

The Most Powerful Words to Use on Your Resume

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Unfortunately, there's no list of best words to put alongside a list of worst words. Why? Because the "best" words, sometimes known in the biz as keywords, are different for every job and every resume. Fortunately for the job seeker, you can use tools to figure out which words are optimal for your resume. You'll have to be a bit of a detective. But, when you think about it, job hunting is a lot like detective work anyway.

Here are some clues to get you started:

The strongest words on your resume are almost always nouns. Not verbs. Employers and their software aren't scanning for "managed" and "assisted." They're looking for skills, certifications, degrees, job titles, names of products or services, names of processes, names of hardware and software, company names, names of professional or trade organizations, or names of schools.

One great way to discover which nouns your potential employer cares most about is to study the job description. Use those nouns and noun phrases in your resume. For example, if the employer is looking for someone who knows how to "build customer databases," then those are the exact same words you want to use on your resume (assuming you know how to build customer databases).

Don't forget to spend time checking out your potential employer's website. You'll learn a lot about the corporate culture and maybe glean some valuable words to include in your resume. While you're at it, take a look at their annual report for more clues.

If you notice the same keywords on both the employer's job description and the website, not only should you use them on your resume, you should use them more than once. Some resume writers recommend using the most important keywords both in your objective (if you have one) and in the body of your resume, as close to the beginning as possible. That helps those terms stick out not only for a computerized keyword search, but also for the in-person resume reader.

Discover more good words by joining your professional or trade organization and attending the meetings. Or at least read their newsletters. What are people saying? What are the titles of the speakers' talks? These words likely reflect the issues at the top of your potential employer's mind.

Take a hard look at your former job titles. If they're non-standard, or don't accurately describe you and your accomplishments, find out what the industry-specific standard title would be for your particular specialty. Either use that instead or use your actual title but expand upon it, using smart keywords to clarify your meaning.

Don't shy away from using appropriate industry-specific jargon or acronyms. Knowing the insider lingo puts you in the in-crowd. But if you're looking to transition to a new industry or position, and the hiring manager won't understand acronyms or jargon from your last job, remember to replace that lingo with a strong keyword.

When you do use verbs to describe your background, choose powerful ones. Try "achieved," "completed," "managed," "resolved," and "increased." Words like "contributed" or "supported" are less impressive. Keep in mind that your resume is the place to list accomplishments, not just job duties or responsibilities.

Avoid adjectives when talking about your skills and qualifications. Skip words like "dynamic," "experienced," and "strong." Instead, stick to nouns and (powerful) verbs. Be specific and quantitative when describing your successes and strengths, using percentages and dollar amounts. Also avoid adverbs like "skillfully," "effectively," and "successfully"—basically any word that ends with "ly." If a skill is on your resume, it's assumed that you can do it well.

Okay, so this isn't a simplistic list of best words for resumes. That's just not possible. But using these tips to figure out which words are best for you may just land your resume at the top of the pile.