

The ATS Resume Policy

Applicant tracking systems reject fewer resumes than the internet claims and mangle more than candidates realise. Both errors come from the same place: nobody explains what the software actually does. This reference sheet sets a policy you can apply today, whether you are **writing one resume, screening two hundred, or setting the hiring standard for a company.**

FOR INDIVIDUALS

A formatting policy and a five dimension self check that gets your actual experience through the parser and in front of a human.

FOR TEAMS

Hiring managers: write job posts that produce matchable resumes, and screen with a rubric instead of a mood.

FOR COMPANIES

A consistent, defensible resume policy that treats internal and external candidates by the same rules.

01 What the software actually does

An ATS parses your document into fields: name, titles, employers, dates, skills. Then a human, or increasingly a ranking layer, searches and sorts those fields. Two consequences follow. First, anything the parser cannot read effectively does not exist, no matter how good it looks. Second, the search runs on the language of the job post, so a resume that describes the right experience in the wrong vocabulary ranks like a wrong resume. Your job is to survive the parse, then match the vocabulary, without lying about anything.

02 Myths versus what actually happens

THE MYTH	WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS
The ATS auto rejects seventy five percent of resumes.	Most systems rank and filter for humans; auto rejection is usually knockout questions, not the parser. The real risk is ranking so low nobody scrolls to you.
You beat it by stuffing keywords in white text.	Parsers read hidden text fine, and recruiters see it highlighted in the parsed view. It reads as fraud because it is.
One clever template works everywhere.	Parsing quality varies by system. A layout that survives one may scramble in another, which is why the policy below is conservative on purpose.
ATS is why you never hear back.	The commonest causes are vocabulary mismatch and weak evidence, both fixable, both yours to control.

03 The formatting policy

ELEMENT	POLICY	WHY
Single column layout	Safe	Parsers read top to bottom. One column means one reading order.
Standard section headings	Safe	Experience, Education, Skills map directly to parser fields.
Simple bullet points	Safe	Plain markers parse cleanly and humans scan them fast.
Dates as MMM YYYY	Safe	Unambiguous for tenure calculations.
Two column layouts, sidebars	Risky	Some parsers interleave the columns into word salad.
Tables used for layout	Risky	Cell order is unpredictable after parsing.
Text inside images or icons	Never	Invisible to the parser. Skills in an icon row do not exist.
Contact info in headers or footers	Never	Many parsers skip these regions entirely.
Photos, charts, skill meters	Never	Unparseable, and in many markets they trigger compliance concerns.

04 The five dimension self check

Score yourself before anyone else does. These are the same five dimensions the Resume Radar tool scores automatically.

- ☐ **Parse safety.** Copy your resume, paste it into a plain text editor. Is everything present, in order, with nothing scrambled? What you see is what the ATS sees.
- ☐ **Keyword match.** Highlight the ten most repeated meaningful terms in the job post. How many appear in your resume, in the same form? Eight or more is competitive.
- ☐ **Evidence density.** Count your bullet points, then count the ones containing a number, scale, or named outcome. Below half, you are describing duties, not performance.
- ☐ **Structure.** Reverse chronological, no unexplained gaps, three to six bullets per recent role, fading detail for older ones.
- ☐ **Readability.** Give a friend ten seconds with page one. Can they say what you do and how well? The parser gets you ranked, this gets you called.

05 The keyword mapping worksheet

Do this per application, not per resume. Ten minutes here beats fifty identical submissions. Pull the repeated meaningful terms from the post, then write where each one truthfully lives in your resume. If a term has no honest home, that is either a line to add or a job to skip.

06 The thirty minute rebuild

If your current resume fails the policy, do not redecorate it. Rebuild it in this order; each step feeds the next.

- **Minutes 0 to 5:** paste everything into a plain text file. Formatting gone, content exposed. This is your raw material and your parse test in one.
- **Minutes 5 to 15:** for your last two roles, write three to six bullets each in the shape verb, what, scale, outcome. Led migration of 40 stores to new POS, cutting checkout time 22 percent.
- **Minutes 15 to 22:** rebuild in a single column document: name and contact in the body, then Experience, Education, Skills under standard headings.
- **Minutes 22 to 27:** run the keyword map above for the one job you want most and place every honest match.
- **Minutes 27 to 30:** the ten second test with a friend, then export to PDF with a filename a recruiter can file: lastname firstname role.

07 For hiring teams: the post creates the resumes you get

If screening feels like archaeology, the job post usually caused it. Candidates mirror your language back at you, so vague posts produce unmatchable resumes and keyword stuffed posts produce keyword stuffed applicants. Write the post as a search query you would be happy to receive.

- Name the five skills that actually decide success in the role, in the words your team uses daily. Cut the other fifteen.
- Separate must have from nice to have, and mean it. Every fake requirement filters out modest candidates and keeps overconfident ones.
- State the screening criteria in the post. Candidates who know what you score will show you exactly that evidence.

Screening rubric: score each resume 0 to 2 per row, in writing, before discussing any candidate.

CRITERION	SCORE	EVIDENCE FOUND
Must have skill 1:		
Must have skill 2:		
Must have skill 3:		
Outcome evidence at relevant scale		
Trajectory fits the role level		

08 For companies: one policy, applied to everyone

The resume policy earns trust when it is consistent. Publish it where candidates can see it, and hold internal moves to the same standard as external hires. Three commitments cover most of it.

- **Tell candidates how they are screened.** A single line in the post, we screen for evidence of X, Y, Z, raises the quality of every application you receive and costs nothing.
- **Audit the parser quarterly.** Run five real resumes of known good candidates through your system and read what comes out. Every mangled field is a candidate you silently lost.
- **Keep humans in the reject path.** Automated rejection on parse failure discards people for using a sidebar. If the software cannot read it, someone should glance at it before it disappears.

And measure the funnel, or the policy stays theoretical: applications per post, percent parsed cleanly, percent screened by rubric, offer rate, and time to first human contact. A company that knows those five numbers can defend every hiring decision it makes. A company that does not is guessing with other people's careers.

A NOTE FROM THE CLASSROOM

My students in Seoul often arrive convinced the ATS is an unbeatable villain, and their resumes prove the opposite problem: beautifully designed documents the software reads as noise. We fix the formatting in twenty minutes, and the interviews start arriving. The machine was never the obstacle. The mismatch between how the document was built and how it gets read was the obstacle, and that is entirely within your control.

Matthew Clement · CareerComms, Seoul

TAKE IT FURTHER

Resume Radar scores your resume across these five dimensions in about thirty seconds. Free, no signup:
careercomms.com/tools/resume-radar