How do employers assess resumes?
by Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

What a boss or resume reviewer in Human Resources want to learn from your resume is whether you (1) have the particular skills they want, (2) have a good, solid, progressive job history, and 3) are a fit for the organization, an indefinable quality they believe they know when they see it. Employers infer your fit from your past ("Good non-profit background, like us!"), what they need ("Great! We need more technology skills in the recruiting function!"), or what they are ("broad exposure in PR").

You have only seconds to make a good first impression. The resume reviewer may have to wade through more than a hundred resumes — thousands if the job was posted on the Internet. Here's how to make those seconds count:

1. Make your resume look fresh and crisp. Don't send out a tired, often-photocopied resume.

2. Capture in your work history specific tasks you've done that match the experience they want. Computers make it easy to customize resumes. Also, only go for jobs where you have what they want. It's only in your dreams that employers stretch to take undeveloped talent. People are willing to spend hours creating a career objective which is ho-hum pap to the resume reader. Spend that time instead on the meat of your resume, the work history.

3. When you've finished, read the resume backwards. Yes, backwards. It's what resume readers do because it gives them a chronology of you, rather than jumping from present job down through your next previous jobs, and it makes plain any holes or inconsistencies in your resume. Try it. See how different you look when you read your resume this way. If you see any problems, fix them.

4. Create a cover letter that sells how the totality of you matches what they want, and prove it with your past experience or education.

Should I do a creative resume?

No. Creative resumes only work under these circumstances: Your creative execution is flawlessly professional, on target for the company, and you're going for a creative job. It is difficult to be flawlessly professional, especially early in your experience, and each company's definition of the term is different. It is even more difficult to be on target. You don't know the organization or its needs and values, making true the old saw, "a miss is as good as a mile." (A little off is way off.)

People have sent resume songs, flippers ("I want to swim with your company"), ad campaign collateral materials, "special edition" newspaper resumes. They often come across as pathetically amateurish. The lack of knowledge and discernment painfully showed.

If you're going for a creative job, create the portfolio your career demands. Writers send clips of published articles (No term papers, please, even if you got a really, really good grade!). Artists

bring samples of work that got used in a brochure, a calendar, a display ad. Television reporters do resume tapes showing the breadth of their on-air work.

The portfolio comes to the interview you got as a result of a clean, simple resume done on boring white, cream or gray stationery. When you send the resume, you can include a photocopy of a clip or a stat of your art, and you definitely enclose the resume tape.

Get advice from people in your field about what sells in your market and do it.

What's the biggest reason a resume ends up in the round file?

Some resumes look just plain scary to the reader: handwritten, bad spelling, photo-copied so often the page is covered with tiny gray dots (like the joke pages that used to get passed around the office till e-mail made it obsolete, or clearly part of a mass mailing to all of that Sunday's want ads ("I sent out 53 resumes this week") without concern for fit.

Those are the first to get pitched. Resume readers correctly assume this is you doing your best to look your best. If your best is bad, they know it's only downhill from here.

Hiring managers also toss resumes with holes, where months or years are unaccounted for. You may have traveled before joining the rat race, raised children before trading your apron for a briefcase, or fruitlessly looked for work during a recession. You'd better say so, either on the resume or in the cover letter, or you'll get dumped.

You'll also reside in the waste can if the reader believes you're not telling the truth. Why should a company hire someone known to be dishonest?

With the Internet, a final reason for getting pitched is that the computer couldn't find you on its "key word" drag through its resumes. Be sure you know the conventions of submitting.