

ATS Checklist & Guide

ATS stands for Applicant Tracking System, which is a software application that helps organizations manage the hiring process. It's important to remember that each Applicant Tracking System (ATS) may have different capabilities, and you won't always know what software a potential employer is using. Use this checklist to improve the chances of your resume passing through the ATS and reaching the hiring manager.

“ATS-FRIENDLY” FORMATTING

ATS converts your document to a text file and it reads content linearly (left to right and top to bottom) so aim to keep your document simple and consistent throughout.

- ☐ **Minimize Complex Formatting.** Many ATS platforms struggle to interpret complex elements like headers, footers, columns, tables, and text boxes. Additionally, employers often avoid resumes with photographs due to potential biases.
- ☐ **Choose Readable Fonts.** Use standard fonts like Times New Roman, Arial, Calibri, Garamond, Helvetica, and Georgia. Use one consistent font type and do not exceed 3 different font sizes. Font sizes may vary on your name, your section headers, and the content listed within each section.
- ☐ **Avoid Graphic Elements.** Do not use images, colors, icons, charts, or visual designs. Keep the design simple and straightforward. You may use these design elements on printed resumes to hand out at in-person events, but using them for digital submissions may cause them to be corrupted and stop your document from passing through.
- ☐ **Steer Clear of Templates.** Downloading pre-designed templates or using layouts from platforms like LaTeX and Overleaf can be misinterpreted by ATS. (Even ones that advertise being ATS-passable!)
- ☐ **Verify PDF Integrity.** Saving a Word document as a PDF repeatedly can lead to corruption. Periodically convert your PDF back into a Word document to check for formatting issues.
- ☐ **Correct Use of Punctuation.** Punctuation is what allows ATS to accurately parse information. For example, "Bachelor of Science in Computer Engineering" without punctuation might be read solely as a degree title, whereas "Bachelor of Science, Computer Engineering" could be interpreted as both a degree and a major due to the use of a comma.
- ☐ **Use Periods in Abbreviations.** ATS systems can accurately interpret abbreviations if they are punctuated, such as "B.S." or "M.A." In contrast, "MA" without periods may be treated as a single word.
- ☐ **Format Dates Consistently.** If you use abbreviations for your dates, you must use a period after every 3 letters for each month. You should even use a period on May to ensure ATS can match the formatting. (ex: Nov., Jul., Oct., May., etc.) If your experience exceeds several months, separate the information with EITHER a hyphen or a dash, but make sure not to interchange the two. (ex: May. 2023 – Jun. 2024 **OR** May 2023 - June 2024)
- ☐ **Ensure URLs are Recognized.** Adding "www." or "https://www." in front of your links will ensure ATS recognizes the URL as a website link and does not misinterpret it as a spelling error.

CONTENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Remember, the primary function of ATS software is to filter out resumes that do not meet specific criteria rather than to identify the best candidates. Most ATS software generates a report that includes a summary or objective statement from your resume. HR personnel often rely on these reports to decide which resumes to pass on to hiring managers. Therefore, it's advisable to include a customized summary tailored to each job application.

- ☐ **Avoid Trickery.** Attempts to deceive the system, such as inserting job descriptions in white font to match the background, will result in your resume being flagged and discarded.
- ☐ **Consolidate Skills in One Section.** Emphasizing your skills in a single section is crucial because ATS software scans resumes for relevant keywords and phrases. This will ensure that your qualifications can be easily identified and categorized which will increase the likelihood of your resume being ranked higher and passing through the initial screening.
- ☐ **Emphasize Achievements.** ATS software gives greater importance to statements that demonstrate achievements or outcomes. Utilize numbers and symbols like \$ or % to highlight your accomplishments and impact.
- ☐ **Spelling is Crucial.** Many ATS systems automatically reject resumes with spelling errors. Even British spellings could be flagged as incorrect, so triple check your spelling for accuracy and consistency.
- ☐ **Customize for Each Application.** Tailor the objective or summary statement for each job you apply for and generate a fresh PDF each time.
- ☐ **Compact and Formalize Your File.** While ATS can handle files up to 10MB, it's advisable to keep your resume file size under 2 MB to ensure smooth processing. Name your file something simple like:
"FirstNameLastName_Resume.pdf"