

Unit 5: Resumes, Cover Letters and Interview Techniques

If you are new to Canada and looking for employment, or you want to change your job for any reason, you may want to explore career development, resume writing or interview technique training available through community and government organizations. The economic and employment environment can change rapidly and these organizations can help you to refine your resume.

Unit 5 includes 7 topics focusing on how to make the best impression when applying for a job. There are a number of downloadable resources on our Resource page to provide you with some examples and templates.

The topics we will cover are:

Resumes

Cover Letters

Interview Techniques

Interview Strategies

After the Interview

Illegal Questions

Negotiating Compensation

Resumes

A resume is a one or two page summary of your education, skills, accomplishments, and experience. Your resume's purpose is to get your foot in the door. A resume does its job successfully if it does not exclude you from consideration. In Europe, a resume is called a CV or curriculum vitae.

To prepare a successful resume, you need to know how to review, summarize, and present your experiences and achievements on one page. Unless you have considerable experience, you don't need two pages. Outline your achievements briefly and concisely.

You may need to have different versions of your resume, depending on the type of job you are applying for. A resume can focus on your education, work experience, or skill-set. For example, if you wish to take your career on a new path and apply for a job that you believe you have the skills for, but not the exact work experience, you would write a skill-set based resume.

Your resume is your ticket to an interview where you can sell yourself!

How to Prepare an Effective Resume

1. Resume Essentials

Before you write, take time to do a self-assessment on paper. Outline your skills and abilities as well as your work experience and extracurricular activities. This will make it easier to prepare a thorough resume.

2. The Content of Your Resume

Name, address, telephone, e-mail address, web site address

All your contact information should go at the top of your resume.

- Avoid nicknames.
- Use a permanent address

- Use a permanent telephone number and include the area code. If you have an answering machine, record a neutral greeting.
- Add your e-mail address. Many employers will find it useful. (Note: Choose an e-mail address that sounds professional.)
- Include your web site address only if the web page reflects your professional ambitions.

Objective or Summary

An objective tells potential employers the sort of work you're hoping to do.

- Be specific about the job you want. For example: To obtain an entry-level position within a financial institution requiring strong analytical and organizational skills.
- Tailor your objective to each employer you target/every job you seek.

Education

New graduates without a lot of work experience should list their educational information first. Alumni can list it after the work experience section.

- Your most recent educational information is listed first.
- Include your degree (A.S., B.S., B.A., etc.), major, institution attended, minor/concentration.
- Mention academic honors.

Work Experience

Briefly give the employer an overview of work that has taught you skills. Use action words to describe your job duties. Include your work experience in reverse chronological order—that is, put your last job first and work backward to your first, relevant job. Include:

- Title of position,
- Name of organization
- Location of work (city, country)
- Dates of employment
- Describe your work responsibilities with emphasis on specific skills and achievements.

Other information

A staff member at your career services office can advise you on other information to add to your resume. You may want to add:

- Key or special skills or competencies,
- Leadership experience in volunteer organizations,
- Participation in sports.

References

A reference is a brief verbal or written recommendation of your character and business skills. A reference should be provided by a previous supervisor, professor, mentor, or other respected member of the community.

Ask people if they are willing to serve as references before you give their names to a potential employer.

Do not include your reference information on your resume. You may note at the bottom of your resume: "References furnished on request."

Some companies or organizations have specific reference requirements that may take time to organize. It can include commendations from your previous employer but also include a police background check and letters or certificates from professional organizations and educational institutions. Be sure to note what references are required when applying for the position.

3. Resume Checkup

Content:

- Run a spell check on your computer before anyone sees your resume.
- Get a friend (an English major would do nicely) to do a grammar review.
- Ask another friend to proofread. The more people who see your resume, the more likely that misspelled words and awkward phrases will be seen (and corrected).

Design:

These tips will make your resume easier to read and/or scan into an employer's data base.

- Use white or off-white paper.
- Use 8-1/2- x 11-inch paper.
- Print on one side of the paper.
- Use a font size of 10 to 14 points.
- Use non-decorative typefaces.
- Choose one typeface and stick to it.
- Avoid italics, script, and underlined words.
- Do not use horizontal or vertical lines, graphics, or shading.
- Do not fold or staple your resume.
- If you must mail your resume, put it in a large envelope.

Cover Letters

The preliminary application for a professional position generally consists of two documents: a cover letter and a resume. While the resume is a somewhat generic advertisement for yourself, the cover letter allows you to tailor your application to each specific job.

Overview

Effective cover letters are constructed with close attention to

- **Purpose**
- **Audience**
- **Content**
- **Format**

Purpose

Your cover letter and resume usually provide all the information which a prospective employer will use to decide whether or not you will reach the next phase in the application process: the interview.

While your goal is an interview and, ultimately, a job offer, the more immediate purpose of your cover letter in some cases may simply be to gain an attentive audience for your resume.

Audience

A cover letter provides, in a very real sense, an opportunity to let your prospective employer hear your voice. It reflects your personality, your attention to detail, your communication skills, your enthusiasm, your intellect, and your specific interest in the company to which you are sending the letter.

Therefore, cover letters should be tailored to each specific company you are applying to. You should conduct enough research to know the interests, needs, values, and goals of each company, and your letters should reflect that knowledge.

Content

A cover letter should be addressed to the specific company and the specific individual who will process your application. You can usually find this through research or simply by calling the company to find out who you should address your letter to.

The letter should name the position for which you are applying and also make specific references to the company. Indicate your knowledge of and interest in the work the company is currently doing, and your qualification for the position. You want the reader to know:

- why you want to work at that specific company
- why you fit with that company
- how you qualify for the position to which you applying.

In addition to tailoring your application to a specific job with a specific company , the cover letter should also

- highlight the most important and relevant accomplishments, skills, and experience listed in your resume
- point to the resume in some way (as detailed in the enclosed resume")
- request specific follow up, such as an interview.

Format

A cover letter should be in paragraph form (save bulleted lists for your resume) with a conversational, though formal, tone.

The first paragraph should be brief, perhaps two or three sentences, stating

- what job you are applying for and how you learned about it
- any personal contacts you have in or with the company
- your general qualifications for the job.

The body of your letter should consist of one to three longer paragraphs in which you expand upon your qualifications for the position. Pick out the most relevant qualifications listed in your resume and discuss them in detail, demonstrating how your background and experience qualify you for the job. Be as specific as possible, and refer the reader to your resume for additional details.

The concluding paragraph of your letter should request an interview (or some other response, as appropriate). State where and when you can be reached, and express your willingness to come to an interview or supply further information. Close by thanking your reader for his or her time and consideration.

Interview Techniques

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

There are several different types of interviews which you may encounter. You probably won't know in advance which type you will be facing. Below are some descriptions of the different types of interviews and what you can expect in each of them.

Screening Interview

A preliminary interview either in person or by phone, in which a company representative determines whether you have the basic qualifications to warrant a subsequent interview.

Structured Interview

In a structured interview, the interviewer explores certain predetermined areas using questions which have been written in advance. The interviewer has a written description of the experience, skills, and personality traits of an ideal candidate. Your experience and skills are compared to specific job tasks. This type of interview is very common and most traditional interviews are based on this format.

Unstructured Interview

Although the interviewer is given a written description of the ideal candidate, in the unstructured interview, the interviewer is not given instructions on what specific areas to cover.

Multiple Interviews

Multiple interviews are commonly used with professional jobs. This approach involves a series of interviews in which you meet individually with various representatives of the organization. In the initial interview, the representative usually attempts to get basic information on your skills and abilities. In subsequent interviews, the focus is on how you would perform the job in relation to the company's goals and objectives. After the interviews are completed, the interviewers meet and pool their information about your qualifications for the job. A variation on this approach involves a series of interviews in which unsuitable candidates are screened out at each succeeding level.

Stress Interview

The interviewer intentionally attempts to upset you to see how you react under pressure. You may be asked questions that make you uncomfortable or you may be interrupted when you are speaking. Although it is uncommon for an entire interview to be conducted under stress conditions, it is common for the interviewer to incorporate stress questions as a part of a traditional interview. Examples of common stress questions are given later in this document.

Targeted Interview

Although similar to the structured interview, the areas covered are much more limited. Key qualifications for success on the job are identified and relevant questions are prepared in advance.

Situational Interview

Situations are set up which simulate common problems you may encounter on the job. Your responses to these situations are measured against pre-determined standards. This approach is

often used as one part of a traditional interview rather than as an entire interview format.

Group Interview

You may be interviewed by two or more company representatives simultaneously. Sometimes, one of the interviewers is designated to ask stress questions to see how you respond under pressure. A variation on this format is for two or more company representatives to interview a group of candidates at the same time.

INTERVIEWING STRATEGIES

The interview strategies discussed below can be used effectively in any type of interview you may encounter.

Before the Interview

Prepare in advance. The better prepared you are, the less anxious you will be and the greater your chances for success.

- Role play. Find someone to role play the interview with you. This person should be someone with whom you feel comfortable and with whom you can discuss your weaknesses freely. The person should be objective and knowledgeable, perhaps a business associate.
- Use a mirror or video camera when you role play to see what kind of image you project.
- Assess your interviewing skills. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Work on correcting your weaknesses, such as speaking rapidly, talking too loudly or softly and nervous habits such as shaking hands or inappropriate facial expressions.
- Learn the questions that are commonly asked and prepare answers to them. Practice giving answers which are brief but thorough.
- Decide what questions you would like to ask and practice politely interjecting them at different points in the interview.
- Evaluate your strengths. Evaluate your skills, abilities, and education as they relate to the type of job you are seeking.
- Practice tailoring your answers to show how you meet the company's needs, if you have details about the specific job before the interview.
- Assess your over-all appearance. Find out what clothing is appropriate for your industry. Although some industries such as fashion and advertising are more stylish, acceptable attire for most industries is conservative.
- Have several sets of appropriate clothing available since you may have several interviews over a few days.
- Your clothes should be clean and pressed, and your shoes polished.
- Make sure your hair is neat, your nails clean, your teeth brushed, your breath fresh, and you are generally well groomed.
- Research the company. The more you know about the company and the job you are applying for, the better you will do in the interview. Get as much information as you can before the interview.
- Have extra copies of your résumé available to take on the interview. The interviewer may ask you for extra copies.
- Make sure you bring along the same version of your résumé that you originally sent the company. You can also refer to your résumé to complete applications that ask for job history information (e.g., dates of employment, names of former employers and their telephone numbers, job responsibilities, and accomplishments).
- Arrive early at the interview. Plan to arrive 10 to 15 minutes early. Give yourself time to find a rest room so you can check your appearance.

It's important to make a good impression from the moment you enter the reception area. Greet

the receptionist cordially and try to appear confident. You never know what influence the receptionist has with your interviewer. With a little small talk, you may get some helpful information about the interviewer and the job opening. If you are asked to fill out an application while you're waiting, be sure to fill it out completely.

During the Interview

The job interview is usually a two way discussion between you and a prospective employer. The interviewer is attempting to determine whether you have what the company needs, and you are attempting to determine if you would accept the job if offered. Both of you will be trying to get as much information as possible in order to make those decisions.

The interview that you are most likely to face is a structured interview with a traditional format. It usually consists of three phases. The introductory phase covers the greeting, small talk, and an overview of which areas will be discussed during the interview. The middle phase is a question and answer period. The interviewer asks most of the questions, but you are given an opportunity to ask questions as well. If you choose not to ask any questions, the interviewer may assume that you have no interest in or knowledge about the company. The closing phase gives you an opportunity to ask any final questions you might have, cover any important points that haven't been discussed, and get information about the next step in the process.

Introductory Phase

This phase is very important. You want to make a good first impression and, if possible, get additional information you need about the job and the company.

- **Make a good impression.** You only have a few seconds to create a positive first impression which can influence the rest of the interview and even determine whether you get the job. The interviewer's first impression of you is based mainly on non-verbal clues. The interviewer is assessing your over-all appearance and demeanor. When greeting the interviewer, be certain your handshake is firm and that you make eye contact. Wait for the interviewer to signal you before you sit down. Once seated, your body language is very important in conveying a positive impression. Find a comfortable position so that you don't appear tense. Lean forward slightly and maintain eye contact with the interviewer. This posture shows that you are interested in what is being said. Smile naturally at appropriate times. Show that you are open and receptive by keeping your arms and legs uncrossed. Avoid keeping your briefcase or your handbag on your lap. Pace your movements so that they are not too fast or too slow. Try to appear relaxed and confident.
- **Get the information you need.** If you weren't able to get complete information about the job and the company in advance, you should try to get it as early as possible in the interview. Be sure to prepare your questions in advance.

Knowing the following things will allow you to present those strengths and abilities that the employer wants:

Why does the company need someone in this position?

Exactly what would they expect of you?

Are they looking for traditional or innovative solutions to problems?

- **When to ask questions.** The problem with a traditional interview structure is that your chance to ask questions occurs late in the interview. How can you get the information you need early in the process without making the interviewer feel that you are taking control? Deciding exactly when to ask your questions is the tricky part. Timing is everything. You may have to make a decision based on intuition and your first impressions of the interviewer. Does the interviewer seem comfortable or nervous, soft spoken or forceful,

formal or casual? These signals will help you to judge the best time to ask your questions. The sooner you ask the questions, the less likely you are to disrupt the interviewer's agenda. However, if you ask questions too early, the interviewer may feel you are trying to control the interview. Try asking questions right after the greeting and small talk. Since most interviewers like to set the tone of the interview and maintain initial control, always phrase your questions in a way that leaves control with the interviewer. Perhaps say, "Would you mind telling me a little more about the job so that I can focus on the information that would be most important to the company?" If there is no job opening but you are trying to develop one or you need more information about the company, try saying, "Could you tell me a little more about where the company is going so I can focus on those areas of my background that are most relevant?" You may want to wait until the interviewer has given an overview of what will be discussed. This overview may answer some of your questions or may provide some details that you can use to ask additional questions. Once the middle phase of the interview has begun, you may find it more difficult to ask questions.

Middle Phase

During this phase of the interview, you will be asked many questions about your work experience, skills, education, activities, and interests. You are being assessed on how you will perform the job in relation to the company objectives.

All your responses should be concise. Use specific examples to illustrate your point whenever possible. Although your responses should be prepared in advance so that they are well phrased and effective, be sure they do not sound rehearsed. Remember that your responses must always be adapted to the present interview. Incorporate any information you obtained earlier in the interview with the responses you had prepared in advance and then answer in a way that is appropriate to the question.

Below are frequently asked questions and some suggested responses:

- **"Tell me about yourself."** Briefly describe your experience and background. Focus on work experience, skills and education. They are not looking for detailed personal information. Some personal information is important if it helps to explain why you are looking for this type of position. For example, "I recently immigrated to Canada from China, and I'm looking for an entry level position so I can develop my knowledge and skills in the Canadian job market."
- If you are unsure what information the interviewer is seeking, say, "Are there any areas in particular you'd like to know about?"
- **"What is your weakest point?"** (A stress question) Mention something that is actually a strength. Some examples are:
 - "I'm something of a perfectionist."
 - "I'm a stickler for punctuality."
 - "I'm tenacious."

Give a specific situation from your previous job to illustrate your point.

- **"What is your strongest point?"**
 - "I work well under pressure."
 - "I am organized and manage my time well."
 - If you have just graduated from college you might say,
 - "I am eager to learn, and I don't have to unlearn old techniques."

Give a specific example to illustrate your point.

- **"What do you hope to be doing five years from now?"**
 - "I hope I will still be working here and have increased my level of responsibility based on my performance and abilities."
- **"Why have you been out of work for so long?" (A stress question)**
 - "I spent some time re-evaluating my past experience and the current job market to see what direction I wanted to take".
 - "I had some offers but I'm not just looking for another job; I'm looking for a career."
- **"What do you know about our company? Why do you want to work here?"** This is where your research on the company will come in handy.
 - "You are a small/large firm and a leading force in the local/national economy"
 - "Your company is a leader in your field and growing."
 - "Your company has a superior product/service."

You might try to get the interviewer to give you additional information about the company by saying that you are very interested in learning more about the company objectives. This will help you to focus your response on relevant areas.

- **"What is your greatest accomplishment?"** Give a specific illustration from your previous or current job where you saved the company money or helped increase their profits. If you have just graduated from college, try to find some accomplishment from your school work, part-time jobs, or extra-curricular activities.
- **"Why should we hire you?"** (A stress question) Highlight your background based on the company's current needs. Recap your qualifications keeping the interviewer's job description in mind. If you don't have much experience, talk about how your education and training prepared you for this job.
- **"Why do you want to make a change now?"**
 - "I want to develop my potential."
 - "The opportunities in my present company are limited."
- **"Tell me about a problem you had in your last job and how you resolved it."** The employer wants to assess your analytical skills and see if you are a team player. Select a problem from your last job and explain how you solved it.

Some Questions You Should Ask

- "What are the company's current challenges?"
- "Could you give me a more detailed job description?"
- "Why is this position open?"
- "Are there opportunities for advancement?"
- "To whom would I report?"

Closing Phase

During the closing phase of an interview, you will be asked whether you have any other questions. Ask any relevant question that has not yet been answered. Highlight any of your strengths that have not been discussed. If another interview is to be scheduled, get the necessary information. If this is the final interview, find out when the decision is to be made and when you can call. Thank the interviewer by name and say good-bye.

DO:

- Be sincere and direct
- Be attentive and polite

- Ask relevant questions
- Answer questions concisely
- Use specific examples to illustrate points

DON'T:

- Smoke
- Try to control the entire interview
- Bring up salary, benefits or working hours
- Be too serious
- Let your depression or discouragement show
- Make negative comments about anyone or anything, including former employers
- Look at your watch
- Take extensive notes

After the Interview

You are not finished yet. It is important to assess the interview shortly after it is concluded. Following your interview you should:

- Write down the name and title (be sure the spelling is correct) of the interviewer
- Review what the job entails and record what the next step will be
- Note your reactions to the interview; include what went well and what went poorly
- Assess what you learned from the experience and how you can improve your performance in future interviews
- Make sure you send a thank you note within 24 hours; your thank you note should:
- Be hand-written only if you have a very good handwriting; most people type thank you notes
- Be on good quality paper
- Be simple and brief
- Express your appreciation for the interviewer's time
- Show enthusiasm for the job
- Get across that you want the job and can do it

Everyone knows that a thank you letter should be sent after an interview, but very few people actually send one. Make sure you are one of those few. It could give you the edge.

- Phone follow-up. If you were not told during the interview when a hiring decision will be made, call after one week. At that time, if you learn that the decision has not been made, find out whether you are still under consideration for the job. Ask if there are any other questions the interviewer might have about your qualifications and offer to come in for another interview if necessary. Reiterate that you are very interested in the job. If you learn that you did not get the job, try to find out why. You might also inquire whether the interviewer can think of anyone else who might be able to use someone with your abilities, either in another department or at another company. If you are offered the job, you have to decide whether you want it. If you are not sure, thank the employer and ask for several days to think about it. Ask any other questions you might need answered to help you with the decision. If you know you want the job and have all the information you need, accept the job with thanks and get the details on when you start. Ask whether the employer will be sending a letter of confirmation, as it is best to have the offer in writing.

ILLEGAL QUESTIONS

During an interview, you may be asked some questions that are considered illegal. It is illegal for an interviewer to ask you questions related to sex, age, race, religion, national origin, or marital status, or to delve into your personal life for information that is not job-related. What can you do if you are asked an illegal question? Take a moment to evaluate the situation. Ask yourself questions like:

- How uncomfortable has this question made me feel?
- Does the interviewer seem unaware that the question is illegal?
- Is this interviewer going to be my boss?

Then respond in a way that is comfortable for you. If you decide to answer the question, be succinct and try to move the conversation back to an examination of your skills and abilities as quickly as possible. For example, if asked about your age, you might reply, "I'm in my forties, and I have a wealth of experience that would be an asset to your company." If you are not sure whether you want to answer the question, first ask for a clarification of how this question relates to your qualifications for the job. You may decide to answer if there is a reasonable explanation.

If you feel there is no justification for the question, you might say that you do not see the relationship between the question and your qualifications for the job and you prefer not to answer it.

WHO GETS HIRED?

In the final analysis, the employer will hire someone who has the abilities and talents which fulfill their needs. It is up to you to demonstrate at the interview that you are the person they want.

NEGOTIATING YOUR COMPENSATION PACKAGE

Do not discuss your specific compensation package, especially salary, with the employer until you have been offered the job and you think it is an offer you should seriously consider. During salary negotiations, you are not only talking about your monetary salary but your entire compensation package. This includes vacation time, sick leave, health insurance, tuition reimbursement, and other benefits the company may offer. Your base salary and performance-based raises are probably the most negotiable parts of your compensation package. However, many companies do have a cafeteria approach to benefits where you select from a number of benefit options based on a total monetary cost. In other words, the company will spend a certain amount of money on each employee for benefits, and employees have some flexibility on which benefit options they select. For example, employees with children might select child care reimbursement benefits, while employees interested in going back to school might choose tuition reimbursement. When negotiating your compensation package, it is important to keep in mind the *total* package.

Make sure you consider all benefits the company has to offer, not just salary. Before you begin negotiating your compensation, decide which benefits are most important to you, so you are ready to talk to the employer.

Salary Negotiations

Like other parts of the job search process, the key to salary negotiations is preparation. It is very important for you to do your research before you begin salary negotiations. In order to determine the salary you are willing to accept, investigate the salary range that someone with your skills and experience can expect to receive.

How do you find salary information?

- **The Library** – Your local library should have a number of references to use to find out the salary ranges for the occupation which you are considering. The reference librarian can provide assistance in locating salary information resources. Some reference books include:
- **Professional associations** – Conduct salary surveys both nationally and regionally; provides salary/compensation information received from membership
- **Your network** – Talk to colleagues in your professional network; talk about salary ranges
- **Job Search Centers** – Can be found in schools, libraries, community centers, or as part of national, provincial, or municipal government programs; frequently keep salary information
- **Your past experience** – Think about your past salary; your previous salary is a starting point for salary negotiation if the position you are applying for does not dramatically differ from your former position

A salary range may have been included in the job description. If so, when the job is offered to you, ask questions regarding eligibility criteria for the low, middle and high places in the range.

The Negotiation Meeting

Once you have a good feeling for the type of salary and benefits you are willing to accept, it's time to negotiate with the company. Don't sell yourself short during these negotiations. Usually, when a company is ready to make you an offer they have invested a lot of time and money in their search for a qualified employee. You don't want to be overly aggressive with the employer, but you do want to receive a fair compensation package. If the employer makes you an offer that does not seem equitable, discuss your concerns with the employer. Present your concerns about the benefits package in a constructive, non-threatening manner. Focus on the reasons why you have concerns, as opposed to making general statements about what you think you deserve.

For example, it won't be productive to simply state, "I must have more money." It would be more productive to explain that the company's offer is less than you were making previously and you would like them to match your previous salary. In most situations employers do have some flexibility in what they can offer an applicant. They might be able to offer you more money or compensate you with additional benefits (e.g., more vacation leave). Some companies can offer a signing bonus to compensate for other weaknesses in their compensation package.

When you are considering the offer, make sure you are taking the entire benefits package into account. Sometimes excellent benefits can compensate for a lower salary. If you really want the job, but the offer still seems low after negotiations, see if the employer will consider a salary review three to six months from your starting date. Usually, you don't have to make a decision about the offer immediately. Ask the employer for a couple of days so you can carefully consider the position and the offer.

If you do come to an agreement with the employer, find out when you can expect to receive the offer in writing. It is very important to get the official offer documented. An official letter usually means that the management at the company has approved your acceptance of their offer.