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# I've read thousands of resumes. Most of them suck. Yours doesn't have to.



Eric Meyerson Feb 25, 2019 · 13 min read



This is where I worked as a Senior PM in 2007.



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negotiating an offer. Please read that one first, or this one first. Either way, I hope this is helpful to you and your career.

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Do you expect to be working for the foreseeable future? If so, we need to talk about your resume.

About 10 years ago, I somehow became all my friends' resume doctor. I'm not exactly sure how it happened. I *guess* I helped out one or two people who were struggling with their job searches, and then word spread. Next thing you know, this became my *thing*.

It's my own fault, really. Aside from an open offer to friends, resume upgrades have become something I really enjoy doing for almost anyone. So I've worked on resumes for all kinds of people, ranging from close friends to distant relatives to almost anyone who reaches out (while flattering me).

I'll tell you this: I've revised probably 70 or 80 resumes by now, and almost all of them sucked when I got them.

And as a marketing and product management hiring manager at Google, Facebook, Eventbrite, Wells Fargo and other places, I've evaluated thousands of resumes, and most of them sucked, as well.

Yours probably sucks, too. It likely doesn't do the job it's supposed to do.

Here's how to fix it. Six easy rules will do it.

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***Rule 1: Detail impact, not responsibilities***

***Rule 2: Cut back everything that's irrelevant to getting the job***

***Rule 3: Write a short summary that positions you strategically***

***Rule 4: Format for readability***

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**Rule 0. Always be honest**

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It all starts with asking yourself this question: **Why do I have a resume?** If you're like most people, it's to help you get a job. And you likely update it every time you're looking for one.

So for the purposes of this essay, let's assume that you maintain your resume so you can find a job that suits you.

Here's the first and only principle you need to remember:

**Your resume is a story about the results you'll deliver in the job you really want**

That's it. Nothing else.

Go ahead and parse that statement. It needs to show that you're going to do great things in your next job.

You may think your resume is the story of your career so far. But it's not. It should be the *prologue* to the rest of your career, setting up whatever's next.

Ultimately, you need to think about who reads your resume and why. Depending on the size of the organization and other factors, it could be:

- An **algorithm**: Large organizations that hire thousands of people per year often start with screening algorithms to score the resumes, usually outsourced through career sites or Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS). The algorithms are qualifying and ranking candidates by scanning for keywords: "content marketing," "Class A commercial drivers license," "cheesemaking." A machine needs to be able to read and process your resume, but only to start the process. Machines don't make hiring decisions — yet.
  - A **recruiter**: Recruiters are the gatekeepers to determine if you're *qualified* for a job. Their role is to determine if you're worth a hiring manager's time before sending you to them for a first interview. So to a recruiter, your resume needs to tell the story, "I
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- A **hiring manager**: You'll meet other people in your journey to your next job, but the manager to whom this role will report is obviously the most important. To them, your resume needs to tell the story, "I will produce results in this job and make you successful, because I have performed well in the skill areas that matter most for this role."
- An **interview panel**: You will likely interview with a bunch of other people. They may review your resume before speaking with you, but most will not read it very thoroughly. Their job is to judge whether you'll be an effective partner, and whether they will enjoy working with you. Your resume needs to tell the story, "I partner with people and help them be successful."
- A **hiring committee**: At some larger companies, your resume will become part of a packet to be reviewed by a team of executives. Few or possibly none of them will have met you in the process. Your resume needs to tell the story, "I will be a sound long-term investment for this organization."

How do you prepare a resume for these disparate audiences and purposes? It's not easy, but you can do it. Let's start by looking at what you've already got.

## We learn how to write our resume in high school

...and then we never do it differently.

What mattered most about writing your resume in high school? What was the story you were trying to tell with that resume?

When you were 17, you likely didn't have a ton of career wins to brag about. You just had to show that, well, you were diligent not lazy, smart not dumb, detail-oriented not sloppy. That kind of thing. So somebody in school gave you a set of rules designed to tell the story of a teenager who could do the kind of job an adult would assign a teenager.

These writing rules included:

- List out everything you've done in chronological order, especially the responsibilities that the adults gave you
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Technical interview tips

While I recommend living and breathing that final point for the rest of your life, the others won't serve you well today if you're looking for a job that couldn't be filled by a teenager.

And yet, at least 70% of the resumes I see still apply the high school rule set. They don't try to tell the story of why someone is a great choice for the job they want. They're just *a page or two of stuff they did*.

So let's go back and look at the principle of resume writing again:

## **Your resume is a story about the results you'll deliver in the job you really want**

Let's start at the end: What is the job you really want?

One of the reasons why I became a source of career advice to my friends (and people who found me on LinkedIn) is that I pulled off two career pivots. I started coding, pivoted to product management, and then pivoted again to marketing. I've hired and led teams in social media, events and ticketing, online video, marketing tech, government IT consulting, and financial services over 20+ years in the labor market. (I just started my first role in a green tech / industrial automation company. Variety gives us life.)

But a lot of people feel stuck in a career track, and they wish they were doing something else. If this is you, I have good news: You can do it! It's hard, but you can pivot, too.

Your resume won't get you there on its own, but it's a key piece in your broader strategy. And it starts with asking yourself what job you want next.

And even if you want to remain in your key field, your resume needs to explain clearly not just what you did, but why you're going to *crush it* for your next employer.

Once you've narrowed on that next job, you need to do the research. Talk to people with that job. Read job descriptions on career websites. Define the skills and experiences a hiring manager would want to see.

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What else have you done in your career that's not on your resume now, but would be relevant to the job you really want? Add those and mark them.

Now let's write your resume. But use these rules.

### **Rule 1: Don't list responsibilities. Detail your wins and impact.**

Nobody, and I mean nobody, wants to hire a liaison. Do you have "liaison" on your resume? Congratulations, you went to meetings.

If your resume is loaded with responsibilities, then it's a collection of job descriptions, not a resume. Responsibilities say, "I showed up and did the stuff someone told me to do." They don't prove that you were *good* at the job. They don't communicate any value that you created, how you supported the mission of the organization, or how you made or saved your company money. They don't show how you made your bosses more successful or their lives easier.

Responsibilities fill space on your resume. They're the Airpaks of resumes. Like the remnant of an Amazon shipment, you should stab them with a scissor and throw them in the recycling bin.

Your career performance is unique, but lots of people have held jobs similar to yours. Listing the responsibilities of your past roles isn't any different from pasting the job description itself. **You are not your old job descriptions.**

OK, I'll shut up about this and show a couple hypothetical bad and better resume bullets.

- **Bad:** Prepared reports for quarterly business review by cross-functional leadership.
- **Better:** Delivered quarterly insights on business operations that influenced major decision that reduced costs by 40%.

You see? Impact. You're not just a drone who does what your boss told you to do, and then passed it on to the next person. You understand *why* you're doing something, how

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- **Bad:** Met regularly with key accounts to assure customer satisfaction and resolve issues.
- **Better:** Achieved 95% retention of high value accounts by launching proactive customer success campaign.

What if you don't have precise numbers? Do your best to calculate them. Even if you have to be general about it.

(Just make sure your results are true and real. More on that later.)

- **Bad:** Served as liaison to product and HR teams.
- **Better:** This can't be fixed. We all work cross-functionally. *What did you do and why did it matter?*

## **Rule 2: Cut down everything that isn't highly relevant to your next job.**

This is a really important point for people looking to pivot, or anyone who's had more than a few years in the workforce.

Deleting a task you owned in 2006 may feel like throwing away a treasure. You *earned* that bullet on your resume, after all. But if it's not relevant to the specific recruiter, hiring manager, or committee you're trying to win over next, then it should probably go.

Remember, your resume is a prologue, not a novel.

Here's a brief list of the kinds of things you should delete:

- **Experiences that have nothing to do with the job you want next**, unless it's a direct application of a skill that's important to that job, or evidence of you generating successful results.
  - **Most of your high school and college experiences**, unless you're new to the workforce, or they're also evidence of your intelligence, drive, or passion for a relevant industry. If your GPA wasn't outstanding, take it off. Keep only the basic
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consuming wine with grad school classmates is great fun but not usually a hireable quality. Get rid of your high school and other proto-professional experiences unless you're under age 21. (Yes, I see some 40-year-olds who still list English Honor Society and Model UN.)

- **Entry-level professional competencies.** Mac and Windows machines, Microsoft Office, Google apps. Unless you're applying for an administrative job where this is highly relevant, or looking to transition from floor work to desk work, it's like saying you know how to put on your shoes and get to the office by 9.
- **Your home address.** This one is a little sensitive: We've all seen the research that shows that identical resumes can have very different levels of response from employers based on their racial, gender, national and other biases. It sucks, but it's reality. Interviewers at larger, HR-sensitive companies are trained not to ask where you live during an interview, even casually, because it can be interpreted as fodder for discrimination. And the fact of the matter is, someone may judge your social class or background based on where you live, and you don't want that clouding the process. So take your home address off your resume. If they need to mail you something, they'll ask.

How long should your resume be? Not too long. Decide if one page or two pages better tells your story, with lots of impact and low filler. Then hold yourself to that. Setting a limit is a great forcing function to delete the junk.

Mine is two pages. Also, be sure to number your pages and have a natural page break between jobs.

### **Rule 3: You need a summary to position yourself for your next job.**

This is like the lead paragraph of a news story. This is where you say, "I'm a lot like the person you had in mind for this job. Read on for details."

The summary should be about your experience, expertise, and success, and should tie directly to the role you're seeking.

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*and international customer development.”*

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Avoid connotative self-perceptions like, “Results-driven self-starter.” Everyone says that. You prove that in the details below it.

If you’re attempting to pivot, this is where you re-position yourself for the next thing. If you’re the “sales leader” who wrote the summary above, but you want to move to a customer success role:

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*“Seasoned and innovative communicator with 10 years’ experience working directly with B2B customers to win and retain them.”*

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#### **Rule 4: Format for readability.**

Some people download templates for their resume, which is a fine idea if it’s a readable one. The question to ask yourself: Would someone scanning this resume judge it a potential fit for the job you want, in less than 10 seconds?

If your resume is a puzzle that requires mental processing, then it’s a bad resume. Summary, job titles, and the most visible details need to tell the story easily. *People form judgments instantly.*

Your resume should be simple, scannable, and brief, with easily readable job titles. Which brings us to...

#### **Rule 5: Your past job titles are your story milestones, so write them well**

Look at your job titles. What story do they tell?

Your titles and employers form the outline for your narrative, and many people will scan those and immediately form judgments about your suitability for the job you want.

But your job titles were likely bestowed upon you by other people. They may reflect the organizational policies of the company, or what the hiring manager was thinking when they posted the role. They may not reflect your actual achievements in the role, and unless you take action, they won’t tell the story of your career.

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fraudulent national bank.)

I was hired as a “Product Manager, Business Services Packages.” A couple years later, I was promoted to vice president. (Don’t be *too* impressed — Wells Fargo has lots of them.) So my business card now read, “Vice President, Small Business Cash Management,” and my internal job title was “Product Management Manager II.”

When I left Wells Fargo, I intended to move out of retail banking and into consumer internet services. So I needed to retitle the position to translate outside of my field.

When I left, my resume reflected something closer to my real role: **“Vice President, Small Business Payments and Cross-Sell Marketing.”**

Was this ever my title at Wells Fargo? No. But the future hiring committee at Google was more likely to understand it than the official title. And it more honestly and accurately reflected both my contribution at Wells Fargo and what I could contribute in future roles.

It was a better, more accurate job title than my “real” job title. Which brings us to...

## **Rule 6: Be honest, always**

OK, so I just told you how to reposition yourself for the job you want. Like any advertisement, your resume is a tactic to introduce your best self to the right buyer.

Also, like any advertisement, if you can’t deliver what you promise, you’re in big trouble.

Ideally, the interview and evaluation process should smoke out the bullshit, but sometimes it doesn’t.

If you claimed experiences and achievements that weren’t yours, or maybe took credit for someone else’s work, and successfully faked your way through the interview process, then you’re not going to last too long in that job. And you’ll be much worse off than if you hadn’t gotten that job at all.

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If you don't legitimately have the skills that will support your success in the next role, then your resume isn't the problem. It's the lack of experience underlying it. And you need to find a role that's a more appropriate pivot from what you've been doing.

## **Final review:**

When you're done, here's a test you can run with trusted friends, preferably someone who hires people and leads teams.

Take your name and identifying info *off* your resume, and share it with them. Then ask them to spend just 30 seconds reading it, and to answer this question: "Who is this person, and what kind of job should they be looking for next?"

If they describe someone who sounds like you and something close to the next job you want, you're on the right path.

If their description of an appropriate next job isn't like the job you want, then you have more work to do. (Or you might want to reconsider if you need to take an interim step to more clearly pivot the job you want.)

If the description of the next job is close, but their description of *you* doesn't sound right, then your resume may be dishonest. See Rule 6.

When you're done, update your LinkedIn and other public resources to keep them in alignment. And start shopping yourself.

I hope this is all helpful. Here, clip this:

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*Rule 6. Be honest, always*

Best of luck with your career!

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