
How to Stand Apart From the Crowd

Competition for jobs is at an all-time high, so it's essential that you distinguish yourself from other job applicants. Regardless of the field that you're entering, individuality matters. Everything you've experienced until now—in the classroom, during after-school jobs and internships, and through volunteer experiences—sets you apart from your fellow students. These unique experiences provide knowledge and abilities that must be demonstrated to potential employers through the resume, cover letter and interview. This is your chance to prove that you're the best candidate for the job and will make a great addition to their team. Here are some ways to make sure your true potential shines.

What Makes You Special?

Your roommate may have the exact same major and GPA as you do, but those factors are only superficial. More importantly: everyone has his or her own set of life experiences that influence personal growth and skill development. Maybe you've traveled around the world, speak several languages, or were born in another country. Or perhaps you've worked your way through high school and college to help support your family. Numbers only tell part of the story. When an employer is evaluating you for a job, you have to make sure your unique experiences come through on your resume and cover letter so that you have the opportunity to elaborate on the details during the interview.

Go Team!

Employers want hires who can hit the ground running and work well with others in a team environment. Your academic experience has been packed with teamwork even if you don't realize it. Just think back to all those group projects and study sessions. Many extracurricular activities from athletics and fraternities and sororities to clubs, volunteer work and student government require team participation as well. By using the language of teamwork and cooperation on your resume and cover letter, you've taken the first step toward proving that you're a collaborator. During the interview you can further express what you've learned about yourself and others through teamwork.

Leadership 101

Teamwork is key, but employers also want candidates who can step up to the plate and take charge when it's appropriate. If you've never been class president, however, don't fear; leadership can be demonstrated in many subtle ways. In addition to traditional leadership roles, leaders also take on responsibility by providing others with information and advice. If you've ever helped a friend with a paper, volunteered to teach a class or given a speech that motivated others, then you've served as a leader. During your interview, speak confidently about your accomplishments, but don't cross the line into arrogance. Good leaders know when to show off, as well as when to listen to others.

Art of the Resume

Your resume provides the opportunity to stand out, but don't distinguish yourself by using bright-colored paper or an unusual font. Those tactics are distracting and leave employers remembering you negatively. Instead, it's the content of your resume that will really get you noticed. Make sure to describe each experience in clear detail; highlight not only what you did, but also what results were gained from your actions. Don't forget to include special skills, such as foreign languages and international travel.

Cover Letter Zingers

While your resume chronicles your experiences, the cover letter lets your personality shine through. Here you can expand upon your past experiences and briefly discuss what you learned. Use concrete examples from your resume in order to showcase specific skills and characteristics. Be sure to tailor each letter to the specific organization and position, and state specifically why you want to work for the organization. Demonstrate that you've done your research; it will impress employers and set your letter apart from the rest.

Interview Expert

When it comes to the interview, preparation is key. Be ready to talk about everything you've done in a positive light, and make sure you're well informed about the organization and industry. Focus on what distinguishes the employer from their competition and why you are a good fit. If possible, speak to alumni or other current employees to learn more. Remember, practice makes perfect; many career centers offer mock interviews with a counselor. And don't be afraid to ask for help from friends and professionals as you review the answers to common interview questions.

Dos and Don'ts

- DO dress the part. Even employers with casual dress codes expect interviewees to be dressed in professional business attire.
- DON'T chew gum, wear too much cologne/perfume or smoke before the interview.
- DO look your interviewer in the eye and offer a firm handshake.
- DON'T try too hard to please and appear loud or cocky.
- DO emphasize your skills and accomplishments.
- DON'T make excuses for failures or lack of experience. Instead, take responsibility for your mistakes and change the subject to something positive.

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