

# How to Write a Killer Resume (for Software Engineers)

by Niniane Wang, May 2005

In the past few years working as a software engineer for Google (and previously a dev lead at Microsoft), I've screened hundreds of resumes, to make the decision on whether to proceed with the interview process. Some resumes gave off a great impression, and others didn't.

Increasingly, friends and relatives ask me for suggestions on improving their resumes, so I've created a list of the most common pitfalls I've seen, and how to avoid them:



**1. Include technical details of your work: programming language, your individual contribution, metrics.** Sometimes I see job descriptions that contain a single line, such as:

\* Worked with a team of 3 on an e-mail plugin.

The screener is reading your resume with the mindset of judging 1. how challenging this work was, 2. how relevant it is to their own company, so you need to be specific. A better way to rewrite this is:

\* Implemented in C++ an Outlook e-mail plugin which performs automatic backups. Along with two other team members who wrote the backup storage server, shipped the product to 300,000 customers.

**2. Don't dilute the impressive details with unimpressive ones.** If you write too much fluff, it will drag down the overall quality of your resume. You don't need to say "The task was completed on time and met the original specifications." The reader assumes this, and writing a non-achievement as though it were an achievement weakens your resume.

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Sometimes I will see a list of bullet points:

```
Intern, XYZ Corporation
```

- \* Optimized subroutines to improve performance of the ABC widget by 20%.
- \* Implemented in C++ the frontend to the ABC widget.
- \* Filed papers and did office administrative work.

If the last point is not as strong as the first two, leave it off. It is okay to have only one bullet point.

**3. Showcase your work using facts, not adjectives.** The screener wants to judge for themselves how impressive your work is, so use metrics, awards (external or internal to the company), press quotes, revenue growth, and other measurable items, instead of subjective descriptions. This also allows you to hype yourself without coming across as arrogant.

Instead of saying "Developed amazing results rapidly", rewrite it as "Increased application performance by 25% after 3 weeks of work." Instead of "I am regularly called in to save projects where others have failed," say, "I have stepped in on 3 projects that were running behind schedule and shipped them on-time."

Also, don't exaggerate in a ridiculous way, like the following:

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Achieved cross-group coordination by organizing an ice cream social.
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**4. Include all relevant impressive details (awards, pet projects).** I have a friend Melody (name changed) that I've known for 10 years. She developed a product that earned her company XXX million dollars, received several industry awards, and became one of her company's flagship products. Even when I went to Shanghai, the highways there were lined with billboards advertising her product. Yet when I saw her resume, it said simply:

- \* Lead engineer on a product which performs X for enterprise solutions.

Include the awards and accolades you have received!

If you've done projects in your spare time that are technically challenging, or that have a sizeable user base (in the hundreds), include those on your resume.

**5. Don't lie.** This should be obvious, but I've served multiple times on hiring committees where the cover letters says, "Rewrote XYZ Corporation's e-commerce backend." and a member of the hiring committee says, "I worked at XYZ and the candidate didn't do that!"

This was usually sufficient reason to reject the candidate.

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Good luck in writing your resume! It's a challenging task, but can be fulfilling.

For an example resume, you can take a look at [my own resume](#).

In closing, I'll name a few of my favorite resume highlights...

- One candidate used the word "ass" in the first sentence of his cover letter. (Risky, but he pulled it off! "Does Google need a strong engineer to put boot in ass in developing the next XXX ...")

- One candidate's cover letter said, "I don't have time to write a cover letter. I need to go out to party and meet girls." (Risky, and he didn't pull it off!)
- One candidate wrote "Proved  $P=NP$ ." When I interviewed him, he said "For the case where  $N$  equals 1."



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