

Resumes and Cover Letters

By: Rachel Applegate

W

ill you be a great librarian?

Productive and innovative, responsive to patrons and co-workers, both dependable and creative? Will you be good—and will you make the library look good? Who knows? People who are looking to hire librarians want to know. They will try to figure this out in three ways: from an interview (or two or three), from references...and from your resume and cover letter. Your resume and cover letter are essential for you to get to the stage of being taken seriously for a job.

First important note: Yes, there are positions which are filled through “connections.” You may not think about “networking,” but whether you realize it or not, you are creating connections with the work you currently do, the people at events you go to, and the classes you take. You are building a reputation, which will be in people’s minds when they think of you and a position that is open—or they may even create a position for you, if your reputation is splendid enough. However, even if a library has a position that they know you will be perfect for, there are few libraries that will hire you without at least a resume. If a library subscribes to equal opportunity or affirmative action (that is, all publicly-funded and most privately funded libraries), they will want to document that they hire qualified people—not *just* people with connections.

What follows are some ways to make the resume-cover letter process benefit both you and the libraries to which you apply. It is most applicable to smaller academic and public libraries—“small” meaning those not filling very specialized positions. If you are interested in school library positions you should make sure you conform to certification and other requirements (and

describe your qualifications in those terms); people interested in a special library position should try to find out as much as possible about two things: the particular specialty of the library, and the size of the library (number of employees) and its parent organization.

Second important note: The generic resume compared to the blue/black/gray interview suit. Should you wear a blue suit to an interview? Should your resume look like everybody else’s? Well, first, a resume that follows a format will not look like everybody else’s, because there will be applicants who send in very poorly-done resumes. Second, following a convention such as “wear a blue suit” or “follow resume format” itself sends a signal to your job site: a signal of taking the process seriously. Third, “conventional” clothing and resume formats allow job search committees to focus on the content of your presentation or interview responses or resume, without becoming distracted by its packaging. If you truly want people to focus on you, make the “package” (your resume, how you dress) as conventional and therefore as invisible as possible. If you want to show your creativity, consider doing that in the content of what you present, not in its format.

The resume: The most efficient way to do this starts with what seems like extra steps: preparing three separate resume-like items: a “CV,” a generic resume, and one or more specific resumes. More work now, less work later, although you should update these on a regular basis so that you are able to send the generic resume out on very short notice and a specific resume with just a few days’ time.

Third important note: “CV.” A “c.v.” is NOT a resume. CV stands for “curriculum vitae,”

which is roughly, “the course of your life.” Some academic job ads will request a “c.v.,” although this is rare for librarian positions, and a CV should NOT be used unless specifically requested. So why should you do one? So that you can have in one place all of the elements that might go into a resume. This is tedious to create—so do it only once! *If you do really need to use a CV in a job application, check out the Tools and Resources in the Careers section of the Chronicle of Higher Education: chronicle.com*

Resume-item A: Elements of a CV:

- Your own contact information.
- A list of all educational degrees after high school, including year (month is not needed—except when you are applying for a job within 12 months of receiving your highest degree), any honors (you may include GPA), majors, and the titles of final projects (honors projects, theses, and dissertations).
 - o *If there is something particular about your high school you may record it here. Use very rarely.*
 - o *You can list individual coursework (taken outside of the degrees) or certifications or other types of education if they are relevant to your career.*
- Everything you have published: books; articles in journals, magazines, or newspapers; newsletter items (or editorships); manuals if they have some public access/use.
 - o *Keep a file of your publications in paper and/or have copies in Word or pdf format.*
 - o *Not yet published? “in press” means accepted but not yet printed; avoid “submitted.”*
 - o *Web pages? Make sure of two things:*

that the page will be ‘live’ if someone wants to get to it, and that you are clear about your role in authorship/design.

- Presentations. These should only be those to some sort of external audience (conferences or workshops). If you regularly do internal presentations, include those in your work or volunteer experiences (below).
- Grant proposals or projects. Be very clear about your personal responsibility. Do not use “principal investigator” unless you are sure that is technically correct. Include amounts of awarded grants.
 - o *You can include here for your records unfunded grant proposals. Avoid including them in a resume.*
- Work experiences. You may wish to divide these into library and non-library experiences. In this CV, keep them in chronological order and include dates as exact as possible (some employer forms require very specific dates of previous experience). Record supervisor’s names, titles, and contact information, even if they are not references for you. If it is not obvious, include a note about the size of the organization.
 - o *This is where internships go, paid or unpaid. Note that they are internships. You can note the extent of the internship (180 hours, etc.). Include student teaching.*
 - o *In this CV, include every work experience (well, except those you are trying to forget). You will not use all of them in any resume, but it is invaluable to have them recorded in one spot.*
 - o *Describe them as thoroughly as you need to in order to remember what you really did. Be generous here, but in your resume you’ll need to be concise*

and focused.

- o *Even high school jobs, even when you are well past high school, may be relevant — not to include on a resume, but perhaps for you to refer to when talking about your experiences. The CV functions as your memory.*
- Volunteer experiences. Volunteer experiences can display the characteristics that employers are looking for. Include specific dates, organizational information (including something about its size), supervisor, and how many hours per week you were involved.
 - o *You can use volunteer experiences to signal two things: specific skills and experience (for example, creating marketing campaigns or coordinating a lot of co-volunteers) and “values.” Some private organizations look for people with specific “mission” orientations, and this can show how familiar you are with a particular “mission.”*
- Memberships: Make sure you get organization names correct, and include web sites if they aren't obvious (for example, the Association for Institutional Research is at airweb.org not air.org). ALA and affiliates count as “obvious”! You do not need to specify “student member” (generally, you may pay a student rate but you are an actual member). Include dates. Include sub-divisions. Especially include any officer or committee positions.
 - o *Here is one place where you may omit items that are no longer active. If you were just a member (especially just a student member) for a year or two and are no longer, you can drop it. If the organization is important, you should still belong.*
- Technical skills: This is normally NOT part of a real CV, but you will need it for a

resume. Avoid obvious skills: we assume you know how to answer a phone, use a computer (you wrote your resume, didn't you?), surf the Web, and make copies. Be specific: don't say “programming” unless you can name the specific programming language. Include certifications if possible.

- References. If you are looking for different types of jobs you may wish to line up references who can speak to different parts of your career — have a “bank” of references from which you draw the most appropriate for each opening.
 - o Check with each person for permission to list them, and in what circumstances. Some will only allow you to list them as references for specific types of jobs, or even for specific job openings — take notes on this.
 - o Include email contact information; phone information as well. References are seldom checked by paper mail. Do not acquire copies of generic letters of references.
 - o If you are a recent graduate, remember that one of your references is usually a professor. Remember that when you are in class! You are making an impression with your attitude as well as with your assignments.

DO NOT include of these:

- Family information: marital/partnership status, children, commute.
- Personal information such as ethnicity, health, or non-job-related desires (“Love walking in the woods; marathon runner.”)
- Hobbies and religious preferences may show up in “volunteer” experiences or in “publications;” otherwise, avoid.

- o *If you include this information in a resume, people will believe you have no understanding of equal employment practices. Some very old resume books still show this information but it is a sure way to date yourself.*
- Soft skills or personality traits: “Strong leadership skills.” Teamwork.” “Enthusiastic.” While employers do value these traits, they find simple lists to be useless. You need to demonstrate that you have them, with specifics in your experiences or cover letter, not simply claim that you do.

Resume-Item B: The Generic Resume

This resume should be targeted at a category of potential employment: type of library combined with area of librarianship. Examples include children’s services/public libraries, public services/academic libraries, technical services (in library large enough to have tech services departments), etc. If you will be pursuing jobs in different categories, you should prepare different generic resumes.

You will use this generic resume when you need to send something off quickly and do not have the time to specifically tailor your resume to one particular opening.

Overall guidelines:

- No more than 2 pages total (references can be on a separate page). One page is fine; you should have had at least two substantial full-time jobs to justify a second page (those could be with the same organization—anything requiring a separate description).
- Proofread! This is your public advertisement: check for correct spelling, correct grammar, consistent verb tenses, and parallel construction in bulleted items. Employers assume that this is something you care about and had time to work on: if you cannot be correct and detail-

oriented in something so close to you, they will have little confidence that you can represent their organization well. Three tips in proof-reading:

- o Let it sit a little. You need to get your brain away when it becomes too familiar.
- o Let someone else read it.
- o Read it aloud.
- Use simple formatting, reasonable page margins, and common fonts. Many applications are conveyed online; people will be printing out what you send to them.
 - o White space helps and so do underlining or bolding to identify sections. The goal is to have a resume where readers can quickly go to the parts that interest them.
 - o **Mac users:** Test to be sure the fonts and other features you use translate to a PC. Send your resume to someone with a PC and have them print it out. (Often Mac fonts show up as Courier, which is very crude-looking).
- Show, don’t tell. Anyone can write, “I am a strong leader.” What have you done that demonstrates that? Create strong, specific descriptions of your jobs (your experience)—avoid a list of adjectives that you believe describe you (“Team-oriented. Good communicator.”)
- Education vs. experience: You are trying to demonstrate that you have skills and knowledge that your employer will value—people don’t care about courses, they care about what you know as a result of the courses or of experience. If you are a recent library school graduate, specific courses can be appropriate to mention when you have no experience (for example, a course in advanced cataloging,

or user education). Do not list all your courses.

Formats/features: The order in which these appear is up to you, with some notes of advice. You want to make your strongest case, soonest.

- o Contact information. Remember graduates of most universities can have or retain a university email address—at least try for something professional rather than very personal in appearance.
- o AVOID: A “Goal” or “Objective” statement. Out of twelve academic and public library directors consulted on this point, a few were mildly accepting of this (as long as it did not contradict the job being applied for) but all indicated that it was essentially useless, and a majority actively disliked it.
- o Education: For academic library jobs, place education here no matter how much experience you have. For others, consider whether your education or experience is more impressive at this point in your life.
 - o Provide specific correct degree initials (B.A., B.S.N., etc.), years, and institutions. The institution name should be the same as on your transcript and/or diploma—this becomes tricky when you graduate from a ‘system’ college.
 - o Include a location if it or the college is not well-known (that is, not Purdue, not Indiana State University, but maybe Hanover and certainly any college called ‘Concordia’ or ‘St. Mary’s’—very common college names).
 - o For positions requiring a high school or associates’ degree, you can include high school and any high school honors. For positions requiring a bachelor’s degree or above, omit lower-level degrees.

For academic MLS positions, include bachelor’s degree and the major: that’s relevant to most academic jobs. Omit titles of projects.

- o Experience: List your work history with job titles, organization names (addresses aren’t needed), dates, and a description of your responsibilities.
 - o While you can list your work history in several ways, a chronological order was preferred by the majority of library directors.
 - o If you have substantial experience overall, or substantial pre-MLS experience, a division into library and non-library sections is appropriate.
 - o If you have substantial experience and are applying for a fairly specialized position, you can use a “functional” approach to highlight skills and experiences relevant to a particular job opening.
 - o Many employers like seeing a “trajectory”—how have you progressed in your career? Two things make employers a bit wary: short times in positions, or unexplained gaps. Remember they are looking for a great—and reliable--colleague. Librarians understand reality, and you can explain any unusual job history elements in your cover letter.
 - o In describing your jobs, use no more than 3-4 lines each. Begin with the most responsible elements first, as long as they were genuinely part of your job. You may have spent more hours putting labels on new books, but if you were the one responsible for processing purchase orders, that’s what you need to

start with. You can say that you provided back-up or filled in for people in higher level positions, if true.

- o Use library language. If you had a job in another field, try to turn its terminology into library equivalents: “member relations” or “visitor research” at a museum would be the equivalent of “Member (equivalent of Friends) Relations” and “Visitor (Patron) research.”
- o Volunteer work can be incorporated into an experience section, particularly if it shows up-to-date skills.
- o Publications and presentations, as long as they are relevant to the job category for which the resume is designed.
- o Specific skills, memberships and honors. If brief, these can also be grouped with education. Here you may list specific courses appropriate to the generic category.

Do you have more than 2 pages? Try these tips:

- o Review your job descriptions. Remove or group details: “Programmed using Unix and other languages” (rather than listing five), “Processed books prior to cataloging; performed other clerical duties” (rather than “filing orders in numerical order, updating vendor lists, emailing recipients”).
- o List some employment in a group, especially of non-library related short-term jobs. “1995-2000: Various student employment positions (cashier, residential advisor, administrative assistant).”
- o List presentations in a group; consider grouping publications, but those in “peer-reviewed” journals should be listed individually.

- o Remove the “Goals” statement. Few of your readers will miss it.
- o But--do NOT make the font very small. 10-point is the limit, and even that can be difficult for some older readers.

References

Have a list ready of 3-4 people. They should not be family, friends, or pastors; professors only if relevant to the job you’re applying for.

- Include their names and titles if any, email, phone, and physical *business* mail organization names and addresses. A business address and title will show what their background and qualifications are.
- Follow a job ad’s instructions carefully on providing references.
- You should send a copy of your generic or specific resume to the people you’ve asked to be references. If you do so ahead of time, they can alert you to any errors or problems with your resume.

Resume-Item C and D and E: Specific Resume/s

A specific resume is aimed at one particular job, or a very narrow range of particular jobs. Here, the building blocks are your generic resume, your CV, and the job ad. Insert into this specific resume all of the items from the CV which specifically target that particular position. Your resume will still not refer directly to that job—that’s for your cover letter.

This is a very individual creation. Here are some examples of ways to create a targeted resume:

- o For an academic library position as “liaison” or someone working with a specific academic department, be sure to include your college major or minor, if they match. If you did an honors paper or thesis in that major, list it in the degree section.

- o For a position serving youth or children, don't forget relevant volunteer experiences.
- o For any job requiring technical skills, include relevant coursework or non-credit classes, including dates and level (e.g. a freshman, graduate, or continuing education course) especially if they are recent.
- o For a position at a religiously affiliated institution, you can signal your understanding of their mission if you have work or volunteer experience that shows a relevant affiliation. (For such institutions, faith-oriented qualifications are legal, and their ad or web pages should be clear about any requirements).

Cover letter:

The cover letter is where you make a specific match between you (represented by the resume) and the organization (represented by their job ad AND by their general characteristics—at least, everything you can find out about them online). All cover letters must be individually targeted at a specific job—even when in an extensive job search you are repeating some of your phrases from letter to letter (keep copies!)

You want to please your potential employer by communicating to them what they want to know. Most of the time, they do not know you: they know you only through this letter and your resume. However, they have clear desires.

- o They want to know that you have read and understood the ad. Consider asking if something is not clear (e.g. what kind of experience is required?). Consider not applying simply on a whim or to see what happens. It is a small world. If you treat them with respect, they and their colleagues will treat you with respect.
- o They want to know that you meet what they said they are looking for—that

you have everything they mentioned as “required,” and that you have as much as possible of the stated “desired” items.

- o They want to know that you want to be part of their organization. Show at the least that you're motivated enough to have done some homework about them. You don't need to dig up secrets—but you do need to read their web page. If you can briefly suggest ideas about how you could serve the position and their organization in ways the ad did not mention, that would show both preparation and initiative.
- o They want to be reassured that you can become a committed part of their organization. Explain very briefly and very carefully any unusual job moves or gaps, or indicate in some way why their position is attractive to you at this time. You won't have to explain why you want to move to the big city, but you may want to indicate why a smaller or out of the way place would be attractive to you. (It is expensive and disheartening to have someone come and then leave). In short, show that you understand them, and that you can do what they are looking for.
- Length: In general, one page should be completely sufficient for nearly all applicants. The only exceptions would be if a job advertisement itself is very lengthy and you have substantial experience, or the job ad asks for specific “essays” such as a philosophy of service.

- Format: Date of sending. The name* and address of the recipient. Salutation*. Body of the letter: a) the first paragraph should specifically say exactly what job, from the ad, you are applying for--1-3 sentences total; b) one or two paragraphs where you describe how you fit the job ad and their organization; c) possibly a paragraph or sentence about how the job fits your work trajectory / goals; d) a concluding paragraph repeating that you are qualified

for their position and available. Ending: Sincerely, <line, line> your name. Use a four-line space if you will actually sign a paper copy. After your name, include your email address; include your full address if you have room on one sheet.

- *Salutations/names: This can be rather tricky.
 - If it is an academic position, check the library's or the university's web site to see if the head of the library is called "Dean." If so, use that ("Dean Jones.") If the head of the library has a doctorate (Ph.D. or Ed.D.), say, Dr. Jones (but use Dean if available).
 - Use any title given in the ad ("Send applications to Dr. Smith, chair of the search committee).
 - If no title is given but a personal name is provided, and if you can reasonably guess at gender, use Mr. or Ms. (not Mrs. or Miss). If no name is given, or there's no other title available, consider these: Dear Committee Members (for academic positions at the MLS level or higher, most of which involve a search committee) or Dear Sir or Madam. Go into the body of the letter right after the recipient address.

Again, it is important to review your letter for grammar, spelling, and consistency. If you are applying to a number of positions, be sure to double-check that you don't have elements that belong to one application showing up in another (surprisingly common but very irritating to libraries).

Bottom line: People expect you to be careful. They expect you to pay attention to what they've said in their ad. They expect you to do web-homework on their organization. They

want to see a match between what they have envisioned and what you can provide. They need information from your resume, your cover letter, and your references to find that out.

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Biography

Applegate spent 18 years as an academic librarian: reference librarian and library director at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minnesota. She has held a variety of other academic positions, mostly involving assessment and evaluation. Currently she teaches masters students in the library science program situated at IUPUI.

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