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## 02.01: Business Correspondence and Resumes

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### Recommended Citation

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## Business Correspondence and Resumes

David McMurrey

### Chapter Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. Summarize the basics of format and style in business correspondence.
2. Explain and distinguish between three common types of business letters.
3. Explain and apply basic guidelines for resume-writing.

# Business Correspondence and Resumes

[Link to chapter introductory video](#)

## Overview of Business Correspondence: Format and Style

The following is concerned with the mechanical and physical details of business letters. All of the components discussed in the following are illustrated in the following:

[Link to sample letter with format and style comments](#)

## Common Components of Business Letters

**Heading:** The heading contains the writer's address and the date of the letter. The writer's name is not included; only a date is needed in headings on letterhead stationary.

**Inside address:** The inside address shows the name and address of the recipient of the letter. This information can help prevent confusion at the recipient's offices. Also, if the recipient has moved, the inside address helps to determine what to do with the letter. In the inside address, include the appropriate title of respect of the recipient and copy the name of the company exactly as that company writes it. When you do have the names of individuals, remember to address them appropriately: Mrs., Ms., Mr., Dr., and so on. If you are not sure what is correct for an individual, try to find out how that individual signs letters or consult the forms-of-address section in a dictionary.

**Salutation:** The salutation directly addresses the recipient of the letter and is followed by a colon (except when a friendly, familiar, sociable tone is intended, in which case a comma is used). Notice that in the simplified letter format, the salutation line is eliminated altogether. If you don't know whether the recipient is a man or a woman, the traditional practice has been to write "Dear Sir" or "Dear Sirs"--but that's sexist! To avoid this problem, salutations such as "Dear Sir or Madame," "Dear Ladies and Gentlemen," "Dear Friends," or "Dear People" have been tried--but without much general acceptance. Deleting the salutation line altogether or inserting "To Whom It May Concern" in its place, is not ordinarily a good solution either--it's impersonal.

The best solution is to make a quick, anonymous phone call to the organization and ask for a name; or address the salutation to a department name, committee name, or a position name: "Dear Personnel Department," "Dear Recruitment Committee," "Dear Chairperson," or "Dear Director of Financial Aid," for example.

[Link to block letter format example](#)

**Subject or Reference line:** As shown in the order letter, the subject line replaces the salutation or is included with it. The subject line announces the main business of the letter.

**Body of the letter:** The actual message, of course, is contained in the body of the letter--the paragraphs between the salutation and the complimentary close. Strategies for writing the body of the letter are discussed in the section on business-correspondence style.

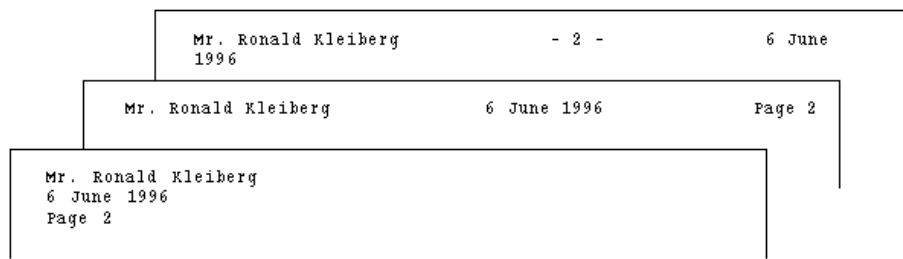
**Complimentary close:** The "Sincerely yours" element of the business letter is called the complimentary close. Other common ones are "Sincerely yours," "Cordially," "Respectfully," or "Respectfully yours." You can design your own, but be careful not to create florid or wordy ones. Notice that only the first letter is capitalized, and it is always followed by a comma.

**Signature block:** Usually, you type your name four lines below the complimentary close, and sign your name in between. If you are a woman and want to make your marital status clear, use Miss, Ms., or Mrs. in parentheses before the typed version of your first name. Whenever possible, include your title or the name of the position you hold just below your name. For example, "Technical writing student," "Sophomore data processing major," or "Tarrant County Community College Student" are perfectly acceptable.

**End notations:** Just below the signature block are often several abbreviations or phrases that have important functions.

- **Initials:** The initials in all capital letters in the preceding figures are those of the writer or the letter, and the ones in lower case letters just after the colon are those of the typist.
- **Enclosures:** To make sure that the recipient knows that items accompany the letter in the same envelope, use such indications as "Enclosure," "Encl.," "Enclosures (2)." For example, if you send a resume and writing sample with your application letter, you'd do this: "Encl.: Resume and Writing Sample." If the enclosure is lost, the recipient will know.
- **Copies:** If you send copies of a letter to others, indicate this fact among the end notations also. If, for example, you were upset by a local merchant's handling of your repair problems and were sending a copy of your letter to the Better Business Bureau, you'd write something like this: "cc: Mr. Raymond Mason, Attorney."

**Following pages:** If your letter is longer than one page, the heading at the top of subsequent pages can be handled in one of the following ways:



If you use letterhead stationery, remember not to use it for subsequent pages. However, you must use blank paper of the same quality, weight, and texture as the letterhead paper (usually, letterhead stationery comes with matching blank paper).

## Business Letter Formats

If you are writing a business letter, select one of the common formats as shown in the example letters listed below. These include the block letter, the semi-block letter, the alternative block letter, and the simplified letter.

Which of these formats to use depends on the ones commonly used in your organization or the situation in which you are writing. Use the simplified letter if you lack the name of an individual or department to write to.

## Style in Business Correspondence

Writing business letters and memos differs in certain important ways from writing reports. Keep the following advice in mind when you write and especially when you revise your business letters or memos.

**State the main business, purpose, or subject matter right away.** Let the reader know from the very first sentence what your letter is about. Remember that when business people open a letter, their first concern is to know what the letter is about, what its purpose is, and why they must spend their time reading it. Therefore, avoid round-about beginnings. If you are writing to apply for a job, begin with something like this: "I am writing to apply for the position you currently have open...." If you have bad news for someone, you need not spill all of it in the first sentence. Here is an example of how to avoid negative phrasing: "I am writing in response to your letter of July 24, 1997 in which you discuss problems you have had with an electronic spreadsheet purchased from our company." The following shows an additional example.

[Link to problem version of a sample business letter](#)

[Link to the revised version of the previous business letter](#)

State the main purpose or business of the letter right away. The problem version just starts flailing away from the very outset. The revised version at least establishes the purpose of the letter (and then starts flailing).

**If you are responding to a letter, identify that letter by its subject and date in the first paragraph or sentence.** Busy recipients who write many letters themselves may not remember their letters to you. To avoid problems, identify the date and subject of the letter to which you respond:

Dear Mr. Stout: I am writing in reponse to your September 1, 19XX letter in which you describe problems that you've had with one of our chainsaws. I regret that you've suffered this inconvenience and expense and....

---

Dear Ms. Cohen: I have just received your August 4, 19XX letter in which you list names and other sources from which I can get additional information on the manufacture and use of plastic bottles in the soft-drink industry....

**Keep the paragraphs of most business letters short.** The paragraphs of business letters tend to be short, some only a sentence long. Business letters are not read the same way as articles, reports, or books. Usually, they are read rapidly. Big, thick, dense paragraphs over ten lines, which require much concentration, may not be read carefully—or read at all.

To enable the recipient to read your letters more rapidly and to comprehend and remember the important facts or ideas, create relatively short paragraphs of between three and eight lines long. In business letters, paragraphs that are made up of only a single sentence are common and perfectly acceptable. Throughout this chapter, you'll see examples of the shorter paragraphs commonly used by business letters.

**"Compartmentalize" the contents of your letter.** When you "compartmentalize" the contents of a business letter, you place each different segment of the discussion—each different topic of the letter—in its own paragraph. If you were writing a complaint letter concerning problems with the system unit of your personal computer, you might have the following paragraphs:

- A description of the problems you've had with it
- The ineffective repair jobs you've had
- The compensation you think you deserve and why

Study each paragraph of your letters for its purpose, content, or function. When you locate a paragraph that does more than one thing, consider splitting it into two paragraphs. If you discover two short separate paragraphs that do the same thing, consider joining them into one.

**Provide topic indicators at the beginning of paragraphs.** Analyze some of the letters you see in this chapter in terms of the contents or purpose of their individual paragraphs. In the first sentence of any body paragraph of a business letter, try to locate a word or phrase that indicates the topic of that paragraph. If a paragraph discusses your problems with a personal computer, work the word "problems" or the phrase "problems with my personal computer" into the first sentence. Doing this gives recipients a clear sense of the content and purpose of each paragraph. Here is an excerpt before and after topic indicators have been incorporated:

### Problem:

I have worked as an electrician in the Decatur, Illinois, area for about six years. Since 1980 I have been licensed by the city of Decatur as an electrical contractor qualified to undertake commercial and industrial work as well as residential work.

**Revision:**

*As for my work experience,* I have worked as an electrician in the Decatur, Illinois, area for about six years. Since 1980 I have been licensed by the city of Decatur as an electrical contractor qualified to undertake commercial and industrial work as well as residential work.

**List or itemize whenever possible in a business letter.** Listing spreads out the text of the letter, making it easier to pick up the important points rapidly. Lists can be handled in several ways, as explained in the chapter on lists. For examples of lists in business correspondence, see the block-letter format in the preceding, the inquiry letter, and order letter.

**Place important information strategically in business letters.** Information in the first and last lines of paragraphs tends to be read and remembered more readily. These are high-visibility points. Information buried in the middle of long paragraphs is easily overlooked or forgotten. For example, in application letters which must convince potential employers that you are right for a job, place information on your appealing qualities at the beginning or end of paragraphs for greater emphasis. Place less positive or detrimental information in less highly visible points. If you have some difficult things to say, a good (and honest) strategy is to de-emphasize by placing them in areas of less emphasis. If a job requires three years of experience and you only have one, bury this fact in the middle or the lower half of a body paragraph of the application letter. The resulting letter will be honest and complete; it just won't emphasize weak points unnecessarily. Here are some examples of these ideas:

**Problem:**

In July I will graduate from the University of Kansas with a Bachelor of Science in Nutrition and Dietetics. Over the past four years in which I have pursued this degree, I have worked as a lab assistant for Dr. Alison Laszlo and have been active in two related organizations, the Student Dietetic Association and the American Home Economics Association. In my nutritional biochemistry and food science labs, I have written many technical reports and scientific papers. I have also been serving as a diet aide at St. David's Hospital in Lawrence the past year and a half.

*The job calls for a technical writer; let's emphasize that first, then mention the rest!*

**Revision:**

In my education at the University of Kansas, I have had substantial experience writing technical reports and scientific papers. Most of these reports and papers have been in the field of nutrition and dietetics in which I will be receiving my Bachelor of Science degree this July. During my four years at the University, I have also handled plenty of paperwork as a lab assistant for Dr. Alison Laszlo, as a member of two related organizations, the Student Dietetic Association and the American Home Economics Association, and as a diet aide at St. David's Hospital in Lawrence in the past year and a half.

**Problem:**

To date, I have done no independent building inspection on my own. I have been working the past two years under the supervision of Mr. Robert Packwood who has often given me primary responsibility for walk-throughs and property inspections. It was Mr. Packwood who encouraged me to apply for this position. I have also done some refurbishing of older houses on a contract basis and have some experience in industrial construction as a welder and as a clerk in a nuclear construction site.

*Let's not lie about our lack of experience, but let's not put it on a billboard either!*

**Revision:**

As for my work experience, I have done numerous building walk-throughs and property inspections under the supervision of Mr. Robert Packwood over the past two years. Mr. Packwood, who encouraged me to apply for this position, has often given me primary responsibility for many inspection jobs. I have also done some refurbishing of older houses on a contract basis and have some experience in industrial construction as a welder and as a clerk in a nuclear construction site.

**Find positive ways to express bad news in your business letters.** Often, business letters must convey bad news: a broken computer keyboard cannot be replaced, or an individual cannot be hired. Such bad news can be conveyed in a tactful way. Doing so reduces the chances of an end of business relations with the recipient of the bad news. To convey bad news positively, avoid such words as "cannot," "forbid," "fail," "impossible," "refuse," "prohibit," "restrict," and "deny" as much as possible. The first versions of the example sentences below are phrased in a rather cold and unfriendly negative manner; the second versions are much more positive, cordial and tactful:

**Problem:**

Because of the amount of information you request in your letter, I simply cannot help you without seriously disrupting my work schedule.

**Revision:**

In your letter you ask for a good amount of information which I would like to help you locate. Because of my work commitments, however, I am going to be able to answer only a few of the questions....

**Problem:**

If you do not complete and return this advertisement contract by July 1, 19XX, you will not receive your advertising space in this year's *Capitol Lines*. If we have not heard from you by this deadline, we will sell your advertisement space to some other client.

**Revision:**

Please complete the enclosed contract and return it to us by July 1, 19XX. After this deadline, we will begin selling any unrenewed advertisement space in this year's *Capitol Lines*, so I hope we hear from you before then.

**Problem:**

While I am willing to discuss changes in specific aspects of this article or ideas on additional areas to cover, I am not prepared to change the basic theme of the article: the usability of the Victor microcomputer system.

---

**Revision:**

I am certainly open to suggestions and comments about specific aspects of this article, or any of your thoughts on additional areas that you think I should cover. I do want, however, to retain the basic theme of the article: the usability of the Victor microcomputer system.

**Focus on the recipient's needs, purposes, or interests instead of your own.** Avoid a self-centered focus on your own concerns rather than those of the recipient. Even if you must talk about yourself in a business letter a great deal, do so in a way that relates your concerns to those of the recipient. This recipient-oriented style is often called the "you-attitude," which does not mean using more you's but making the recipient the main focus of the letter.

**Problem:**

I am writing you about a change in our pricing policy that will save our company time and money. In an operation like ours, it costs us a great amount of labor time (and thus expense) to scrape and rinse our used tableware when it comes back from large parties. Also, we have incurred great expense on replacement of linens that have been ruined by stains that could have been soaked promptly after the party and saved.

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**Revision:**

I am writing to inform you of a new policy that we are beginning, effective September 1, 19XX, that will enable us to serve your large party needs more often and without delay. In an operation like ours in which we supply for parties of up to 500, turn-around time is critical; unscrapped and unrinsed tableware causes delays in clean-up time and, more importantly, less frequent and less prompt service to you the customer. Also, extra fees for stained linens can be avoided by immediate soaking after the party.

**Problem:**

For these reasons, our new policy, effective September 1, 19XX, will be to charge an additional 15% on unrinsed tableware and 75% of the wholesale value of stained linens that have not been soaked.

---

**Revision:**

Therefore, to enable us to supply your large party needs promptly, we will begin charging 15% on all unrinsed tableware and 75% of the wholesale value of stained linens that have not been soaked. This policy we hope will encourage our customers' kitchen help to do the quick and simple rinsing and/or soaking at the end of large parties. Doing so will ensure faster and more frequent service.

**Avoid pompous, inflated, legal-sounding phrasing.** Watch out for puffed-up, important-sounding language. This kind of language may seem business-like at first; it's actually ridiculous. Of course, such phrasing is apparently necessary in legal documents; but why use it in other writing situations? When you write a business letter, picture yourself as a plain-talking, common-sense, down-to-earth person (but avoid slang). Check out the following examples for a serious dose of bureaucratese.

**Problem:**

The Capitol Improvements Project (hereinafter to designated as CIP) for the fiscal year 1982-1983 stipulated budget allocations in the amount not exceeding \$20,000 to be designated for utilization by a program under the nomination of the 23rd Street Renaissance Market. The purpose and aim of the aforesaid program is to provide and permit basic pedestrian amenities and conveniences for a marketplace devoted to the commerce of arts and crafts to the maximum extent possible. In consideration of these disctates, the CIP has mandated that there be a geographical extension of the sidewalk no greater than 15 feet in a northerly direction. The said extension would continue to permit an opening of approximately 15 feet for the orderly flow and passage of vehicular traffic. The City Council in 1982 issued directives that mandated the temporary closure of the above named street for a period not to exceed one calendar year. In April of the ensuing year it was directed by the City Council that this closure remain in full effect for a period not exceeding an additional six months.

*This is pompous, officious-sounding prose style. People in authority positions don't have to sound like this (they might get questioned).*

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**Revision:**

The Capital Improvements Program (CIP) in 1982-1983 included the amount of \$20,000 for the 23rd Street Renaissance Market to provide sidewalks for an arts and crafts marketplace. The detailed plans of the CIP called for an extension of the sidewalk 15 feet north, with a 15-foot opening for automobiles.

In 1982, the City Council temporarily closed 23rd Street for a one-year period. In April of 1983, the council extended that closure for an additional six-month period which will end October 1983.

*This version states the case in plain and simple language.*

Avoid pompous, officious-sounding writing. Not only is the tone of the problem version offensive, it is nearly twice as long as the revised version!

**Give your business letter an "action ending" whenever appropriate.** An "action-ending" makes clear what the writer of the letter expects the recipient to do and when. Ineffective conclusions to business letters often end with rather limp, noncommittal statements such as "Hope to hear from you soon" or "Let me know if I can be of any further assistance." Instead, or in addition, specify the action the recipient should take and the schedule for that action. If, for example, you are writing a query letter, ask the editor politely to let you know of his decision if at all possible in a month. If you are writing an application letter, subtly try to set up a date and time for an interview. Here are some examples:

As soon as you approve this plan, I'll begin contacting sales representatives at once to arrange for purchase and delivery of the notebook computers. May I expect to hear from you within the week?

---

I am free after 2:00 p.m. on most days. Can we set up an appointment to discuss my background and this position further? I'll look forward to hearing from you.

## Inquiry Letters

This section focuses on the inquiry letter or inquiry e-mail; let's call it the inquiry communication. The *inquiry communication* is useful when you need information, advice, names, or directions. Be careful, however, not to ask for too much information or for information that you could easily obtain in some other way—for example, by a quick trip to the library or by an Internet search.

For related matters, see the section on general business-letter format and style.

### Inquiry Letters or E-mail: Contents and Organization

1. Early in the letter or e-mail, identify the purpose—to obtain help or information (if it's a solicited communication, information about an advertised product, service, or program).
2. In an unsolicited letter or e-mail, identify who you are, what you are working on, why you need the requested information, and how you found out about the individual. In an unsolicited letter or e-mail, also identify the source that prompted your inquiry, for example, a journal article.
3. In the communication, list questions or information needed in a clear, specific, and easy-to-read format. If you have a number of questions, consider making a questionnaire and including a stamped, self-addressed envelope. If it's e-mail, just put the questions in the body of the e-mail or attach a separate questionnaire document.
4. In an unsolicited letter or e-mail, try to find some way to compensate the recipient for the trouble, for example, by offering to pay copying and mailing costs, to accept a collect call, to acknowledge the recipient in your report, or to send him or her a copy of your report. In a solicited letter or e-mail, suggest that the recipient send brochures or catalogs.
5. In closing an unsolicited letter or e-mail, express gratitude for any help that the recipient can provide you, acknowledge the inconvenience of your request, but do not thank the recipient "in advance." In an unsolicited letter or e-mail, tactfully suggest to the recipient will benefit by helping you (for example, through future purchases from the recipient's company).

## Complaint and Adjustment Letters

This chapter covers two closely related types of business letters: *complaint letters*, which request compensation for problems with purchases or services, and *adjustment letters*, which are the responses to complaint letters.

For related matters, see the section on general business-letter format and style.

### Complaint Letters

A complaint letter requests some sort of compensation for defective or damaged merchandise or for inadequate or delayed services. While many complaints can be made in person, some circumstances require formal business letters. The complaint may be so complex that a phone call cannot effectively resolve the problem; or the writer may prefer the permanence, formality, and seriousness of a business letter. The essential rule in writing a complaint letter is to maintain your poise and diplomacy, no matter how justified your gripe is. Avoid making the recipient an adversary.

**Note:** Complaints by e-mail may not be as effective as those by regular mail, so that option is not included here.

1. Early in the letter, identify the reason you are writing—to register a complaint and to ask for some kind of compensation. Avoid leaping into the details of the problem in the first sentence.
2. Provide a fully detailed narrative or description of the problem. This is the "evidence."
3. State exactly what compensation you desire, either before or after the discussion of the problem or the reasons for granting the compensation. (It may be more tactful and less antagonizing to delay this statement in some cases.)
4. Explain why your request should be granted. Presenting the evidence is not enough; state the reasons why this evidence indicates your requested should be granted.
5. Suggest why it is in the recipient's best interest to grant your request; appeal to the recipient's sense of fairness or desire for continued business, but don't threaten. Find some way to view the problem as an honest mistake. Don't imply that the recipient deliberately committed the error or that the company has no concern for the customer. Toward the end of the letter, express confidence that the recipient will grant your request.

### Adjustment Letters

**Note:** Adjustment communications by e-mail may not be as effective as those by regular mail so that option is not included here.

Replies to complaint letters, often called letters of "adjustment," must be handled carefully when the requested compensation cannot be granted. Refusal of compensation tests your diplomacy and tact as a writer. Here are some suggestions that may help you write either type of adjustment letter:

1. Begin with a reference to the date of the original letter of complaint and to the purpose of your letter. If you deny the request, don't state the refusal right away unless you can do so tactfully.
2. Express your concern over the writer's troubles and your appreciation that she or he has written you.
3. If you deny the request, explain the reasons why the request cannot be granted in as cordial and noncombative manner as possible. If you grant the request, don't sound as if you are doing so in a begrudging way.
4. If you deny the request, try to offer some partial or substitute compensation or offer some friendly advice (to take the sting out of the denial).
5. Conclude the letter cordially, perhaps expressing confidence that you and the writer will continue doing business.

## Job Application Letters

This section focuses on the application letter (sometimes called a "cover letter"), which together with the resume is often called the "job package." You may already have written one or both of these employment-seeking documents. That's okay. Read and study this section, and then apply the guidelines here to the resumes and application letters you have created in the past.

In many job applications, you attach an application letter to your resume. Actually, the letter comes *before* the resume.

The role of the application letter is to draw a clear connection between the job you are seeking and your qualifications listed in the resume. To put it another way, the letter matches the requirements of the job with your qualifications, emphasizing how you are right for that job. The application letter is not a lengthy summary of the resume—not at all. It selectively mentions information in the resume, as appropriate.

## Common Types of Application Letters

To begin planning your letter, decide which type of application letter you need. This decision is, in part, based on employers' requirements and, in part, based on what your background and employment needs are. In many ways, types of application letters are like the types of resumes. The types of application letters can be defined according to amount and kind of information:

- **Objective letters**—One type of letter says very little: it identifies the position being sought, indicates an interest in having an interview, and calls attention to the fact that the resume is attached. It also mentions any other special matters that are not included on the resume, such as dates and times when you are available to come in for an interview. This letter does no salesmanship and is very brief. (It represents the true meaning of "cover" letter.)
- **Highlight letters**—Another type of application letter, the type you do for most technical writing courses, tries to summarize the key information from the resume, the key information that will emphasize that you are a good candidate for the job. In other words, it selects the best information from the resume and summarizes it in the letter—this type of letter is especially designed to make the connection with the specific job.

How do you know which to write? For most technical-writing courses, write the highlight letter. However, in "real-life" situations, try calling the prospective employer; study the job advertisement for clues.

## Common Sections in Application Letters

As for the actual content and organization of the paragraphs within the application letter (specifically for the *highlight* type of application letter), consider the following common approaches.

**Introductory paragraph:** That first paragraph of the application letter is the most important; it sets everything up—the tone, focus, as well as your most important qualification. A typical problem in the introductory paragraph involves diving directly into work and educational experience. Bad idea! A better idea is to do some combination of the following:

- State the purpose of the letter—to inquire about an employment opportunity.
- Indicate the source of your information about the job—newspaper advertisement, a personal contact, or other.
- State one eye-catching, attention-getting thing about yourself in relation to the job or to the employer that will cause the reader to want to continue.

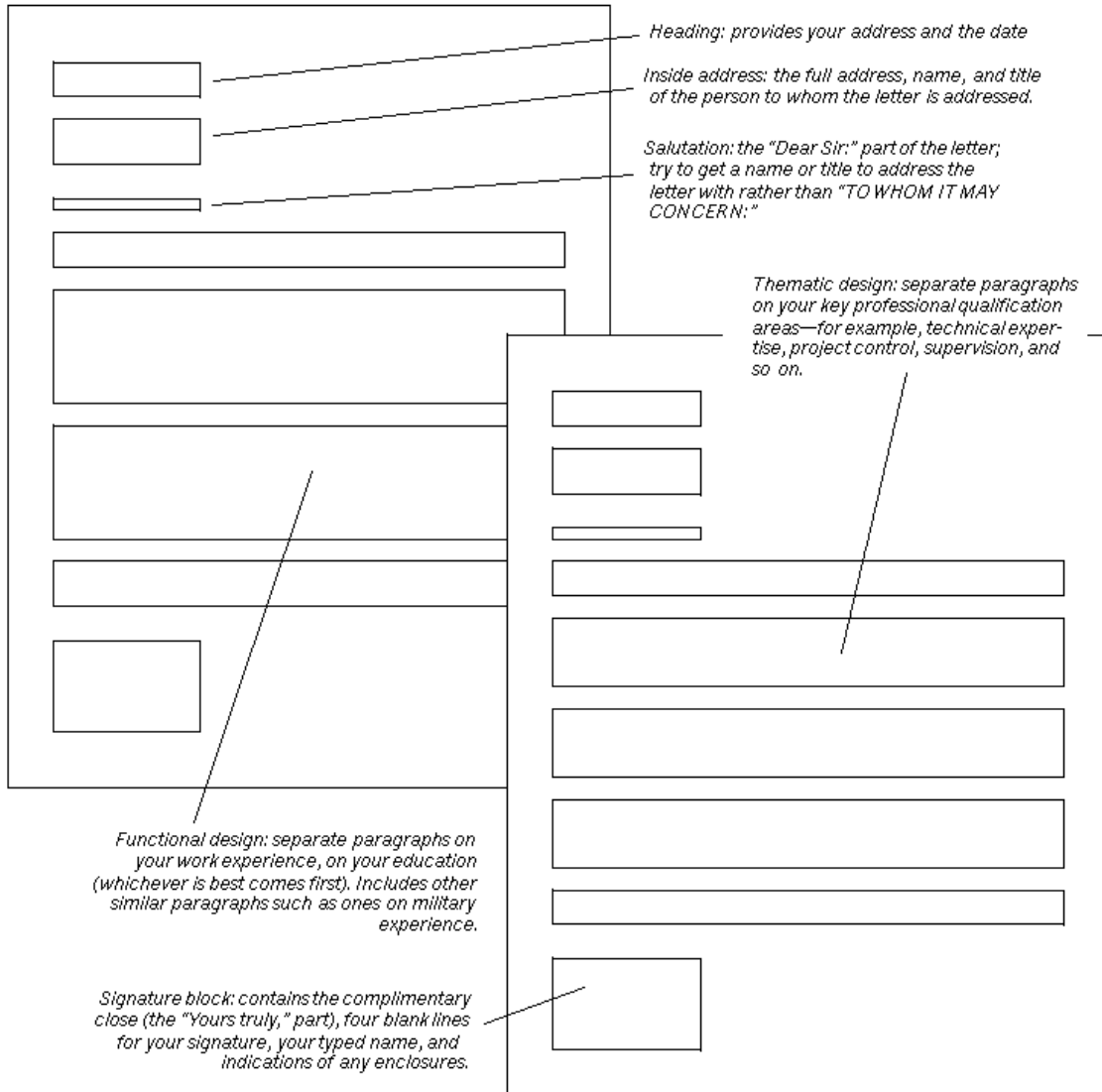
And you try to do all things like these in the space of very short paragraph—no more than 3 to 4 lines of the standard business letter.

**Main body paragraphs:** In the main parts of the application letter, you present your work experience, education, and training—whatever makes that connection between you and the job you are seeking. Remember that this is the most important job you have to do in this letter—to enable the reader see the match between your qualifications and the requirements for the job.

There are two common ways to present this information:

- **Functional approach**—This one presents education in one section, and work experience in the other. If there were military experience, that might go in another section. Whichever of these section contains your "best stuff" should come first, after the introduction.
- **Thematic approach**—This one divides experience and education into groups such as "management," "technical," "financial," and so on and then discusses your work and education related to them in separate paragraphs.

If you read the section on functional and thematic organization of resumes, just about everything said there applies here. Of course, the letter is *not* exhaustive or complete about your background—it highlights just those aspects of your background that make the connection with the job you are seeking.



Another section worth considering for the main body of the application letter is one in which you discuss your goals, objectives (the focus of your career) what you are doing, or want to do professionally. A paragraph like this is particularly good for people just starting their careers, when there is not much to put in the letter. Of course, be careful about loading a paragraph like this with "sweet nothings." For example, "I am seeking a challenging, rewarding career with a dynamic upscale company where I will have ample room for professional and personal growth"—come on! give us a break! Might as well say, "I want to be happy, well-paid, and well-fed."

**Closing paragraph:** In the last paragraph of the application letter, you can indicate how the prospective employer can get in touch with you and when are the best times for an interview. This is the place to urge that prospective employer to contact you to arrange an interview.

## Background Details in the Application Letter

One of the best ways to make an application letter great is to work in details, examples, specifics about related aspects of your educational and employment background. Yes, if the resume is attached, readers can see all that details there. However, a letter that is overly general and vague might generate so little interest that the reader might not even care to turn to the resume.

In the application letter, you work in selective detail that makes your letter stand out, makes it memorable, and substantiates the claims you make about your skills and experience. Take a look at this example, which is rather lacking in specifics:

As for my experience working with persons with developmental disabilities, I have worked and volunteered at various rehabilitation hospitals and agencies in Austin and Houston [say which ones to inject more detail into this letter]. I have received training [where? certificates?] in supervising patients and assisting with physical and social therapy [which specific therapies?]. Currently, I am volunteering at St. David's Hospital [doing what?] to continue my education in aiding persons with developmental disabilities [which specific disabilities?].

Now take a look at the revision:

As for my experience working with persons with developmental disabilities, I have worked and volunteered at *Cypress Creek Hospital in Houston and Capital Area Easter Seals/ Rehabilitation Center and Health South Rehabilitation Hospital in Austin*. I have received *CPR, First Aid, and Crisis Intervention certificates from Cypress Creek Hospital*. Currently, I am volunteering at *St. David's Hospital* assisting with *physical therapy* to persons with *developmental disabilities* in the *aquatics department*.



## Early-Career Application Letters

In the preceding, you've seen some rather impressive application letters. But what if you don't have all that experience—how do you construct a respectable application letter?

- Cite relevant projects (both in academia and community) you've worked on, even if they are not exactly related to the career that you pursue.
- Spend extra time describing college courses and programs you have been involved in. What about team projects, research projects, or reports?
- Include volunteer work that has had any trace of technical in it. (If you've not done any volunteer work, get to volunteering!)
- List any organizations you have been a member of and describe any of their activities that have any trace of technical in them. (If you've not belonged to any technically oriented organizations, get to belonging!)
- As with the resume, you can use formatting to spread what information you have to fill out the resume page.

In the example student application letter below, notice that the writer describes his coursework and the applications that he used. His reference to a professional exposition shows an active interest in a particular technical area. Moreover, his visit with an employee of the company with which he seeks employment is a crafty form of name dropping. In general, the letter expresses enthusiasm about working in the VLSI area.

*Early-career application letter.* Use the strategies suggested here to fill your letter with good specific information.

## Checklist of Common Problems in Application Letters

- **Readability and white space**—Are there any dense paragraphs over 8 lines? Are there comfortable 1-inch to 1.5-inch margins all the way around the letter? Is there adequate spacing between paragraphs and between the components of the letter?
- **Page fill**—Is the letter placed on the page nicely: not crammed at the top one-half of the page; not spilling over to a second page by only three or four lines?
- **General neatness, professional-looking quality**—Is the letter on good quality paper, and is the copy clean and free of smudges and erasures?
- **Proper use of the business-letter format**—Have you set up the letter in one of the standard business-letter formats? (See the references earlier in this chapter.)
- **Overt, direct indication of the connection between your background and the requirements of the job**—Do you emphasize this connection?
- **A good upbeat, positive tone**—Is the tone of your letter bright and positive? Does it avoid sounding overly aggressive, brash, over-confident (unless that is really the tone you want)? Does your letter avoid the opposite problem of sounding stiff, overly reserved, stand-offish, blasé, indifferent?
- **A good introduction**—Does your introduction establish the purpose of the letter? Does it avoid diving directly into the details of your work and educational experience? Do you present one little compelling detail about yourself that will cause the reader to want to keep reading?
- **A good balance between brevity and details**—Does your letter avoid becoming too detailed (making readers less inclined to read thoroughly)? Does your letter avoid the opposite extreme of being so general that it could refer to practically anybody?
- **Lots of specifics (dates, numbers, names, etc.)**—Does your letter present plenty of specific detail but without making the letter too densely detailed? Do you present hard factual detail (numbers, dates, proper names) that make you stand out as an individual?
- **A minimum of information that is simply your opinion of yourself**—Do you avoid over-reliance on information that is simply your opinions about yourself? For example, instead of saying that you "work well with others," do you cite work experience that proves that fact but without actually stating it?
- **Grammar, spelling, usage**—And of course, does your letter use correct grammar, usage, and spelling?

## Resumes

A *resume* is a selective record of your background—your educational, military, and work experience, your certifications, abilities, and so on. You send it, sometimes accompanied by an application letter, to potential employers when you are seeking job interviews.

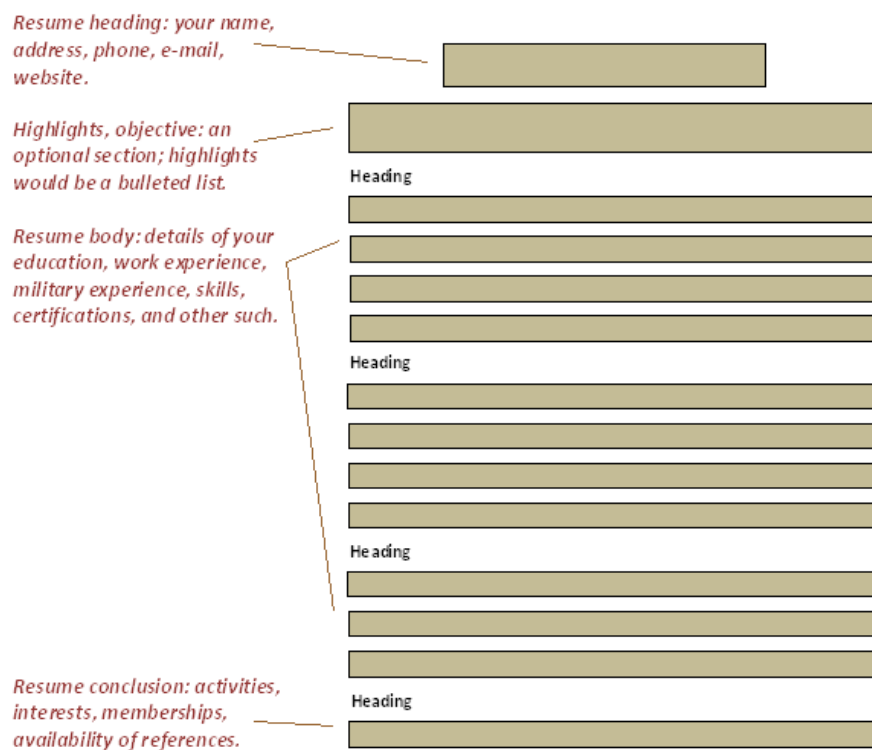
A resume should be easily readable, effectively designed, and adapted to audience expectations. If you are taking a technical writing course, your instructor may be okay with your making up a few details in your resume to represent what you'll be when you graduate. However, if you're just starting your college education and have little work experience, why not try using the techniques and suggestions here to create a resume that represents your current skills, abilities, and background? Developing a decent-looking resume based on what you are now is a challenge that you have to deal with at some point—so why not now?

## Resume Design: An Overview

Before personal computers, people used one resume for varied kinds of employment searches. However, with less expensive desktop publishing and high-quality printing, people sometimes rewrite their resumes for every new job they go after. For example, a person who seeks employment both with a community college and with a software-development company would use two different resumes. The contents of the two might be roughly the same, but the organization, format, and emphases would be quite different.

You are probably aware of resume-writing software: you feed your data into them and they churn out a prefab resume. You probably also know about resume-writing services that will create your resume for you for a hundred dollars or so. If you are in a time bind or if you are extremely insecure about your writing or resume-designing skills, these services might help. But often they take your information and put it into a computer database that then force it into a prefab structure. They often use the same resume-writing software just mentioned; they charge you about what the software costs. The problem is that these agencies simply cannot be that sensitive or perceptive about your background or your employment search. Nor are you likely to want to pay for their services every month or so when you are in the thick of a job search. Why not learn the skills and techniques of writing your own resume here, save the money, and write better resumes anyway?

There is no one right way to write a resume. Every person's background, employment needs, and career objectives are different, thus necessitating unique resume designs. Every detail, every aspect of your resume must start with who you are, what your background is, what the potential employer is looking for, and what your employment goals are—not with from some prefab design. Therefore, use this chapter to design your own resume, browse through the various formats, and play around with them until you find one that works for you.



## Sections in Resumes

Resumes can be divided into three sections: the heading, the body, and the conclusion. Each of these sections has fairly common contents.

**Heading.** The top third of the resume is the *heading*. It contains your name, phone numbers, address, and other details such as your occupation, titles, and so on. Some resume writers include the name of their profession, occupation, or field. In some examples, you'll see writers putting things like "CERTIFIED PHYSICAL THERAPIST" very prominently in the heading. Headings can also contain a goals and objectives subsection and a highlights subsection. These two special subsections are described later.

**Body.** In a one-page resume, the body is the middle portion, taking up a half or more of the total space of the resume. In this section, you present the details of your work, education, and military experience. This information is arranged in reverse chronological order. In the body section, you also include your accomplishments, for example, publications, certifications, equipment you are familiar with, and so on. There are *many* ways to present this information:

- You can divide it *functionally*—into separate sections for work experience and education.
- You can divide it *thematically*—into separate sections for the different areas of your experience and education.

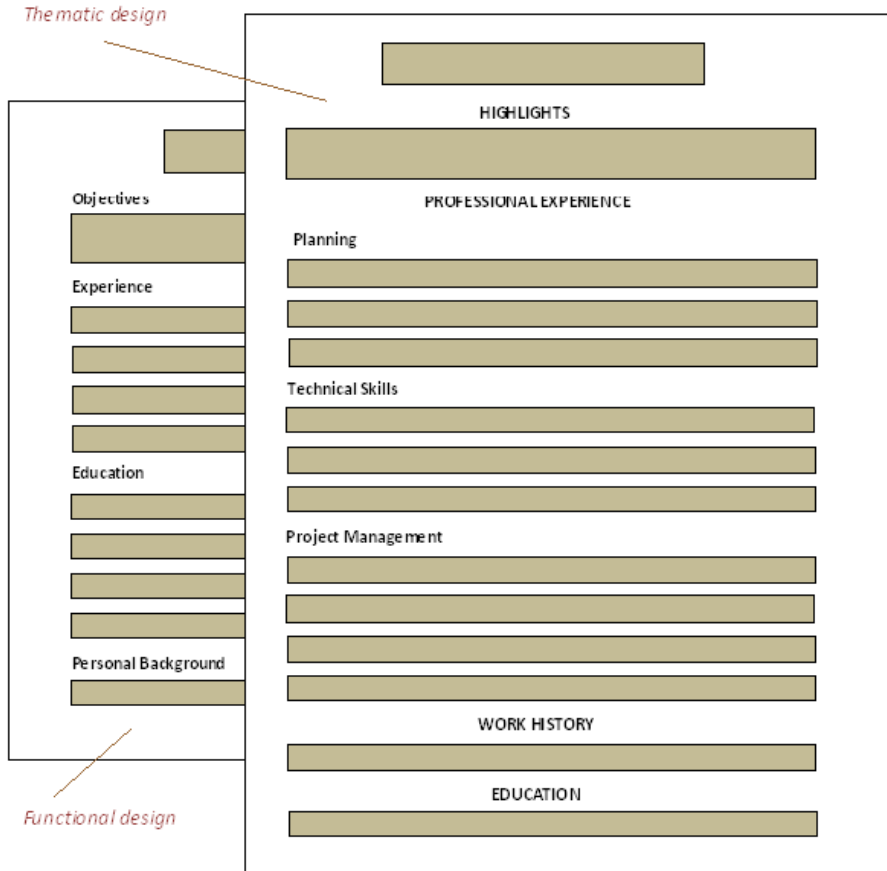
**Conclusion.** In the final third or quarter of the resume, you can present other related information on your background. For example, you can list activities, professional associations, memberships, hobbies, and interests. At the bottom of the resume, people often put "REFERENCES AVAILABLE ON REQUEST" and the date of preparation of the resume. At first, you might think that listing nonwork and personal information would be totally irrelevant and inappropriate. Actually, it can come in handy—it personalizes you to potential employers and gives you something to chat while you're waiting for the coffee machine or the elevator. For example, if you mention in your resume that you raise goats, that gives the interviewer something to chat with you about during those moments of otherwise uncomfortable silence.

## Resumes: Types and Design

To begin planning your resume, decide which type of resume you need. This decision is in part based on requirements that prospective employers may have, and in part based on what your background and employment needs are.

**Type of organization.** Resumes can be defined according to how information on work and educational experience is handled. There are several basic, commonly used plans or designs you can consider using.

- **Functional design:** Illustrated schematically below, the functional design starts with a heading; then presents either education or work experience, whichever is stronger or more relevant; then presents the other of these two sections; then ends with a section on skills and certifications and one on personal information. Students who have not yet begun their careers often find this design the best for their purposes. People with military experience either work the detail in to the education and work-experience sections as appropriate, or they create separate section specifically for military experience at the same level as education and work experience.



- **Thematic design:** Another approach to resumes is the thematic design, illustrated schematically in the preceding. It divides your experience and education into categories such as project management, budgetary planning, financial tracking, personnel management, customer sales, technical support, publications—whichever areas describe your experience. Often, these categories are based directly on typical or specific employment advertisements. If the job advertisement says that Company ABC wants a person with experience in training, customer service, and sales, then it might be a smart move to design thematic headings around those three requirements. If you want to use the thematic approach in your resume, take a look at your employment and educational experience—what are the common threads? Project management, program development, troubleshooting, supervision, maintenance, inventory control? Take a look at the job announcement you're responding to—what are the three, four, or five key requirements it mentions? Use these themes to design the body section of your resume. These themes become the headings in the body of the resume. Under these headings you list the employment or educational experience that applies. For example, under a heading like "FINANCIAL RECORDS," you might list the accounting and bookkeeping courses you took in college, the company-sponsored seminars on Excel you took, and the jobs where you actually used these skills.

**Type of information.** Types of resumes can be defined according to the amount and kind of information they present:

- **Objective resumes:** This type just gives dates, names, titles, no qualitative salesmanship information. These are very lean, terse resumes. In technical-writing courses, you are typically asked not to write this type. The objective-resume style is useful in resumes that use the thematic approach or that emphasize the summary/highlights section. By its very nature, you can see that the thematic approach is unclear about the actual history of employment. It's harder to tell where the person was, what she was doing, year by year.
- **Detailed resumes:** This type provides not only dates, titles, and names, but also details about your responsibilities and statements about the quality and effectiveness of your work. This is the type most people write, and the type that is the focus of most technical-writing courses. The rest of the details in this section of this chapter focus on writing the detailed resume.

## Layout and Detail Format in Resumes

At some point in your resume planning, you'll want to think schematically about the layout and design of the thing. General layout has to do with the design and location of the heading, the headings for the individual sections, and the orientation of the detailed text in relation to those headings. Detail formats are the way you choose to arrange and present the details of your education and work experience.

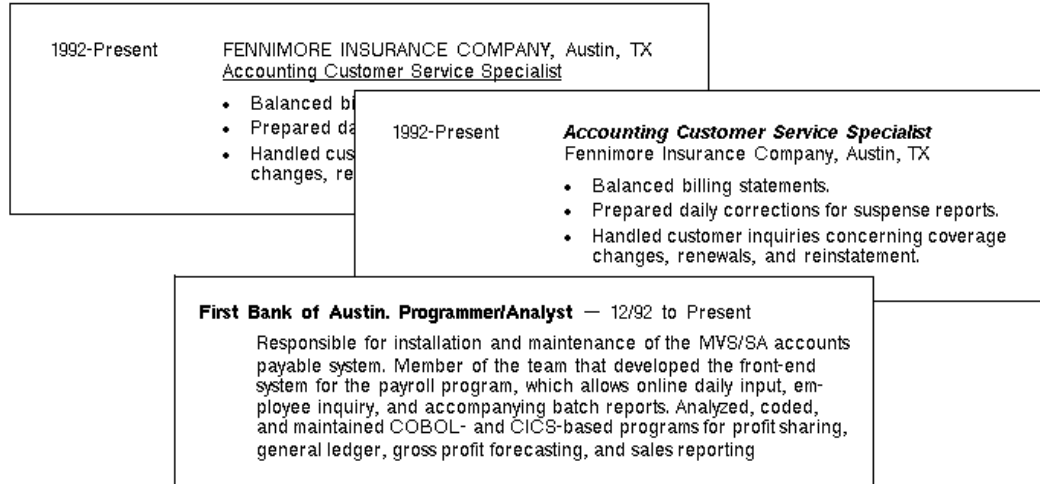
**Layout.** Look at resumes in this book and in other sources strictly in terms of the style and placement of the headings, the shape of the text (the paragraphs) in the resumes, and the orientation of these two elements with each other. Some resumes have the headings centered; others are on the left margin. Notice that the actual text—the paragraphs—of resumes typically does not extend to the far left and the far right margins. Full-length lines are not considered as readable or scannable as the shorter ones you see illustrated in the examples in this book.

Notice that many resumes use a "hanging-head" format. In this case, the heading starts on the far left margin while the text is indented another inch or so. This format makes the heading stand out more and the text more scannable. Notice also that in some of the text paragraphs of resumes, special typography is used to highlight the name of the organization or the job title.

**Detail formats.** You have to make a fundamental decision about how you present the details of your work and education experience. Several examples of typical presentational techniques are shown below. The elements you work with include:

- Occupation, position, job title

- Company or organization name
- Time period you were there
- Key details about your accomplishments and responsibilities while there.



There are many different ways to format this information. It all depends on what you want to emphasize and how much or how little information you have (whether you are struggling to fit it all on one page or struggling to make it fill one page). Several different detail formats are shown above.

## Special Sections in Resumes

Here are some ideas for special resume sections, sections that emphasize your goals or qualifications.

**Highlights, summary section.** In the illustration below, you'll notice the "Highlights" section that occurs just below the heading (the section for name, address, phone number, etc.) and just above the main experience and education sections. This is a popular section in resumes. Resume specialists believe that the eye makes first contact with a page somewhere one-fourth to one-third of the way down the page—not at the very top. If you believe that, then it makes sense to put your very "best stuff" at that point. Therefore, some people list their most important qualifications, their key skills, their key work experience in that space on the page. Actually, this section is useful more for people who have been in their careers for a while. It's a good way to create one common spot on the resume to list those key qualifications about yourself that may be spread throughout the resume. Otherwise, these key details about yourself are scattered across your various employment and educational experience—in fact, buried in them.

**Objectives, goals.** Also found on some resumes is a section just under the heading in which you describe what your key goals or objectives are or what your key qualifications are. Some resume writers shy away from including a section like this because they fear it may cause certain employers to stop reading, in other words, that it limits their possibilities. A key-qualifications section is similar to a highlights section, but shorter and in paragraph rather than list form.

*Amplifications page in a resume.* If you have lots of detail about what you know, this approach on page 2 of the resume may work. On the first page of this resume, the writer divides the presentation into experience and education sections and takes a chronological approach to each. On the first page, he only provides company names, job titles, dates, and discussion of duties.

## Early-Career Resumes

If you are at the beginning of your career, all the advice and examples to this point may seem fine and good, but what if you have very little experience? Careers must start somewhere—and so must resumes. You can use several strategies to fill out your resume so that you appear to be the promising entry-level candidate that we all know you are.

- Cite relevant projects (both in academia and community) you've worked on, even if they are not exactly related to the career that you pursue.
- Spend extra time describing college courses and programs you have been involved in. What about team projects, research projects, or reports?
- Include volunteer work that has had any trace of technical in it. (If you've not done any volunteer work, get to volunteering!)
- List any organizations you have been a member of and describe any of their activities that have any trace of technical in them. (If you've not belonged to any technically oriented organizations, get to belonging!)
- Use formatting to spread what information you have to fill out the resume page.

In the student resume shown below, notice how much space that details about education take up. This resume writer could have included even more: Descriptions of key courses and projects could have been provided under a heading such as "Essential Coursework."

*Early-career resume.* Use the strategies suggested here to fill out your resume with good information.

Notice too that the resume above includes plenty of co-op and part-time work. The bulleted-list format extends the length of the resume so that it fills up the page. At the bottom of the resume, the writer lists awards and organizations. These too could be amplified if necessary. Details as to what the award is about, why this writer received it, and what those organizations are—these are examples of good information that could be added, if necessary.

Subtle changes in format can also help make your resume fill a page. Top, bottom, left, and right margins can all be pushed down, up, and in from the standard 1.0 inch to 1.25 inches. You can add extra space between sections. To do so, don't just press Enter. Instead, use the paragraph-formatting feature of your software to put 6 or 9 points, for example, below the final element of each section. Line spacing is another subtle way to extend a resume. If your software by default uses 13.6 points of line spacing for Times New Roman 12 point text, experiment with changing the line spacing to exactly 15.0 points.

## Resume Checklist

As you plan, write, or review your resume, keep these points in mind:

- **Readability:** are there any dense paragraphs over 6 lines? Imagine your prospective employer sitting down to a two-inch stack of resumes. Do you think she's going to slow down to read through big thick paragraphs. Probably not. Try to keep paragraphs under 6 lines long. The "hanging-head" design helps here.
- **White space.** Picture a resume crammed with detail, using only half-inch margins all the way around, a small type size, and only a small amount of space between parts of the resume. Our prospective employer might be less inclined to work through that also. "Air it out!" Find ways to incorporate more white space in the margins and between sections of the resume. Again, the "hanging-head" design is also useful.
- **Special format.** Make sure that you use special format consistently throughout the resume. For example, if you use a hanging-head style for the work-experience section, use it in the education section as well.
- **Consistent margins.** Most resumes have several margins: the outermost, left margin and at least one internal left margin. Typically, paragraphs in a resume use an internal margin, not the far-left margin. Make sure to align all appropriate text to these margins as well. Avoid unnecessary multiple margins: they give your resume a ragged messy look.
- **Terse writing style.** It's okay to use a rather clipped, terse writing style in resumes—up to a point. The challenge in most resumes is to get it all on one page (or two if you have a lot of information to present). Instead of writing "I supervised a team of five technicians..." you write "Supervised a team of five technicians..." However, you don't leave out normal words such as articles.
- **Bold, italics, different type size, caps, other typographical special effects.** Use special typography, but keep it under control. Resumes are great places to use all of your fancy word-processing features such as bold, italics, different fonts, and different type sizes. Don't go crazy with it! Too much fancy typography can be distracting (plus make people think you are hyperactive). Also, whatever special typography you use, be consistent with it throughout the resume. If some job titles are italics, make them all italics. Avoid all-caps text—it's less readable.
- **Page fill.** Do everything you can to make your resume fill out one full page and to keep it from spilling over by 4 or 5 lines to a second page. At the beginning of your career, it's tough filling up a full page of a resume. As you move into your career, it gets hard keeping it to one page. If you need a two-page resume, see that the second page is full or nearly full.
- **Clarity of boundary lines between major sections.** Design and format your resume so that whatever the main sections are, they are very noticeable. Use well-defined headings and white space to achieve this. Similarly, design your resume so that the individual segments of work experience or education are distinct and separate from each other.
- **Reverse chronological order.** Remember to list your education and work-experience items starting with the current or most recent and working backwards in time.
- **Consistency of phrasing.** Use the same style of phrasing for similar information in a resume—for example, past tense verbs for all descriptions of past work experience.
- **Consistency of punctuation style.** For similar sections of information use the same kind of punctuation—for example, periods, commas, colons, or nothing.
- **Translations for "inside" information.** Don't assume readers will know what certain abbreviations, acronyms, or symbols mean—yes, even to the extent of "GPA" or the construction "3.2/4.00." Take time to describe special organizations you may be a member of.
- **Grammar, spelling, usage.** Watch out for these problems on a resume—they stand out like a sore thumb! Watch out particularly for the incorrect use of its and it's.