



resume

Colin Powell School
for Civic and Global Leadership

The City College
of New York

Master's Program In Public Administration:

Resumes and Cover Letters

2016

Resumes and Cover Letters

2016

Master's Program in Public Administration
Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership
The City College of New York, NY 10031
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*The Public Administration Program at The City College of New York's
Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership prepares students for management
careers in government agencies and nonprofit organizations.*

*This guide was prepared as part of the career services that the program provides to
students. It was written by R. Mark Musell, director of the program. Writing expert and
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Resumes

Resumes alone will seldom win a job for you, but they can easily lose one. So how do applicants maximize the chances of winning further consideration and minimize the chances of losing out altogether? The guidance offered here can be summed up as follows:

- ***Give employers what they want!*** Lists of duties, responsibilities and qualifications found in vacancy notices indicate the education and experience an employer wants. Winning resumes and cover letters directly address how applicants meet those needs.
- ***Make it easy for employers to determine that you have the education, experience, and skills they are looking for.*** Resumes and cover letters should make it a quick and easy matter for potential employers to determine that an applicant is a good match. That means clear headings, proper grammar, and concision, among other things.

Putting these ideas into practice means customizing resumes and cover letters for each job. **If you plan to send out the same resume and letter for every job, stop now, give up, and expect to remain unemployed.**

This guide offers specific guidelines on how to customize resumes and cover letters so they present you and your qualifications in the best light possible. The guidelines are accompanied by examples of a generic resume and resumes customized for two different types of jobs—one in research and one in fundraising. Note that the same guidelines also apply to writing cover letters. In the examples given for each

guideline, the original, wrong, or less desirable wording is given in roman type in quotation marks; the correct or more desirable wording is given in italics.

Structuring a Resume

This guide favors the use of a chronological resume—one that lists education and experience in reverse chronological order, that is, starting with the most recent degree or job and then working back in time. If you do not have extensive work experience, put the information describing your degrees first, followed by work and volunteer experience. In the absence of extensive work experience, keep your resume to one page.

Some resume experts recommend organizing resumes by skills rather than chronologically by experience. Such resumes may have currency in certain fields, but public service employers usually ask for the more standard chronological approach.

Start with a Summary, Not “Objectives”

A statement of objectives takes up space and adds little. Employers generally do not care about a candidate’s objectives. They know that students change objectives for each job. Thus, the information is meaningless.

Start, instead, with a summary or synopsis—a brief (two-line) overview of your education, experience, and skills. A summary is an easy way for employers to determine whether you meet *their* objectives, which is what hiring is all about. Below are three examples:

Experienced program director with a master's degree in public administration and five years of experience managing community health clinics.

Graduate student with wide-ranging experience in community service and expert training in grant writing.

Former White House intern with extensive background in immigration policy, three years of experience in translating documents, and a master's degree in public administration.

Include a List of Relevant Course Work

You cannot be sure that everyone evaluating your resume will know what your degree entails. When describing your education, mention the courses relevant to the job for which you are applying. In the sample resumes presented later in this section, the applicant lists courses relevant to the research and fundraising jobs in which she is interested.

Properly Name Your Degree

The degree you have been working so hard to earn is most commonly known as a master's degree in public administration, with an apostrophe in *master's*. Here are some guidelines to follow when referring to your degree:

- Lowercase the degree (that is, do not capitalize the first letter of each word) when using it in the course of running text, as in a cover letter: *In June I received a master's degree in public administration from City College.*
- Capitalize the degree when displayed in a stand-alone fashion, as in a resume or on a business card. Confused yet?

- Spell out the degree whenever possible in case the employer or other person reviewing your resume is not familiar with the abbreviation. If you need to abbreviate it, use *MPA* or *M.P.A.* Both forms are correct, but the former, without periods, is more common; just be consistent.

List Your Grade Point Average

Almost every resume I review fails to include one of the very first things most employers will look at—your GPA. Include it, unless it is poor.

Use Headings and Bullets to Highlight Relevant Education and Experience

Headings separate major sections of resumes (education, employment, and so on) and help employers find the information they need. They also highlight your most relevant experience. In the sample resume tailored for a research job (see page 8), the heading *Research Experience* calls attention to the applicant's research background in a way that the standard approach, with a chronological list under the heading "Experience," would not.

Similarly, using a bulleted list highlights your most outstanding qualifications. See, for example, the sample resume tailored for a fundraising position on page 9, in which the applicant uses bullets to draw attention to her experience in that type of job.

Use a Consistent and Appropriate Grammatical Form

When listing duties in a resume, use a consistent grammatical form—that is, use a parallel structure. In the example below, the last entry in a list of duties from a resume's

job description switches form and should be rewritten to eliminate the “ing.”

- Organize meetings
- Prepare reports
- ~~Arranging~~ Arrange conferences

Describe past work in the past tense and be consistent. In the example below, the last entry switches tense and grammatical form and should be changed.

- Organized meetings
- Prepared reports
- ~~Responsible for Arranging~~ Arranged conferences

Do Not Include References

References waste space that is better used for information describing your qualifications to the employer. Employers who are interested will ask for references. Similarly, do not write “references available on request,” which merely states the obvious. (See text box for some pointers on requesting letters of recommendation from your references.)

Writing a Resume

In today’s job market, an employer seeking to fill a vacancy might receive hundreds of resumes for that position. And in many cases, the person who is reviewing the resumes and cover letters that applicants submit may not be the person who is actually doing the hiring. That task may fall instead to a human resources specialist (rather than to a subject matter specialist), who screens the applications and sends the most relevant ones on to the person making the hiring decision.

To make your resume stand out in a crowd, follow the guidelines detailed below when writing it.

Letters of Recommendation

Do not be reluctant to ask for letters of recommendation. It is a normal part of work and academic life. Make it simple for the people you ask by providing:

A description of the position;

Complete instructions on how and when to submit the letter; and

Some suggestions about what makes you the perfect candidate for the job.

The last item is particularly important. The person writing on your behalf may not remember all the details of your background that make you a stellar candidate. Simply ask if the letter writer would mind mentioning some of those things you think most critical to your successful candidacy.

Echo the Employer’s Language

One way to increase the chances that potential employers identify you as a relevant candidate is to describe yourself using the words and phrasing they used in the job description. Say, for example, that you apply for a job with the City Council. Council members often seek community liaisons to handle relations with community organizations. If your resume describes the years you spent “coordinating” your agency’s relations with outside organizations, change it to describe the years you spent acting as your agency’s *liaison* with outside organizations.

Similarly, if you are applying for a position with the title of director and your resume refers to “managing” client services, change it to *directing* client services.

Be Specific and Concrete

Think of your resume as an advertisement—your opportunity to convince prospective employers that you have the experience they are looking for. State your case as clearly and concisely as possible, keeping your resume short and to the point. Tone is also important—be matter-of-fact in describing your experience and avoid pretentious language.

For example, if you are applying for a job that requires making public presentations, saying that you were “responsible for office activities and operations” is too general. Instead, be more specific and state your relevant experience, reflecting the employer’s priorities (as shown in the first revision below). If the position also requires experience “planning and coordinating,” you might refine the resume entry further, as shown in the second revision.

First Revision (More specific, reflects employer’s priorities): *Prepared public presentations, arranged travel, and planned conferences.*

Second Revision (More specific, reflects employer’s priorities, echoes employer’s language): *Prepared public presentations; planned and coordinated travel and conferences.*

The need for specificity and relevance also applies to writing cover letters. For example, a student applying for a White House internship stated in his cover letter that his membership in student council allowed him “to exercise leadership.” But how? His

wording was not only vague but also failed to address the application’s requirement to provide specific examples of leadership. With encouragement, the student rewrote the section to read: *As president, I led the student council to adopt a system of town hall meetings with students. As a result, approval ratings for student council doubled during my tenure.*

A popular fellowship requires applicants to describe their experience in community service. In the example below, the applicant undermines the value of his experience by making vague and lofty sounding references to “change within the targeted group.” The description leaves one to guess what actually transpired. Was it a change in hair styles or living conditions? The revision makes the value of the student’s experience clear and precise.

Original (Vague and a bit pretentious): “During those years, my psychology and social work skills were put to use to assist and effect change within the targeted group.”

Revision (Specific and precise): *For ten years, I assisted elderly Alzheimer’s patients with legal, emotional, health, and financial problems. The work required the use of the counseling, case management, consultation, and team work skills I acquired through graduate study in social work and psychology.*

Be Concise

Eliminate unnecessary words. Potential employers are too busy to wade through superfluous words to get to your point. You are trying to get a job, not put an employer to sleep! Below are two examples from students’ resumes and how they were revised:

Original (Wordy): “Was responsible for coordination of office work on the annual report to donors.”

Revision (More concise): *Coordinated work on the annual report to donors.*

Original (Wordy): “Tracked clients for 20 units to ensure that each unit was provided with adequate staff.”

Revision (Clearer and more concise): *Developed staffing plans for 20 offices.*

In another example, a student’s cover letter made a vague reference to “having served on committees as needed.” Why “as needed”? Would anyone assume that the student served on committees that did not need her? And what committees? Was it the hallway decorating committee or the committee to draw up options for dealing with a major funding shortfall? It makes a difference. Rather than be wordy and vague, say: *Chaired the City College presidential search committee.*

Avoid Specialized, Technical Language

You will not receive credit for what you have to offer if nobody knows what you are talking about. Avoid complicated vocabulary associated with a particular profession or group (commonly referred to as jargon) and use plain English instead.

In one cover letter, for example, a student’s description of her work stated that she “coordinated sub-certifications under Sarbanes-Oxley.” That description might be appropriate for jobs in finance, but her relevant qualifications would be better demonstrated if she described her work using language that is more accessible to nonspecialists: *Coordinated the preparation*

of reports required by federal financial disclosure rules.

In another example, a college admissions officer described part of her current job by saying that she “managed the Hobson’s Apply Yourself System.” Sounds impressive, but only if a potential employer is familiar with the Hobson’s system. Better to be safe and write something like:

Managed the automated system by which students apply for admission to the college.

Like jargon, abbreviations may be unfamiliar to potential employers, so avoid using them. Nobody will be impressed with your two years of experience with the BMI unless they know it is the Black Male Initiative. If you use such a term several times in a resume or cover letter, spell it out at first mention and give the abbreviation in parentheses—*Black Male Initiative (BMI)*—and then use the abbreviation in subsequent references.

Go the Extra Mile

By now you have probably put a lot of thought and effort into composing your resume and cover letter. You have used bold headings, bulleted lists, and proper grammar to ensure that your qualifications are presented in the most favorable light. But wait—is that a typo I see?

To create a favorable impression, your written submissions must be not only clear and concise but also free of errors. To that end, carefully proofread your work. Proofread the written copy of your resume and cover letter but also read them out loud—the ear sometimes catches mistakes the eye overlooks. Better yet, have someone else proofread for you. A fresh set of eyes often catches errors that the author misses.

Sample Resumes

Tamara is a graduate student applying for two jobs—one in research and one in fundraising. The vacancy notice for the research position specifically mentions a requirement for experience with regression analysis. The fundraising position requires both a proven record of success and

experience with fundraising software called Raiser’s Edge. The sample resumes on the following pages show Tamara’s generic resume and how she customized it to highlight her qualifications for each application.

The generic resume lists degrees and jobs in the standard, reverse chronological order.

Tamara Andrews (Generic Resume)

46 99th Street
Dunlop Hills, NY 33300

AOAndrews@yipee.com
(766) 999-9999

Education

Bold headings make it easy for employers to find information.

September 2012 to Present—**The City College of New York**
Master's in Public Administration, expected June 2014, GPA 3.6

Include your grade point average.

September 2006 to February 2011—**The City College of New York**
B.A., magna cum laude, International Studies and Political Science, 2011

Awards and Scholarships

Tamara's challenge: Customize her generic resume for two job applications—one for a research position and one for a fundraising position. She has education and experience in both areas.

September 2012, Franklin Public Service Scholarship in recognition of my commitment to public service; June 2009; Judith and Allan Flint Scholarship Award for research excellence; June 2008, Peter Vallone Scholarship for dedication to women's issues and academic achievement.

Experience

October 2012 to Present

Children's Cancer Foundation, *Development/Database Assistant*

Assist the development manager with writing acknowledgment letters, maintaining the donor database, planning fundraising events, preparing grant proposals, and writing annual reports.

January 2011 to May 2012

Urban Scholars Research Foundation, *Assistant Researcher*

Studied the issue of educational attainment of students in charter schools compared with that of students in public schools. Work included collecting data, setting up a database, running regressions, and writing up preliminary results.

January 2008 to January 2011

Women's Policy Institute, *Development and Policy Intern*

Participated in all aspects of fundraising for the organization, including researching sources of grants and other funding, preparing for fundraising events, updating donor lists, and preparing acknowledgment letters. Mastered the fundraising software "Raiser's Edge." Helped raise over \$3 million for the organization and its programs to advance women in business, politics, and media. Also helped develop a strategic plan for a new program of micro loans directed toward women entrepreneurs in Kenya.

A new list of courses draws attention to graduate study relevant to research.

Tamara Andrews (Research Resume)

46 99th Street
Dunlop Hills, NY 33300

A0Andrews@yipee.com
(766) 999-9999

Summary: Committed public servant with research background and graduate-level training in public administration.

A new summary gets research at the top of the resume.

Education

September 2012 to Present—**The City College of New York**
Master's in Public Administration, expected June 2014, GPA 3.6

Relevant Courses: Statistics (including regression analysis), research methods, economics, and public policy.

September 2006 to February 2011—**The City College of New York**
B.A., magna cum laude, International Studies and Political Science, 2011

A new heading calls attention to a research award. Bullets help organize the list.

Research and Other Awards

- o September 2012, Franklin Public Service Scholarship for commitment to public service
- o June 2009, Judith and Allan Flint Scholarship Award for research excellence
- o June 2008, Peter Vallone Scholarship for dedication to women's issues and academic achievement

Research Experience

A new heading calls attention to excellent research experience that was buried in the generic version.

January 2011 to May 2012

Urban Scholars Research Foundation, Assistant Researcher

Conducted research on educational attainment of students in charter schools compared with that of students in public schools. Research work included collecting data, setting up a database, running regressions, and writing up preliminary results.

Other Experience

Echo the employer's language! In the first sentence, instead of saying "Studied the issue of . . ." as in the generic resume, say: *Conducted research on . . .*

The job requires experience with regressions.

October 2012 to Present

Children's Cancer Foundation, Development/Database Assistant

Assist the development manager with writing acknowledgment letters, maintaining the donor database, planning fundraising events, preparing grant proposals, and writing annual reports.

January 2008 to January 2011

Women's Policy Institute, Development and Policy Intern

Participated in all aspects of fundraising for the organization, including researching sources of grants and other funding, preparing for fundraising events, updating donor lists, and preparing acknowledgment letters. Mastered the fundraising software "Raiser's Edge." Helped raise over \$3 million for the organization and its programs to advance women in business, politics, and media. Also helped develop a strategic plan for a new program of micro loans directed toward women entrepreneurs in Kenya.

A list of courses includes those most relevant to fundraising.

Tamara Andrews (Fundraising Resume)

46 99th Street
Dunlop Hills, NY 33300

AOAndrews@yipee.com
(766) 999-9999

Summary: Committed public servant with extensive fundraising experience and graduate-level training in public administration.

A summary highlights Tamara's fundraising experience.

Education

September 2012 to Present—**The City College of New York**
Master's in Public Administration, expected June 2014, GPA 3.6

Relevant Courses: Nonprofit management, communications (including instruction in writing grants)

September 2006 to February 2011—**The City College of New York**
B.A., magna cum laude, International Studies and Political Science, 2011

Awards and Scholarships

September 2012, Franklin Public Service Scholarship in recognition of my commitment to public service; June 2009, Judith and Allan Flint Scholarship Award for research excellence; June 2008, Peter Vallone Scholarship for dedication to women's issues and academic achievement.

Fundraising Experience

A new heading calls attention to fundraising experience.

October 2012 to Present—**Children's Cancer Foundation**, *Development/Database Assistant*
Assist the development manager with writing acknowledgment letters, maintaining the donor database, planning fundraising events, preparing grant proposals, and writing annual reports.

January 2008 to May 2011—**Women's Policy Institute**, *Development and Policy Intern*

- o Participated in all aspects of fundraising for the organization, including researching sources of grants and other funding, preparing for fundraising events, updating donor lists, and preparing acknowledgment letters.
- o Mastered the fundraising software "Raiser's Edge."
- o Helped raise over \$3 million for the organization and its programs to advance women in business, politics, and media.
- o Helped develop a strategic plan for a new program of micro loans directed toward women entrepreneurs in Kenya.

Bullets highlight Tamara's familiarity with Raiser's Edge, which the employer required.

Other Experience

The vacancy notice asks for a *proven* record of success. Tamara provides that by giving specifics, namely, the dollar amount she helped raise.

January 2011 to May 2012—**Urban Scholars Research Foundation**, *Assistant Researcher*

Conducted research comparing the educational attainment of students in charter schools with that of students in public schools. Work included collecting data, creating a database, and running regressions.

Cover Letters

A cover letter offers another means to highlight how your education, experience, and skills match an employer's needs. Like your resume, your cover letter should be brief, written in plain English, and echo the language in the job description. This guide takes a basic approach to cover letters, envisioning them as consisting of two or three paragraphs, with the first identifying the specific position sought and the applicant's status: *I am currently a graduate student earning a master's degree in public administration at the Colin Powell School of Civic and Global Leadership.*

Each of the two sample cover letters presented below offers a different approach to organizing the information that follows the introduction. The first—written for a research job—takes its lead from the resume and addresses relevant education and then relevant experience. The second—for a fundraising job—lists the job's major qualifications and then shows, for each in turn, how the applicant's education and experience relate to them.

Remember, cover letters are de facto writing samples. They have to be flawless. A typo or a grammatical error can sink your chances. Proofread, proofread, and proofread again!

Have a Strong Opening Paragraph

The most straightforward approach is to open by stating the position for which you are applying and your current status.

Please consider me for the position of policy coordinator for Director Spratt (Announcement 001). I am currently a graduate student at the City College of New York and will graduate with a master's degree in public administration in May.

If you possess a key qualification—years of grant experience in the example below—such information can make an opening more impressive.

Please consider me for the position of policy coordinator (Announcement 001). I am currently a graduate student at the City College of New York and will graduate with a master's degree in public administration in June. I also have five years of experience in grant management.

If you have some special connection to the position, add that to the opening.

Please consider me for the position of policy coordinator for Director Spratt (Announcement 001). I am currently a graduate student at the City College of New York and will graduate with a master's degree in public administration in May. My budget professor, former Director Bancroft, wrote to you about my interest in the position.

Please, **do not** start a cover letter with any version of the following: “I think my background offers a close match to the requirements of the position.” Frankly, the employer does not care that you think you are a close match. That is for you to prove and the employer to decide.

State Why You Want the Job

Some experts recommend that cover letters include a statement explaining why the applicant wants the job. It may help, but only if you otherwise meet the qualifications for the position. However, general platitudes, such as “I have always desired to be a part of a dynamic, success-oriented enterprise like yours” probably have little value and may hurt more than help.

It is also not likely to help much if you make your reason all about you: “The job will give me the chance to expand my skill set and build a record of success in the nonprofit field.”

Instead, add a statement of why you want the job, if you can make it both specific and mostly about the employer, as in the examples below:

The new high school tutoring program you recently announced on your website seemed like a great opportunity to translate my long-standing interest in urban education into real change for my community.

I was inspired to apply after witnessing your strong advocacy of the recently enacted campaign finance reform. If not for your efforts, I believe the interests of a significant portion of our community would still be underrepresented in Albany.

I have been a long-time fan of Councilwoman Inez, particularly her work advocating on behalf of abused women.

As someone with a keen interest in international relations and five years' experience working in that field, I was impressed when I saw the range of work your agency has done on building better relations with other countries through cultural exchanges.

Sample Cover Letter for a Research Position

Tamara Andrews
46 99th Street
Dunlop Hills, NY 33300

November 11, 2013

Ms. Ann Wakefield
Director of Research
Urban Research Authority of New York
New York, NY 10999

This letter accompanies Tamara's research resume. It first addresses her relevant education, then her relevant experience.

Dear Ms. Wakefield:

Please consider me as an applicant for the research position with the Urban Research Authority (Vacancy No. 3354). I am currently a graduate student at the City College of New York, pursuing a master's degree in public administration.

In my graduate program, I have earned a GPA of 3.6 and have completed a variety of courses necessary for effective research work, including statistics (regression analysis), research methods, economics, and public policy. In addition, an analysis I completed on the relationship between child nutrition and success in school won the Judith and Allan Flint Scholarship Award for research excellence. The *Journal of Childhood Education* published that paper in its June 2010 edition.

Relevant experience.

I have also been an assistant researcher at the Urban Scholars Research Foundation, working against tight deadlines to complete research on the educational attainment of students in charter schools compared with that of students in public schools. Specific tasks included collecting data, setting up a database, running regressions, and writing up preliminary research and analytic results.

The employer requires experience with regression. The letter mentions it here and above in the list of relevant courses.

My graduate program has used many of your organization's reports in case studies, and I have long admired the relevance and clarity of your work. I believe my background could help continue your excellent work and have attached my resume for your consideration. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

The closing includes a reason for applying that is specific and focuses on the employer's needs.

Sincerely,

Tamara Andrews

Sample Cover Letter for a Fundraising Position

Tamara Andrews
46 99th Street
Dunlop Hills, NY 33300

November 11, 2013

Mr. James Durante
Director of Development and Institutional Giving
American Poverty and Urban Affairs Center
New York, NY 10999

This letter targets a fundraising job. In the second paragraph, Tamara addresses each qualification in turn.

Dear Mr. Durante:

Thank you for the opportunity to apply for the fundraising position with your organization (Vacancy No. 99887). I am currently a graduate student in the Public Service Management program at City College and will earn my master's degree in public administration in June. Professor Kandis Bergman, your former colleague at Yale, suggested that I apply.

I offer the following experience and training:

Fundraising – I have experience with two major nonprofit organizations that exposed me to almost every aspect of fundraising, including writing grant applications, maintaining budget data, writing annual reports, and researching donors.

Raiser's Edge – At the Women's Policy Institute, I had primary responsibility for maintaining the accuracy and integrity of our Raiser's Edge database along with supplemental databases for events and communications with donors.

Record of success – My work helped raise over \$3 million in grants and donor gifts for the Women's Policy Institute.

The letter substantiates a record of success by giving a specific example.

Thank you again for the opportunity to apply. I read recently of the great strides you have made in dealing with the problem of homelessness in our community and would be honored to be a part of an organization with such an outstanding record of success.

The closing offers a specific reason for applying that reflects knowledge of the employer. Do your homework!

Sincerely,

Tamara Andrews

Notes

