A Code Money's Handbook To Writing Your First Resume

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Forward

I make it a point to stay involved with the Computer Science department from my Alma Mater. Figure it's my good cause of choice. Often, this involvement takes the form of reviewing resumes for students scrambling to get ready for the career fair. After a while, I've found myself offering the same advice over and over. Call this an attempt at process improvement.

Full disclosure: I am not a recruiter. I'm a code monkey. I've had my recruiter friends read this and they've told me it's pretty decent advice. Worst case, It's not bad advice. Take it for what it's worth.

Motivation

Just like any app, TV or radio commercial, your audience has a very short attention span and they look at (literally) thousands of resumes a year. This is your first meaningful impression with a recruiter after the hand shake and a smile. Goal Numero Uno: In less than 10 seconds, convince the recruiter that your resume is worth another 3 minutes of attention. Step 2: convince the recruiter that you're a Stand Out Candidate and worth a short interview, likely the on campus variety. That's it. Don't think you're going to get the job based solely on this single sheet of paper. Trying to do too much will cause you stumble over the first hurtle of what turns out to be a very long arduous process.

Put yourself in recruiter's shoes. What are they looking for first? If they can't find an element they're looking for within 5 seconds, they toss it and grab the next one from the stack. They've got 50 more to get through in the next 2 hours. It's your job as Stand Out Candidate to anticipate their needs and make it delightfully easy to answer their questions. (Not so unlike software design, eh?)

My friend Jon summed it up nicely when I told him I writing this little paper.

> *"The resume is a tool for telling me about you. Your major tells me what you want to do (and whether I am the right person to be talking to). GPA tells me you can do what your boss (teacher) tells you to do. Skills tells me what part of the company I can put you in (with the assumption I can make a good engineer do anything). Awards tells me someone else thinks you're neat, and that you care about pursuing something more than mediocrity. Employment/Projects is the most critical thing - it doesn't tell me what you want to do, it tells me what you <u>can and have done</u>. 'Projects' is your opportunity to demonstrate your passion, if you aren't lucky enough to have your employment reflect that"*

Remember to keep iterating. You're not going to knock this out in a single sitting like your World Civ. 102 paper. This is a living document that gets updated every few months as your experience and goals change. You'll be maintaining this for the rest of your professional career.

Guiding Principles

1. Elaborate with specifics.
2. Real estate and attention spans are precious commodities.
3. Be realistic about what actually adds value.
4. Avoid distractions like the plague.
5. Be strategically honest.

Sections

Your resume should have the following sections. Keep them in this order. Ya know, anticipating needs and such.

1. Contact info
2. Education
3. Skills
4. Experience

Contact Info

This section should probably go last because it's the easiest. Layout wise, it goes first. Top of the page. Your name should be in big, bold letters. Don't worry, the recruiter will forget it at least 4 times. Make it easy to find again. Email and phone number are minimum. I don't usually put my full address, but at least my current city and state. I like to make them a smaller than they body font with a gray color. Don't make the recruiter hunt, but it's information you want them focusing on AFTER you've proven you're a Stand Out Candidate.

Thoughts on LinkedIn: Yes, I generally think it's worth the effort to maintain one and have a link on your resume in your contact section. However, there is an intentional strategy to it. It should have more information than your resume. It's a good place to accumulate recommendations from superiors. Post in depth descriptions of your projects. Screenshots are gold. Be selective about who you ask to be in your network. This takes time to build out fully. You don't want it to look stale or incomplete.

Education

This one is also pretty straight forward. Absolute must haves in this order: degree your pursuing, minors, school name, GPA, and expected graduation date (they want to know if they should put you in the intern bucket or full time bucket). Make sure this is accurate and fields are easy to pick out.

Include your GPA. Just do it. Oh, it's below a 3.5? Well in that case... Nope still don't care. Include it. Yes, there are companies that have a minimum requirement. If they do and your GPA is absent, they'll ask immediately. ::sad trombone:: Game over. More dangerously, you've just looked careless and/or deceitful to the companies that *don't* have a minimum requirement.

When I read a resume, an absent GPA means it's less than 2.0. If that's really the case, you've got some serious soul searching to do before you even consider finding a job in your field of study. #sorryNotSorry.

If your GPA is lower than you'd like it to be, own it. Let the other parts of your resume scream why you're a Stand Out Candidate. Have a locked and loaded response when a recruiter frowns at it. Explain what you've done and are doing to improve. Don't make excuses or place blame. I personally know people who got jobs at top firms with GPA's in the 2's because they had a long list of other things that made them awesome. If your in major GPA is higher than your overall, breaking that out might help (see Guiding Principle 3).

Other things that might be helpful things to include in your education section are scholarship awards, a *few* relevant classes or specific areas of study if you've begun to focus in your 300/400 level courses.

Recruiters aren't going to know that "Cpts 223" at your school is "Advanced data structures." Spell it out for them. Please don't list every single class or the individual marks you received (yes, I see this more often than you think).

If you're a freshman or sophomore, it might be worthwhile to talk about your high school education, but once you're an upper classman, you shouldn't be relying on that information anymore. While you're in school the education section lives at the top. Once your career has blossomed and you've got a ton of relevant work experience, it moves down to the bottom.

Skills

Okay, take a breather. You've just passed the first real hurdle. The next one is slightly harder to think about, but way easier to write down. This section should read like a simple list, most relevant first.

 "But Mason, I don't know what my skills are." Grab a cup of coffee and start brainstorming.

Technical ones are pretty easy; computer languages, industry specific software tools. Spell these out, don't assume the recruiter will know your jargon or acronyms. Office, Windows and OSX aren't skills, they come with a high school diploma. (Linux probably is a skill though) The only exception I can see is if you are a Rockstar with Excel. And I mean *Rockstar*. Like using it to model complex macro economic scenarios or something. In this case it should read like "Modeling Macro Economic Models in Microsoft Excel."

Speak Arabic? Mandarin? Spanish? Make sure you're fluent, and put it down in this section. Sleeping through 2 years of it in high school like I did doesn't count for much.

Now for the trickier ones; soft skills. Interpersonal skills. Analytical thinking. Time management. Communication. Teamwork. Entrepreneurial spirit. These are easy to call out, and recruiters will expect you to prove these in your experience section, and if you can't, see GP 3.

Experience

Congratulations, you've just checked all the recruiter's minimum requirements. Now it's time to tell the them why you are a Stand Out Candidate. Put your helmet on and strap in.

I've left the title of the section intentionally vague, mainly because it's where you have a lot of flexibility. You'll see this section titled many things: Work History, Leadership, Community Involvement, Projects, etc. Here, you get to answer the recruiter's skeptical question "All right hot shot, what have you actually done that makes you a Stand Out Candidate?"

The information you want the recruiter focusing on most should be towards the top of this section. Categorize it accordingly and attempt some semblance of chronological order. Got some of non-technical work experience working at McDonalds? That is a value add – shows reliability and initiative. But perhaps it belongs below your Projects if you're going for a tech job.

For each experience, you should have your title, company, city, start/end month/year. Then list out what you actually did. Listing your regular duties is a decent start, but some (most) can be implied from the title – especially for jobs like cashier or barista. Be efficient with your words, but make sure it flows naturally. To really get traction, think about these as impact driven statements. "I did x, and the positive

impact was y." I always try to make each of these fits on a single line. Bonus points if you can call out numbers and statistics (see GP 1).

Examples:

- *Fully automated the process for adding new organizations, decreasing on boarding costs by 82%*
- *Generated and distributed marketing materials to grow the client base by 350 clients.*

"But Mason, I'm only a freshman and I've always been too focused on getting the best GPA to find time for work!" That's A-okay. This is where a Projects section comes into play. Start with ones that you've done on your own time. (relevant xkcd: https://xkcd.com/519/). What technologies did you use? What were you trying to learn about? What were you trying to accomplish? What was the outcome? Be proud of your work. Show passion. You'd be amazed at the difference a little bit of that magic dust will make.

Don't have any personal projects? Talk about class projects. You don't even have to tell the recruiter it was for class. They'd only pick up on it if yours was the 3rd console based battleship game (a classic!) they've seen today. But perhaps you generated an AI engine for it over thanksgiving break?

Let's take a moment to be brutally honest here. Getting straight A's is not enough to land a job or even an internship. Period. You NEED to distinguish yourself beyond that. If you're already convinced someone to pay you to code, skip ahead to the next section but otherwise listen closely. Be Awesome. GEEK OUT. Show that you're passionate about tech. Code is such that the only barrier to entry is *time* (aka priorities). Fiddle with a new graphics library. Do SOMETHING out side of class. Got a smart phone? Write an app so you can show the recruiter right there on the floor what you're capable of. Publish it. Go to the hackathons. Burn the midnight oil.

This might (will) take some tough choices. Passing up a ski trip to stay in and code. Discontinuing your World of Warcraft account. Conquering your social anxiety to participate in tech clubs. Extending your graduation date by a semester or two to work a <u>related</u> job part time.

The point is, you want to have a spectacular answer to that nagging question in the recruiter's head.

"What makes this candidate awesome?"

Does and don'ts

Do spend some extra time picking out a font. Yes, this *is* important. Times New Roman is outdated, dense and hard to read. We're not constricted by MLA format here. Chose something clean, crisp, modern and elegant. Don't go crazy. Companies invest millions of dollars picking just the right font to ensure their stuff is easy read and accurately reflects their brand. You can afford the extra 40 minutes. Microsoft uses Segoe UI Light.

Don't sound like a condescending computer person. This is an easy trap to fall into. Stay positive with all your statements. "Less Technical People" are users, customers, clients, or leadership. Don't talk about what a mess it was before you saved the day.

Don't include an objective or references sections. These are not part of a tech resume. See GP 1. They'll ask for your references during the back ground check if you make it that far.

Do make sure your alignments are pixel perfect. **Don't** over use indentation.

Don't call into question your ability to work in the U.S. on your resume.

Do proof read your statements out loud. One after another. You'll hear the awkward sentences.

Don't organize with chrome. I see a lot of people add bars, tables and even asci art to try and add visual appeal to their resume. ARGH! Remember guiding principles 2 & 3!? Instead, use white space and group related information. Use font weight and size to designate the start of a new section. Does that piece of information *really* need a label?

Do print it out and mark it up with a red pen. Hand it to your mom and friends to do the same. Get feed back and be gracious for it, especially if it's negative. Fight the urge to defend yourself. Chances are your friends are noticing the same things professional resume readers (recruiters) are.

Don't start with the same template that was blasted out to everyone in your CS 101 class. You'd be amazed at how similar resumes end up looking and how hard it is to strip 'the template' from yours. Start from the ground up. You'll be glad you put in the extra work.

Do limit yourself to 1 page. If you have enough experience (10+ years) to fill two, you're reading the wrong hand book. You should fill the page evenly. Kick up the font size, use white space.

Do make sure your resume looks fantastic in .docx, .pdf and .txt format.

Do make sure the entire resume reads from the 3rd person. You could debate this. Fine. Just be uniform.

Don't add filler to bulk up your resume. This stuff is easy to spot. Recruiters don't care that you love photography or wood working. Unless you're running a legitimate business, you're distracting from things the recruiter actually cares about. Save this for pleasantries in the interview room.

Do apply online. Always.

Do be confident. Completing a STEM degree puts you in the top 5% of people in the world. Some of your peers will make getting a job look easy. You didn't see is the sweat equity they put in. Some are genuinely gifted (certainly not me). Don't let that discourage you. It's a tall mountain to climb.

Work hard. Be passionate.