

10 Common Résumé Pitfalls to Avoid

by Kathryn Troutman, The Résumé Place

The 2011 Top Ten Common Pitfalls was the most popular article that I wrote for FedSmith last year, and the list is STILL applicable and worth a peek. For this year, I am bringing it back again, but I have added a whole new top 10 list, making a combined mega-list of 20 common pitfalls for writing the federal résumé work experience section.

The new top 10 includes the most common problems we have seen in working with our clients this past year with writing a federal résumé that will get an applicant Best Qualified, Referred, and Interviewed. These tips are based on federal résumé writing classes taught at more than 30 federal agencies in 2011 with varied occupational series specializations, missions, and grade levels.

The work experience section is the most important section of your federal résumé, and the hardest part to write. If you correct these common pitfalls in your résumé, your chances of getting Referred and selected for an interview will dramatically increase. Try it and let me know what happens. Write me at kathryn@résumé-place.com.

Problem # 1: Big Block Paragraphs

One of the biggest problems I saw in 2011 with client federal résumés was the use of a Resumix format that I call the “Big Block.” The original instructions for Resumix, which is now nearly gone, said to write as much as possible, use as many keywords as possible from an occupational series or vacancy announcement, and fill in all of the character space allowed. It was a common myth that you had to write it in one paragraph.

The big block legacy lives on today. The format that I saw most often this past year in my federal résumé writing class for federal employees was one huge paragraph for the work experience section of the résumé.

THE FIX: Instead of one big paragraph, create 5 to 7 paragraphs that are 5 to 10 lines long. Each paragraph should feature one skill set or one accomplishment. This format will be more successful and more readable for someone in human resources (HR) who could be reading from 30 to 500 résumés.

Problem # 2: Weak Presentation of Your Accomplishments

In many résumés that I have reviewed, accomplishments are often either not included or blended in the middle of a paragraph that could be up to 100 lines or more. The HR specialist or the hiring manager will not be able to determine what you have achieved for your current agency.

Tell a good story about your accomplishment! With the stiff competition for today’s federal positions, it’s important that the accomplishments stand out in separate paragraphs so that they are readable and engaging. Your goal is to get the interview. It’s time to let the hiring manager know that you could be a valuable asset to the new organization as a result of your past performance.

Problem # 3: Lack of Proof

Most vacancy announcements now include a self-assessment questionnaire where you score your skill level. Did you know that you must also back up your questionnaire answers with proof in your résumé? We often find this connection between the questionnaire and the work experience section missing. If your questionnaire is scored at the perfect level, then the résumé MUST ALSO match those levels. The HR specialist will compare your answers to your résumé, and they do have the authority to reduce your score if your résumé does not demonstrate the level of expertise that you are stating in your questionnaire.

THE FIX: After you have completed the questionnaire for an application, make sure you go back through your work experience section and check that your work experience section provides adequate proof for your questionnaire answers.

Problem #4: Keywords Are Missing

The busy HR specialist will be looking for keywords from the announcement. If they receive 500 résumés, they will focus their search on specific skills. Many applicants use the same résumé to apply for a variety of job announcements, and these applicants will not be recognized as having the specific set of skills needed for a position.

THE FIX: Make sure your résumé is updated to match each announcement. Analyze each vacancy announcement for keywords by looking for 5 to 10 words that are repeated throughout the announcement. I know this takes time, but with a little practice you will be able to analyze an announcement and add the keywords into your résumé in about half an hour.

Problem # 5: Not Taking KSAs Seriously

It is well known that the KSA narratives were eliminated in November 2010 with Hiring Reform. But the reality is that you are not completely off the hook with KSA writing. KSAs are frequently still listed in the vacancy announcement. They are there so that you will know what Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities are required for the position. They are also most often covered in the questionnaire. Most résumés that we review do not include accomplishments that speak to the KSAs in the announcement.

THE FIX: If you want to prove that you have a certain Knowledge, Skill, or Ability, you will need to add an achievement that proves you have that experience. Write examples of accomplishments or write statements that clearly demonstrate that you have the KSAs for the position. Including these accomplishment statements within the text of your résumé.

Problem # 6: Résumés That Are Too Long

USAJOBS résumé builder has no limit for length. You could actually put a 20-page résumé in the builder, and we have seen people try to do just this. It's important that you TRY to limit your writing to a range of about 5 to 7 pages, even if your career is long and accomplished. Hiring officials will focus on the most recent 5 years of your career. They will also read and consider up to the last 10 years of work experience. Prior to 10 years, they will scan quickly.

THE FIX: The USAJOBS builder does not automatically optimize the space of your résumé content, so your résumé could print out longer than you expect. Print out your current résumé to see how long it is, and adjust it accordingly.

Problem # 7: The USAJOBS Upload Résumé Feature

The upload résumé feature seems to work well for vacancy announcements where the questionnaire managed by applicationmanager.gov

PROS: The résumé that you upload can be formatted for plain paper reading. You can use bold type, centering, indentations, and other helpful styling techniques.

CONS: If the announcement is posted by NASA, DHS, or other agencies not using applicationmanager.gov, the integration between the résumé and the questionnaire may not be perfect.

THE FIX: I am starting to use the Upload résumé feature, but when I do, I ensure that I include the critical compliance information, such as: month and year, hours per week; supervisor name; supervisor phone; salary; full address and location of the employer for each position for 10 years.

Problem # 8: Too Many Words Spent on Irrelevant Jobs

Sometimes employees get into a job that is not great. Or you may have a job in the past that simply has nothing to do with the position for which you are applying. I have seen résumés that spend too much time describing the jobs that I would basically call irrelevant.

THE FIX: What should you do? You can keep the job(s) on the résumé; just keep the description short. You can write about any transferrable skills that will be helpful for your preferred career, but don't dwell on unnecessary details.

Problem # 9: One Year Specialized Experience Is Not Taken Seriously Enough

The One Year Specialized Experience is a deal breaker for your application. This is a very simple, but sometimes overlooked, requirement. One of the very first sections I look at in the vacancy announcement is the qualifications section and the One Year Specialized Experience.

THE FIX: Ask yourself, “What is the best position in my experience that supports the One Year Specialized Experience requirement?” I hope you have an answer to that question from the last 5 years of your work experience; if necessary, you can go out to 10 years. At the Résumé Place, we make it a priority to feature the One Year Specialized Experience in a résumé with accomplishments that prove the level of that experience.

Problem # 10: Not Getting Selected for an Interview

I realize that this problem isn't really a specific problem with your résumé. However, the current reality is that many current federal employees can get Best Qualified and even Referred, but they don't get selected for an interview. If you have personally experienced this, then take it to be an indicator that there IS something in your résumé that could use adjusting.

THE FIX: Get to the bottom of it! Carefully review your résumé again, using this top 10 list and the top 10 list of 2011. If you still cannot determine where your résumé needs strengthening, consider getting some professional eyes to help you look over your résumé for its weaknesses.

Wishing you the best for your federal job search in 2012!

Kathryn Troutman is dedicated to helping veterans write great résumés. Kathryn is the President of The Résumé Place, Inc. Write your federal résumé with Kathryn's 5 steps with the free template sample at www.vetfedjobs.org. Kathryn is also the author of the Military to Federal Career Guide and CD-ROM, filled with successful samples of federal and private industry résumés. The guide is available as a print book and eBook. You can view a federal résumé and a private industry résumé for six case studies on the eCD-ROM, which costs only \$9.95. The samples also include a cover letter for each case, which can help you feature your most marketable skills for the hiring specialist.

<http://www.military.com/veteran-jobs/search/government-jobs/federal-job-résumé-tips-for-2012.html>