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View yourself as a research topic when writing your résumé (opinion)

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When I started applying for post-Ph.D. jobs, I found the idea of writing résumés mystifying and the work of doing it difficult. I was so used to maintaining my CV, a sturdy, capacious document that could and did contain everything notable that I'd done as an academic. I didn't have to make decisions about what to include on my CV -- academic convention did that for me -- nor did I have to do the hard work of describing, quantifying or connecting to skills what I'd done. I just listed my accomplishments and moved on.

But the résumé was a whole other kettle of fish, and one that was rather more slippery and wiggly than I liked. What experience counted and what didn't? Could I treat my Ph.D. like a job and mine it for skills and accomplishments even though I didn't have a proper job title or a boss? What was the best way to convince a hiring manager that I had the knowledge and experience to do the job they were hiring for?

My early attempts were not inspiring -- cluttered, tentative and so dense they could have sunk a ship. Yet one of them did the job, and I moved into my first full-time role in graduate career and professional development. And as I gained more experience in career development, mastered the fundamentals of résumé writing and started learning to teach other people how to craft job documents, I started to notice something.

A résumé is just another piece of research-based persuasive writing, like a conference paper or a journal article. It has an argument, evidence, a standard structure, formatting conventions, even discipline-specific language. It requires, and is fundamentally rooted in, research. It is a kind of writing that graduate students already know how to learn and excel at.

Once I unlocked this key to résumé writing and started teaching it to my students and clients, I saw the anxiety and lack of confidence that had plagued so many of them disappear. This was something they knew how to do. They had come to grad school not knowing the conventions of writing a *Science* paper or a talk to be presented at the Modern Language Association. They had learned how to work within those conventions and constraints, to the point that they were now second nature. All they had to do was learn new ones.

And so do you. And while, like with all forms of academic writing, there are lots of subtle variations and plenty of room for maneuvering within the genre of résumé writing, you should follow some very standard conventions and protocols, too. Use them as your framework while you learn, then go wild once you have or adapt them to your specific employment subdiscipline (think government or creative sectors, both of which tend to do résumés a bit differently). Those conventions and protocols include:

In résumé writing, you are your own research subject. As a piece of persuasive writing, a résumé has an argument: that you are the right person for the job to which you are applying (or, at the lower bar, that you're someone who should be invited in for an interview). As with all good persuasive writing, the argument of your résumé is supported by research and the evidence for your argument that you collect during the research process.

Your research subject? You. The evidence you're looking for? That your past accomplishments and experiences suggest you'll be good at the job for which you're applying.

A good way to get started with résumé writing is to collect a body of documents about yourself that you can mine for evidence of your skills and expertise. Good places to look to evidence:

- Your CV
- Old résumés from pre-grad school jobs
- Teaching evaluations
- Grad school annual assessments or progress reports
- Project or assignment assessment and feedback (formal or informal)
- Notes of praise that you might have tucked away in your inbox
- Certificates and certifications

We'll get to what to do with all of this shortly.

Résumés have a standard structure: an intro, body and conclusion. The introduction of your résumé is made up of at least one, and often two or three, introductory sections:

- The header, which contains your name and contact information
- A professional summary, which provides a snapshot of your qualifications and experience
- A skills summary, which highlights the relevant skills you bring to the position to which you're applying

The body of your résumé should be made up of chronological sets of CAR (challenge-action-result) statements that document your skills and accomplishments, organized underneath position-specific headings. (More on them in a minute.) This is where you should present the bulk of your argument and evidence.

The conclusion of your résumé is generally a single section about your formal education. It may be preceded, in some circumstances -- it will depend on what you've done and the position to which you're applying -- by one or more optional sections. Tread with caution here. These optional sections should be deployed only if absolutely necessary and if the information in them cannot be fully or adequately woven into your employment history.

- Additional training, where you document nonformal education or additional certifications that are relevant to the role
- Technical skills, if the job requires specific technical expertise
- Publications, if the job requires a publishing track record and you have publications relevant to the role
- Funding history, if you're applying to a job that requires a track record of success with securing grant funding or working with specific agencies.

Résumés use standard language. By the time you reach the point of applying for post-Ph.D. jobs, you've so effortlessly absorbed the standard way of writing in your academic discipline that you don't even realize you've learned it. Résumés are no different -- they use standard rhetorical conventions, syntax and grammatical structures, which together are known as CAR or STAR statements.

CAR stands for challenge-action-result; STAR is situation-task-action-result. CAR/STAR statements are the standard way of presenting the evidence that's going to convince a hiring manager you're the right person for the job. CAR statements note a challenge or situation you faced at work (often implicitly), the action you took and the results of that action. They are always in bullet-point form, they always begin with an action verb (there's a handy list [here](#) [1]) and they never contain pronouns.

Each CAR statement in the employment history section of your résumé should directly speak to one of the required or desired skills, knowledge areas or experiences noted in the job posting to which you're applying. The job of each CAR statement is to provide evidence that you can do one or more of the things you'll need to do in the job to which you're applying. As with all persuasive writing, a mix of qualitative and quantitative data backing up your claims about your skills and experience will be the most convincing. And you'll find that data in all of the documents and ideas you collected in doing your self-research.

Once you know what a job needs to you to be able to do, you'll go to your cache of evidence, pull out what looks convincing and craft a CAR statement to show that you can do it. Say, for example, that a job requires evidence of exceptional oral communication and presentation skills, as so many do. You take a look at your CV and decide that your work with Let's Talk Science, plus that poster prize you won, constitutes some pretty convincing evidence that you know how to write. So you craft a CAR statement that looks something like this:

- Distilled complex ideas into engaging, informative, award-winning presentations to generalist and specialist audiences

It's a great idea, as you apply for different positions, to start collecting your various CAR statements together under skills-based headings with a flag for what past position they're related to. That way, whenever you're applying to a new position, you can just pull out the best CAR statements for the skills required, slot them under the right employment history subheading, make sure you've hit the keywords relevant to that position (i.e., reflect the language the hiring manager used in the job posting when describing what you do and how you do it), and away you go.

Résumés use minimal, simple formatting. As in your CV, a long journal article or a grant proposal, résumés make use of subheadings and simple formatting to help guide the reader's eye, break up the text into manageable sections and make clear what information is where. They also have implicit (but granting agency-level strict) page layout and formatting conventions. Once you've set out the basic structure and format of your résumé (I recommend using tables or LaTeX to ensure consistency and stability), it's easy-peasy to tailor of different positions. The basics:

- Use clearly distinguishable subheadings to set out your résumé sections (professional summary, skills summary, employment history, education).
- Use consistent formatting of each page element to help your reader distinguish different kinds of information. Make sure all of your bullets are the same size and alignment; that your dates are consistently left or right justified; that if your employer names are italicized, your subheadings aren't.
- Choose at most two fonts (one main, one accent) and make sure they're both simple, clean, professional and highly legible on a computer and in print.
- Don't use less than an 11-point font and a standard narrow margin if you don't want to annoy your readers.
- Ensure plenty of white space -- take the amount you have and increase it by 20 percent -- to give your readers, and your text, breathing room.
- Write two pages, maximum, unless you're applying for a job in the government or another field where longer résumés are requested or the norm.

Once you realize that résumé writing is just another form of the persuasive, research-based writing you're already so good at, and that your research subject in résumé writing is you, the process

becomes far easier -- and, may I even suggest, a bit fun?

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Links:

[1] <http://careernetwork.msu.edu/resources-tools/resumes/action-verbs.html>