

Should Your Resume Be Chronological or Functional?

By Lancelot Larsen

Before writing a resume, it is important to determine what format is going to present you and your skills the best so you get the job. Each resume writing format (chronological, the most common and often times the easiest to write; functional, used to highlight experiences, achievements, and skills; or a hybrid of both, used when the writer has a long history of experience within their profession) has an upside and a downside that needs to be contemplated before being used. Each is used for a specific purpose; depending on your career history and present career pursuits, these formats are designed to emphasize your most relevant qualifications and transferable skills.

The purpose of a resume is to land an interview. Do the storytelling later. The resume is strictly for telling recruiters and employers about your work experience, skills, and education and, more importantly, how it will benefit them. Before you start drafting your resume, it is equally important to decide which format you will use. There are only three options available to you: chronological, functional, or a hybrid of both. All three are challenging to draft, but it's a decision that will make or break your initial image as a possible interviewee.

Chronological

This is the most common format, since it's the easiest and most forthright to plan. Just list your work history in reverse chronological order starting with your current position and go back as far as you see necessary. Most employers prefer the chronological format because they are accustomed to it, and it offers a convenient configuration for questions during the interview. It also reinforces stability and development in a particular career that employers like to see. In essences, it's your way of saying, "Look at me! I'm always employed and advancing in my career!"

Keep in mind

- A lot of employers are not so interested in what you did 10 years ago, and any work you did 20 years ago might become questionable as to how it is still relevant to this day and age. So, keep your current work history full of information; keep your long-past work history brief and only use what is relevant and might not have been stated before. If you have 20 years of continual and progressive real estate experience, and you decide to use the chronological format for your five places of employment to date, ask yourself first how many times have you written that you negotiated contracts? If you have a lengthy career in one particular field, be mindful of repetition of duties performed. Aim for variety.
- The chronological format works well if you have had continual jobs in one or two professions. If your goal is to emphasize your transferable skills toward a career in finance but your resume only shows a history of retail and publishing, you might want to pick another format.

Downside

This format might work against you if you are going into a new profession or have a lot of gaps in your work history. The immediate presence of positions held and dates might raise a lot of questions in an employers mind—what were you doing when you weren't working and why do you want to work in a bank when you have been working in manufacturing this whole time?

Functional

This formatting option is a must for candidates who want to focus the reader's attention on their experiences, achievements, and skills above all. Here, you can throw in everything but the kitchen sink about any experience or skill you gained, including volunteer work and real world duties you might have performed during classes you took... even related hobbies. By playing up your experiences, achievements, and skills, you play down your work history. In the functional format, right under your header (and Summary of Qualifications, if you choose), you immediately display your Experience section, and then follow it with a Work History section. This way the focus is more on the "what" and less on the "where" and "when." Simply put, the functional resume exists to help you mask the following:

- Gaps in your employment
- Jobs you had that you don't want anyone to know about

The functional resume also exists to help the following professionals:

- Career changers
- Job hoppers
- Recent graduates with little or no experience in their field
- Candidates entering the hiring world for the first time
- Candidates re-entering the work force after an extended period

Downside

A lot of recruiters and employers know all about the functional resume and why it's used, so they get suspicious right away when they see that your resume is not in the traditional chronological format. Those who are not skeptical of functional resumes don't want to belabor the task of assembling what you did at what place and when, if that's primarily what they want to know. If the recruiters and employers prefer the chronological resume, your functional resume will definitely injure your chance to get an interview.

Hybrid

This format is worth considering for professionals who have a long history of experience within their profession that they want to display but in a condensed manner, particularly if they have a lot of prior experience in a related field. For example, if someone was once a cop for five years and decided to go into criminal law for another five years and has focused on white collar crime for the past five years (and has corporate experience as well somewhere along the line), then a hybrid resume would be a good option to keep all this relevant work history as clear and concise as possible. A typical hybrid resume will have a Summary of Qualifications (or a Profile) section at the top and possibly a bulleted list of subjects in an Areas of Expertise section below it. Below that, you can then place a reverse-chronological list of the "what, where, and when" of where you worked to date. You don't have to state every little thing you did for every position. Just write the highlights and maybe sub-bullet a short list of key accomplishments for each job title. You might even consider creating a Key Accomplishments section before listing your work experiences. That's why it's called a "hybrid" and is a delightful option, because you can experiment with it. You can divide your work experiences into separate sections if you wish. Using the above example, you can create "Law Enforcement" and "Criminal Law" and "Corporate" sections. You can even create an "Early Career" section for long-past experiences you want to mention but not elaborate.

Downside

Like with the functional resume, some recruiters and employers might not want to hassle with your hybrid resume because they can't be bothered with piecing together the information they seek in your resume.

Questions to ask when deciding

Q: Are you looking for a promotion or a greater title at another company?

A: Chronological

Q: Are you relocating?

A: Chronological (assuming your work history is specific and continual)

Q: Are you looking for work after family, maternity, or medical leave?

A: Chronological (if your leave is recent—one year, tops—and explained in your cover letter)—otherwise, Functional

Q: Do you want to change careers?

A: Functional (granted that it's a significant change)

Q: Did you change jobs too often?

A: Functional

Q: Are you a first-time job seeker?

A: Functional

Q: Did you stay at the same job so long as to not gain experience elsewhere?

A: Hybrid

Q: Did you just complete a graduate degree or advanced training?

A: Chronological (if you have been continually working and in the same field)—otherwise: Hybrid

Q: Do you know for certain that the person to whom you are sending your resume is more conservative?

A: Chronological (with heavy explaining in the cover letter if necessary—gaps and/or career changes)