

Cracking the Genre of the Resume

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In this article, Bruce explores the genre of the resume and the variations of what resumes can look like in modern-day society. She concludes with a focus on the “real-world” implications of resumes. Bruce discusses the historical background of resumes and then looks at different examples and audiences for which specific resumes are appropriate. Bruce concludes by addressing the fact that resumes are context specific, and the choices must be carefully considered in order for resumes to be effective.

One of the most complicated genres that I have ever composed in is the genre of the resume. This genre can be intimidating because of the implications of what is written, the authority of the reader, and the various places that the resume goes. Resumes can help usher someone into a job or can work against them to keep them out of a desired position. As such, the resume is a “gate-keeping” genre in that it is a medium used to judge and sort through potential employees. There is no one formula for writing a resume, nor can someone say that certain conventions—“a rule, method, or practice established by usage; custom” (Dictionary.com)—are fixed and finite. The resume is a genre that looks different for almost every writer, and it has to be constantly tweaked, added to, deleted from, and reworked in order to fit the various demands of the employers to whom it is addressed. The trajectory—places that something can go; the path that it follows through different situations, audiences, and contexts—of a resume can be overwhelming, so I will begin to explore the genre by asking: where did the genre of the resume come from? Then I will delve into how the genre has unifying conventions but also many different appearances in our world today. Cracking the genre of the resume isn’t an easy task, but it is a genre that has real-world implications, so the more we know about it, the better our resumes can be.

Where Do Resumes Come From?

One of the very first recorded documents to ever be called a resume was a letter written by Leonardo Da Vinci in 1482 (Lempicke, “History of the Resume”). This letter was simply a correspondence with a friend. This word-based resume is used again in 1500 when a lord in England offered a “handwritten letter of introduction to an acquaintance” (Lempicke). This may be a step closer to what we see as a resume, as this letter was giving details about this lord to his new acquaintance. It wasn’t until 1914, though, that the resume as a list of qualifications to present oneself to an employer began to be used regularly. After this shift, people started to call this “list of facts” a resume, but, in these early days, it was almost always attached to an employment application letter (Popken 100). The employment application letter has evolved into a genre that we call a “cover letter” today. A cover letter, while it can vary in difficulty, length, scope, and purpose, serves to tell the employer about the applicant in a more narrative way than a resume. If we make a connection between cover letters and resumes, we might be able to understand the genre of the resume more fully. The important components of the letter, such as introducing oneself, listing outstanding qualities, and highlighting applicable experiences, are all elements that should appear in a resume as well.

Once the resume became more of its “own” genre (separate from the letter), it began to look more like information that could be included in a Facebook profile page, for example. See any resemblances between Figures 1 and 2 (below)?

Gentlemen:-

I wish to say, in answer to your advertisement for a stenographer, in to-day's Journal, that my preparation and qualifications are as follows:—

Age: 21.

Nationality: American.

Habits: Good. I neither smoke nor drink.

Education: Commercial High School—shorthand course.
[Speed in shorthand and typewriting mentioned here.]

Disposition: Work harmoniously with associates.

Experience: [Here the positions held, if any, and the reasons for leaving are stated definitely. If inexperienced, training in school is mentioned.]

Salary: Nine dollars a week at start.

Yours truly,

Figure 1. Written resume-in-letter example, published in 1916 (as cited in Popken 102).

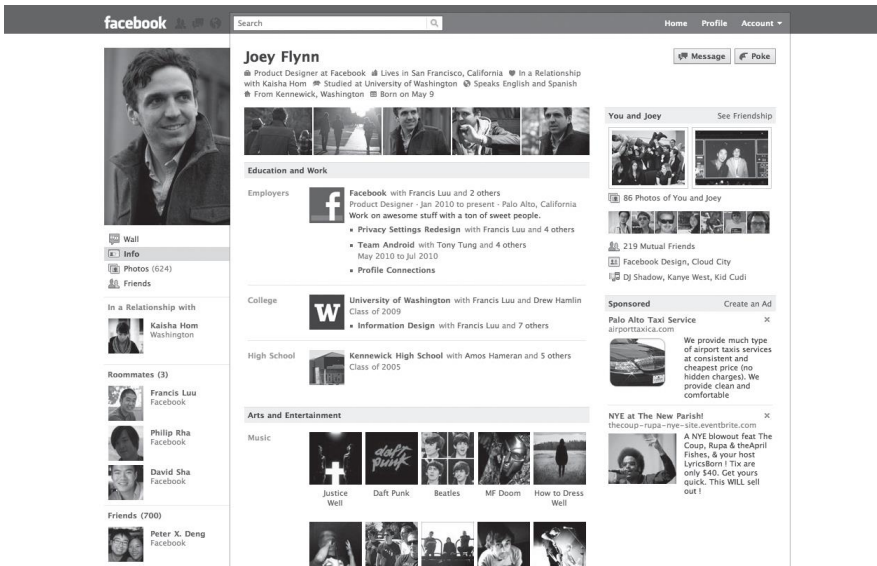


Figure 2. Personal Facebook profile page example, published in 2012 (as cited in Li).

The images above are prime examples of the ways that genres not only diversify, but also begin to take on fresh life as they are adapted into new forms. Facebook is an extremely popular website, and the information used on profile and business pages originated from resume letters. Figures 1 and 2 provide an excellent illustration of genres changing and people adapting to the changes over time.

What Do Resumes Look Like Today?

Examining the history of the resume is somewhat easier than discussing what the resume looks like today. Writing from the past is completed and unchanging, so it is easier to identify similar attributes and trends between past resumes than to do so with modern resumes. A difficulty with modern-day resumes is that the genre is always shifting and changing. What was expected on a resume ten or even two years ago may look different than what is expected today. But while there are many differences, there are some very basic elements that are most likely expected on a resume. Here are some conventions that are *generally true* about the genre of the resume, currently, in the United States of America:

1. Name
2. Contact information
3. Desire/interest in a specific job and position
4. List of distinguishing qualifications

5. Past experience relating to the desired position
6. References that the employer can contact

That's it. There are only six things that we can consider to be generally reliable conventions in the resume genre. For a somewhat standard written resume, there are some conventional headings that can be used to organize the information: Executive Summary, Education, Professional Experience, and References. Now, how these categories are presented, what needs to be added to them, what needs to be readdressed or glossed over, etc., are all dependent on the position for which a person would submit a resume. Resumes are not uniform documents, and rarely can one resume be used for more than one position; they need to be edited depending on the desired job. To showcase one possible resume format, Figure 3 (below) shows an example of a one-page, written resume:

<h2 style="margin: 0;">Resume Resume</h2> <p style="margin: 0;">123 Resume Road, Resume, RM, 12345 resume@resumesarethebest.com</p>	
<hr/> <h3 style="margin: 0;">Executive Summary</h3>	
<p>Really good at giving short, descriptive facts about a person. Expected to include valuable details from a person's character and work ethic, and stay within a one-page limit. Sometimes expected to include strong action verbs such as: championed, formalized, and rejuvenated, sometimes meant to be more descriptive.</p>	
<hr/> <h3 style="margin: 0;">Education</h3>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College Courses in Business Discourse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teaching began in the 1914s ○ Methods adapted by professionals and professors ○ Genre regularized by repetition 	
<hr/> <h3 style="margin: 0;">Professional Experience</h3>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appearance in textbooks beginning in the 1920s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Not normalized or tested • First 'normalized' name appearance in the 1970s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ready to serve, although somewhat inefficiently • Cultural phenomenon causing writing services to spring up in the U.S. in the 1980s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Creation of a market of claims 	
<hr/> <h3 style="margin: 0;">References</h3>	
<p>Application Letter replacedformatofapplication@letter.com Professors/ Past Employers needthemforreferences@good.com Modern Day Students thisisntreallysobad@yay.com</p>	

Figure 3. Fictional example of written resume following basic resume conventions.

The resume in Figure 3 (above) is one way to format and present personal information. There are hundreds if not thousands of examples in books and on the internet that might look something like this resume but have variations.¹

The genre of the resume changes as jobs and employers change. This has happened partly because of technological changes over the past decade or so. Reliance on the internet, digital media, and prioritization of the accessibility of documents has changed what employers expect from applicants. Though a basic paper resume is a good place to begin, there are now different kinds of jobs where more interactive or electronic resumes are better ways to showcase one's skills and information. Here is an example of a way to format some of the basic resume conventions, but in more graphic display:

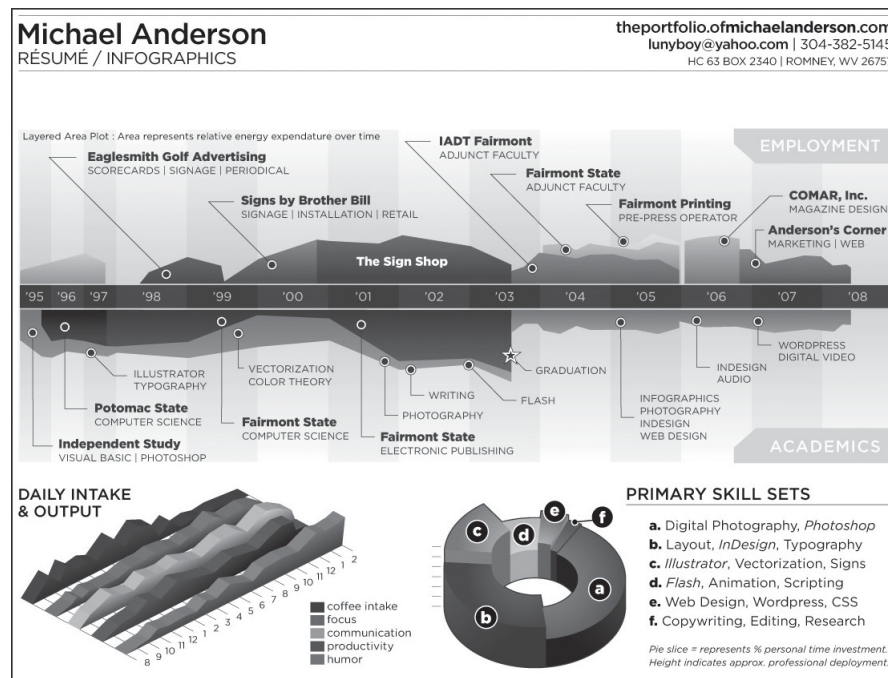


Figure 4. Infographic resume example, published in 2012 (as cited in Lauby).

The kind of resume represented above is called an infographic resume. It is created and distributed online, although it probably could be printed as well. An infographic resume supplies the conventional resume information, but because it does so in such a colorful, graphic format, it allows room for extra information as well. Resumes “with maps or infographics provide the same chronology of information, but with a bit more flair” (Larby, “9 Dynamic Digital Resumes”). The infographic resume is a genre that

employs not only the genre of the resume, but also the genre of the graph. The infographic format breaks a lot of “traditional” standards, but the information is still presented in a clear and concise way. Employers can still glean the potential employee’s skills and basic information, but the resume showcases not only those qualifications but also the applicant’s creative design skills. The infographic resume requires time and skill to put together, and as such, it shows a specific interest in graphic design *and* the position for which the person is applying.

Another resume that is gaining popularity in our digital age is the social media resume. Social media resumes are entirely online. To distribute a social media resume, employees would provide a link to employers (as exemplified in Figure 4), which would take them to some kind of social media site where the potential employee’s qualifications are displayed. The social media resume operates under the assumption that employers are going to check social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn to find out information about the possible applicants anyway. The social media resume is definitely more progressive than the written resume, and while it may not be appropriate for all jobs or possible employees, using the social media resume could help a candidate stand out from other applicants. Using this kind of resume appropriately shows knowledge about popular culture as well as an intentional effort to procure a particular type of job, as the social media resume showcases not only the “basics,” but also additional thought and effort.



Figure 5. Link to a social media resume example, published in 2012 (as cited in Lauby).

The social media resume is just one way to engage an employer and link them to a dynamic, online resume. It becomes a resume that can be seen by anyone at any time and something that can lead to networking and exposure of skills that is not possible with a resume formatted in the standard way. An article on CNN Tech suggests that we are “already in a post [paper] resume era” (Gross, “Are Social Media Making the Resume Obsolete?”). While employers may not currently expect social media resumes, digital resumes seem to be the direction that resumes are headed, and may *someday* replace paper resumes altogether.

How Are Resumes Actually Used?

The above examples highlight just a few possible resume options. But regardless of the format chosen, each resume needs to be specifically crafted for the employer to whom it is given. Here is where the resume genre starts to feel complicated. We begin to ask questions like: What does a particular employer want? What is the best way to present my resume to a particular employer? Who will have access to this resume? These are the types of questions that *need* to be asked in order to determine what information should be used on a resume, as well as what kind of resume would be the best for each particular applicant and job. As shown above, there are different options for the presentation of resumes, and choosing the best fit for the job category is important. Resumes are resumes, though, and regardless of the type or format, they are a “gate-keeping” genre that will always be regulated by job markets and employers’ demands. That the creator of the resume (the employee looking for a job) will always be “ruled” by the resume because of its changing, shifting nature is an interesting thought.

Each person must make his or her own decisions regarding what or what not to include in his or her particular resume, but the cultural reality is that we must always be exploring the genre of the resume because it will always be changing, and we must continue to strive to meet the *current* conventions of the genre. So while the genre of the resume might not be one that we can totally “crack,” this initial exploration into the genre shows the necessity of research into the genre and an awareness of the current job markets and trends. Prospective employees must contend with the stress of being judged through the resume, so the more that they are aware and able to adapt to current expectations, the better their resumes can be. The more we research and explore, the more we try to “crack” open the genre of the resume, hopefully the better our resumes will be.

Endnote

1. There are many ways to format written resumes, and the “right” formatting depends on the job or position that one is applying for. Here is a link to an example from the Purdue OWL website of how to format a written resume, along with more help and instructions on resume writing: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/564/01/>.

Works Cited

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Kayla Ann Bruce is an MA student specializing in Rhetoric and Composition at Illinois State University. Her interests include tasting new foods, talking and texting with friends and family, teaching university students, and traveling anywhere she can. She hopes that one day her resume will include jobs and references from all over the world.