

Public Service Internships: Guide to Writing Resumes and Cover Letters

2011

Charles B. Rangel Center for Public Service, City College of New York, New York, NY 10031



Guide to Writing Resumes and Cover Letters

Rangel Center
2011

The Charles B. Rangel Center at the City College of New York sponsors research, provides scholarships, and undertakes other activities designed to promote diversity in public service. This guide was prepared as part of the career services that the Center provides students in City College's Public Service Management Program. It was written by R. Mark Musell, Deputy Director of the Center.

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THE BASICS

Resumes and cover letters alone will seldom win you a job, but they can easily lose you one. So how do you maximize the chances of winning further consideration, and minimize the chances of losing out altogether? The guidance in this handbook can be summed up in two overarching principles:

First, give them what they want! Figure out what an employer needs and convince her you've got it. Instead, students often make resumes and cover letters about what they themselves think is important. Remember, it isn't about you; it's about employers and their needs. They have work to do, and hiring is all about finding someone who can get it done, and get it done right.

Second, make it easy for employers to determine that you have what they want. Employers have too much work and too little time. You won't win jobs by adding unnecessarily to the busy lives of already overburdened employers. Your written material should make it a quick and easy matter for potential employers to figure out if you have what they need. Among other things, that means clear headings, proper grammar, and concision.

So how does one apply these general principles in the case of cover letters and resumes? Some specific guidance follows. It focuses on common problems observed in student resumes and cover letters. Examples are modified versions taken from actual student materials.

Know Your Potential Employer

Give employers what they want? Short of reading minds, how does one know what an employer wants? Well, vacancy notices and job descriptions offer a wealth of information. An organization's web site can help too.

Customize each resume and cover letter to address the experience, skills and abilities the employer is looking for. What I often find instead is that students make little effort to address what employers say is required.

In a recent example, a student's cover letter asserted that several years working for an organization dedicated to preventing teen HIV had prepared him well for a job with an environmental conservation agency. But how is that? What does one have to do with the other? Nothing on the organization's website or in the vacancy notice suggested that the employing agency or the position to be filled had any involvement whatsoever with teens, HIV, or any activities associated with the student's former position. Worse, the student's materials failed to mention course work directly relevant to the position.

If you don't do a little homework in advance and then customize your resume and cover letter, you are wasting both your time and theirs.

Organize Information to Reflect the Employer's Priorities

Not only does your material have to contain relevant information, it also has to give emphasis to what is relevant. Employers are busy; don't force them to work at determining what you have to offer them.

- **Highlight Relevant Duties and Accomplishments** - One way to approach this is to eliminate the extraneous. If your resume lists all ten responsibilities you held in your last internship, and only five of those relate directly to the job for which you are applying, pare down the list so as to focus on the relevant skills. At a minimum, list the most relevant items first. The same goes for accomplishments associated with jobs; push the relevant ones to a prime location.
- **Highlight Relevant Jobs** - Also consider omitting information on lesser jobs you've held, especially if it buries more relevant information further down in a resume. For example, suppose that your last job was cashier, but your most relevant experience was the Parks Department internship you had before that. In a chronological resume the most recent job--that is, the irrelevant cashier job--would come first at the top of your list of jobs. Instead, list the Parks Department first and eliminate mention of the cashier job or push it lower down in the resume under the heading "Other Experience."
- **Use the Cover Letter** - The cover letter is another means of emphasizing what makes you attractive as a candidate. In fact, that is the chief function of a cover letter. Use it to summarize all the most relevant experience and training you have to offer.

Echo Their Language

Another way to increase the chances that a potential employer picks up on your value is to describe yourself using their terms. Remember, this is about giving them what they want and making it easy for them to see you have it.

Say, for example, that you are applying 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, you would be better served if you echo the employer and change your resume to describe the years you spent acting as your agency's "liaison" with outside organizations. In the same way, 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.

In a recent example, a student applied for a position that specifically required experience with simple regression analysis. Her resume and cover letter described course work in "quantitative methods." She would increase her chances with "quantitative methods, including regression analysis." Don't bet on the person at the other end of the process knowing that your college covers regression in a quantitative methods course. Echo!

Create a Consistent Persona

Organize the information in the material you submit for a job so that each item, including personal statements and letters of recommendation, highlights your most valuable qualifications. Your material should communicate a consistent story about what makes you an attractive candidate, with each item echoing and reinforcing the others.

Letters of Recommendation

Don't be reluctant to ask for letters of recommendation. It is a normal part of work and academic life. But don't make it unnecessarily complicated for the person you ask. Follow some simple rules:

- *Provide a description of the position you are applying for.*
- *Provide complete instructions on how, when, and where to submit the recommendation.*
- *Provide a draft, or at least some guidance on what points to cover.*

That last point is particularly important. To create the consistent persona described in the text, you have to give the letter writer some guidance. Simply ask if your recommender would feel comfortable mentioning those things you have determined to be most critical to your chances.

In summer 2010, CCNY had its first graduate-level White House intern. The lucky student had a deep interest and lots of experience in promoting the social welfare of immigrants. With guidance from faculty:

- Her personal statement described her family's struggles as immigrants and how they overcame those challenges.
- The required policy paper was about immigration reform.
- Her resume highlighted her experience working with immigrant groups, as well as course work related to the subject.
- Her cover letter reinforced her message by summarizing the most attractive aspects of her experience and education, focusing on immigration.
- Finally, her letters of recommendation continued the theme. She obtained one letter from the supervisor of the immigration organization for which she worked. The other came from a professor aware of her commitment to the immigration cause.

In this way, each component of her application material reinforced the message that the candidate was a person committed to and experienced in an important area of national concern, exactly what the program looks for. She got the position. You can't argue with success!

Be Clear

You lower your chances of getting credit for qualifications if your resume and cover letters are too general, too wordy, or too technical. Be specific in describing your qualifications, avoid technical language, and avoid extra words.

Be Specific and Concrete

In the example below the job description is too general and misses the chance to advertise experience with presentations....a specific requirement of the job to which the student is applying. The first revision is not only more specific, it also lists the relevant experience first. If the position also requires experience “planning and coordinating,” the resume entry might be further revised as shown in the second revision below.

Original: Too general

- Responsible for office activities and operations.

1st Revision: More specific, reflects employer’s priorities

- Prepared public presentations, arranged travel, and planned conferences.

2nd Revision: More specific, reflects employer’s priorities, echoes employer’s language

- Prepared public presentations planned and coordinated travel and conferences.

The following example is from a student’s resume that lists “Relevant Courses.” The courses are listed in an order and described in a way that fails to advertise that the student has some of the grant writing experience the employer seeks.

Original: Too general

RELEVANT COURSES:

Human Resources, Management, Public Service Writing

Revision: Made more specific and re-ordered to reflect employer’s needs:

RELEVANT COURSES:

Public Service Writing (including grant writing), Human Resources, Management

In yet another 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? In what way? Worse the application required examples of specific instances 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 “your 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 in targeted groups.” 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 ostentatious

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 work in social work and psychology.

Avoid Specialized, Technical Language

You won't get 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 unless you are sure the potential employer will understand.

In one example, a student's job description stated that she:

"Coordinated sub-certifications under Sarbanes-Oxley."

That description is appropriate for jobs in finance. Otherwise, she would do better to describe her work using more accessible language.

"Coordinated the preparation of reports required by federal financial disclosure rules."

In another example, a college admissions officer used the following to describe part of her job:

"Managed the 'Hobson's Apply Yourself System'."

You won't get credit for that experience from a potential employer who has never heard of the Hobson's system. If you aren't sure, better to be safe and write something like:

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

The same rule applies to abbreviations. Don't use abbreviations or acronyms unless you are sure an employer is familiar with them. Otherwise spell it out. Nobody will be impressed with your two years of experience with the BMI, unless they know it is the Black Male Initiative. Spell it out if you are not sure.

Be Concise

Eliminate unnecessary words. Potential employers are busy. Don't force them to take the

time 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 student resumes.

Original: Was responsible for coordination of office work on the annual report to donors.
More Concise: Coordinated work on the annual report to donors.

Original: Track clients for 20 units to ensure that each unit is provided adequate staff.
More Concise: Developed staffing plans for 20 offices.

In another example, a student's cover letter makes an obtuse reference to having "served on committees as needed." Why "as needed?" Would anyone assume that the student served on committees that didn't need her? And what committees? The approach is not only wordy, but lacking in specificity and concreteness. Was it the hallway decorating committee or the committee to draw up options for dealing with a major funding shortfall? It makes a difference. The student would be better served to write:

Chaired the City College presidential search committee.

A great deal of wordiness in resumes and cover letters lurks in smothered verbs. Smothered verbs occur when writers convert perfectly good verbs into nouns. For example, the verb "decide" becomes the noun "decision." The practice adds words, but not meaning. You can often spot smothered verbs in words ending in "ment," "ion," "tion," and "ing." Below are examples of smothered verbs and better choices.

*Original: For two years I oversaw **the management of** a staff of ten.*
*More Concise: For two years I **managed** a staff of ten.*

*Original: After much consideration I **arrived at the decision to** apply for the internship.*
*More Concise: After much consideration I **decided** to apply for the internship, or I applied for the position*

Other Advice

Don't Start a Resume With "Objectives"

Employers don't care about your objectives. They know that students change objectives for each job. Thus, the information is meaningless. Instead, consider starting the resume with a summary or synopsis. That is, start with a brief *two-line* overview of your education, experience, and skills. A summary is an easy way for the employer to determine if 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, as well as three-years of experience in translation and a master's degree in public administration.

Have the Right Opening for a Cover Letter

The most straight forward 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 May. 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 doesn't care that you think you are a close match. That is what the employer decides. Remember, it isn't about you.

Make it Easy to Read

Use bold headings, bullets, and proper grammar. Proof-read or, better yet, have someone else proof read for you. A fresh set of eyes often catches errors that authors miss.

Properly Name Your Degree

It is a master's degree in public administration, with an apostrophe in master's. Alternatively, you can write "the degree of master of public administration."

Lower case the degree (that is, don't capitalize it) when naming the degree 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?

If you wish to abbreviate, use periods after each letter or omit them, but be consistent. Spell out the degree if you are unsure the employer knows what the abbreviation MPA means.

List Your Grade Point Average

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

Use a Consistent and Appropriate Grammatical Form

When listing duties in a resume, use a consistent grammatical form. In the example below, the last entry in a list of duties from a resume's job description switches form and should be re-written to eliminate the "ing."

- o Organize meetings
- o Prepare reports
- o ~~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.

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

Don't List Reference

Unless asked for one, a list of references is unnecessary. If an employer is interested in you, they will ask for references. Do not write "references available on request." It wastes space and states the obvious.

Sample Cover Letters

This guide takes a basic approach to cover letters, envisioning them as consisting of two or three paragraphs that highlight for an employer a job seeker's *most relevant* qualifications. Such cover letters open with a statement of the specific position sought and a statement of the applicant's current status. The next paragraph describes an applicant's most relevant and attractive qualifications. The emphasis is on what you offer that can help them. It is about the employer, not you. The final paragraph thanks employers for their consideration.

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

The two cover letters that follow concern a job with the transportation authority of a large urban area. The job involves both research and program management concerning sustainability and the urban area's major transportation systems.

In the first example, the student has little experience in transportation, sustainability, or in research. So the cover letter focuses on the management skills and the knowledge of urban affairs acquired in the classroom. The student also draws into the letter her experience in different community groups. While not directly relevant, it may demonstrate to an employer that the student has some familiarity with the various communities within which the transportation authority must operate.

In the second example, the student focuses on his experience working on sustainability with the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, DC. The student also skillfully demonstrates some knowledge of and commitment to the subject. The student goes on to highlight his research experience, as the transportation authority's position involves research. The student rightly is specific when describing the types of work and analytical techniques the research work involved. Be specific and concrete!

1st street
Fisherton, NY 11813
227 833-0012
HGold@hotmail.com

November 11, 2010

Ms. Ann Wakefield, Director
Transportation Authority of New York
New York, New York 10999

Dear Ms. Wakefield:

Please consider me as an applicant for a research position with the Urban Transportation Authority. 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 studied US transportation policy from a number of perspectives. In Metropolitan Communities, we examined theories of urbanization and urban life, including those having to do with urban transportation systems like New York's. I have also completed course work in Urban Economics, which analyzed the economic theories that deal with housing, transportation, crime, rent control and zoning. In addition, my project management and analytical skills have been honed in courses on budgeting, management, statistics, policy, and public policy writing.

I also offer a broad knowledge of New York and its diverse communities, which I gained from many years of community service. As a Weston Scholar at City College, I devoted over 400 hours per semester to different community groups, including the Harlem 40, the New York Mission Society reading program, and the Emergency Nurse Service of the Bronx.

I have attached my resume for your consideration. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

Sincerely,

Hermione Gingold

James Whistler
PO Box 999
New York, NY 19919

October 29th, 2010

Recruitment Office
Transportation Authority of New York
New York, New York 10999

Dear Recruitment Officer:

Thank you for the opportunity to apply for the research/management position with the Urban Transportation Authority (Vacancy number 99887x). 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 May.

I have a long-standing interest in sustainability, which led me this past summer to take an internship with the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, DC. While there, I worked on a team researching best practices for incorporating sustainability into existing projects. We found that, without exception, the upfront costs of implementing sustainable strategies are recouped ten-fold in a short period of time. Given the Port Authority's commitment to sustainability and carbon neutrality, and given the current budget deficits in New York and New Jersey, there is no better time to research sustainable alternatives for our vast transportation infrastructures.

I also offer a solid background in writing, policy research and analysis. I have worked for two years as a research assistant to Professor Ann Linkfield on an analysis of congestion pricing proposals in New York. The work involved extensive data collection and analysis, including the development of multivariate regression models.

I look forward to hearing more about the exciting opportunity to be a fellow at the Port Authority.

Sincerely,

James Whistler

Sample Resumes

This guide favors use of a chronological resume. Such resumes are lists of degrees earned and jobs held. Lists are in reverse chronological order, starting with the most recent degree or job and then working back in time. For students without extensive work experience, a section describing degrees earned comes first in a resume, followed by sections on work and volunteer experience. Unless you have extensive experience, keep the resume to one page.

Some experts promote resumes focusing on skill sets. Such resumes have currency in certain fields. They are not generally welcome in public service.

The two resumes that follow pertain to the job with a regional transportation authority described in previous pages. The job involves both research and program management concerning sustainability and transportation systems.

Both resumes correctly use bold headings for “education,” “experience,” and other entries. In the first example, Hermoine has little relevant experience. To compensate, her resume focuses on relevant academic work by bulleting courses that prepared her for the job (urban economics, statistics, and management). She also lists “community service” before her work experience on the assumption that the broad exposure to the community she acquired through her service would appeal more to the employer than her work as an office assistant.

In the second example, James focuses on his knowledge and experience with the subject of sustainability. In the list of courses, his sustainability class is listed first, followed by management. The first two jobs listed under “experience” are also directly related to the job. James might have considered deleting reference to the job at Front Place Media because media experience isn’t directly relevant to the job. In doing so, he would give more prominence to the following volunteer service, which does directly relate to the job.

Hermione Gingold

1st street

Fisherton, NY 11813

227 833-0012

HGGold@hotmail.com

EDUCATION

Master's in Public Administration, City College of New York (CUNY)

anticipated graduation date June 2011, GPA 3.9

Relevant Course Work:

- o Policy Analysis
- o Urban Economics
- o Metropolitan Communities
- o Management
- o Statistical Analysis
- o Budget and Finance

Awards: Public Service Tuition Scholarship, Public Service Stipend of \$1000 for educational expenses for 4 semesters 2009 to 2010.

Bachelor of Arts in Political Science *Cum Laude*, City College of New York

B.A. 2009, GPA 3.2

COMMUNITY SERVICE EXPERIENCE

Weston Community Service Fellowship, City College of New York, 2008- 2009

Devoted over 400 hours per semester to work with the Harlem 40, the Young Women's Academy of Harlem, and Lenox Hill Hospital Volunteers. Helped underserved students prepare for SAT tests and GED tests. Helped poor patients apply for health benefits under various City programs. Mentored more than 20 young women through the college application process, and saw all of them admitted to major universities.

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

June 2008 - May 2010

Office of Health Insurance Access, New York, NY

Administrative Assistant

Assisted the Director of the Office of Teen Pregnancy Prevention. Wrote business letters, filed forms, entered data, arranged business travel, responded to client inquiries, assisted with preparation of annual report.

COMPUTER SKILLS:

Microsoft Office, including MS Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Access

James Whistler
PO Box 999, New York, NY 19919
676-779-0009
Whistle99@kmail.com

Education

City College New York, New York, NY

Master's Degree in Public Administration, Expected Graduation May 2011
Concentration: Environmental Policy, **Current Cumulative GPA: 4.0**

Relevant Courses: Urban Sustainability, Management of Public Organizations, Economics of Urban Areas.

Long Branch College, New York, NY

B.A. with Honors, Media and Cultural Studies, 2007, **Cumulative GPA: 3.77**

Professional Experience

City College New York- Research Assistant

New York, NY January 2009- Present

Collected data for cost-benefit analyses of various congestion pricing proposals. Created bibliographic data base on articles and research related to the subject. Managed project budget and volunteer undergraduate research assistants.

Environmental Protection Agency

Washington, D.C. Summer 2010

Worked as part of a team studying best practices for incorporating sustainability measures in existing transportation, energy, and other infrastructure projects. Wrote draft reports of findings. Helped prepare Congressional testimony.

Front Place Media- Interactive Web Editor

Brooklyn, NY January 2008- May 2009

- Wrote and proofed all newsletters, promo copy, banners, landing page copy, promotional items, and modules
- Researched, cross referenced and quality-assured all content for editorial department by using HTML and Microsoft editing
- Maintained a system-wide Content Management System (CMS)

Volunteer

Sustainable CCNY Working Group- Procurement Team Member

New York, NY January 2010-Present

Developed “green” guidelines for purchasing furniture, equipment, and supplies for various departments across the University

Special Interests and Skills

Adept at Microsoft Applications on both PC and Mac formats, types 87 WPM

