Crack the Code: Create An ATS-Friendly Resumé

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What is an ATS?

An Applicant Tracking System (ATS) is software used by many employers to screen resumés before they ever reach a hiring manager. The system works by extracting the raw text from the resumé file, then using algorithms to parse the content into structured data fields such as job titles, skills, and education. It then scans for keywords and phrases that align with the job description, and finally scores and ranks the resumé based on relevance.

Nearly 90% of employers rely on ATS for screening applications.

Every time an applicant applies for a job on a company website or online job board, their resumé likely goes through ATS.

Approximately 70-80% of resumés never make it through to a hiring manager.

In this handout you will find:

Proven tips to get your resumé past the ATS and into the hands of hiring managers

TIPS & TRICKS TO BEAT THE ATS

Use a Simple Layout: Stick to clean, professional formatting with clear section headings (e.g., Education, Experience, Skills). ATS only recognizes traditional headings so refrain from using creative headings.

Avoid fancy designs and templates, two-column layouts, photos, charts, tables, and graphics—ATS may not read them. Skip headers, footers, and text boxes for better compatibility.

Optimize Keywords: Tailor your resumé to the job description by including keywords from the job posting. Use exact phrases for skills, qualifications, and job titles as applicable.

Use keywords naturally—overstuffing can make your resumé look artificial and may get it flagged. A perfect keyword match isn't necessary. Avoid pasting the job description in the background since ATS can detect this.

Use Standard Fonts: Use ATS-friendly fonts like Arial, Times New Roman, or Calibri (11–12pt for body text). Headings and name can be larger. Limit to 3 font sizes and 2 font styles to prevent ATS compatibility issues.

Formatting: Spell out terms and include abbreviations where relevant [e.g., Certified Public Accountant (CPA)].

Only use vertical divider lines in the contact section (i.e. Phone | Email | LinkedIn). Avoid vertical divider lines in the body of the resume.

Education Section: List the university name and degree on separate lines. Use a comma between degree and major (e.g., Bachelor of Science, Accounting). For majors with emphases, use a hyphen (e.g., English - Creative Writing). List minors on the line below major (e.g., Minor, Biology). A GPA can be included in this section (e.g., GPA: 3.9).

If you have two or more degrees from the same university, list the university name with each degree.

Bullet points in an 'Education' section (other than GPA) get flagged by ATS. List relevant coursework under a 'Relevant Coursework' subheading and any educational achievements under a separate 'Achievements' section following the 'Education' section.

Experience Section: Begin bullet points with strong action verbs. State in past tense (even with current positions) since you want to highlight achievements and results rather than daily responsibilities.

Showcase skills in an experience section—ATS values them more there. Use "Experience" in the header (e.g., Work Experience, Leadership Experience, Volunteer Experience, Project Experience) to get credit for time spent using skills. Always include dates and use a chronological resume over a functional/skills one.

For skills that can't be accounted for in your 'Experience' section, create a separate "Skills" section. Use bullet points in columns to ensure ATS reads each skill individually.

Use the company's legal name and exact job title. For smaller companies, include LLC or Inc if applicable. If you change positions within the same company, list the company information again as if it is a different employer.

If working at a university, include the department with the school name so as not to confuse ATS (e.g., Utah Valley University - Career & Internship Center).

Create in the Right Format: It's best to create your resumé in Word since it's a more robust system and optimized for ATS. Avoid using multiple editing platforms (i.e. Google Docs - Word - PDF) because the PDF can become corrupted. If you create the resumé in Google Docs, you must save it directly to PDF.

Avoid creating a resumé in Canva and other online platforms. The algorithim is different and doesn't work well with ATS. Also, ATS can't read documents created with text boxes.

Save and submit your resumé as a Word document (.docx) or a text-based PDF, with PDF preferred to ensure the formatting remains intact for when a hiring manager receives it. Avoid image-based PDFs (scanned files), as ATS cannot read or extract text from them.

When saving a Word document as a PDF on a PC, using "Save As" → PDF can sometimes cause formatting and encoding issues, resulting in unreadable characters or square boxes within ATS. In contrast, "Save as Adobe PDF" uses Adobe's more accurate conversion tool, preserving text integrity and ensuring better ATS compatibility. If Adobe Acrobat isn't available, you may also save using
File > Export >Create PDF/XPS Document > Publish.

Test PDF for Compatibility: PDFs can become corrupted with repeated use. Before submitting, test for corruption and compatibility. To prevent issues, save a fresh copy from Word to PDF every 15 days or monthly.

To test ATS compatibility, copy text from your PDF in Adobe and paste it into Word. If compatible, all text will be selectable and properly formatted. Most formatting will remain intact.

When the PDF file is corrupt, you are still able to select all of the text and paste it into the blank Word document. However, it will look significantly different from the original. You may see boxes instead of bullet points. There may also be spelling errors that appear on the Word document that were not part of the original document. This is an indication that the PDF is starting to become corrupt and you need to resave the PDF.

Now if you see a lot of extra spaces or question marks where the bullet points should be, or information that's jumbled together, these are signs that the PDF has become very corrupted.
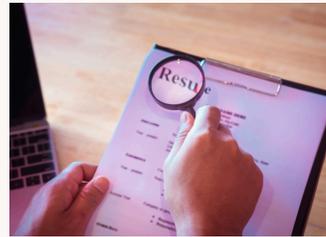
Graphic & Scanned Resumés: These resumés aren't compatible with ATS. If you try run a test with either of these types, you won't be able to select the text. It selects it all as an image. Therefore, when you try to paste it into the blank Word document, it pastes it as an image. This resumé would not be compatible with ATS.

Canva & Online Resumé Creation Tools: If you test a resumé created with online tools such as Canva, or from companies promoting their own AI tool for resumé creation, the PDF version may look fine to the human eye. However, the code at the back end for the ATS to read that PDF is not correct since it was made by an online tool. ATS just reads it as one big text box.

When you run the test, formatting may disappear entirely. Bullet points may be present but hard to read. Letters might change (e.g., T's to D's), information could be jumbled, out of order, or missing, and random words may run together. This resumé will not be ATS-compatible.

ADDITIONAL ATS ESSENTIALS

Issues with Two-Column Resumés: Two- column resumés may create a compatibility issue with ATS since many ATS systems struggle to read multi-column formats. They may misinterpret or skip information in the second column.

Information may be parsed incorrectly and therefore be overlooked. In addition, resumé content may also end up out of order and mixed with the wrong section heading.

When applying for jobs online which are highly likely to use ATS, make sure to upload an ATS-friendly resumé in the resumé section. If you really want a human recruiter to see your two-column resumé, you may upload it in the 'Additional Document' section. Also, two-column resumés will work fine if you are emailing the resume directly to a recruiter or hiring manager.

Proofread for Accuracy: It is essential that you proofread your resumé for spelling and grammar errors prior to submitting it. Spelling or grammar mistakes can prevent your resumé from being properly read by ATS.

Don't rely solely on spell check since it can't detect context and may therefore miss correctly spelled, but incorrect words (e.g., hear vs. here). Make sure to also do a manual review yourself or have a friend review it.

How to Tell if a Company Uses ATS:

Job Application Process: Many companies integrate ATS into their career pages and require candidates to upload resumés through the portal and answer standardized questions. If a company requires candidates to fill out a detailed online application form instead of simply emailing a resumé, it's likely they use an ATS.

If the job posting is listed on major job boards like LinkedIn, Indeed, etc., there's a good chance the company uses an ATS. Many employers integrate their ATS with these platforms to streamline the application process.

Job Description & Keywords: ATS systems scan for keywords. If a job description contains a lot of skills, qualifications, or industry-specific jargon, it could indicate the company uses an ATS to filter resumés based on keyword matches.

Companies that include a set of pre-screening questions might be using an ATS to filter out applicants who don't meet certain criteria.

Email Correspondence: If you receive an automated generic confirmation email after submitting your application, it's often an indication that the company uses ATS. These systems typically send emails to applicants to update them on their application status.

References: Quinncia (quinncia.io) ATS 1.0, 2.0, & 3.0 webinars