

# **Smarthinking Career Writer's Handbook**

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## Lesson 1: Components of an Effective Resume

A resume is a potential employer's snapshot into who you are and what you bring to a position. It's your chance to showcase your accomplishments in an ordered and visually appealing way. Like all writing, a resume should be written to its target audience. In fact, you may be surprised to learn that one key to creating an effective resume is tailoring it to each different position, even if you're applying for multiple positions within the same company. Your resume may not need an overhaul every time, but it should be considered as a living document that will change in response to the specific job you're seeking. As with any piece of writing, creating an effective resume is a process.

### Resume Components

Most resumes are a single page, and their basic structure relies on the following guidelines, which are demonstrated in the [sample resume](#) below. You can find additional sample resumes in the Appendix.

#### Contact Information

Begin the resume with your name at the top in a large, bold font. Under your name, place your mailing address, your professional email address, and your phone number. In this section, you can also place a link to your LinkedIn account, ePortfolio, or professional website. See [Digital Media as a Branding Tool](#) and [Leveraging Your LinkedIn Profile](#) for tips on creating professional email addresses and using LinkedIn effectively. Also refer to [ePortfolios and Your Online Presence](#) for information on writing and designing professional websites.

#### Summary

The summary should be 2-3 sentences or bullet points that describe your work experience in an engaging way. You can think of these as the focus or purpose statement for your resume. Emphasize specific key skills and use strong verbs in this section. The Summary is also a section where you can revise the wording for specific jobs by including keywords from the job description that match your experience.

#### Education

List your degrees or certifications by starting with your most recently acquired degree. If you're still working on a degree, place it first with an anticipated graduation date. If you've been on the Dean's List, consider noting this honor along with the name of the appropriate school.

#### Professional Experience

This section can have many possible titles. One strong choice is to title this section using the type of experience required for the potential job. For example, when you're applying to a technical support job, if your work experience includes technical support and database management, you might title this section *Technical Experience* or *Technical Support Experience*. Meanwhile, when applying for a database job, you might change the title to *Database Experience*. If you're new to the field, consider titles like *Work Experience* or *Professional Experience*.

#### Specialized Sections

Depending on your activities and interests, you might decide to include other special sections in your resume to highlight skills and contributions beyond your education and specific work experience. Choose from the following possibilities:

- *Awards*: If you've earned awards from your academic department, your institution, or philanthropic organizations, list them along with the dates they were received.
- *Certifications*: You may have specialized certifications related to your field. If so, place them in their own section, identifying each certificate name and the date it was completed. If you're currently working on a certification, list its date with *anticipated completion*.
- *Volunteer experience*: Volunteer experience may be useful to include on your resume to show a potential employer your interests outside the workplace as well as your willingness to go above and beyond required duties. Depending on how much space you have on your resume, identify the name of the volunteer position, the organization, the dates of service, and your key responsibilities.

## Effective Resumes

As you review your resume for final editing, remember these characteristics of strong resume writing:

- Limit your resume to one page in most cases. Employers are busy and often have hundreds of resumes to review for a single position. Therefore, avoid overcrowding your resume with too many details. Save them for the cover letter or interview, and focus on including the most applicable and pertinent information on the resume. The only exception to this rule might be if you're at a later stage in your career and need to showcase multiple application positions or you're completing a Curriculum Vitae (common when applying for academic positions).
- Be flexible by revising the resume regularly. A fresh resume will give you a fresh look at your experience and skills, which will translate well during your contact with the company.
- Use keywords from the job description. Most companies have a computer program that scans résumés for keywords. Resumes without those keywords will be discarded before they're ever seen by a manager.
- Strive to omit unrelated experience. If you don't have enough job experience in your field, then you may include unrelated work. Even so, you'll want to keep unrelated information to a minimum and highlight skills that might transfer to the job you're applying for, such as customer service skills, writing-related experience, or mastery of particular computer programs or software specific to your field.
- Keep your language and tone professional. Avoid slang and text lingo, and use a professional email address.
- Refrain from including any references. You will be asked to include these later in the hiring process, so adding them to the resume is unnecessary and takes up valuable space.

## Think About It

- How applicable is each component to the current position?
- How can you showcase your skills so they directly link to this potential job?
- What keywords can you highlight to show you're the best candidate?

In the job application process, your resume is your chance to showcase the marketable skills that will make you the perfect fit for the job you're seeking. After you've completed your resume, use these questions to help keep it fresh.

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## Sample Resume

**Michelle Katz**  
101 Amy Street St. Louis, MO 63130  
231-222-0123 [michellekatz@emailaddress](mailto:michellekatz@emailaddress)

**Summary**  
Proven, strong ability to manage every day and critical IT incidents in a high-stress, fast-paced environment. Excellent attention to detail, enthusiastic customer service, and a strong passion for innovation.

**Education**  
2014 B.S., Information Technology Illinois University, Coffee, IL

- Technical Student Excellence Award 2013
- Elected President of Student Association of Sciences 2012-2014

**Technical Experience**  
June 2014 – Present  
Operations Center Representative Computer Operations, St. Louis, MO

- Manages custom database and creates new content as needed
- Utilizes CLEO ticketing management system to update clients and resolve issues
- Provides phone and email support to data hubs for everyday tasks and troubleshooting

May 2012 – May 2014  
IT Support HelpDesk Illinois University, Coffee, IL

- Managed HelpDesk to support students and professors in a computer lab with 400 devices
- Provided software support and projector assistance to professors in connected classrooms
- Provided phone and email support to all professors and students on campus

**Volunteer Experience**  
August 2015 – June 2016  
Web Designer Illinois University, Coffee, IL

- Designed the university's new website
- Maintained and updated the site as needed

Michelle chose to create a professional email address instead of using her usual address, [catgirl08@email.com](mailto:catgirl08@email.com).

The term *fast-paced* was in the job ad, so Michelle incorporated it into her summary when she revised.

The job description mentions a ticketing management system, but Michelle doesn't know which one they use. Therefore, she explains that CLEO is a ticketing management system she's used.

Michelle worked as a barista in high school, but she omits that to focus on relevant work.

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## Lesson 2: Best Practices for Writing Resumes

In an ever-changing and increasingly technologically rich job market, successful resume criteria are also in flux. While the content of your resume is critical, the presentation and philosophy behind that content are increasingly important as well. You can adopt some strategies to make your resume stand out from among hundreds of others and increase the chances that you'll land an interview—and hopefully that dream job!

### Before Writing

#### Create Your Brand

Like a politician or product, you can't sell yourself as a job candidate without a platform or story. You'll need to create a brand for use in the online job search world before you begin writing your resume. How do you want to be known? Are you an educator, a public speaker, a medical professional? Taglines and elevator speeches will help you create a brand for yourself, which will then help you frame the information on your resume. Keep these branding materials concise and use them on multiple job-search materials: resumes, business cards, ePortfolios, and websites.

#### Taglines

A tagline is simply a group of words that identifies you and, if repeated often enough, becomes associated with you. Taglines are most useful in a resume summary but can be used elsewhere when describing job skills and experiences. For instance, if you're an early education teacher who values hands-on learning, you might develop a tagline like *elementary school educator focusing on experiential, kinesthetic learning*. Having a consistent message will help cement your image in the minds of potential employers.

#### Elevator Pitch

An elevator pitch is a way to practice branding yourself in a short speech. Decide the top qualities you'd want to share with a hiring manager or future employer. Then, compose a brief (30- to 45-second) speech in which you introduce yourself, highlighting those qualities. If you happen to meet your future boss at the elevator when arriving for an interview, how would you pitch yourself in the short time it would take to travel to the designated floor? A prepared elevator pitch is an excellent resource not only if you really do find yourself facing a future boss at an elevator but also when you're networking in numerous venues, such as a career fair. Once you have your elevator pitch on paper, you can mine this brief piece for descriptions and keywords that you can use in your resume.

#### Build and Promote Your Brand

Once your brand is in place, look for ways to increase its reach and credibility. This will ensure that your resume isn't the only product out there associated with your name and credentials attached. You can create an ePortfolio or professional website, particularly if you have skills that are visually marketable, like photography. Include links to your resume, a professional picture, and a short description of your career goals on the homepage. Inner pages will highlight your projects and skills. To see more, review [ePortfolios and Your Online Presence](#).

Another method for promoting your brand is to cross-list pertinent information on different documents and social media platforms. You can include a custom LinkedIn URL on your Twitter or YouTube accounts as well as on business cards, your ePortfolio, and your resume. When you cross-list information on online platforms, you increase the chances that keywords will come up frequently when a potential employer explores who you are by entering your name in a variety of search engines.

#### Build Connections

Opportunities are extremely accessible with the Internet and digital connections. While resume sites and emails are starting points for promoting yourself, you can increase the reach of your application materials by expanding your options. Join LinkedIn and post your resume. Connect with the local Chamber of Commerce to network with local business owners. Talk to family and friends. At corporations, obtain contact names rather than general titles. Resumes sent directly to the proper channels are 20 times more likely to be read than ones sent to the hiring manager or simply posted on a job site.

## Begin Writing

### Choose Your Format

While the reverse chronological resume is an old standard, that format isn't ideal for everyone. A candidate with employment gaps, for example, should consider a functional resume, which focuses on skills rather than employment history.

### Reverse Chronological

Using a reverse chronological format, highlight your accomplishments by listing each position, starting with the most recent. After identifying the employer and job title, include a handful of your most notable and relevant achievements and duties. A teacher, for example, might include work experience at a previous school and prior experience at a day care. A short list of phrases describing responsibilities, accomplishments, and skills gained would accompany each job.

### Functional

The functional format focuses on groups of skills and accomplishments. Rather than separating by employer, these groups are separated by functions. For example, a person continuing a career in marketing might break experience into *advertising campaigns*, *social media marketing*, and *customer analytics*. Each of those categories would include responsibilities, accomplishments, and skills gained from previous experience, even if they occurred at different employers.

### Combined Formats

A third format joins chronological and functional by listing prior employment but breaking accomplishments into sections by function. Here, a nurse might list two previous jobs but organize accomplishments and duties within those jobs into functional categories like *patient care*, *management*, and *nursing best practices*.

### Choose Your Style

While long considered a standard font, a typical **Times New Roman** resume with no use of bold or other style elements could come across as unoriginal. Consider a font that is still professional but has a bit more pop, like **Calibri** or **Tahoma**. Look for sample resumes in your industry to help you decide what's appropriate and expected. Whatever font you choose, you want to make sure it's legible and allows readers to quickly skim and understand the information being presented.

You might also consider adding a bar of color to highlight important information or help your resume stand out. However, if you choose to use color, understand that the potential employer may need to make black and white copies of your resume to share it with the entire hiring committee. If you print your own copy in black and white before distribution, you can check to ensure the color effects translate well even with color removed.

Most importantly, be consistent with your formatting. If your bullet points and sections don't align, your work will raise eyebrows rather than expectations. Appearance and attention to detail count! Make them work in your favor. To see more on formatting your resume and using appropriate fonts, refer to [Visual Design in Business and Technical Writing](#).

## While Writing

### Be Personal

Rather than sending one generic resume with all applications, use a standard resume that you customize to suit different positions. For instance, a resume submitted for a marketing analysis position will differ slightly from one submitted for an advertising position, even though the fields are related. For the marketing analysis position, an employer will want to know how you'll obtain, analyze, and apply data results; for the advertising position, the employer's interest shifts to the way you'll use knowledge of customers, products, clients, and software to create effective ads, logos, and campaigns. While both positions are technically in marketing, the contrast of analysis versus creativity means you'll need to highlight your skills differently.

If you find resume tweaking challenging, at the very least, be sure to create a customized, concise cover letter for each position. A prospective employer who sees the hiring manager's name, the

company name, and a reference to a specific job posting and qualifications will be quicker to hold on to that resume than one that says *your company* or *this position*.

### **. . . But Not Too Personal**

Someone reviewing your resume doesn't want to see personal information such as your age, religion, weight, or height. Therefore, don't include photographs of yourself on your resume, since images can reveal or suggest these details. If you plan to model or act, this standard may not apply to you, but, for most professionals, personal details are inappropriate.

### **Be Active and Concise**

Employers might be scanning hundreds of resumes, so those featuring multiple pages, paragraphs, and wordy, empty phrases won't receive more than a cursory glance before being set aside. Rather than sentences or paragraphs, use phrases and bullet points to be active and concise. Replace wordy, passive phrases with more active phrases:

<b>Passive</b>	<b>Active</b>
<i>responsible for managing</i>	<i>managed a team of 20 employees</i>
<i>had the opportunity to organize a trade show</i>	<i>organized a trade show</i>

### **Be Honest. Be Perfect. Be Perfectly Honest.**

It seems obvious, but sometimes resume writers are dishonest when promoting themselves. Exaggeration becomes half-truth or complete fiction. Some employers will notice these inaccuracies on resumes. Those who don't will definitely pick up on exaggerations during an interview. Save your time and maintain your integrity. Be confident—but also be accurate and honest.

### **Polish by Proofreading**

You only have one opportunity to make a first impression. When that impression is being made on paper or being scanned by computers, a spelling or typographical error can make the difference between your resume being thoroughly reviewed or tossed in the trash. Employers want candidates who possess an attention to detail and ability to communicate. A poorly worded resume with spelling and grammatical errors suggests that you're unable to communicate clearly or unwilling to take the extra step to make a clean presentation. Neither are appealing qualities in a job candidate.

### **Follow up**

A few days after sending your resume, contact the appropriate person to follow up. If possible, directly contact your potential supervisor; avoid human resources personnel who are already handling a high volume of resumes and requests for hiring updates. If you're applying for a sales position, find the name of the sales manager before you call. Then, ask for that person directly. Plan what you might say or ask ahead of time, and be sure to confirm your availability and interest in the position.

If making a call isn't possible, there are many other ways to demonstrate your interest in the position. A hand-written note, typed letter, or email to a specific contact person will put your name in the minds of those with influence in the hiring process.

While many candidates feel pushy following up, doing so can move your resume out of that growing pile and in front of the right set of eyes. Follow up may be the difference between landing an interview or being completely overlooked.

### **Be Organized and Flexible**

Keep track of your contacts. Where did you send resumes and when? What is your response rate? If you're only securing a handful of interviews but have sent out hundreds of resumes, try re-evaluating your resume and strategy. A new approach or strategy may be what lands you the interview—and the job!

- Seek advice from tutoring services by submitting your resume for review or working with a tutor in a live chat, whiteboard setting.
- Tailor your content more specifically to each position.
- Change your resume format to give it a fresh design.
- Take a course or volunteer to increase your marketability.

## Think About It

- What are the best ways to create and promote your personal brand?
- What information should you include to best present your skills accurately and honestly?
- How and when should you follow up with employers to demonstrate your interest in the job?

Through some legwork and attention to detail, most applicants can expect to land that coveted job, if not an entry-level position with the opportunity to advance. Keep this advice in mind, and hopefully you'll be sorting through your wardrobe and practicing [interview techniques](#) and responses soon!

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## Lesson 3: Components of an Effective Cover Letter

You might have polished your resume, but there's another essential element in a solid job application: the cover letter. The cover letter is sent to the employer with your initial application and resume, tailored to the employer and specific position. It also highlights unique skills from your resume by providing specific details about your accomplishments, both at former positions and throughout your education.

### The Purpose of a Cover Letter

The cover letter is a writing *and* a thinking document. Therefore, it has a dual purpose: to demonstrate your writing ability while showing potential employers your ability to think critically about and link your experiences to a given position. A cover letter is an argument you make to your potential employer; it's your opportunity to make a case for how your talents match the job. Because the cover letter makes an argument about you as a job candidate, it should have a main claim and evidence to support those claims.

A cover letter should be addressed to the individual in charge of hiring, using only his or her last name. If you don't know this person's name, use his or her job title, such as *Dear Managing Editor* or *Dear Human Resources Director*. Additionally, your cover letter should be only one page consisting of three (sometimes four) paragraphs. To organize it, use an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

### Introduction

This first paragraph should state the position and indicate why you're interested. Mention where you saw the job posting, including the names of any contacts you have at the company or organization, especially if someone referred you to the job. Think about answering these core questions in your introduction:

- Why are you interested in the position?
- Who did you talk to?
- What skills and experiences do you bring that make you a good fit for the position?

Think of your answer to the last question as your main claim. It's okay to write your letter in its entirety and then go back to craft your claim. Some writers find that drafting a claim about themselves before they've written specific examples in the body paragraphs is difficult. For help with your claim, look at the job description's keywords and take note of the elements of the position that are highlighted the most. Are there repeated keywords or phrases? Your claim should include those keywords and phrases, indicating how the elements they're looking for match your skills and experiences.

### Body

Whatever your main claim, you want to ensure that it's supported by your evidence. While the first paragraph *tells* the potential employer why you're a good fit for the position, one or two body paragraphs will *show why* using specific examples. These may be examples of specific projects, milestones, or accomplishments from your other jobs or more elaborate information about the type of work you did at a specific job or internship. Avoid simply repeating information from your resume; build on identified educational and work experiences by pinpointing specifics and elaborating on them to show the reader what you've accomplished:

- *Draft:* After obtaining my degree, I worked at Global University for one year as a financial aid counselor.
- *Revision:* At Global University, I built my customer service skills while working with students and was recognized for *Outstanding Service to Students* three semesters in a row.

Show what you've gained, learned, or accomplished from the education and job experiences included on your resume instead of simply repeating them. To help generate a list of these benefits, sit down with your resume and write some specific accomplishments or projects from each work-related position or educational stage. You don't need to discuss each point in detail while brainstorming; instead, once you've jotted down a number of ideas, you can then narrow the list and use only the evidence that clearly supports this claim.

## **Conclusion**

Including the following elements in the conclusion will show you're seriously pursuing the position and committed to working for the company:

- End the cover letter by looking to the future and expressing your desired outcome, such as an interview or a request to speak with a manager about other opportunities.
- Thank the employer for considering your request or application.
- Have a firm plan for when and how you'll follow up on your application, letting the employer know when to expect a call or email from you.
- Choose a respectful closing, such as *Sincerely* or *Best regards*.

## **Think About It**

- What argument or claim are you making about yourself as a potential employee in your letter?
- How does your cover letter complement your resume and vice versa?
- What specific accomplishments or positions on your resume do you want to highlight in your cover letter?
- What should you include in the conclusion to note your outcome and how you'll follow up?

By writing a brief, specific cover letter with a main claim and supporting evidence from your experiences, you will make a positive impression and land your interview!

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## Lesson 4: Best Practices for Writing Cover Letters

The job search and application process can be time-consuming, but planning can make the process more efficient, especially when you sit down to write each of your cover letters. That's right—you want to tailor each cover letter to the specific position and company, so you should avoid writing one generic cover letter. With the right tools, though, writing a cover letter can be a truly rewarding process.

### Set Aside Time to Write

Treat the process of writing a cover letter like other tasks by setting aside a block of time to write. Review the application deadline to determine how much time you'll have to work on your materials. You may want to earmark time to write daily or weekly, depending on the deadline. Attempt to turn in your application before the final due date to allow time for soliciting feedback. You might use Smarthinking's Career Writing subjects and choose either *Submit My Writing* for a full review or *Connect with a Tutor Now* for a one-on-one coaching session. If you're submitting an electronic application, plan to send it early in case there are any technological glitches.

### Do Your Research

For an academic assignment, writers often gather information through research, and writing cover letters is no different. Therefore, build time into your writing schedule to research the company or organization. Look at its website and read about its mission, vision, philosophy, or similar information regarding what the company represents and believes. Ask yourself these questions to locate the kind of information you'll need:

- What important initiatives is the company leading in the community or within the organization?
- What keywords are repeated across the company's website, social media platforms, or other company literature, such as brochures, pamphlets, or flyers?
- Who are the current employees, and what are their backgrounds?
- What similarities or differences do you see when comparing your professional background to current employees?

Answers to these questions will reveal how you as a candidate match the company and the position. At this stage, if you can find out who the hiring manager will be (the person reviewing your application), make a note to address your letter specifically to that person.

### Draft Your Cover Letter

#### Elaborate Rather Than Repeat

No one wants to read the same information on your cover letter that's also on your resume. Instead of paraphrasing or summarizing information from your resume, expand by providing examples of specific projects, milestones, or accomplishments from the job responsibilities or academic accomplishments you've listed. You might also elaborate on experiences you had at specific points in your occupational or academic career. Then your cover letter will complement your resume instead of simply repeating it. For details about providing specifics in your letter, see [Components of an Effective Cover Letter](#).

#### Format Appropriately

Use letter formatting, and address your letter to the hiring manager. Your address should be listed in the first block of the letter, followed by the date and a blank line space. In the next block, list the hiring manager's name, his or her title, and the company's name and address. Then, after a blank line space, begin with the greeting:

222 Monterey Drive  
Monterey, CA 93940  
September 5, 2017

John Waters  
Director of Communications  
Waters Communications  
100 Munras Drive  
Monterey, CA 93940

Dear Mr. Waters:

### **Use Keywords and Phrases**

Review your research notes to see important points you gathered about your potential employer. Use your research to incorporate terms, keywords, and phrases from the company's mission and the job posting. Connect these keywords and phrases to your own experiences, showing how you meet not only the qualifications but also the company's culture and ideals.

### **Revise Your Cover Letter**

#### **Solicit Feedback**

You might seek a professional in your field or even a peer who works or has worked a similar job to ask for feedback on your cover letter. Share the job posting and ask the professional or peer to identify how well you'll fit the job based on your letter. You can also ask if he or she will review your resume and cover letter side by side to see if the letter complements and elaborates on (but doesn't simply repeat) your resume.

#### **Proofread, Proofread, Proofread**

By planning your writing and application timeline, you'll give yourself extra time to re-read your letter before hitting send or putting it in the mail. Proof it for errors and typos but also check your details. When writing multiple cover letters, ensure you aren't mixing up the name of a company or a specific job title. Attention to detail pays off!

### **Think About It**

- Looking at your job application timeline, how will you plan your research and writing?
- How do you match up with the company or organization's mission or goals and the position's qualifications?
- What areas would you like feedback on from a peer or professional in the field?

Have a plan of attack for cover letter writing and include ample time to write and seek feedback. If you do, you'll stay organized and grounded in your job search.

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## Lesson 1: ePortfolios and Your Online Presence

ePortfolios are popular in higher education, and the Internet age has made them applicable to countless professions. Think of your ePortfolio as an enhanced resume for reflecting on life, academic, and career experiences, providing a link between what you've learned and how you'll use it on the job.

In your ePortfolio, a variety of items—also known as *artifacts*—will give employers a sense of who you'll be as an employee. Consider it a potential marketing tool not only for employment but also for graduate school. As a student, your artifacts should document your achievements and progress over time, demonstrating how effectively you've prepared yourself to contribute to the workplace. Your ePortfolio will prove you can do just that.

### The Portfolio's Contents

To build your credibility, your ePortfolio needs a resume, your contact information, and evidence of your skills, knowledge, and potential.

#### The Opening Page

The opening page should set up the experience of exploring your ePortfolio. It's also the first impression your audience will get of you, so it should accurately represent who you are and will be as a strong employee. Build your opening page with the following items:

- A clear menu
- A professional photograph of yourself
- Your resume
- Access to your contact information
- Social media connections, such as your LinkedIn ID and Twitter handle

#### Resume

Resumes are the most important artifact for employers. Since they're highly important, they must meet employers' needs quickly when there are multiple candidate resumes to review. A strong resume can be reviewed promptly so employers find applicable information with ease. Employers are busy, so you'll need to make it simple for them to see your potential. Therefore, your ePortfolio should efficiently show your skills and knowledge with your resume upfront. See [Best Practices for Writing Resumes](#) for help.

Think of it this way: your resume and, indeed, your entire ePortfolio need to be easily accessible and tailored to the specific type of job you're seeking.

#### Videos

An item to consider for your ePortfolio is a video or even multiple videos. An introductory video works well, and another video could show you in action. Do you want to be a teacher? Include a clip of you interacting with students in a classroom. Or perhaps you're entering the medical profession and have a brief video showing how you've assisted a patient. These types of short videos allow employers to connect virtually with you, providing a visual as well as a quick sense of who you are. In fact, think of a video as a sort of a pre-interview so that employers have a chance to discover your strong qualities in tangible ways even before meeting you in person.

Practically, keep the time length of a video to a minimum. A three-minute video is ample, and try not to go over five. Employers are busy and need you to be focused and to-the-point. To meet these goals, make the first 20-30 seconds count. Be strong and confident, using a clear voice and energetic tone to introduce yourself.

#### Other Artifacts

Additional artifacts should act like an extension of the resume, complementing and supporting its contents. You might choose to include evidence of research conducted; reports on projects, certificates, and awards; information on internships; and/or evaluation results. However, avoid making the ePortfolio too academic by bogging it down with simple assignments.



introduce you to future colleagues at a company or even to individuals closely connected with the employer, such as parents of students if your goal is to become a teacher. The ePortfolio could also be shown to high-level administrators in a company to justify the decision to hire you, or it could be shared with a future employee mentor. An employer could also see you as a better fit for another company and share the ePortfolio with a manager at that company as a result.

There should be enough artifacts to appeal to this wide audience, and making these different artifacts accessible from your homepage will ensure that the ePortfolio is usable practically speaking. Your organizational choices for the artifacts will make all the difference in meeting various audiences' needs.

## **Navigation**

Regardless of your purpose, giving employers easy access to inner pages of the ePortfolio and making sure the homepage strikes their interest will motivate them to keep reading. Rely on these best practices for creating clear navigation:

- Provide clear, applicable labels for tabs.
- Keep menu structures convenient.
  - Avoid menus that require clicking on an icon to make them appear.
  - Group any submenus by placing related artifacts together.
- Use vertical and/or horizontal menus.
- Prevent excessive scrolling by placing most text and graphics on a single screen.
- Highlight pertinent information with bold text and/or clear headings if scrolling is necessary.
- Name files and artifacts clearly so that what employers read matches their initial expectations.
- Avoid multiple clicks to access an artifact; they'll make navigation seem time-consuming.

Your intent certainly isn't to disappoint your audience or waste their time, and providing clear navigational paths is critical for keeping them motivated as they explore your ePortfolio's contents.

## **Design**

The design of your ePortfolio is critical because it's the entryway to your content. If the audience is distracted or annoyed by the design, they may not even look at the content. To find out more about the design potential of your ePortfolio, see [Visual Design in Business and Technical Writing](#).

### ***The Menu***

Your menu should provide an overview of the ePortfolio because it's the main tool your audience will use as they navigate. Two basic options will help you prepare your menu:

- A vertical menu on the left works well because audience members are accustomed to using menus in this location from their experiences on other websites.
- A horizontal menu at the top is easily found by viewers as they open the ePortfolio.

Items in your menu should clearly relate to one another. In other words, make the order and proximity of items logical:

- Create an order within a menu that gives meaning to individual artifacts.
- Place the foundational or important items first/at the top.
- Group related items together so they're close to one another.

### ***The Platform***

Whatever platform you choose to construct your ePortfolio, remember that it, too, represents you. When deciding which platform, website creator, or program to use, consider available templates carefully. If a template seems restricting or won't let you include necessary artifacts, don't choose it. Also, be sure to use a template as intended. Forcing in artifacts or graphics that don't fit will be obvious to viewers. Using the platform and/or template effectively will achieve a clean, clear ePortfolio.

### ***The Colors***

The aesthetic appeal of an ePortfolio is conveyed in large part by color choices. The background color should be consistent throughout pages and should complement other color choices. Use a limited

number of colors, and make sure all colors are acceptable in a professional setting. There's a place for fluorescent orange, but your ePortfolio isn't that place. Even in a menu, keep color choices to a minimum; multi-colored menus look cluttered and distract from your purpose, causing viewers to stop reading. To choose colors, draw from an important image or from your photo on your homepage. Trying out a few color schemes before developing your content can help determine the best fit. As with any visual element, check colors on different computers, such as both PCs and Macs, to ensure that you like their appearance.

### **The Graphics**

Personalizing your ePortfolio is exciting, and your graphics—images, photos, bulleted lists—can be an enjoyable part of the composing process. As with other design elements, graphics must support your purpose. For instance, an informal photograph would misrepresent someone seeking a management position, implying he or she isn't serious about the job search. Include graphics judiciously and choose those that are tasteful and applicable to the job you're seeking.

### **Fonts**

Like other design choices, the fonts in your ePortfolio need to convey a professional tone. A relaxed or exaggerated font sends the message that you might not approach the job seriously. Traditionally, serif fonts, or those with serifs (feet) like **Times New Roman**, haven't been as easy to view on a computer screen as sans serif fonts (those without feet). Avoid unique fonts and choose from popular sans serif fonts like **Arial** and **Calibri**. In general, use serif fonts for long blocks of text, such as in your artifacts. Avoid all caps, choose 12-point or higher, and view your font choice on different screens and browsers to ensure readability for a wide-ranging audience.

### **Grammar and Editing**

As with any professional document, grammar and punctuation in the ePortfolio should be impeccable. If poorly executed, they'll obstruct your content. Employers look at grammar and punctuation as indicators of someone's ability to communicate in the workplace. Errors imply an inability to write, prepare presentations, dialogue in meetings, and perform day-to-day business communication. Follow these guidelines to sharpen grammar and punctuation:

- Proofread every page in your ePortfolio very carefully.
- Ask a skilled writer to review the ePortfolio.
- View the ePortfolio on different computers to see it in various contexts and catch errors.
- Ask a tutor from Smarthinking's Career Services to review the ePortfolio by using *Submit My Writing*.
- Preschedule a one-on-one coaching session with Smarthinking's Career Writing Services or click *Connect with a Tutor Now*.

Editing your ePortfolio also means reviewing its navigation and links. If you include videos, ensure that they play on multiple platforms. View photos and other images on various computers and browsers to ensure that they appear as intended. Finally, double-check and triple-check links. Broken links send the message that you won't successfully finish a project on the job.

### **Distributing the ePortfolio**

While there are many important choices to make when creating your ePortfolio, a highly crucial one is how to distribute it. There are various avenues for distribution:

- Include the URL on your resume with your contact information.
- Share the URL in a cover letter when applying for a job.
- Choose a URL that makes sense—a screen name like *fastjack2007* won't convey a professional tone or clearly represent you like your actual name will.
- Decide if you'll purchase a URL or use a free online platform to create and house the ePortfolio.
- Have the ePortfolio ready for an interview, providing the URL to the employer in person.
- Email the URL directly to the person who will make the final hiring decision.

### **Think About It**

- What executive summaries or reflections do you need for pages and artifacts?
- What can you say to show employers why they should read the ePortfolio?

- What design elements should you use to convey who you'll be as a professional?
- What changes in editing will sharpen the ePortfolio for final presentation?

Simply put, employers are busy. They often have mere seconds to review a resume, so their time with your ePortfolio may also be limited. Be concise and clear, using a thoughtful, dynamic design to represent what makes you outstanding.

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## Lesson 2: Creating Effective Employment and Social Media Profiles

Applicants might be surprised to hear an interviewer begin by stating *Well, I was recently looking over your Facebook profile*. However, potential employers commonly check the online presence of applicants, including social media profiles, personal statements, ePortfolios, and *About Me* excerpts. Because your social media presence can play an important role in making a strong first impression, you'll want to invest in a profile that highlights your interests and demonstrates your suitability for your chosen profession. Your social media presence can play an important part in making a strong first impression.

### Understanding Social Media and the Job Search

A decade ago, a company taking the initiative to review someone's online profile would've been relatively innovative, but such practices are commonplace today. Your online presence is a quick way for employers to begin to understand who you are. Some employers choose to wait until after they've met a candidate face-to-face to view his or her online presence while others turn to social media profiles as their first opportunity to meet the candidate. These employers will look for professionalism, maturity, honesty, and sound judgment in a social media presence. They will also check to see if a job seeker's social media presence reveals a deeper interest in or understanding of a specific job or career.

Furthermore, employers aren't legally required to disclose that they'll be looking at a candidate's online presence (although some companies do so as a courtesy), so your actions on social media should be considered as crucial to your job search. Since employers frequently search for candidates through social media, you'll need to know how to develop a consistent and professional online profile to make the best impression possible.

### Creating an Effective Social Media Presence

#### Strategies to Use

- *Choose the social media platform(s) applicable to you and your job search:* Social media platforms are always evolving and increasing. Most companies and job seekers agree that LinkedIn is a key tool for new and current professionals. Aside from using LinkedIn, though, consider what other platforms are right for you. For instance, if you're a musician, you may find that SoundCloud is a great way to showcase your music; if you work in visual mediums, Instagram, Ello, or Vimeo may suit your needs.
- *Use privacy settings to your advantage:* You may have accounts with several social media platforms, but you may only want potential employers to see a few. Most platforms have privacy settings that allow you to turn off public viewing of your profile, so use those privacy settings to hide any profiles you don't want a potential employer to see. For instance, if you know you need a safe, online space to complain or share private news and you use Facebook for that purpose, make your Facebook account private to all except your friends.
- *Use social media for networking:* Join groups that support your professional interests, and act as an engaged member. Comment on posts or articles respectfully, and share information with others in your field. Liking, responding, and sharing are fantastic ways to start building connections with individuals and companies.
- *Be aware of your brand and social media presence:* Conduct what's known as a vanity search, in which you search your name on a few different browsers, such as Google, Bing, and Yahoo, to see what comes up. Be sure to look through the first several pages of search results. Do you like what you see? Do you feel like you're representing yourself appropriately for the job you want? If you do, great! Keep up the good work. If you don't, consider removing information or photos you dislike. You may also want to write reviews or respectful comments in public forums for your professional field to keep your voice in the conversation; such comments and reviews can become a part of your online presence and brand. If you're able to maintain it, you may even create a professional blog. For many careers, creating an ePortfolio can also showcase your accomplishments or projects. See [ePortfolios and Your Online Presence](#) for more on writing and designing an ePortfolio.
- *Minimize the uncontrollable:* Tell your friends and family that you're conducting a job search, and ask that they refrain from posting anything questionable on your profile. If you're worried they may not comply or you feel uncomfortable asking, limit your privacy settings so you must

approve all posts, consider making certain social platforms private, or develop one profile for friends and family and a separate profile for your professional needs.

- *Be consistent across platforms:* Use the same screenname and profile picture across various platforms to help employers find you. Crosslink different platforms to further assist the employer in finding what you want him or her to find.
- *Keep your information up-to-date:* Having many social media pages means little if the information on them is inaccurate or outdated. Open only those accounts you can maintain, and check them regularly for communications from potential employers and to connect with others in your industry. If maintaining up-to-date information means you only have a LinkedIn account, that's far better than having several accounts that are out of sync with one another or aren't regularly updated.
- *Balance social and professional posts:* Just because you're searching for a job doesn't mean you can't tell your friends you got a new puppy. Social media platforms are, after all, social. Feel free to share appropriate posts with your friends, but remain mindful that potential employers may also be viewing your profile. Balance posting information on your industry and your professional interests with information on your personal interests and hobbies.
- *Use industry buzzwords and keywords:* As a professional in your industry and an expert in your field, you should feel comfortable using the language. When constructing your profile, use buzzwords and keywords to ensure that your profile connects with your preferred jobs. If you're unsure what keywords to use, check job descriptions for positions in your field and mirror that language as you craft your profile.
- *Have a trusted, honest friend or family member review your social media presence:* Tell a friend or family member to look you up using two to five search engines and report his or her impressions. Is your online presence professional? Would he or she hire you for the type of job you want? Make sure you've chosen someone who is comfortable sharing an honest opinion to ensure you're getting constructive feedback.

### **Pitfalls to Avoid**

- *Avoid posting things you wouldn't share with your academic advisor or boss:* If you wouldn't feel comfortable sharing your Facebook or Twitter profile with an academic advisor or a boss, try editing it to make it more professional. Consider all social media posts with this same kind of scrutiny. Some examples of problematic posts include the following:
  - Inappropriate photos or videos
  - Vulgar language
  - Blatant self-promoting or grandstanding
  - Controversial, offensive, or inflammatory posts
  - Posts related to criminal activity
  - Inaccurate or dishonest information
- *Refrain from sharing information you wouldn't normally share at an interview:* If you question whether it's appropriate to say something at an interview, it's probably best not to post it. Your online presence is an extension of you, and your potential employer is likely to treat what you post as similar to what you would share in an interview setting.
- *Withhold complaints about your current company or boss:* Posting complaints about where you're currently working may worry a potential employer since you could do the same with his or her company. Posting complaints may also leave the potential employer feeling that a candidate may be negative about working in general.
- *Keep from posting information about interviews or job offers until you're securely in your new position:* If you want to quickly post, *I have an interview* or *My interview seemed to go well*, that's fine, but don't share specifics about a company or potential position. Most companies like to keep interview and hiring information private until all candidates have been screened and some time has passed. If you want to share specifics with close friends or family, do so through a private message, email, phone call, or face-to-face conversation. If you're in your new position but unsure if enough time has passed, ask your employer if it's okay to post information about the position. Alternatively, review the company's social media policy for specific guidelines.
- *Understand that whatever is out there isn't out of your control:* You can choose to delete information that doesn't effectively represent you or un-tag or delete photos you don't want a potential employer to see. The data may still be available somewhere, but a potential

employer isn't likely to track down such data. If you can't readily access the information, the employer most likely can't either.

### **Social Media is a Two-Way Street**

Just as recruiters can get an understanding of candidates through their social media presence, job seekers can use social media to learn about potential employers. Many companies have a social media presence, and exploring their presence can be an effective way for candidates to find helpful information to prepare informed questions to ask during interviews. Opening a question with, *I saw on LinkedIn that you . . .* can be a good way to show that you've taken the time to research the company and are interested in the position.

### **Think About It**

- What impression are you making to a potential employer?
- What do your posts or photos say about you?
- What do you see from a company's social media presence that can aid an interview?

People are accustomed to using social media in their everyday lives. Likewise, employers find valuable insight into potential hires via social media. Developing a unique online presence and personal brand can give you a significant edge in the job-search process.

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## Lesson 3: Digital Media as a Branding Tool

Social media isn't just for socializing anymore. One Twitter user shared that a single tweet landed him a job. His well-crafted, concise profile, along with a little Twitter networking and etiquette, helped him obtain a position doing something he loves in a company he's proud to work for. Stories like his are becoming more common every day. As digital media becomes increasingly prevalent, potential employers are able to learn more about job candidates online; similarly, applicants are able to promote a professional persona via digital media.

### Using Writing to Your Advantage

Strong writing skills have provided job candidates with a competitive edge for years, but many people struggle to understand the unique complexity of writing professionally online. However, there are many similarities: writing for business means considering the specific audience, purpose, and form, and the same is true when writing in a digital medium. Paying close attention to detail, using concise language, and maintaining professionalism will help you more effectively build your online presence and personal brand. Follow these general rules to guide your digital business writing:

- Use formal, professional language.
  - Avoid slang, colloquialisms, abbreviations, inflammatory language, emoticons, and emoji.
  - Type or text in full, grammatical sentences with proper punctuation.
  - Proofread for typos that might decrease your credibility.
- Develop a professional tone.
  - Be respectful by recognizing the relationship you have with the recipient (e.g., use a title if you're connecting with someone for the first time).
  - Be polite by using greetings (e.g., *hello, good morning*) and saying *please* and *thank you* when appropriate.
  - Avoid typing in all caps.
- Know when to use different mediums.
  - Social networking platforms, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, are a great way to begin building connections and networking with various companies.
  - Emails can effectively communicate technical or lengthy ideas that require minimal input from recipients and allow you to share files with them.
  - Text messages work well for urgent messages, but the sender should remain mindful that the recipient may not respond right away, especially if the text is sent outside of business hours.
  - Phone calls, video conferencing, and face-to-face meetings are best for conversations that will require a great deal of interaction between the participants and for private or time-sensitive information.

### Medium-Specific Tips for Using Writing

Quite apart from general writing rules, different forms of digital communication have their own unique rules of etiquette and methods for developing strong digital messages and personal branding.

#### Social Media

Some social media profiles are simply consulted by employers to learn more about applicants, but others can be created with the sole purpose of attracting potential employers. Determining your purpose for posting on social media will help determine how you communicate.

- *Profiles*: Most social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, offer users space to write a profile. For those platforms that aren't professionally based, describe who you are in a professional yet candid way, keeping in mind possible space limitations. For instance, on Twitter, users have a sparse 160 characters to develop a description of who they are. On Facebook, the *Intro* section of a user's profile is limited to an even sparser 101 characters. Some platforms also give you the opportunity to expand your profile. For example, Facebook has a separate section for employment and educational history as well as an *About Me* section, so look for ways to trim details from the *Intro* and include them elsewhere. That way, if an employer chooses to learn about you via your profile, they'll read the most pertinent information.

Facebook	Twitter
I'm a self-starter; owner of a small bakery, @simplebake; I challenge flavors and create new bakes.	I'm a self-starter; owner of a small bakery with 20 employees, @simplebake; I challenge flavors & create new bakes.
Freelance programmer. Skilled in C++, ColdFusion, Java, & Python. See "About Me" for other languages.	Freelance programmer. Skilled in C++, ColdFusion, Java, Javascript, HTML, & Python.
Studying business management @globaluniversity. Interned @cityconsulting. Engaging team leader.	Currently studying business management @globaluniversity: graduating in June '17. Interned @cityconsulting. Engaging team leader.

- *Posts:* Scrutinize your social media posts carefully, as though everyone, including your potential employer, is reading them. In addition, avoid the following:
  - Sharing inappropriate photos
  - Using vulgar language
  - Discussing anything overly controversial or offensive

When you're beginning your job search, if you have any previous posts you don't feel meet these standards, be sure to delete them, as your potential employer can see your history of posts if your account is public. You might also review [Creating Effective Employment and Social Media Profiles](#) for more on polishing your profile on different social media platforms.

In addition, balance your professional and personal posts. For example, if you find an article or website that interests you professionally, you might share it and comment on it to show your ongoing interest in your work and to keep your voice in the professional discussion.

## Emails

Writing professional emails is mandatory for job seekers as communication with recruiters, potential employers, or hiring managers is often online. Make sure your emails remain professional and follow these guidelines:

- *Subject lines:* Develop brief but informative subject lines. A lengthy subject line may lead a reader to believe the email is spam, but a subject line that isn't informative may mean an email's never opened. For instance, *Inquiry* alone may be too brief to merit attention; however, *Inquiry Regarding Opening in IT Department* is clear, concise, and informative.
- *Greeting:* When you're emailing someone for the first time, include a title and the recipient's last name (e.g., *Ms. Langdon, Dr. Stevenson, or Mr. Saylor*). The recipient may eventually ask you to use his or her first name, or you may see signs that using the first name is fine—if, for example, the recipient includes his or her first name at the end of an email as a signature that's separate from a pre-generated signature. Only use the recipient's first name when you're sure it's appropriate.
- *Closing:* How you close an email says a lot about you and your relationship with the recipient. For formal emails, use a relatively traditional closing, such as *Sincerely, Regards, or Best*, or a minor variation, including *Best wishes, Best regards, or Sincerely yours*. Don't include your closing in the email's pre-generated signature line because you'll need to change word choices for closings as the recipients and content of emails change. For instance, you might send a new coworker an email with *Best* as the closing, but a coworker you've known for years might get *Take care*. You might also use *Hope this helps* when sending something to a colleague to assist him or her or *Thanks* when you receive assistance from a colleague.
- *Signature:* As you develop the signature for your email, keep it clear and professional. Your business contacts need pertinent details, such as your name, job title, company, contact information, website or ePortfolio (if you have either), and any disclaimer the company may require you to include:

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### **Text Messaging as a Sender**

Although social media and emails are more common communication mediums during the job search, text messages are becoming increasingly common in the business world. If, for instance, you're asked to text an interviewer to confirm a date or time, you'll want to ensure your responses are appropriate by keeping these strategies in mind:

- Refrain from using texts as your first form of communication with a potential employer or with a contact within an organization.
- Reserve text messages for somewhat urgent communications, bearing in mind that companies have different standards or preferences for the appropriate context for texting. While one company may prefer that a change in meeting time be communicated with a phone call, another company could prefer that you send the same information via email or text. Similarly, avoid texting outside of office hours as a text message can interrupt personal time with family or friends. Reserving text messages for business hours is also a good way to ensure others will do the same for you.
- Check your employer's policy before texting business communications. Not all professionals use text messaging. If there's no written policy about texting, ask the recipient if texting is an option. If a person sends an email in response to your text or continually fails to respond to texts, they're probably not an appropriate form of communication. On the other hand, if the recipient has texted you for business purposes in the past, it's likely okay to send a text to that person.
- Check each individual's willingness to participate in group messages. Group messages can be cumbersome and difficult to leave, so make sure each recipient is willing before adding him or her to a group text.
- Keep texts brief, usually around two sentences maximum. If a message needs to be longer, consider sending an email and following up with a text asking the recipient to check the email.
- Sign the text with your name if it's the first message you've sent the recipient or you don't communicate with the recipient regularly.
- Write texts with professional word choice and tone because they're digital records of your conversation.
- Abstain from sending private information or gossip since texts are not secure (anyone around the recipient can see what you've sent).

- Proofread the text and check the recipient(s) before sending. As helpful as autocorrect can be, it can also send incorrect or inappropriate messages. A quick glance at a text before sending it can avoid embarrassment and miscommunication.
- Avoid resending a text if the recipient doesn't respond immediately. Give the individual several hours to respond as he or she may not check incoming texts regularly or may be in a meeting.
- Clarify when you've finished a text conversation by saying thank you or indicating that you'll be in contact later if needed.

### Text Messaging as a Recipient

You'll also want to be mindful of professional etiquette when you receive text messages:

- Avoid calling in response to a text message unless the sender explicitly asks you to call. Otherwise, text back, as the sender may be unable to accept a phone call.
- Refrain from texting during business meetings or presentations, such as face-to-face meetings or training seminars. Also avoid texting while driving, no matter how important the text may seem. If you must text a response immediately, pull over first.
- Notify a presenter ahead of time if you have an emergency but must also attend a meeting, informing him or her that you may need to check your phone and/or put it on vibrate.
- Silence your phone during work presentations or meetings if there is no emergency.
- Try to respond to text messages promptly.
  - If the matter isn't urgent, tell the coworker you'll respond later.
  - If you don't have the information you need to respond, tell the coworker you'll respond as soon as possible.

### Instant Messaging (IM)

- Check the recipient's status message, and don't send IMs if the recipient indicates he or she is unavailable. If you need to communicate with the recipient, send an email instead.
- Reserve IM for people you have met in person unless IM is the primary or only means of communication between coworkers.
- Begin an instant message with a greeting, such as *Hi, Maria. How are you?*
- Keep IM conversations brief and to-the-point.
- End IM conversations with an indication that the conversation is over, such as *Thank you, Talk to you later, or Have a nice day.*

### Handles and Screen Names

Whether selecting an email handle or a screen name for Skype or Twitter, keep word choices professional if using the handle or screen name for business purposes. If you want a casual handle or screen name, create a separate account to use for business purposes and/or your job search. Having professional, straightforward handles and screen names shows maturity and business sense.

	Unprofessional	Professional
<b>Email:</b>	Volleyballgirl92@domain.com	j.smith@domain.com
<b>Email:</b>	Topscore18@domain.com	Jon.s.doe@domain.com
<b>Screenname:</b>	VolleyballGurrrrrl92	J.Smith
<b>Screenname:</b>	Top_Scor318	JonSDoe

### Think About It

- What should you change or polish on your social media platforms or posts to maintain a professional appearance and demeanor?
- What information do you need to send by email or text, depending on the situation?
- What word choices and information are needed for your email signature, handles, and screen names?

Most digital business writing is done in a way that avoids offending the recipient and relays a clear message. In general, the golden rule applies here: treat your business associates as you would like to be treated—with respect and courtesy.

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## Lesson 4: Leveraging LinkedIn Profiles

Perhaps the best known social media website for job seekers is LinkedIn. A platform where job seekers, professionals, and employers can share their resumes and professional insights, LinkedIn also connects professionals in varying fields. Today, LinkedIn is invaluable on many professional levels—for the person seeking a job, the employer seeking talent, and the professional seeking more insight into his or her field.

### Developing an Effective Profile

Developing an effective profile is the key to connecting with recruiters. The following tips will help you stand out among other professionals:

- *Choose a professional picture:* Preferably, this picture will be a headshot (as opposed to a full-body picture, even if you're a professional trainer). A headshot with clear lighting connects you in a personable way to viewers because of the eye contact you provide by looking directly at the camera. If possible, consider having a professional photo taken, and make sure it isn't a cropped photo that shows missing images or people. While your photo doesn't have to feature you in professional attire, it should show you looking pleasant and appropriate.
- *Create an engaging headline:* To compose a headline, include keywords that tell employers what you do. Rather than using your job title alone, add keywords to represent your various skills and job responsibilities. Google terms to see what's most common your field, and use the 2-3 most common, accurate terms. Avoid using the word *student* in your headline even if you are because it doesn't show who you seek to be as a professional.
- *Develop an interesting summary:* Your summary can include photos, infographics, or videos. As you turn your attention to the written portion of the summary, remember that this is your opportunity to win over the reader. You may treat it as a resume summary, a biography, or a place to highlight key skills or accomplishments. Depending on the field you're entering, you may instead be creative by sharing a story about something you've done or might not normally put on a resume, even though it speaks highly of your professional experiences. By the end of your summary, your reader should have a good idea of who you are.
- *Include past work experience:* To highlight your work in the past, cover at least two previous positions you've held. If you've held several positions in recent years, consider targeting those that most closely match the positions you're hoping for. For each position, include information about the job duties you performed or a general summary in a skills section. As you develop in your career, phase out positions that are less applicable to your current focus.
- *Use keywords to promote search engine optimization:* When employers search LinkedIn, they're looking for industry-specific terms, so using keywords is important, especially in the *Summary* and *Experience* sections. Consider looking at job postings in your industry to help you pin down the keywords to use.
- *Actively seek recommendations:* Request recommendations and follow up with individuals who agree to write recommendations for you. You might get recommendations from peers, coworkers, mentors, mentees, supervisors, or anyone else you've worked with in a professional capacity. Consider strategizing your recommendations by asking these colleagues to highlight your different skills in detail. You could also offer these colleagues examples of when you demonstrated particular skills. Then, thank your recommenders and offer to recommend them as well.
- *Join and engage with groups and associations:* An ideal way to network is to throw your voice into the conversation by finding groups that correspond with your skills and interests. After joining groups, provide thoughtful, respectful, relevant points on the conversations occurring within them. You might start with the alumni group for your school or any professional organizations associated with your field.
- *Complete your profile:* Include your industry and location and indicate your current position along with a description of what you do. Complete all essential sections of your profile, including the educational and work experience sections, as well as any volunteer experience and transferrable skills you have. The more information you provide and the more you network, the more likely you are to be noticed.
- *Avoid writing in the third person:* Your reader knows that you're the one who is writing your profile. Using "I" is perfectly acceptable for this form of communication.

## Maintaining Your LinkedIn Presence

- *Set up notifications:* Adjust the settings of your LinkedIn account to ensure that you receive email notifications as you prefer. These notifications can help keep you in the loop so you know when to respond to comments or requests.
- *Log in regularly:* Check your messages and stay current with what's happening on your feed. If you have a message, try to respond quickly—within 24 hours if possible. Connect with people consistently to continue to build your network.
- *Designate a specific LinkedIn time:* Try to establish some time each day to log in and review posts from within your network. During this time, engage with your network: like, share, and comment on others' posts.
- *Comment on what others say:* Commenting will build your connections and will encourage many people to reciprocate your thoughtfulness. Be respectful while sharing your opinions and experiences.
- *Update your status regularly:* At a minimum, update your status twice a week. Updates might include sharing personal views on your work, or you might share industry news.
- *Share industry-specific news:* When sharing news that's applicable to your field or job search, provide your own take on it in a comment. Only sharing isn't enough to make your voice a part of the conversation, but if you comment on what you share, you'll show a connection with the content.
- *Blog:* If you have insights about your industry or your professional experiences, write an article or blog post. Then, share it to get people in your network reading and talking about what you've written.

## Think About It

- What makes you stand out from the crowd?
- How can you connect with industry leaders in the fields you care about?
- What unique talents will point recruiters back to you?

For many years, the adage about job searching has been *It's not what you know; it's who you know*. Today, job seekers should know both *what* and *who*. LinkedIn can help you expand who you know while giving you the opportunity to showcase what you know. In a job market that has long been employer-driven, LinkedIn is an opportunity for job seekers to drive the market, allowing recruiters to search for talented up-and-comers.

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## Lesson 1: Interview Prep Techniques and Strategies

You've spent countless hours writing, typing, and editing your [resume](#), and now it's uploaded to job-search and networking sites. After networking in person, online, and on the phone, you've landed an interview with a potential employer. What can you do to stand out among other interviewees? The way you respond to interview questions will help you land that dream job!

### Know Yourself

#### Research Yourself

Before you enter a job interview, you need to know the information about you that's readily available to employers. Research and re-evaluate your social media presence by reviewing your accounts on Twitter, LinkedIn, and other social media sites. What do you say in your posts? How professional (or unprofessional) do you sound? Employers won't rely solely on the information you give them on paper and in person. In today's digital age, they can google your name and pull up articles, sites, and tweets to learn more about you. Know what they will see, polish available information as you can, and be prepared to address any questionable content in an interview. See [Creating Effective Employment and Social Media Profiles](#) for more on refining your social media presence.

#### Practice Interview Responses Aloud

Although talking to yourself may seem strange, doing so will help you articulate your stand-out qualities and attributes. For example, what response would you give when an employer asks *Why should we hire you?* Try practicing a response regularly, keeping different employers in mind. What sets you apart from other candidates? Have you volunteered for a project or gone above and beyond the duties of your position? How? Reflecting and practicing will help you articulate clear, concise, and thoughtful responses to many interview questions.

#### Anticipate Other Questions (and Practice, Practice, Practice)

While you might be caught off guard by an unusual interview question, many questions are fairly easy to anticipate. Prepping responses (and avoiding potential pitfalls) is that much simpler when you know the most common questions:

- *What is your greatest strength?* When answering this question, keep in mind the duties in the job description you're applying for, and be honest. If you're applying for a job in public relations and you're a personable and resourceful networker, highlight these skills rather than a knack for finance. Be concise, but include an example, such as *I increased our list of contacts by 75% in six months.*
- *What can you tell me about this gap in time on your resume?* Focus on what you did to build yourself as a candidate during such times. Did you take a class or volunteer in a relevant position? If you were unable to continue developing your resume due to personal reasons (e.g., caring for a loved one) or the choice to leave a former employer was out of your control, then focus on how you grew from and resolved the situation. Gaps are in the past; emphasize the present and the future.
- *Where do you see yourself in five years?* Be careful with this one! If you sound too ambitious (i.e., you tell the sales manager you see yourself in his or her position), an employer might think you'll use the job as a stepping stone and move on. Focus on what you'd like to accomplish for the company and what you'd like to learn.
- *Tell me about a time you disagreed with a supervisor. How did you handle the situation?* First, no matter your current or previous work situation, *never* ridicule an employer! The interviewer wants to see how diplomatically you handle conflict; speaking ill of a supervisor will show the employer you're likely to speak ill of him or her as well. To answer this question effectively, choose a specific situation that shows you can consider another's opinion. Then, calmly and clearly present an alternative solution or compromise. If the solution was influenced by your positive approach and informed opinion, that will demonstrate your effectiveness in connecting with and respecting your superiors.

### Know How to Present Your Weaknesses

Many interviewees dread another common question: *What is your greatest weakness?* Far too many recruiters have heard flat (and not entirely true) responses like *I am a perfectionist* or *I take on too*

*much*. In an interview, the last thing you want to do is blend in or sound cliché. However, don't overcompensate with a lack of tact or too much self-deprecation.

### **Recount Weaknesses Unrelated to the Job**

Discuss minor weaknesses that aren't critical to the position. If the weaknesses you note wouldn't affect your ability to do this job, you'll sound honest and self-aware while still appearing to be qualified. For example, if you're applying for a job as an accountant, you might say that you struggle with calling people you don't know rather than saying you're sometimes challenged when making smart financial decisions.

### **Avoid General Statements**

You might also show that a weakness is limited to a specific scenario and won't affect your performance in all aspects of your job. Of course, you'll want to show how you specifically overcame a weakness in a given situation and used it for personal and professional growth. For example, you might reframe your struggle with calling people you don't know by sharing how you motivated yourself to make 50 sales calls by creating a chart to track your findings. You'll show the employer you rose to the challenge. Everyone makes mistakes; how you overcame an obstacle and learned from it will set you apart from other candidates.

### **Know Your Audience**

While you may want to focus only on your accomplishments and strengths while practicing for an interview, researching the company you're interviewing with is equally important. Many hiring managers complain that candidates are unfamiliar with basic knowledge of their respective companies. Studying a company's website or reading news about the company will help you frame your responses in terms of the company's needs and philosophy. An educated applicant conveys enthusiasm and drive, and the more you learn about the company beforehand, the better equipped you'll be to align your skills and experiences with the company's needs for this particular job.

### **Think About It**

- What do you need to learn about your prospective employer before your interview?
- What information can the employer find out about you, and how can you better influence and control your online presence?
- What prepared responses to interview questions will set you apart as an outstanding job candidate?

The good news is that interviewing is a skill; like all skills, it can be taught and learned. With reflection, practice, and sound advice, you can acquire the confidence, poise, and self-knowledge that you need to obtain any position.

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## Lesson 2: Best Practices for Presentations and Interviews

Whether you're interviewing on the phone, at the company, or over Skype, being prepared is crucial. Think of the interview as your chance to present yourself to the company, subtly interview them to see if you'll enjoy working there, and show them what kind of experience you have beyond your resume.

### Before the Interview

You'll want to speak intelligently about the company where you're interviewing. Search for news items, review the company on sites like LinkedIn, and analyze the company's website. You can then use what you've learned to ask questions during the interview. In addition, you should always tailor your responses to interview questions based on what you know about the company's culture, practices, and needs. They've done the work to research you, so you should do the same for them. In fact, the more you know about the company, the more confident you'll likely feel. These tips can also help your interview go as smoothly as possible:

- Research the specific person conducting the interview, if possible.
- Develop a few potential questions you could ask at the end of the interview.
  - What new direction is the company planning to take that will affect this position?
  - What are some company-wide goals for the next few years?
  - What is rewarding about working here?
  - What opportunities for growth do you envision for this position?
- Prepare a professional outfit to wear to the interview, whether it's by Skype, over the phone, or at an office building.
- Get adequate rest the night before, drink plenty of water, and bring mints.

### During the Interview

#### Making the Right Impression

The interview process starts as soon as you arrive at the building, answer the phone, or connect online. Greet everyone present in a friendly, professional way, and maintain confident posture as you wait for the official portion of the interview to begin. If you're interviewing in person, smile and look the interviewer in the eye when you enter the room. Also keep this advice in mind:

- Avoid wearing a strong perfume or cologne.
- Smile and be friendly.
- Pay attention and use names.
- Take a quiet, deep breath as the interview begins.
- Pause to think before answering an unexpected question.

#### Participating in Phone Interviews

For many companies, a phone interview is a common first step that can lead to an in-person interview. Phone interviews have their own key strategies and challenges:

- Have your resume in front of you to field any specific resume questions.
- If possible, stand during your interview. Standing will communicate confidence through your voice, enhancing how you sound over the phone.
- Maintain strong posture if you must sit.
- Choose a quiet location with no possible interruptions. Don't take incoming calls, and turn off any alarms on your phone.
- Refrain from using the speaker function on your phone; it could cause echoes on the other end.
- Speak clearly, breathe regularly during the interview, and avoid speeding up or slowing down as you talk.

#### Completing Video Interviews

Similar to a phone interview, a video interview may occur as pre-screening or may simply take place when you aren't located near the company. When facing a video interview, rely on these strategies to make it productive:

- Dress as you would for an interview at the company's building.
- Bring your resume and keep it in front of you.

- Make sure the environment around you looks professional by reviewing the area with your computer's camera to see what's in the field of vision.
- Sit up with strong posture during the interview.
- Ensure that there won't be interruptions and that your surroundings will remain quiet.
- Book a private room at your local public library or school if you don't have Internet access at home.
- Turn off your phone and stay focused on the screen during your interview.

For more insight on successfully tackling video interviews, see [Best Practices for Video Interviewing and Conferencing](#).

### **After the Interview**

When your interview is over, if you've been given a business card or know the contact information for your interviewer, send a short, polite thank you email within the next 24 hours.

### **Think About It**

- What pre-interview research and preparation need to be completed?
- How can you ensure that you make a strong impression, both verbally and non-verbally?
- How should you adapt your plan when completing phone and video-conference interviews?
- What's the best way to follow up after the interview?

With a bit of time and preparation, you can ensure that your interview goes smoothly. Use the advice and questions above to prepare yourself for every interview you land.

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## Lesson 3: Best Practices for Video Conferencing and Interviewing

Increasingly, businesses are using video calls and interviews to circumvent difficulties arising from long-distance interviewing, remote employees, and international communication. Whether you're applying for a position in a different state or country or you're telecommuting to your job on a regular basis, you'll probably use video calling during your career.

### Effective Video Communication

Video communication is a unique medium that comes with its own benefits and challenges. Several key strategies can prepare you for any form of video communication, whether it's [interviewing](#) for a new position or connecting with your colleagues.

#### Check Your Technology

When technology fails, the results could feel catastrophic. Take precautionary measures to understand the technology and prepare for a video call to help demonstrate your professionalism.

- *Determine the platform:* Before the video communication will occur, make sure you have the necessary technology. Contact the organizer of the call to determine what platform, such as Skype or Google Hangouts, you'll be using.
- *Make sure your software is up-to-date:* Avoid logging on to your computer only to find that a software update needs to run before you can join the communication platform. Log on early to make sure everything is up-to-date and running smoothly.
- *Check your video:* Most communication platforms allow you to check your camera and video properties. Before your call, check the video and adjust as needed to create a clear picture. You may need to adjust settings on your computer, change what you're wearing, or alter the lighting or background in your surroundings. Something as simple as turning on an overhead light or opening a window's blind can significantly improve video quality.
- *Check your audio:* Like the option to check video, most communication platforms offer an audio test so you can check your microphone levels and make sure there's no echo. Additionally, you may be able to listen to some sample audio to determine if your speaker and headphone levels are acceptable.
- *Explore the program or platform:* Make sure you have a thorough understanding of how to use the communication platform, such as how to send attachments and how to mute your microphone when it's not in use.

### Tips for Video Interviewing

If you've found your dream job, but it's over 500 miles away, you may participate in a video interview. Following the above tips will help you prepare, but there are additional considerations when interviewing through video communication.

#### Before the Interview

- *Do your research:* Determine if the video interview will happen at your home with your own technology or at a video interviewing site. If it won't be at your home, locate the site and consider driving there beforehand to make sure you don't get lost on the day of the interview. Also, arrive at the site at least 15 minutes early on the designated day to ensure you have time for an orientation to the available technology. Additionally, find out who will be conducting the interview so you can research the individual(s) and ask informed questions. You may also wish to find out approximately how long the interview will last.
- *Make a professional profile:* Establish your profile on the communication platform that will be used for the interview. For instance, Skype allows users to select a username and image. See [Creating Effective Employment and Social Media Profiles](#) for suggestions on creating professional profiles.
- *Practice with a friend:* A strong video interview has many components. Using the advice throughout this lesson, practice with a friend. Set up your interview space as if it's the day of the interview, wear the same clothing and accessories you plan to wear that day, and practice looking at the camera when speaking. Ask your friend for feedback. Consider sharing your concerns about the interview with your friend beforehand so he or she can share specific feedback about those areas.

## During the Interview

- *Keep notes handy:* If you need your resume or notes you've made about the company on hand, feel free to keep them close. Don't be overly reliant on them, though.
- *Introduce yourself before speaking:* If you don't have video for the call or if there's any chance of confusion regarding who's speaking, introduce yourself before adding your point (e.g., if you're a male and there are several male speakers in the conversation say something like *It's Jim. I was wondering . . .*)
- *Keep your interviewer engaged:* By maintaining eye contact with the camera while speaking, talking without using your notes, and asking informed questions, you can make the interview feel more like a conversation than a rapid-fire Q&A session. Connect with the interviewer while remembering the conversation's purpose. Be confident that you're qualified for the job and that you'll fit the company and the company will fit you. In fact, you're interviewing the company as much as the interviewer is interviewing you.
- *Be yourself:* You can still be yourself and act professionally. For example, share relevant stories. Remember that you're just talking to another person, and try not to overthink the situation. Also remember that, in the end, you're trying to sell you and your fit with the company, so canned, over-rehearsed answers will counteract your goal. It's fine to prepare in order to know your strengths and weaknesses and some talking points, but, during the actual interview, your answers should show the interviewer who you are.

## After the Interview

- *Collect names, email addresses, and proper spellings:* Knowing all participants' names and how to spell them will show attention to detail. You may also want to ask who your point of contact should be if you have questions about the job search.
- *Send thank you notes:* After the interview, send thank you emails or written thank you notes. Make sure to send them to each of your interviewers. Personalizing each email or note by highlighting details in the conversation that stood out to you will demonstrate your interest in the position and maintain a connection with the interviewer(s).

## Tips for Video Conferencing

Aside from the tips that apply for any video communication, consider these specific, unique concerns associated with video conferencing:

- *Engage everyone:* In conferences with more than two people, one or two participants may not speak much or may seem unengaged. They may have valuable information to share but may not feel comfortable breaking into the conversation. Direct questions to these participants by name.
- *Tell someone if you need to step away:* In small conferences, you can leave for a moment by saying something like *Excuse me a moment; I shouldn't be long*. For larger conferences, you can probably slip away without an announcement.

## Think About It

- What can you find out about the communication platform beforehand to prepare?
- What can you change about the background to limit distractions?
- How should you dress to fit the situation?
- What can you do after the interview to maintain connections?

As businesses grow and expand, video communications are increasing. As you prepare for your own video interviews and conferences, check your tech and your space, dress professionally, and mind your video manners.

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## Lesson 1: Best Practices for Business Writing

As with all writing, business writing requires close attention to some essentials. Because business professionals work in a fast-paced environment, their writing is generally narrowed to an intended audience and purpose. You'll need to tailor your document, website, or project to the medium you've used to communicate your ideas. Your audience will enjoy interacting with your piece when it's tailored as well!

### Types of Business and Technical Writing

#### Memos

Memos can be either print or electronic. Printing memos ensures they're secure and seen only by their intended audience.

#### Key Criteria

- Pinpoint the key issue.
- State why the issue is important.
- Tell readers exactly what you want them to do in response.
- Provide essential background information on what has happened so far.
- Remind readers of the actions they need to complete.
- End on a personal note, thanking readers for their time and consideration.

#### Emails

Though emails are some of the most common means of communication, they should still be written for a professional audience. Emails can be less formal than other types of business correspondence, but they require as much attention to content and writing details as letters and reports.

- *Watch your tone:* Because emails are often brief, humor and sarcasm can be misinterpreted.
- *Be careful of knee-jerk responses:* Because emails are permanent, think carefully before replying in confusion or anger.
- *Consider when to reply:* If you've received a request from a supervisor, respond as quickly as possible. Otherwise, respond within 24-48 hours.
- *Reply to only the necessary people:* Since people's time is limited, use *reply all* only when necessary. Make sure your responses go only to those who need them.
- *Use blind copies:* If privacy is an issue, use *blind carbon copy* or *bcc* so each recipient's address is hidden.
- *Avoid overusing email:* Sending too many emails can mean they get lost in an associate's mailbox, create irritation, dilute the importance of messages you want to get across, or cause people to routinely delete your messages. If you don't receive a reply to an interoffice email, pick up the phone or schedule a face-to-face meeting instead.

#### Key Criteria

- Compose a clear, interesting subject line because it can mean the difference between someone reading your email versus deleting it.
- Use a greeting such as *Dear*, *Hello*, or *Hi* since you want readers to feel welcomed and respected.
- Use priority symbols, which signal the importance of an email and help your audience assess their need to read it, with discretion by assigning high priority to only the emails that need it.
- Send attachments with care since some readers outside an organization might be leery of opening attachments due to viruses and slow load time.
- Use your email program's linking tool to share links, or, if there isn't one, use shortened or full URLs so your audience will be able to access links easily.

#### Business Letters

With the advent of electronic media, business letters are less common, but they can still be an important means of communication. For instance, a paper business letter might still be appropriate in a couple of scenarios:

- Sharing important information between offices of a company
- Communicating with important individuals outside the company, such as investors or donors who don't have inside information about recent projects or initiatives

### **Key Criteria**

- Open a letter personally, with an emotional warmth that connects readers to the message.
- State the point concisely and precisely in short, clear body paragraphs.
- Remind readers in the final lines of the action item, emphasizing its importance.
- Include a professional closing (e.g., *Best regards*, *Sincerely*, or *Best*) that's appropriate to the audience and purpose.

### **Newsletters**

Newsletters can be either internal documents for company employees, external documents for members of an organization, or updates for a specific customer base. They also can be either electronic or print.

### **Key Criteria**

- Write engaging article titles to catch your reader's interest.
- Begin each article with an eye-catching, evocative visual or headline to entice people to begin reading.
- Write a lead paragraph that answers the following questions: Who? What? Where? Why? How?
- Describe and detail information to keep readers interested.
- Close with reminders about what you would like readers to remember or do.

### **Reports**

Reports let fellow employees and others know the details about business-related tasks such as on-going projects, business plans, funding proposals, and new product announcements. You may be asked to write a recommendation, take minutes of meetings, or develop progress reports on ongoing projects.

Specifically, writers use progress reports to update clients and keep project personnel aware of the overall progress and any upcoming changes. An initial progress report should contain a detailed introduction, the materials that will be used, and the project completion date. Further reports should summarize subsequent project accomplishments.

### **Key Criteria**

- Open progress reports with a title page that indicates key stakeholders for the project.
- Provide a table of contents outlining information readers will find in a longer report.
- Include an executive summary, or a one- or two-paragraph report overview noting action items and the report's purpose.
- Write body paragraphs with strong topic sentences; clear facts, totals, examples, and details; and straightforward subheadings so readers can find the information they want.
- Use interesting visuals that illustrate and expand upon more detailed passages.
- Conclude by summarizing key details and recommending any necessary changes to schedules or budgets to keep the project on track.
- Compose an appendix as needed to include more details for those readers interested in delving into specific information.

### **Presentations**

Oral presentations can be intimidating, but creating a strong presentation can eliminate many of the reasons for anxiety. Perhaps even more than in any other mode of business writing, you'll need to first consider your [audience](#) and [purpose](#). The following tips will help you keep your presentation on track.

### **Key Criteria**

- Rely on transition words and phrases to help your audience follow your ideas from one point to the next (e.g., *on the other hand*, *similarly*, *next*, *in conclusion*, and *finally*).
- Avoid reading your slides word-for-word because doing so could bore your audience.
- Speak clearly and confidently, occasionally making eye contact with audience members.
- Use minimal bullet points on your slides.
- Treat bullet points as reminders to elaborate on your ideas.
- Choose font sizes that can be seen from the back of the room where you'll be presenting.
- Determine a single color scheme and use it throughout all slides.

- Make headings clear, to-the-point, and noticeably larger than body text on slides.
- End with a slide asking if there are any questions and/or thanking your audience for coming.

### **Web Material**

Websites and ePortfolios are easy and inexpensive means of sharing a message with a broad audience. When reading online, though, people often scan more than they read, so online material must be succinct, clear, and visually appealing. To see more on designing and writing for the Web, refer to [ePortfolios and Your Online Presence](#).

### **Key Criteria**

- Tailor each website or ePortfolio to its target audience—a broad audience needs uncomplicated language, but a website targeted to particular professionals or customers of a particular company can be more industry-specific.
- Keep information straightforward and accurate.
- Introduce your purpose on the homepage by connecting with your readers, giving them background details of your organization’s history, goals, and structure or pointing out the benefits of exploring your site or ePortfolio.
- Place clear links on the homepage to help readers easily navigate.
- Limit text on each page to one or two paragraphs.
- Make your text easy to scan and include the most important information in headings.
- Use bold type on important words and highlight key points with bullets.
- Choose a consistent, professional color scheme for the entire site or ePortfolio.

### **Proposals**

These important documents persuade readers to support a project or an idea. Though they can be written for fellow employees within an organization, they are often written for an outside client or funding source requesting that they hire you or your company or fund a project.

### **Key Criteria**

- Introduce your project by posing the problem you will solve, sharing probable costs, and noting the projected timeframe.
- Use body paragraphs to provide details about the project, including goods and services needed to complete it, the proposed workflow, any staff members and their credentials, and a cost breakdown for each step.
- Conclude by briefly summarizing what you propose to do and emphasizing why your proposal is a unique and beneficial solution.
- End by speaking confidently about your proposed work, thanking audience members for their time spent reviewing your materials, and expressing your willingness to follow-up on any questions.

### **Write With a Clear Purpose**

When drafting a piece of business or technical writing, ask yourself what you want to communicate and what you want readers to know or do in response to your writing. In business, readers often operate on tight deadlines and with busy schedules, so decide on your purpose before you start writing. Should you persuade readers? If so, you’ll want to consider how to convince them. Are you attempting to communicate unbiased information in a report? If so, include only the facts with no spin.

The following topic, for instance, includes only general information and doesn’t set up a purpose for writing: *Pedestrians need to be able to travel safely to their destinations.*

The writer could reveal a clearer and more detailed purpose (to persuade readers of the need for action) by writing *Increasing the city’s crosswalk signal time will allow safer passage for children, older people, and people with disabilities.*

After reading the second statement, readers know exactly what the writer is proposing, and they understand why it’s being proposed.

## Reach Your Target Audience

While academic writing is often written for a general scholarly audience or even the course instructor, business writing is dependent on defining a *specific* audience. Knowing your audience will help you make decisions like how much background information to include, what details are necessary to achieve your purpose, and how best to arrange your ideas so audience members read and digest the most important features. You'll also want to think about what common ground you share with your audience in terms of values and beliefs, where you might differ, and how your information could make readers feel. All of these factors will affect how your message is read and received.

### Consider What Your Audience Wants and Needs to Know

Your task is to reach the people you identify as your audience and help them find the information they need. For instance, writing for someone inside a company requires a far different approach than writing for someone outside that company. An outside audience's knowledge of your company and proposed project will be far more limited than someone in-house. Also, if you're proposing a project for an outside client, your audience may not need all of the technical details. Asking some crucial questions will be useful as you determine your audience:

- Who will your writing matter to and why?
- What does your audience already know about the subject?
- What will they still need to know?
- Where will the audience be reading the message?
- How much time do they have to read it?

### Reach Your Audience with Clarity

For clarity in business and tech writing, keep these audience needs in mind:

- Explain terms that could be unfamiliar to your audience members even if you think they're familiar with your topic.
- Avoid jargon, which can alienate readers.
- Spell out all words for acronyms to ensure that your readers have the necessary information, which is especially crucial when writing for an organization that includes people from various work and educational backgrounds.
- Eliminate unnecessary detail and context that doesn't apply to the essentials of your topic to make your writing concise and pertinent (e.g., Although it might be interesting to know the historical background of a building, the information probably won't be essential for people to understand the reasons for upgrading its cooling system).

### Match the Medium to the Message

Deciding how to convey your message can be just as important as the message itself. For example, if you're communicating with others within your organization, an email, memo, or even a text message might be appropriate. However, if you want to reach a broader audience, you'll likely want to consider using social media, adding information to a website, or writing an electronic newsletter.

### Revise and Polish for all Audiences

Finally, no matter who your audience is, take the time to revise and proofread. Submitting strong, error-free writing will make you look professional to potential and current clients, prospective employers, publishers, and anyone else you might want to reach.

## On Visuals

Many documents you'll write and design in a business setting will require a tasteful use of visuals. Whether you're putting together a flyer or newsletter, preparing a presentation, or designing a website, your use of fonts, layout, and color all matter. They, too, must complement your purpose and resonate with your audience. As you design your document or project, refer to [Visual Design in Business and Technical Writing](#).

### Think About It

- What unique needs or background of your audience will affect your writing or project?
- What is your purpose, or why is the writing or project needed?
- Which medium or type of writing is best for both your audience and purpose?

Writing in a business setting is extremely satisfying when you can bring about change and help others. To maintain clear communication, know your audience and purpose so you have a clearer idea of what type of document best fits their essential needs.

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## Lesson 2: Best Practices for Technical Writing

Technical writing is everywhere, and you likely read it nearly every day, even if you don't realize it. Whether you're reviewing instructions on how to clean your coffee maker or checking your cell phone manual for a command, you're engaging with technical writing. Strong technical writing clearly conveys specific information to a targeted audience, often following set format or criteria. If you've ever tried to assemble a piece of furniture and felt increasingly frustrated by the confusing directions, there's a good chance you were looking at poorly written technical writing. But don't worry—there are safeguards that will help you effectively write technical communications.

### Types of Technical Writing

Many types of technical writing are needed in the workplace, whether you're an engineer, nurse, salesperson, or teacher. In fact, a field that doesn't involve some form of technical writing is rare. Those working in STEM careers must be able to draft memos, emails, reports, instructions, and more. The following list covers common types of technical writing, and you can refer to [Best Practices for Business Writing](#) to see more, including types delivered in digital formats.

#### Instructions

Many processes require specific directions or a manual to show the reader how to accomplish a given task. For instance, the steps needed to run a new piece of technology or specific directions for customizing an email server both require specialized instructions.

#### Key Criteria

- *Introduction:* Write each step concisely and clearly. Check that the steps are in the correct order.
- *Steps:* Write the instructions in full.
- *Visuals:* Add screenshots or figures as needed so your audience has visual confirmation that they're accurately replicating the necessary process. Clearly label warnings to keep your audience from making mistakes or risking their safety.

#### Analytical Reports

Formal, long reports are useful when there's a need to analyze a situation, problem, company, or product before recommending a new strategy or solution.

#### Key Criteria

- *Abstract or Executive Summary:* Summarize the main idea and problem, but don't share a full introduction. Instead, think of this section as a brief explanation of the overall report, giving the reader enough information to determine if reading it is necessary.
- *Introduction:* Give an overview of the topic and the sections of the report. Include a purpose statement that explains your reason for writing.
- *Presentation:* Provide context for the problem, situation, company, or product being analyzed. Give the reader enough information to understand the problem and the need for a solution.
- *Discussion and Analysis:* Analyze with explanation, graphs, charts, and figures to explain the topic thoroughly. Ask yourself what the audience can learn.
- *Recommendations:* Recommend steps the audience should take based on the analysis.
- *Conclusion:* Review the problem and clearly state your recommendations.
- *References or Works Cited:* Use the style required by your company or organization to list the sources you used.

#### Lab Reports

In the workplace, you might need to compile data into a lab report that shares research you've conducted.

#### Key Criteria

- *Introduction:* Discuss why the research was conducted and what objective(s) you hoped to achieve.
- *Materials and Equipment:* Indicate exactly what you used and how you used it to verify the validity of your results.

- *Procedures:* Recount the exact procedures you used and disclose any problems that arose. Readers will need to know these steps and potential pitfalls in case they want to try to duplicate your study.
- *Results and Discussion:* Share each result or finding and explain why you achieved these results or why the findings are beneficial.
- *Conclusion:* State what you've concluded from the results or findings and make recommendations. Report whether you met your objectives and why.
- *Appendices:* Add tables or figures to the end of your document when you need to elaborate on your materials and procedures. Readers can consult the appendices as needed, but it won't disrupt the document's flow.

### **Short Reports**

Shorter reports vary by industry but can include meeting minutes, progress reports, and trip reports.

### **Key Criteria**

- *Format:* Choose an appropriate format to structure the report, such as a memo or email.
- *Subject line or title:* Write a clear and concise subject or title to efficiently tell your audience what they'll be reading.
- *Timeline:* Organize the body discussion around a timeline to account for progress, places visited, or people who spoke at a meeting.
- *Conclusion:* Summarize the report briefly or make a recommendation based on what you've discussed.

### **Write for a Specific Audience**

All writing is audience-specific, but technical writing demands particular attention to the target audience. The audience should shape every choice you make for your document or project, so your first step is to identify your audience: Who are you writing for?

For example, writing to a group of engineers who are familiar with a technical process will look very different from writing the same process for business managers for use in their everyday workflow. The engineers will be familiar with specialized language and terms, but the businesses managers may have a completely different vocabulary in common, which will affect the way you write.

### **Write With Accuracy**

Technical writing is precise and accurate and shouldn't contain generalizations, exaggerations, or opinions. Instead, technical writers focus on clear, accurate details that relay only the information the audience needs in accordance with the writing's focus.

For example, if you're writing instructions on how to use a database, you'll need to consider who will read the instructions and what they need to know to use the database successfully. Your audience will need to read about every mouse click or keystroke, even if the choice seems obvious. If a step is skipped, like hitting enter before moving to a new row, the user's work may be lost, and the process could endanger an entire company. Therefore, all technical writing must depend on precise, accurate details.

### **Write for Audience Comprehension**

Presenting your information clearly will help keep the writing accurate and focused. Word choice is crucial in this process. The goal is to produce clear, concise sentences the audience will easily understand by following these steps:

- Be brief and specific, avoiding redundant content.
- Choose simple, strong verbs, and avoid filler terms.
- Avoid jargon not suited to your audience; when introducing a technical term, define it as needed for your readers.
- Write the full words for abbreviations the first time they're used.
- Use *like terms*, writing the same word each time you need to explain or note a concept, item, instrument, etc.

## Write With Purpose

The purpose for which you're writing should still take into account your audience. Plan your document or project by first asking yourself this question: what should your document accomplish for the audience? A technical writing project, such as a webpage highlighting a new product, might be assigned to you, or you might choose to develop a document you see a need for, such as a report on recent changes to the workflow at your company. As you write, keep all content related to your purpose.

Because the purposes for a piece of technical writing may overlap, being familiar with the three main purposes for writing and designing a technical document or project will help you get started:

- *Inform:* You may need to give answers to questions your audience could have. If so, you'll be writing to inform. A set of frequently asked questions, commonly known as FAQs, is an example of technical writing that informs.
- *Instruct:* If you need to explain how your audience will complete a task or procedure, you'll be writing to instruct. Technical writing that instructs must be especially accurate and clear because one wrong or missed word could risk the safety of your audience. If you're writing about how to maintain a lawn mower, every step must be precise so that your users stay safe throughout the process.
- *Persuade:* Technical writing that influences your audience to take an action will be persuasive. In the workplace, you may need to write a sales letter persuading clients to use a new product. Writing accurately about the product's features will show them its benefits, hopefully persuading them to buy it.

## Proofread and Revise

To accomplish the level of focus and accuracy needed for an effective piece of technical writing, allow ample time to proofread and revise. Begin by reading for content: ensure that all of your information relates to the document's purpose, and look for any steps or ideas that might be missing. Then, examine the document for wording that needs clarification. Keep the audience in mind as you revise, asking yourself whether they will understand every detail you include.

## On Visuals

Technical writing often requires careful use of visuals. Whether you need headings in a report or figures illustrating a procedure in a set of instructions, being familiar with effective visual design will help. Therefore, while you plan and write your document or project, refer to [Visual Design in Business and Technical Writing](#).

## Think About It

- Who is in your audience, and what characteristics and background knowledge do they have that will affect your writing?
- What purpose should your document or project fulfill—should it inform, instruct, persuade, or use some combination of these three?
- What word choices and explanations are needed to be as clear and accurate as possible?
- What type of technical writing will best fit your context or situation?

Because technical writing is used every day and its needs and audience vary, knowing who you're writing for, why you're writing, and what type of writing you'll complete will be instrumental as you deliver your message in a clear and accurate way.

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## Lesson 3: Visual Design in Business and Technical Writing

When writing for the workplace or a job search, it's essential to consider visual design of important documents. Whether you're writing a resume or cover letter in hopes of landing that coveted job or completing an assigned project from your boss, the first thing to remember is that *everything* can be a visual cue.

### Audience and Purpose

For any document you create in a professional setting, you should first gain a clear understanding of your audience and purpose. An audience and purpose analysis will reveal needs affecting the document's design. To conduct an analysis, answer these questions:

- Who will be using the document?
- What does the audience already know about the subject matter?
- What unique characteristics does the audience have that could affect the design?
- Why is the document important, and what sort of impact will it make?
- What will audience members do with or in response to the document?

Your answers will lead to appropriate design elements. For example, some audiences need larger fonts for readability. Or a global audience can affect color choices since meanings associated with color vary across cultures. An audience and purpose analysis helps you meet the unique needs of your audience.

### Layout and Design

A logical starting place for a document's design is the layout. Layout is made up of the arrangement of elements in a document, a single printed page, or a website or webpage. Some basic principles serve as resourceful guidelines to begin thinking about layout.

#### Emphasis

Each element in your document should be positioned so that it's viewed in order of importance. Which element should your audience look at first? Put it in a prominent spot. Make sure it's noticeable. What should they look at second? And third? You can encourage readers to look at your information in a particular order by intentionally placing elements first, second, and third.

#### Connection

The first draft of a document might have elements that aren't visually connected, but later drafts of a document should show clear visual connections. Alignment, consistency, difference, and nearness will bring connection.

#### Alignment

Three basic alignment positions are available to you as a designer. Your choice sends a specific message to your audience:

- *Center*: Usually, centered information sends a message that the document is formal. Think of a research paper you've worked on for weeks. After you decide on a title, it's official when you center it on the page. It's the formal descriptor for your paper. But you may not want a formal design for your document or project. Elements that are centered—especially if there are too many—can be distracting because their edges don't align:

Which alignment is best?

Center?

Left?

Or right?

All edges formed by the beginnings and ends of these lines differ. Center alignment should be chosen sparingly and with a clear and deliberate purpose.

- *Left*: Aligning elements at the left side of a page sends a modern message since current readers will be comfortable with this alignment. Aligning on the left is common in business settings because keeping the audience comfortable and focused is crucial.
- *Right*: Elements aligned on the right are unexpected but can provide flair depending on the type of document you're designing. Imagine a cover page of a report: the title and subtitle might be top left, and you could align your name and contact information bottom right, drawing your audience's eyes along a familiar path.



## Nearness

A document has strong design when it's organized and appealing. If similar elements are far apart, the organization is confusing. In the same vein, if all elements are bunched together, readers won't see how they differ. However, if similar elements are near one another, formed into a group, you send a clear visual message. Separating different elements into groups and keeping all elements in each group near one another enhances organization and appeal. These strategies will make that happen:

- *Groups*: Perhaps you're designing a brochure covering membership benefits of your organization. You need to list the benefits, but you also want to include information about costs and deadlines for dues as well as opportunities to upgrade membership. Three groups will keep the brochure organized: 1) Benefits; 2) Dues; 3) Upgrades. All items in each group should be placed near one another so they form their own distinct group.
- *Spacing between groups*: On the brochure, these groups should be clearly separate from one another so their content doesn't blur or overlap. If two groups are on the same page, place a good amount of space—at least a few blank lines—between them.
- *Groups per page*: Because the brochure is a short document with small pages, more than two groups per page would make the material dense and difficult for readers to pinpoint. On a full-page document or webpage, include no more than three to five groups per page.

## Whitespace

Every spot on a page doesn't need content. Deliberately including whitespace—or blank spaces around content—actually works to your benefit as a designer. When there's whitespace, viewers' eyes are drawn to it first, so the content closest to it stands out. Look at the heading for this section. It's easier to see at quick glance than this text, in part because some whitespace is above and beside it. Consider these tips for incorporating whitespace into different types of business documents:

- *Business cards*: Use whitespace around your name and between sections so prospective employer's eyes are easily drawn to these key areas.
- *Flyers*: Incorporate white space between groups of information and within the middle section of the page to highlight content at top and bottom.
- *Brochures*: Rely on a balance of whitespace between groups as well as among the different pages so any one page doesn't seem to present considerably more information than another, which could make the audience less willing to read it.
- *Small cards*: Put more whitespace on the left or on the right of a business card or quick reference card to draw viewers' eyes to the important information so they can find and use it as quickly as needed.
- *Reports*: Build reports or longer documents with whitespace between sections to keep the content in the different sections distinct.
- *Webpages*: Draw viewers in by using whitespace to the right side of a menu that's placed vertically at the left or below a menu that's placed at the top.

## Typeface, Font, and Emphasis

To provide emphasis, typeface and font choices should be intentional and based on contrast:

- *Serif versus sans serif*: The edges of serif fonts are graced by *feet*, or slight lines that lead your eye into the next letter (**Times New Roman**). This leading makes serif fonts good choices for body text. Letters in sans serif fonts do not have feet, so a sans serif font (**Arial**) is a better choice for short lines like headings or a single sentence that needs emphasis.
- *Contrast*: For further emphasis, make your fonts contrast. Use bold or weight (letters with thick lines) for headings, for instance, so they're easy to distinguish from body text. Make body text obviously smaller than headings for more contrast.
- *All caps and italics*: These should be used sparingly. Both are more difficult to read than regular (known as Roman) text, so use them only when emphasis is especially important.
- *Amount*: A document designed with multiple typefaces and fonts has often been said to look like alphabet soup, which is more childlike than professional. One or two fonts will do.

## Think About It

- What special audience characteristics should affect your design choices?
- What elements should be connected by alignment and consistency?
- Where will obvious contrast and use of whitespace draw interest?
- How can you group content so similar information is together?

- Which font(s) convey your document's message and purpose best?

Rely on strong visual design when creating documents in a business setting. You'll enjoy the creation process more, your message will be clearer, and your audience will be thankful!

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