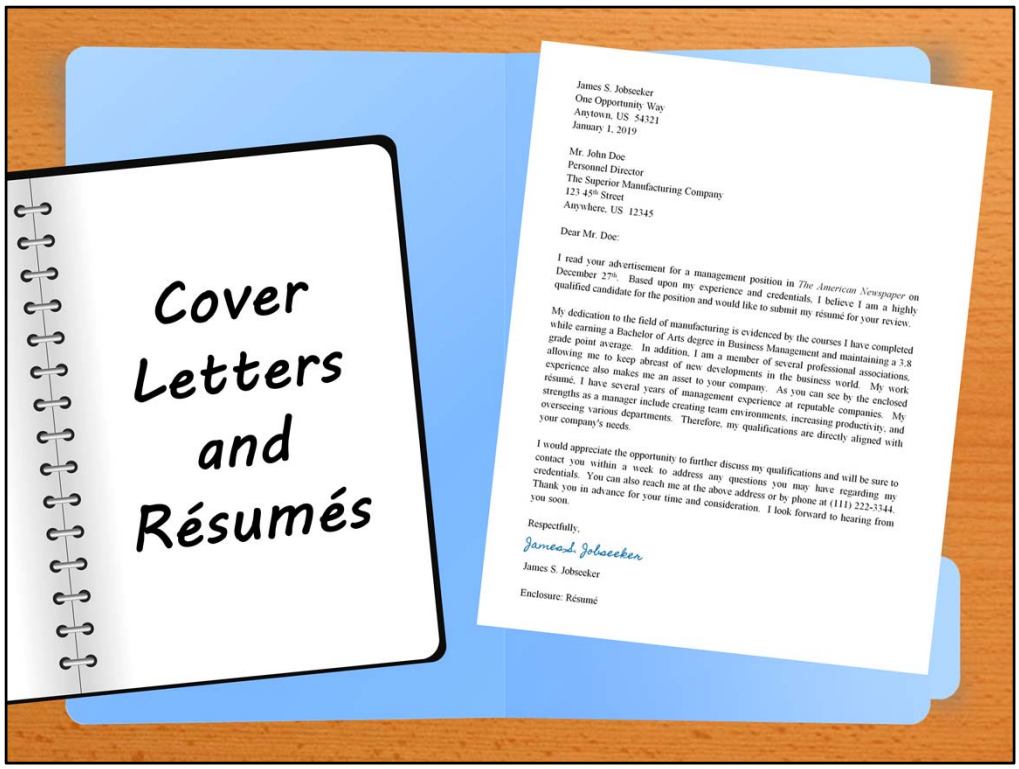
Module 1: Why Is Writing Important?
Topic 2 Content: Cover Letters and Résumés



Cover Letters and Résumés

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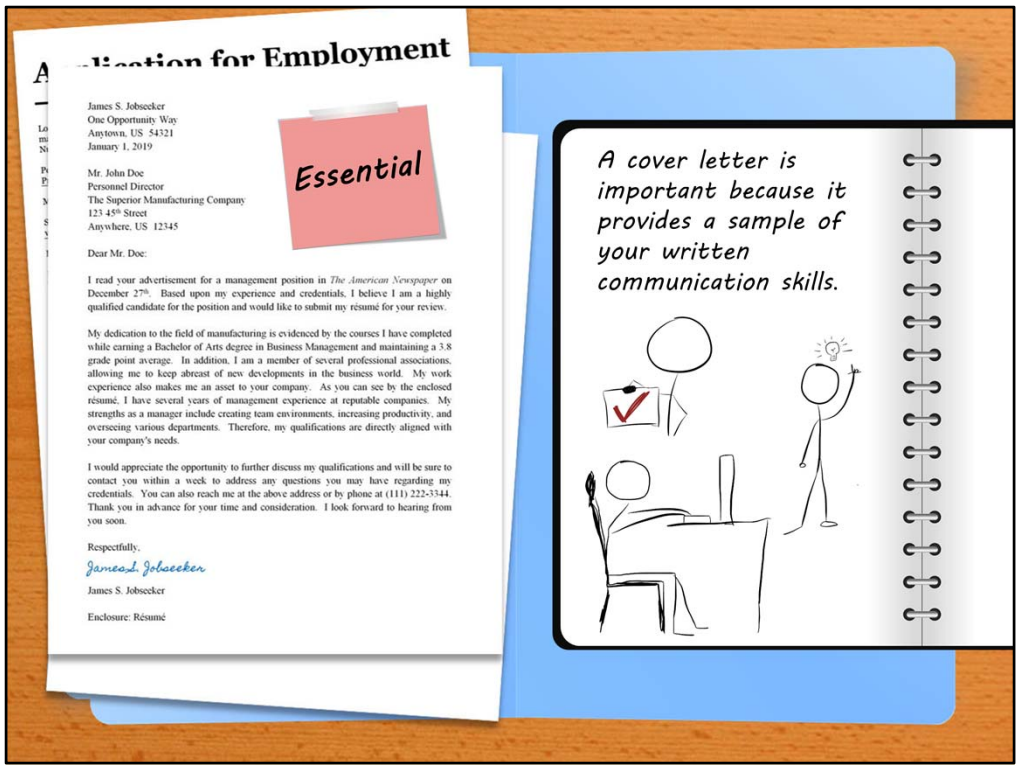

A cover letter is an introductory letter that accompanies a résumé when applying for employment or other activities. It introduces you and your résumé to a potential employer and is essentially a pitch to convince the reader to explore your résumé further. You should consider cover letters an essential part of the application process because they accomplish two goals: they show the reader you possess the skills he or she is seeking, and they convince your reader that the company or organization will benefit from hiring you.

Your argument, or reason for being the best person for the job, is the most important part of a cover letter. You should describe some of the qualifications that prove this, but since you do not have much space, carefully choose what to include in your argument. You want your argument to be as powerful as possible, but you do not want to bog down your reader with excessive details. Remember, a cover letter is only an introduction or first impression; if you are the best candidate, there will be other opportunities to offer more details about yourself, such as in your résumé or during an interview.

A cover letter is also important because it provides a sample of your written communication skills. Showing you can write well demonstrates your intelligence and helps to establish your credibility. Always write cover letters with care because they create an image of who you are as a professional.

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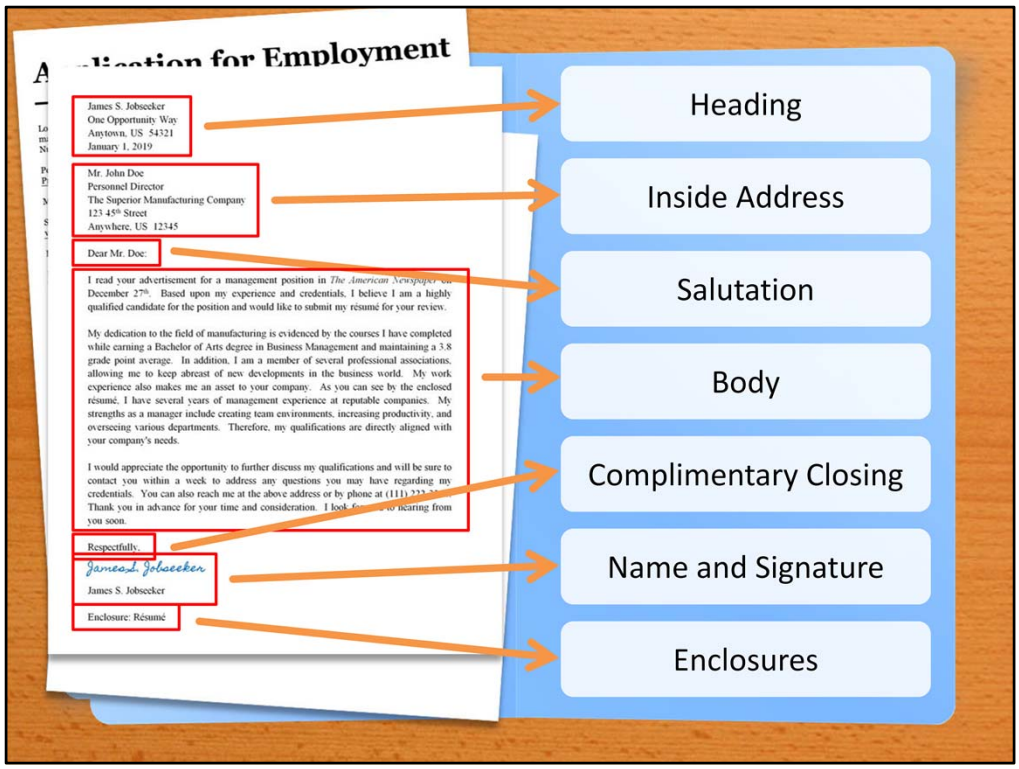

The content of a cover letter includes three short, well-written paragraphs in which you clearly state the job or position for which you are applying, discuss your qualifications, and provide a courteous, closing paragraph in which you provide your contact information. Take a look at this example of a properly formatted cover letter.

The first part of the letter is the heading, which provides your name, mailing address, and the date of your letter. The inside address lists the name and title of the person to whom you are writing and his or her mailing address. This is followed by the salutation, or greeting.

The body of the letter includes the standard three paragraphs in which you discuss why you are writing, why you are the best person for the job, and when you plan to contact the prospective employer for follow-up.

After the body of the letter, you need to include the complimentary closing along with your name and signature. Finally, the Enclosures section lists any other documents that accompany the letter, such as your résumé.

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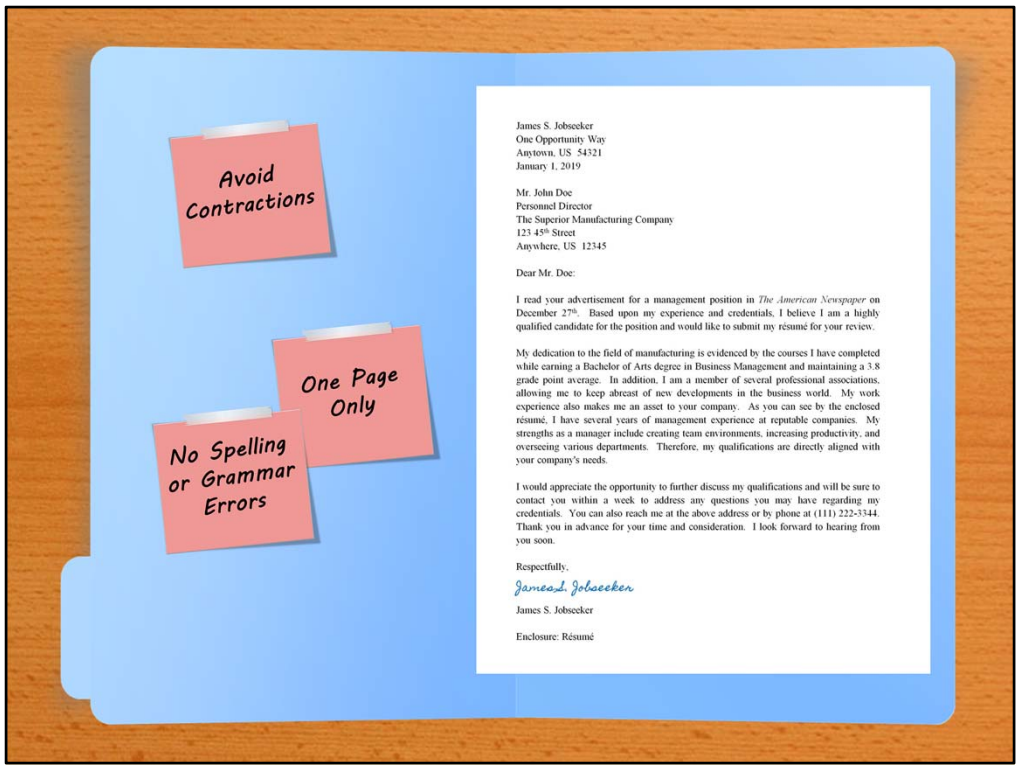

Take note of a few technical aspects regarding formatting. First, the text of the letter is single-spaced, not double-spaced as you are accustomed to using in formal papers and essays. However, observe that there is a double space between paragraphs and between different sections of the letter.

The salutation begins with the word "Dear" and uses the recipient's last name, not first name. You may have to do some research to determine the name of the recipient. If you cannot determine the name of the person who is making hiring decisions, you can address the letter to other titles such as "Human Resources Director" or "Hiring Committee." Instead of a comma, a formal letter such as a cover letter uses a colon at the end of the salutation. On the other hand, the complimentary closing should always end with a comma, and only the first word of the closing is capitalized. When typing your letter, leave three spaces between the closing and your typed name. After printing your letter, use a blue or black pen to sign your name in that empty space.

Finally, to list your résumé as an attachment, type the word "Enclosure" with a capital "E" followed by a colon, and then list the attachment. If you have more than one attachment, such as a résumé and a sample of work, remember to type "Enclosures" in the plural form. It is a good idea in this case to also indicate the number of enclosures and list each attachment on its own line.

As with all formal documents, you should avoid using contractions such as *I'm* or *it's*. Also, your cover letter should not be longer than one page. Make sure to proofread your cover letter numerous times to ensure there are no spelling or grammar errors. An error makes it appear as though you are sloppy or just careless, and no one wants to hire someone who does not take the time to make sure his or her work is correct.

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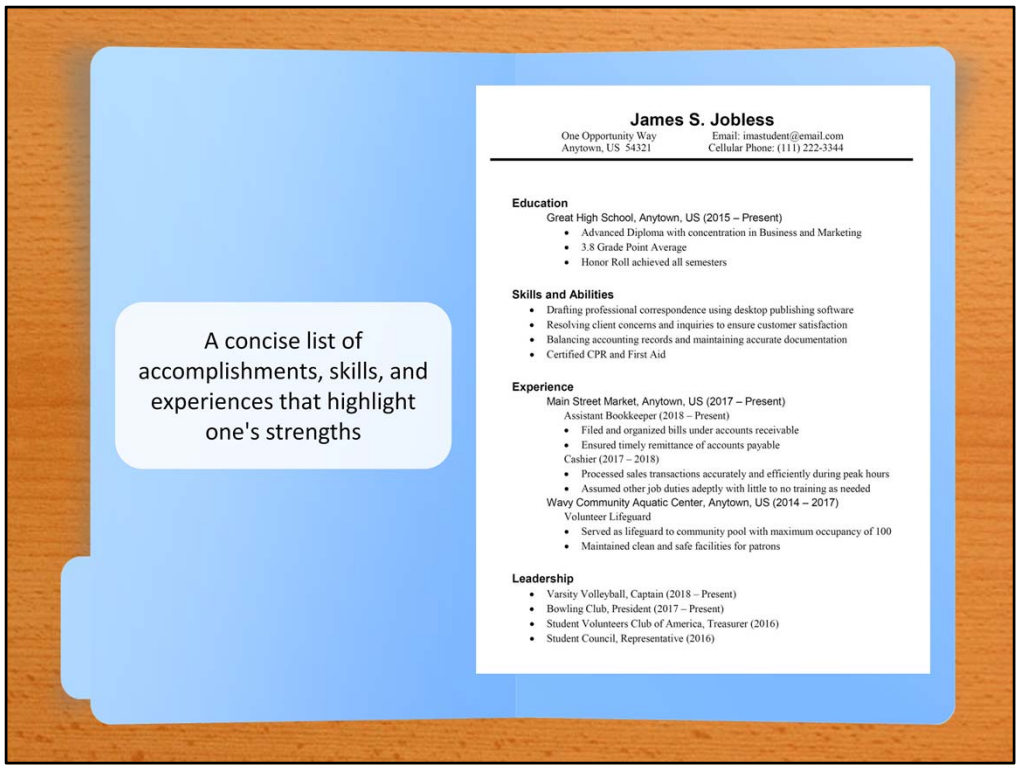

A résumé is a concise list of accomplishments, skills, and experiences that highlight one's strengths. There are several types of résumés, but as a high school senior or recent graduate, you will most likely start with an entry-level résumé. Take a look at some common sections of an entry-level résumé.

The first section should include your personal contact information like your full name, mailing and/or email address, and phone number with area code. To keep your résumé professional, avoid using any nicknames and make sure your email address is appropriate. You can even create a new email address for your job search if the one you already have is inappropriate or unprofessional; remember that you want potential employers to take you seriously.

Education is usually the next section. List all the high schools that you have attended, starting with the most recent and working backwards. This section may also include your major area of study, grade point average, scholastic honors, and specific courses you have taken that are relevant to the job opening.

The next section addresses skills and other qualifications. You can list any special equipment you can operate, software or other technology in which you are proficient, foreign languages you speak, musical instruments that you play, and any certifications or professional licenses you have earned.

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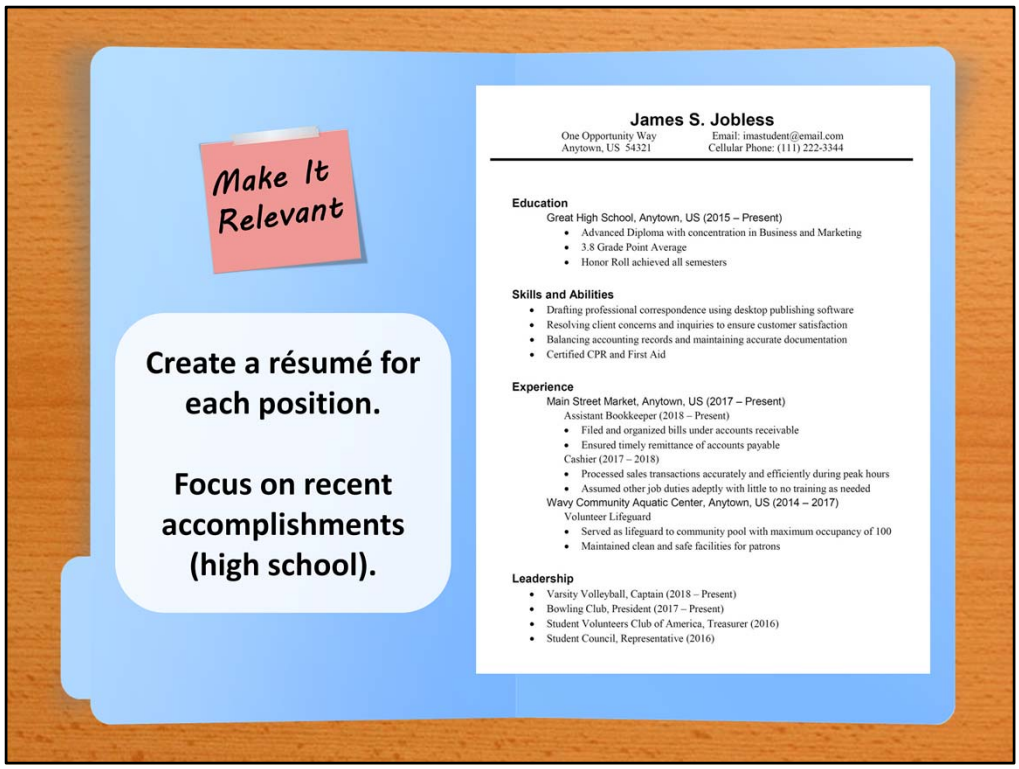

In the Experience section, you should list any jobs and volunteer experiences you have had. Include your job title, the name and location of your employer, the length of time you worked there, and relevant job duties along with any awards or recognition you received while there. In addition to work or volunteer experience, you can list any other extracurricular activities that require commitment, leadership, or special skills on your part. For example, playing a sport requires dedication and skill, and if you have served as a team captain, you can highlight your leadership skills.

The number and names of sections within your résumé will depend on the information you want to share with the reader. If one section is disproportionately larger or smaller than the other sections, you can further divide a section into two categories or merge one section into another to create more balance.

Your résumé also needs to be relevant and tailored to the position for which you are applying. If you are applying for two different companies or organizations, you should create a résumé for each position. As a senior in high school, your résumé will be more relevant if you use your high school information; do not go back to activities or achievements from middle school. Likewise, in the future when you apply for employment after postsecondary training or graduation from college, you should focus on your recent achievements, not what you did in high school.

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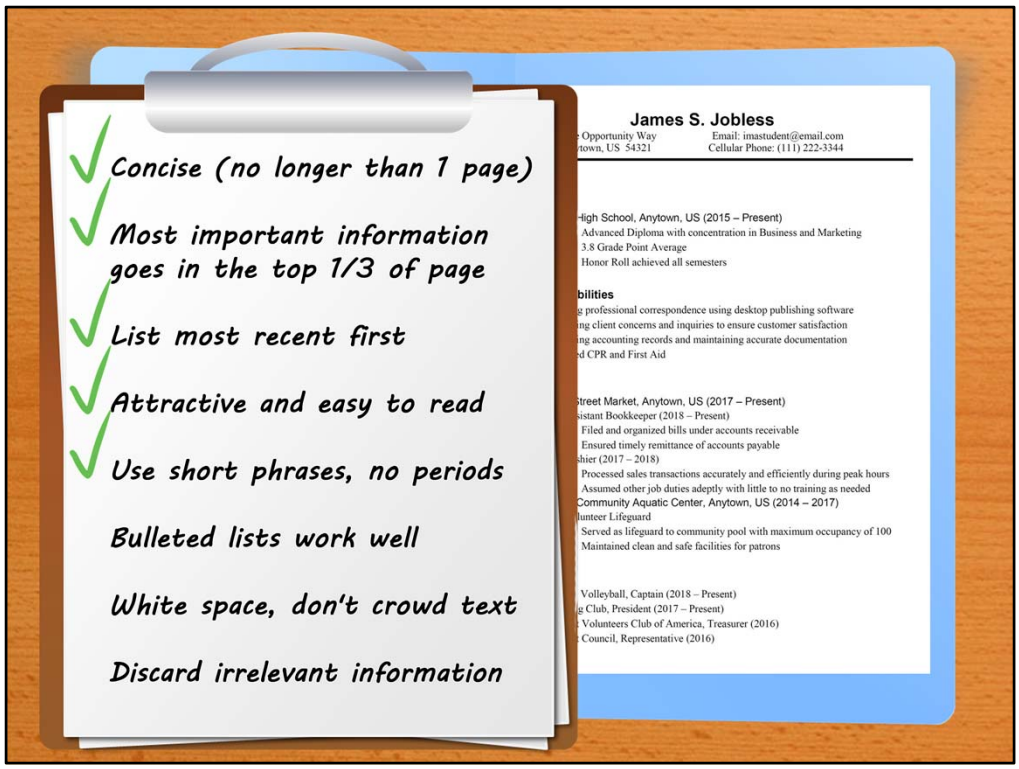

There is no specific format for a résumé, but there are some general guidelines for preparing your résumé.

First, your résumé should be concise and—in this point in your academic career—no longer than one page in length. The most important information should go in the top third of the page. Information should be listed with the most recent first, and then work backwards by date. This is called reverse chronological order. It focuses on the things you are doing now.

Your résumé may be one of many that the reader has to review, so you want to ensure your document is attractive and easy to read. Within each section, use short phrases, not complete sentences, and do not put periods at the end of the phrases since they are not complete sentences. Bulleted lists work well because they allow the reader to quickly skim the document and identify your qualifications.

Another tip that will make your résumé look presentable and easy to read is to make sure you have enough white space on the page. If you crowd your page with too much text, reading through it becomes taxing on the reader's eyes, and the overall look will be unappealing. Making good use of white space gives the eyes a break and sections the information into more digestible pieces. If you find that not all of your information fits onto one page or you have to sacrifice white space to include everything, consider paring down your information by rewording descriptions to be more concise or removing information that does not directly pertain to the position for which you are applying.

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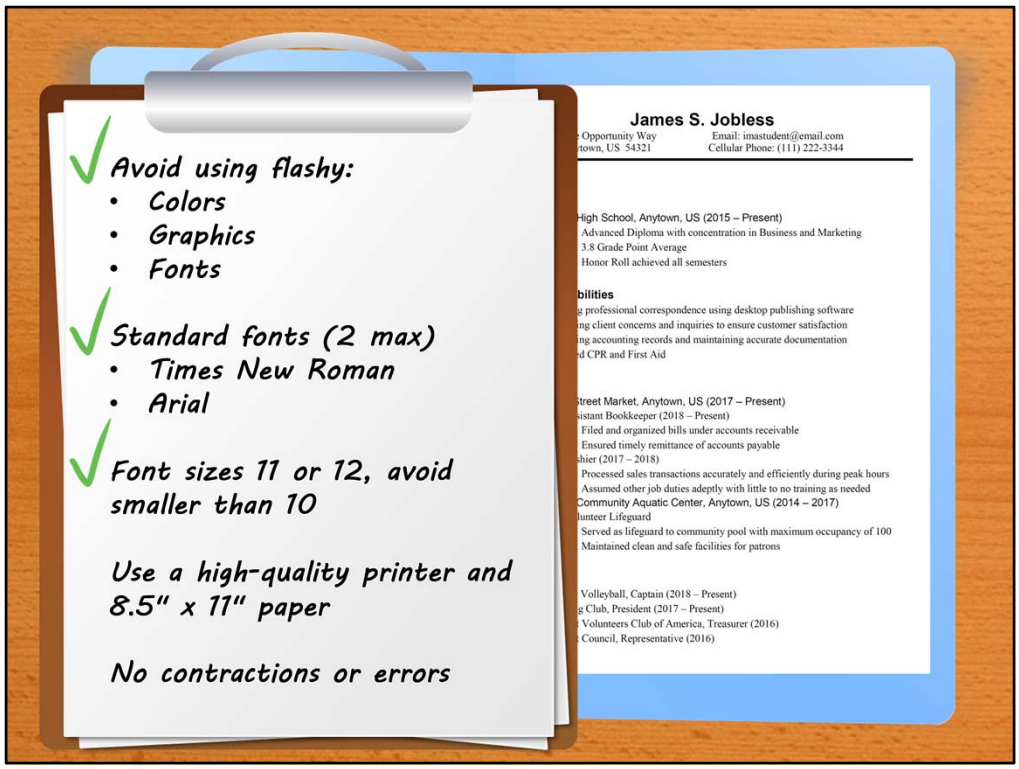

Avoid using flashy colors, graphics, or fonts in your résumé. To keep it professional, fall back on standard fonts such as Times New Roman or Arial. You can even use Arial for the headings and Times New Roman for the information under each heading, but do not use more than two fonts. Size 11 or 12 are preferable font sizes, but do not use anything smaller than 10 or your résumé may be too difficult to read. Use a high-quality printer to print your résumé on standard 8.5" x 11" paper.

Finally, just like your cover letter, avoid using contractions and make absolutely sure that there are no spelling or grammar errors in your résumé.