so I'll try to walk you through those processes, with a little bit of advice thrown in on some of the other fundamental interview skills.

2 The Job Posting

Job postings are out there all the time. They're available on the web, on bulletin boards, help wanted signs in windows and even on street corners – all depending on the job you want. Sometimes they're even available by word of mouth, or even ONLY available by word of mouth. No matter what state the economy is in, in general, companies are hiring, although how many people they may be hiring is going to depend on external factors such as the shape of their stock after the latest crash/boom/etc. Unfortunately, I don't think I'm the right person to tell you how to go find those jobs - besides the

obvious: keep looking hard on line, look for new resources (No, you haven't found all of them, no matter how hard you have been looking – the world is a big place), and remember to do a lot of networking. I once saw some statistics that said a very large number of successful applicants find their jobs through referrals and word of mouth. Some people even claim that most hirings happen that way, though it's really hard to know for sure. However, there is an art to getting a job, and that starts with the job opening.

I recently received some advice from a friend who (paraphrased) said “Don't wait for the perfect job, go out and tell people what your perfect job is, and then have them create it.” While that doesn't work well in the industrial world, it does seem to work for academics. If you're looking for a university fellowship or professorial position, that approach will work well, if you do it properly. (My friend was recently hired as a professor, so it worked well for her.) In the academic world, researchers or committees don't always know what they want until they find it, so if you can figure out how to show them that they want you, then that's your best bet for breaking into academics.

However, most of us will try to find jobs that already exist in the industrial community. Unlike academics, the industrial environment is a little more focused and usually has a given task that needs to be accomplished. Being in industry doesn't just mean that you'll be a drone, although it helps to be able to do the task that needs to be done, but it does mean that you'll need to fit at least one of their pigeon-holes for the job that's been posted.

How to fit yourself to those jobs is what this document is all about. A lot of people think that the process is over once they've hit send on their resume – and for many people it is. To be successful, however, the process begins with the job opening, crosses through your resume (one size fits all isn't always the best approach here), and if you've done everything correctly, will continue through the interview process and end at the offer.

2.1 Does the job fit you?

This is always the first question you have to ask. Do you want the job? If you've been looking for a while you might be tempted to take another job while you wait for that perfect one to come along, or maybe you're facing a fork in the road with where you would like your career to take you. There's nothing wrong with submitting an application to a job you're interested in – you never know until you try – but you should be aware of the commitment that you're making when you start the application process.

If you've ever looked at a medical school application, you'll know how many pages of information, essays and letters of reference they require just to consider before they invite you in for an interview. It's an immense amount of work. At the opposite end of the scale, if you apply to a fast food outlet for a job in the kitchen, it's a single form to fill out. Most of the jobs you apply to will be somewhere in the middle – but you're better off putting more work in than not. If you're not serious about the job, it'll show in your resume and cover letter, so you might as well not waste your time.

If you've decided you want it, go back and read over the job description again – can you see yourself doing that job for a year? 2 years? 10 years? This is the time to ask yourself if you want it. Most of the time, you won't be sure, but you might want to start jotting down questions now – you might forget them later, and if you end up talking with the company down the line, it doesn't hurt to be prepared.

This is also a good time to do a little research. Does the company have a web page? Do they have reviews from former employees? Does the company have an ethics policy that really attracts you? Would you have to sell your soul if you work for them? It's often better to answer these questions before you invest any major time in your application.

2.2 Do you fit the job?

Once you've decided the job fits with your plans (long or short term), you have to decide if you fit the job. The application process is a two way street – the employer wants someone who will fit in with the culture and brings the right mix of skills, whereas the employee has to be comfortable with what they're doing in the environment they'll be doing it in. If either of those don't work out, it's going to lead to a quick and unhappy ending.

The first thing to look at is the skills required by the employer. Do you meet their minimum requirements? Many candidates fail to read this section adequately. If they require a PhD and you have a high school education, you really are wasting your time. Applying to the wrong job doesn't help you out in the long run – and is a mistake many applicants make. If you really want to work for a company, send your application as a candidate for many of the openings, but only those you could seriously fill. Just blanketing a company with your applications will make you look desperate or careless or, worse yet, like you're unable to pay attention to details (i.e. The ones that say you shouldn't apply without certain skills.)

So you have the required skills, or close enough? Good! Most companies will hire someone who have a good overlap, or are capable of showing that you can learn the necessary skills quickly - and that's what the resume and cover letter are for. We'll get to them in a moment.

2.2.1 What not to do

This is a rather technical example, but a good one, none the less. I remember reading a lot of resumes from students applying to co-op positions we used to fill. They were some of the best and worst resumes we used to receive, so they made entertaining reading for an afternoon. However, since there were often more than 100 resumes for each position posted, we had to screen them pretty quickly. One of the first screens we used to do was based on the programming languages listed on the resume. Because we were hiring for a technical position in which the student would be immersed in C (not C+++, which is a related but different language), we used to go through resumes and discard the ones that didn't even include it as a minimum. Many students either didn't bother putting it on their resume, or listed similar skills, but not that one in particular. At first, we used to interview those who listed the

similar skills, but quickly came to the conclusion that they really hadn't understood that the job was in C, not in C++. By taking the time to read the job posting carefully, the students could have avoided missing a class for the interview, and used their allotted number of applications better.

Even more startling was the number of students who would apply for the job with skill sets that had nothing to do with the posted ones. If you're bragging about your skills for .NET (a Microsoft programming environment) in your resume to people who work with Linux or Macs, you're not going to find an appreciative audience. If you feel your skills are transferable, however, that's where the cover letter comes in.

3 Your Cover Letter

Many people approach cover letters with fear and worry. They don't know what to write and they don't know how to write it, which can lead to a disastrous cover letter. Mostly, I suspect, because they don't know why they are writing a cover letter. So, to solve that, here are the three most important points you should address in a cover letter.

3.1 *Why this company?*

This question can be the most difficult of the three, and sometimes can be the most enigmatic as well. It probably won't make or break your chances with the company, but it's often used to show your commitment to the job search process.

As an employer, reading this part of cover letters can be fun. A good applicant will do their own research and provide insight in to their career options, showing that they understand what the company does and how they fit into it. If this is something that your career has been taking you towards for a long time, you'll probably know the company well enough to write it without spending some time on it. Otherwise, set aside 20 minutes to a half hour and do some serious investigation. Do they have a blog? Do they have a web page? Do they do community work? If you're going to spend time working for a company, you need to know what it does, and how it presents itself.

Once you have that under your belt, you then need to come up with a convincing reason why you are interested in working for them.

3.2 *Why You?*

This should be the easiest part to sculpt for most cover letters. When you read the job posting and felt that instant connection between you and the job, there must have been a reason why you suddenly believed you were destined to get it – and here's your chance to show the employer why. Go for it!

Ok, so maybe the connection wasn't that instant – there are a few things you can do here that will help anyhow.

1. Go back over that job posting. What were the key technical skills they asked for? How many

of them do you have? You should probably mention those – and if there's a good reason why you feel that it's a good match, this is the place to put it!

2. Look over that posting again. (Yes, one more time.) Did they mention any key phrases that stick out that fit you particularly well? Do they need someone charismatic with people skills? This might be a good place to mention why you fit their job description better than the average candidate.
3. Ok, one more time, look at the job posting again. (Get used to it...) Most job postings come with some preamble about the company and the culture – is there a reason you feel you might fit with it? If you've done your research, you might have even found something on their web page that fits well here.
4. Is this a short term or a long term job for you? If it's short term, you probably don't want to point that out, but if you feel strongly that this is the place you're interested in being for several years, you might want to explore that as well.

3.3 What isn't in your resume?

Ok, so maybe, upon closer inspection, you only fit most of the skill set they've requested. Don't worry – unless the posting was written with a single person in mind, it's hard to find someone who fits an application perfectly. (If it was written for a single person, you probably don't have much chance of getting the job, but often resumes are kept on file and many companies re-visit previously submitted resumes if something else comes along – don't give up!)

So what are you missing? Is there a reason you think that it might not be detrimental to your employment at the company? Cover letters are also a good place to politely state your case.

“While your job posting states you require skills in working with Microsoft Office, I have several years of experience working with the open source word processing tool OpenOffice, which replicates the interface in a similar manner. Given my experience with word processing software, I believe I would be able to quickly master the skills required to work with the similar Microsoft product.”

You'd be surprised at how often a polite explanation of why you believe you're qualified will help your application along. Remember, though. Don't make excuses.

“I don't have the experience you need in advanced algebra because I was sick that week in school, and I have a doctors note.”

That just doesn't reflect well on you – people don't want to hear excuses, and starting your communications off with a company on that foot isn't going to help you out in the long run.

3.4 *Is there something wrong with your resume?*

I hope you don't need to read this section, but everyone has something they don't like on their resume. One of the most common is a series of jobs in quick procession. My girlfriend had the unfortunate luck to end up with a company that laid everyone off, a job that was so poorly suited to her skill set, that she took the offer from her original company before eventually being laid off a second time and then ending up in a job with an abusive boss from which she had to quit. Her resume ended up looking like swiss cheese for the two years after she finished school.

However, it's not the end of the world – it happens to a lot of people and for many different reasons. Some people will evaluate that and be worried that you're not going to commit to their company. (If a company spends time training you, they want to know they'll make it back in your hard work before you leave.) However, you can clearly explain that in your cover letter, but again, no excuses. You'll have to find a way to explain what happened in a positive light.

“I've recently been employed by several biotech companies which were unstable or provided unacceptable work environments, and as such, I am now looking for a stable and supportive environment in which to work. If you'd like more information on the short duration of my tenure at each position on my resume, I'd be more than happy to discuss any concerns you might have.”

By keeping the tone positive, you show you are able to be constructive in adverse situations, are able to coherently make our case and aren't trying to hide anything. There is always a positive spin to put on things, even if it's not easy to see. Keep reading, since that's a very important point we'll get to next.

3.5 *Communication Skills.*

So you've addressed the three points above? Good – now we need to edit them: there is always room for improvement, and two things that you need to edit for: Tone and Grammar.

3.5.1 *Tone*

Tone can be hard – your cover letter is a snapshot of your personality and can capture the essence of who you are. If you haven't had your cup of coffee yet, don't start writing till you have! You don't want to come across as grumpy, disgruntled or bitter. Would you want to hire someone who sits beside you and complains all day? Your resume rarely tells the reader who you are as a person, but people can read a lot into a cover letter. Make sure it sounds like you – and it should sound like you on a good day.

3.5.2 *Grammar and spelling*

This one sounds simple, but poor grammar and spelling can cost you a job. If there are two perfect

resumes, but one of them has typos and incomplete sentences, which would you pick?

Your cover letter is supposed to be your chance to put your best foot forward. You'd be amazed at how much less seriously you'll be taken for a poorly written cover letter. Get a few people to look over your resume to make sure that you haven't missed something obvious. The more people who look at it, the more feedback you'll get, and that's *always* a good thing.

3.6 What not to do – lack of research

When writing to a company, make sure you stay on topic. Stick to the things the company does, and what you can offer the company, or what they can offer you - and the best way to do that is to do some research. When expressing why you want to work for a company, make sure you come up with a compelling reason. If you can't come up with a good reason, don't try to fake it. Interviewers can see right through it and it's really not going to help you out. One example of an overly vague sentence comes from an applicant who writes:

“Through my friends and research, I have learned that your company is making significant and innovative advances in your field through commercial applications.”

What does this tell the employer about your ability to understand the company's goals or why you're interested in it? Oddly enough, this phrase didn't even describe the company well, making us wonder what he had heard from his friends.

3.7 What not to do - flattery

A mistake a lot of cover letter writers seem to make is to try to flatter the person reading the resume.

“I have always wanted to work for your company, ever since I was young. Your leading edge research has inspired me to do well, so that I might have the opportunity to work for your company.”

Unfortunately for this applicant, the company was only 3 years old, so it was pretty easy to see through her attempts to flatter us.

3.8 What not to do – going too far

People write amusing things into their cover letters all the time and there's nothing wrong with it. You're trying to show your personality – which should come out in the cover letter. However, when the amusement comes because the writer is being boastful, immodest or otherwise, it's probably not a great sign for the candidate getting the job.

One of my favorite statements on a cover letter was “All my new ideas bring profit.” That leads me to believe the applicant either has very few new ideas, or is a very rich person. In fact, reading further, it was clear that the candidate had meant to say “I have creative ideas that can help solve the company's

problems while staying under budget.” Of course, since the cover letter is all about communication and the clear expression of ideas, the applicant made two mistakes: She misrepresented herself in a tone that was boastful and wasn't able to clearly enumerate her true skills.

It doesn't take much to show you're not the ideal candidate.

4 Your Resume:

Your resume is probably the first impression a company gets about you. Even if you decide not to write a cover letter (and there are very good reasons not to do so for some applications), you have to give enough information to give the company something to go on, without giving too much.

4.1 Honesty

I really shouldn't have to say anything about this. Unfortunately, it's all too common for people to lie on their resume – I've seen it done. People lie about working for places that have never employed them, they lie about references, they lie about... well, everything.

I can't say they always get caught, but when it does happen, it has terrible consequences. Save yourself the worry and anxiety and be honest and upfront. Sure, you might not get every job you apply for, but that's normal – someone will hire you for who you are.

And, just in case you think this section doesn't apply to you, let me remind you that everyone is guilty of embellishments, particularly when it comes to describing your role on a project, both on paper and in interviews. You'd be surprised at how often employers know someone who you might have worked with in the past, or come across someone in the future who has a friend who knows you... or some other strange connection. Sooner or later, the truth will come out.

I have two examples that illustrate this point: One of the first times I ran into this was in the very first round of interviews we ever did, looking for a student for a programming job. Both my girlfriend and I went to a university with a very good technical reputation and so it was pretty obvious for me as the place to go to for resumes in order to fill a student programming position. My girlfriend's sister was also there, a few years behind us, and had been telling us stories about her classmates for a while, just venting about the ups and downs of school – and ironically, many of those classmates ended up later on ended up applying for the position. Without any malicious intent, we already knew a lot of the background of the applicants and were able to tell very quickly who had done what they'd said they had – and who hadn't.

In the very same round of interviews, we also interviewed a couple of students who had put a certain skill set down on their resume and cover letter. Including that key word or two got the student's foot in the door and helped them make it through to our final selection of just 10 interviews from the hundreds of applications. Fortunately for us, we made sure to ask a few technical questions during the interview

so it was very easy to tell who really knew how to use the tools and those who didn't. Those students who had wasted our time rarely got a second look when they applied for our other jobs in subsequent years.

4.2 *Layout of a Resume*

Lets be very clear in this section: there is no one perfect layout for a resume. I have juggled mine around so many times that I feel like I have some idea of what works for me and what doesn't. However, what works for me won't necessarily work for anyone else. Instead, I'd rather focus on some simple concepts.

1. **Keep it Simple!** The easier it is to read, the more likely the interviewer is to read it. Messy, cluttered or poorly formatted resumes do get rejected. While I don't believe a cluttered desk is a sign of a sloppy mind, a messy resume is rarely a good sign.
2. **Keep it consistent!** There's no better way to show that you can't keep track of details than to mess up the ones on your resume. This can include the big things (e.g. forgetting to include skills or work places that are clearly highlighted in your cover letter) or the small things (e.g. every single paragraph uses a different font and size.)
3. **Make it legible!** Selecting a font that looks professional is a key requirement. Comic Sans is clearly a poor choice, if you want the reviewer to enjoy reading it.
4. **Include lots of white space.** There really isn't a single rule for this one – but the moment your resume starts to look like an essay, you've gone way too far. (For most documents, you can expect the page to be close to 5% covered in ink. I'd estimate that a good resume should be in the 3% range.) This is a direct consequence of the next point:
5. **Make it Accessible.** The whole point of the resume is to make the information readily available to the interviewer. Clearly separate dates, locations and job titles to make them stand out. Key items of information should not be confused with the regular text of the descriptions.

So there you are – five simple concepts to play with. Go out and have fun with the endless combinations you can create with them. If you need a sample layout, there are thousands of them available on the web. If you ask politely, I might even show you mine.

4.3 *Formatting*

Formatting is not nearly as bad as it sounds, and the better you are with a word processor, the easier that this one gets. If you get help from a friend who's got some design background, I'm sure you'll be steered in the right direction, if not, just pick a template you like and emulate it. Unless you're applying for a design job yourself, you probably don't need to worry too much about having a really creative layout.

4.3.1 Fonts

This is easy to overdo, or just neglect entirely, and both will give you a different result. For most people, it's better to be cautious here than to go too far. When I'm working on my own resume, I usually start by picking three professional fonts. I find if I include more than that, it starts to distract from the content. I use those three fonts for three different purposes:

1. Regular text (descriptive content)
2. Headings (Job Titles, Award Titles and Names)
3. Dates and time periods

This ensures that I'm consistent throughout the resume, and it makes it much easier to find the information quickly. I usually tack on the corollary rule, use as few font sizes as possible!

1. A large font for my own name
2. A small/medium font for regular text
3. A slightly larger font for section headings or employer names.

I also have a second rule which I keep handy concerning bolds, underlines and italics. When you use them, use them consistently. For instance, I use underlines for titles for my own name in academic works and employer names, italics for dates and locations of employment, and bold only for highlighting key words. It doesn't matter which one is used where, as long as they're all used sparingly and to good purpose and (of course) consistently!

4.3.2 Document Format

Document formats are something close to my heart and are a lot more important than people really give them credit for. If you're sending your resume on paper, it's not a big issue, but few employers these days want you to do that. Most of them ask for resumes in electronic formats.

The first rule is to follow whatever they request on their job posting. If they've taken one step up from dinosaurs (legal firms perhaps?) and want word perfect format, send it in word perfect if you want the job. By sending a document in the wrong format, you're not going to be making any friends at the company's HR department, and may just end up having your application thrown away because it's not a technology they understand.

If they're still in the dark ages of computing and require Microsoft Word format, then send it in word format – the same principle applies. However, be aware that Microsoft Word documents save a lot of meta data about who you are, what you've done and often contain earlier revisions of your document. A tech savvy company can read all of that with little to no trouble, which can sometimes turn up stuff you don't want your prospective employers to read.

On the other hand, if they don't specify a particular format, then you have some room to move and employ a bit of sophistication. I strongly recommend sending your resume in PDF format – it preserves your formatting for both print and on screen viewing, is an internationally accepted format,

and all modern word processors are able to produce it natively. (If yours doesn't, you might try OpenOffice 3.0, which is available for all operating systems, has a decent interface, and can import most document formats – and still produce PDFs.)

Finally, if the application requires you to send your resume in plain text format, you really have no choice. Go back to the simplest text editor you can find, and strip out the formatting and start again. Hopefully the company will be able to read your resume on their IBM 80286-based workstations.

Regardless of what format you send it in, **double check** that the formatting is correct! Many word processors don't save what you think they did, and include stuff you'd rather they didn't.

4.4 What to emphasize

There are two approaches to resume writing and a lot of wiggle room in the middle. The first is to write the best, most general resume you can create so that it fits every possible job, while the second is to create a customized resume for each application you submit. My personal preference falls somewhere in the middle, where I have one very general resume which has just about everything I can think of, and then I tweak it slightly for each application. Depending where you are in your career, you can have multiple master resumes, which then require small tweaks, or you might find you need very few changes for most of the jobs you'll be applying to. What is important is how to use those tweaks to maximize the chances that your resume will pass the initial screening.

4.4.1 Key Words

Probably the most important thing you can do with your resume is to ensure you have the key words in there that are necessary, and the trick is that they were probably in the job posting that you saw. When you're editing a resume, you'll want to go through the job posting, pick out the key words and make sure they're somewhere in your resume or cover letter. My favorite trick is to then go through the skills section and make sure they are clearly visible. You probably don't want to go overboard, but you can use some highlighting or boldface font to make them stand out.

If you're writing a resume from scratch, you'll want to make sure that each of those keywords appears in your resume somewhere. If you don't have the skill, make sure you include it in your cover letter.

If the person reading the resume can't find the skills they're looking for at a quick glance, your resume probably won't make it to the short list. The best way to make sure that this doesn't happen is to ensure that those important words aren't hidden amongst the other non-important words. (Hint: that's also a good reason to keep the non-important words down to a minimum.)

4.5 Too Short:

One of the shortest resumes I've ever seen took up half of one page, and about one third of that was taken up by a single job description and the names of three class projects they undertook. As far as the content went, it wasn't bad: rankings in a couple of math contests, a list of programming languages they know, and some of the things they like to do in their spare time (skydiving, bungee jumping and clay animation were on the list).

Where this resume fails is actually the third line on their resume: "Good communication skills." Unfortunately, in one half page, of information in point form, the applicant never managed to demonstrate said communication skills, leaving the employer to wonder if they're lying about it, or just too lazy to show how well they can communicate. The irony was good, but not good enough to get this candidate an interview.

4.6 Too Long

How long is too long for a resume is a question that gets asked a lot. Unfortunately, there's no real answer, since it depends strongly where you are in your career. At some point, I dropped out all of the information about jobs I did while I was in high school – it's just not relevant to know I had a paper route anymore. (Alas, I had a good line about setting a new record for most ice cream sold in one day with an ice cream cart, though...)

Anyhow, on a more serious note, the right length is exactly how long it takes you to get your previous employment history and skill set across. For most non-academic professions, two pages can often be enough. If you have 4 pages worth of scientific publications, then obviously your resume will be longer. Do you see what I'm getting at?

The point is simply to figure out what's relevant – and more importantly, what isn't relevant. If it's not relevant, leave it out of your resume. Don't hide things, though – and obviously don't lie. You never know what will come back to bite you later.

4.6.1 What isn't relevant

One of my best "too much information" stories comes from an applicant who sent us a 40 page portfolio, along with original transcripts from his university and high school, and official notarized translations. While we might have asked for some of that information later in the process, it was clearly more than we wanted for screening applicants. The applicant provided several hundred dollars worth of documentation when all we really wanted at that point was overview of their academic history, publication record and sample of their ability to communicate. We felt guilty telling them they weren't going to get the job after all their effort – but a well run company can't afford to be guilt tripped into hiring someone who isn't going to work out.

Here's a few rules of thumb:

1. If you've been out of school for more than 2 years, your grades don't matter anymore, so don't include transcripts. (Keep the lines in the resume about awards you've won, though!)
2. If you had a job before you turned 18, you probably don't want to keep it on your resume past the age of 22. Your career starts over after you're finished school, unless you're still in the newspaper delivery business.
3. Skill sets that no one has ever heard of probably don't help you, unless you can explain them. I had to take off some of the more obscure programming languages I've worked in after a while. (You can always put a note to the effect that you have several other skills that are not included.)

4.7 Too Weird

People are always looking to make their resume stand out, but this can be taken too far. The goal isn't JUST to make your resume stand out, but to make your qualifications stand out. Sometimes things get a little weird along the way.

4.7.1 Catching the reader's attention – trying too hard

One resume I've seen tried to make the applicant's skill set stand out.... At random points throughout the resume, little nuggets were added in that highlight the strengths of the candidate. On it's own, that sounds like a good thing, but in referring to him/herself in third person, made it seem just a little strange. Here are some of the interjections, renamed to Jane Doe to hide the identity of the candidate:

- KNOWLEDGE: Jane Doe Makes Learning a Priority
- FIT: Jane Doe Likes People and People seem to Like Her
- EXPERIENCE: Jane Doe Works Hard to Help Companies Succeed
- POTENTIAL: Jane Doe Strives to Improve Her Problem Solving Skills

This was followed up with the statement:

Don't worry, Jane Doe doesn't speak in the third person in interviews.

You can see clearly that each point was something the candidate felt she could do well – and is something the employers look for, however, the format it was presented in doesn't really advance Ms. Doe's case. She could clearly have written those under a set of skills or competencies, which wouldn't distract from the message. Remember, a resume is serious – if you want to attempt humour, that should be in your cover letter.

4.7.2 Making Excuses

This is one that always gets me – you may find that you have a burning desire to explain yourself, but the resume isn't the place to do it. If there is a reason why your resume isn't perfect for the job, tell your story in the cover letter. The resume is where you want to see facts, not the story-line.

One of the most technically competent resumes I saw fell into this pitfall, and to this day I don't understand why. There was no cover letter, but the resume itself was peppered with little interjections. I still recall the wording of the header of the document, before the candidate's name was written "I am the author of a discovery, look at the end of the document. There are additional evidences." Grammar aside, the whole point of the resume is to showcase your skills, so I suppose the candidate was worried we wouldn't even get that far.

Still, the resume was peppered with comments like:

- The work in the lab was terminated because of a lack of funding...
- The laboratory was closed because of a lack of funding...
- The state could no longer finance this work...
- My scientific life was not easy due to certain factors...

None of these help make the case for the work he's done in the past. A simple statement in a cover letter saying that he'd repeatedly been involved in projects that were closed due to funding has left him looking for employment in a more stable field would have done the trick, and cleaned up the resume tremendously. Of course that wasn't the only problem with the resume, but it was very distracting and took a lot away from the clear talents the candidate had wished to present.

4.8 Resume Sections:

4.8.1 Objectives:

The objective section of a resume is optional, and really depends where you are in your career. If you have a Nobel prize or two under your belt, you clearly don't need to worry about this section. On the other hand, if you're an undergrad with aspirations of becoming a great scientist, you'll probably need to give some indication where you think your career will take you.

That makes this section dangerous, because you can pigeon-hole yourself if you're not careful. As an undergrad, I used to have two copies of my resume – one for science jobs and one for computer jobs, each with a different objective section. My science one can't have been too good because I always ended up taking computer jobs. Oh well.

As far as writing this section goes, use it to put in a realistic 3-5 year plan. If your goals are too lofty, they won't be taken seriously, but you don't want to sell yourself short either. A good objective for an undergrad would be something like "Pursue graduate studies in computer aided drug design" or "develop the necessary skill to become an entrepreneur upon graduation." Both of those are realistic, and give an indication of where you're trying to go in life.

Making your objective too short can be pretty silly. One of my favorites was:

“Objective: To apply for a Computer Programmer position at your company.”

Just by hitting send on their resume, they had already accomplished their objective. They forgot to mention the part of their goal that included getting the job.

4.8.2 Education

The education section is probably the easiest of all the resume sections. If you have it, it goes in here. If you don't... well, people have a way of finding out. I know someone who tried to fake a degree on their resume by listing a somewhat obscure topic for their bachelors. Unfortunately, I happen to know that that degree was never offered there, since I did my undergrad there. You never know who knows what about your background. These things are far too easy to check up on.

As for how best to represent it, I strongly suggest giving the institution, the name of the degree, and if you have a thesis, the thesis subject and advisor. It couldn't be more simple than that.

4.8.3 Skills

The skills section of a resume is always a challenge – figuring out what to include and what to leave out can be difficult. If you include too many things that aren't applicable for a given job, then you'll convince the employer that your focus is in areas other than where they'd like it to be.

Let me give you two examples.

4.8.3.1 Example 1: What not to include.

If you've been in the computer science world for a long time, you've probably worked with most versions of Microsoft Windows before you saw the light and switched to Mac or Linux.

However, you're now looking to join a Mac workplace. Check out the following skill line:

- Extensive experience with Mac OSX, Debian Linux, Microsoft Windows 3.1, Windows 95, Windows 98, Windows 2000, Windows NT 3.1, Windows 4.0, Windows XP and Windows Vista.

No matter how good your skills are in Mac OSX, you've really made it look like your expertise is with the Microsoft platform. In contrast, the following line might be a better fit for the job.

- Extensive experience with Mac OSX, Debian Linux and most Microsoft Operating Systems.

Suddenly the attention falls back on the versatility of your skill set, rather than on skills that your potential employer probably isn't particularly interested in.

4.8.3.2 Example 2: Order Matters.

Say you were applying for a job as a French translator, and you speak 12 other languages. (I'm very impressed, by the way.) How you present this could impact how your ability to speak the

language is interpreted.

Option 1: Alice has the following line in her resume:

- Fluent in Arabic, Basque, English, Farsi, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Swedish, Thai and Welsh.

Option 2: Bob has the following line in his resume:

- Fluent in **French** as well as Arabic, Basque, English, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Swedish, Thai and Welsh.

It's a small change, but look where the emphasis is placed. By changing the word order to make it clear you're putting forward a skill that they're looking for, it makes a bigger impact.

4.8.4 Work Experience

The Work Experience or Work History section can be a challenge, not because you don't know where you worked (though I often forget the dates I started or ended...), but because each entry should be accompanied by a list of achievements or responsibilities. I caution people from doing too much of the "I accomplished task X" entries in this section. Most employers are more interested in what you responsible for or what skills you used to accomplish those tasks. There's a real art to writing a good job summary. I suggest you go look at a few other resumes on the web and see what good ones (and bad ones) look like before writing your own. These can be very specific to your field, so you need to know what other people are writing - and what they're leaving out - in order to be competitive.

4.8.5 Interests and Activities:

The Interests and Activities section is the wild card section. It can help you find a common interest with an interviewer, or it can make you look like a lunatic. In the best case, you can discover that your flare for gourmet food is shared by the CEO, giving you something to talk about, and common ground with an interviewer - and that can be a huge help during the interview. The better you can relate to the people already in the company or group you're interviewing for, the more they'll like you. It might even them overlook some of your shortcomings, so my advice is to put this section in.

On the other hand, I have to temper that with some advice. If your activities and interests are unlikely to help you find common ground with the majority of human beings in the work force, don't tempt fate - leave this section out.

One of my favorite activity lists sent in a resume included:

- Making Kung-Fu movies
- Wiring video game peripherals

We all kind of scratched our heads after reading this one. Did this mean the candidate was going to spend his time trying to break desks with his bare hands? And how hard is it to attach a peripheral to a

video game console? It usually takes only a couple of seconds for me to connect my video console peripherals.

4.8.6 Letters of Reference

Most of the time, Job applicants don't want to give out the contact information for their references. Too many people calling them up can annoy them, and really, there's no need for it until you've at least secured a telephone interview. If the company won't even talk to you with out a list of contacts, then it's probably a top secret job, and you're in for the full background search anyhow.

Still, a letter of reference can be a nice touch on a resume, if you feel you're weak in an area on paper, and you can find someone who believes in you. And that's really the key part to why you'd want to include them: A letter of reference can be used to shore up your resume in areas you're weak – if (and only if!) you can get a strong recommendation.

For those of you who've gone to grad school, you'll remember the application involved sending two or three letters of recommendation along with your transcripts and essays. They were there for two reasons: to show who you know, and how strong a candidate you are. If your references were from the garbage man and the next-door neighbor, you probably don't have a great case, whereas getting a letter from a top researcher or two could really speed things along. The other trick is what they write. Whereas in grad school applications, you don't have the luxury of seeing what they write, you definitely do for your letters included in your resume.

Which makes it all the more painful to see people who include lousy references stapled to the back. If you get a letter where the best thing your reference can say about you is that you're “competent and able to follow instructions”, you're not really helping your case. Every other candidate could get the same. On the other hand, I have seen letters where someone important has said things like “Bob is able to pick up new skills extremely quickly, grasp complex topics and present them in a coherent and eloquent manner to his group”, then you're starting to pull away from the pack. If you feel your resume doesn't show your strength in a subject, then having a letter saying “Bob's academic background doesn't show his outstanding skills in [Subject A], but was able to demonstrate his incredible depth in it in the lab” might help you get your foot in the door.

At the end of the day there are two take away messages

- A mediocre letter of reference does more harm than good.
- If your letter doesn't provide clarity or backup for something in your resume, don't include it.

Aside: One of the resumes I mentioned earlier also had an interesting variation. A technical applicant was trying to prove in his resume that his ideas weren't off the wall, and included all of the comments from several reviewers on a paper he had submitted. Unfortunately, This really backfired on him, since we wouldn't have been looking nearly as deeply at that publication till later in the review process.

5 Your Interactions with the company:

So you haven't heard from the company in a while – that's natural. Depending on the company, they

may either be hiring for other positions, working on a milestone goal, or just waiting till the job closes to get around to the interviews. All companies know they can't wait too long before calling interviewees (lest they find another job in the meantime), but at the same time, employees always come before applicants, so you probably just have to be patient.

If you're really not patient, there are things you can do. A friendly phone call to the HR department won't make you many friends, but you probably can get some valuable information – assuming the company has an HR department. If the company is small, calling the CEO or department head is probably not a great idea. You're just distracting them from the other things they have on their list before calling you back.

By the way, if you're still bursting from suspense, you should go back and review the job posting. Did it say only successful applicants will be called? If so, just keep applying to other jobs. If they call you back, great, if not, don't worry about it, and move on to the next posting. Some companies just can't afford the time to reply personally to all 250 applicants who wrote to them for each available job.

5.1 What Not To Do:

Here's an example of an email I received.

Dear Sir/Madam,

I have called [Company Z] couple of times and also i had send my CV and covering letter for the position [Job Title]/ As i didn't hear from you for a long time should i consider as not eligible for this position.

Thank you very much for not showing any interest in spite of my telephone calls.
[Applicant name]

Here's why this letter fails:

1. Grammar: If you're going to write to a company, you're giving them one more piece of information to judge you by. If you can't master the language, your communication skills (or lack thereof) are instantly disadvantaging you. When you need to get in touch with a company, do it so that it highlights your abilities, rather than showcases your weaknesses.
2. Formality: Again, the company is going to judge you on your letter to them, so make it count. In the letter above, the author clearly wasn't addressing the company in a tone he or she would be speaking in to an employer. This letter would probably go on file, poisoning any future opportunity this applicant might have had in the future.
3. Assumptions: Somehow, the candidate seems to be assuming that having called the company would mean that they shown interest and should thus be guaranteed an interview or callback.

Candidates should remember that they aren't entitled to anything from the company and to be patient. Maybe they had another job in mind for your skill set.

4. Future: Remember, finding a job is not a single event, but rather a long game. The applicant here clearly shows that they don't have the patience for a long job search. By writing to give a sarcastic reply to the company, they really haven't accomplished anything useful, but definitely destroyed their chances of getting a job with the company in the future.

Back story:

The applicant who sent this letter had several things going against them. They had applied from another continent to a small biotech company who couldn't afford to fly in all of the candidates from “across the pond”, which meant that only the best overseas candidates were contacted. They also called several times during the process and annoyed our engineers, who had better things to do than talk to someone who thought that they deserved the job just on sheer interest alone – which instantly got their resume pushed down the stack. Finally, the resume provided by this individual was full of spelling errors and grammatical problems. Having failed to impress the company with the initial resume submission, each time they contacted the company, they further reinforced the impression that they were not the right candidate.

6 Your Interview:

6.1 Before the Interview

6.1.1 Research

One of our favorite interview questions was simply “Do you know what our company does?” A lot of people couldn't answer that, despite the fact that it was on our web page – they had never bothered to even read that much. I can't say we ever hired someone who failed to answer that question.

6.2 Preparing for the Interview

Are your hands all clammy yet? Are your fidgeting in your chair? Good, then you're all prepared!

Well, no, actually, there is more to an interview than just showing up with your best suit on. First of all, there are things you need to bring with you.

1. A clipboard with fresh paper. (Don't bring your algebra notes to an interview! Focus on one thing at a time.)
2. A pen. You may want to take notes, especially during phone interviews.
3. A copy of your resume and cover letter. If you know more people will be in the interview, it's often helpful to bring extra copies as well. Employers often refer back to it, and may ask you questions from it. If you have your own copy, you can refer to it as well to check the context of their questions. (Yes, you should know what you've done during your career, but if the

employer says “On page 2, third paragraph, what did you mean?” you'll be able to answer them.)

4. Your best suit. By default, this is the way to go, but there are exceptions. If your interviewer says “we're a casual shop”, you might want to tone it down with a good shirt and tie. You'll want to be a step or two better dressed than your interviewer, but being overdressed makes some people uncomfortable, and that can show during an interview. If you can't pull off acting casual in a suit, it'll just make you seem awkward – and that won't help. Of course, if you're more dressed down than your interviewer, that's a bad sign.

Aside: When interviewing local students, we used to explicitly tell them to show up “casual” - jeans and t-shirts were acceptable for our 20 minute interviews, since most were coming from campus. Occasionally students would show up in suits, and then fidget uncomfortably in them for the whole interview. I can be very distracting for an interviewer and interviewee when someone is unable to sit still or just feels out of place.

On the other hand, I once interviewed someone who showed up with more holes in their clothes than the average slice of swiss cheese. Coincidentally, that interview didn't go too well either.

6.3 The Interview

Interviews can be intimidating, but they are really two way processes. As much as you may want or need the job, you are still evaluating them as much as they are evaluating you. They should convince you that you want to work there, and you should convince them that you are their best hope at getting the job done. If only one of those takes place, things will probably break down later in the negotiation phase.

6.3.1 Interview Skills

At this point, there's probably very little I can say about interview skills. You either have them or you don't. Either way, I'm going to suggest you look for interview skills workshops and classes. While I was an undergrad, several of them were offered on campus, and I always learned something from them. Mostly, it just boils down to being a confident speaker, able to express yourself under pressure and not become intimidated. Whether you have that ability or not, try to play to your strengths and push the tone of the interview to where you're most comfortable.

If you have a one-on-one interview, try to become comfortable with the person you're talking with – let the conversation grow naturally and find subjects you're both comfortable with. If your interview is good, they'll be trying to do the same. Your talents and abilities won't shine if you're too nervous to talk about them.

This can be more difficult with group interviews, but the same concept holds.

Let me give you one piece of advice, however: Be yourself. If the employer liked what they saw in your resume, then odds are they want to know who you are – not what you think they'd like you to be.

Good luck!

6.4 After the Interview

Did you like what you saw at the company? Great! Now comes one of the more stressful parts of the application process: sitting and waiting to hear back. If you're lucky, they'll follow up immediately with you, and you'll know the outcome pretty quickly. In most cases, however, the company probably has another couple people to interview, and depending on scheduling, that can take up to a month, depending on the position. (For academic positions, I hear it can be much MUCH longer.)

But while you're waiting, there is one thing you can do – if you take a minute and write to the people who interviewed you, it's polite to thank them for their time, say how much you enjoyed meeting them, and how much you're looking forward to hearing back from them. It doesn't hurt, and is really the polite thing to do.

What's that? You didn't have a good time? You don't really like the position you interviewed for? Yikes! Well, this is also the time to write a quick note to the company and let them know. As above, thank them politely for their time and let them know why you're not interested (politely!) and ask them to remove you as a candidate for this position. If you would still be interested in another position with them, you can mention that here.

7 Your references

Assuming the interview went well, you'll probably have been asked to provide references, and I'm sure you had them ready to give to the interviewer. At this point you're a solid candidate for the position, and may be in touch with the company for a variety of things including further interviews, talks with higher up managers or owners, and sometimes the CEO takes an interest in meeting prospective employees. Just like the interview process, you'll have to navigate these challenges without making too many mistakes. (No one is perfect.)

The first thing any employer will do with your references is to look at them and try to figure out who they are. Depending on your field, this can be a big advantage, or not. If you're a physicist, having Dr. Albert Einstein on there would be a huge advantage, if you can get him to return a call – I think his answering service is pretty full these days.) For most people, however, you'll have to settle for previous employers and possibly co-workers. For people just getting their career started, you'll probably have character references.

A good rule of thumb is to make sure your references aren't too close to you in the family tree. Your mother, father or siblings will just never be trusted as an impartial referee of your skills. The same goes for grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.

On the other hand, you do need someone who knows you well who can speak clearly about your

strengths – and possibly not emphasize your weaknesses too much. If the reference can't explain how they know you or what your relation to them is, it's probably not going to carry much weight.

On the other hand, references are usually called where you have no control over what they say, so pick references you know will give you a glowing recommendation. I've called people up who were listed as references for an applicant only to have the reference tell me more about the candidate's weaknesses and how unmotivated the candidate is. That's a good way to sabotage your application for the job. I can't stress this enough, make sure that the person giving your reference is willing to speak about you in a positive light. The more thrilled they are with you, the better. If they're not amazed by you, then chances are their recommendation won't amaze the prospective employer.

8 Epilogue

You made it through to the end! I hope you've gotten some use out of this tutorial, in whatever shape you found it.

If you disagree with some of my comments, there's probably not much I can do to help you. However, if you feel I've left something out or made a mistake, I'd be more than happy to try to fix the hole – or repair what I have. Feel free to send me an email at apejes@gmail.com. I'm also on IRC (Freenode, #bioinformatics or Efnets #biology and #chemistry) in the evenings and would be happy to take your comments there.

Congrats on getting that job!

Anthony