

THE EXPERIENCE MATRIX RÉSUMÉ BLUEPRINT

 THE PRINCIPAL CENTER



How To Write A Standout Résumé To Rise Above The Competition

To craft a perfect résumé, it's essential to understand what role the résumé plays, and how it relates to the other documents in your application—especially your cover letter and recommendation letters. Together, your application materials present an evidence-based argument that you deserve an interview. The stronger a case you make, the more interviews you'll get.

So, while the résumé doesn't stand on its own, it does play a crucial role in presenting your experience in a compelling way that distinguishes you from other candidates with similar levels of experience. Describing your experience in terms of specific accomplishments can bolster your cover letter's argument that you're the perfect fit for the role.

In the pages that follow, you'll learn exactly what sections to include in your résumé—and what to leave out. What you omit can be as important as what you include, because every unsupported claim in your résumé introduces doubt in the reader's mind, and every unnecessary section takes the reader's attention away from what really matters.

For example, it's not uncommon to see résumés that begin with a "Candidate Profile" full of adjectives describing the applicant. These adjectives—like "innovative" or "collaborative"—are really one-word claims. Presenting claims without supporting evidence is worse than making no claims at all—so if your résumé begins with a profile loaded with one-word claims, deleting that section entirely will strengthen your résumé.

The order in which you present information in your résumé matters, too, thanks to a phenomenon psychologists call the Primacy Effect: our tendency to remember what we encounter first better than information we encounter later. As the reader moves through your résumé, they'll tend to pay more attention at first, then skim as they progress toward the end. This means it's essential to put the most important information first—both by placing the most important sections first, and by placing the most important information first within each section.

As you make revisions to your résumé, make sure it meets the criteria on each checklist to the greatest extent possible. Put in the work to follow this Blueprint, and you'll find yourself landing more interviews when you apply for jobs!

Sincerely,



Justin Baeder, PhD
Director, The Principal Center

Sections To Include

To Help Your Résumé Do Its Job

Your résumé should include the following sections, in this exact order:

1. Header—name & contact info, repeated at the top of each page
2. Professional Objective—a clear statement about the type of role you're looking for
3. Experience, most recent first, including title, school/employer, and dates for each role; an overview paragraph setting the context; and 4-6 full-sentence bullets describing specific accomplishments (NOT duties)
4. Education & Certifications—your degrees, certifications, and relevant licenses—newest first
5. References—contact information and relationship for 4+ references
6. Recommendation Letters—full recommendation letters, best first

Don't worry about fitting your résumé on one or two pages—as long as you organize it this way, the most important information will be presented first, so the reader is sure to see it. Especially for veteran educators, it's normal for the résumé to fill two or three pages.

On the other hand, your résumé doesn't need any of the following sections:

- Candidate profile/overview
- Skills/proficiencies
- Normal duties listed under each role
- List of all trainings/PD attended
- Hobbies/other interests
- "References available upon request"

Further details and checklists for each section are included in the following pages.

Contact Information

Basic But Essential

Include your contact information in a header that repeats on each page—it's still common for reviewers to print application materials and review them in hardcopy, so having your contact information on each page is helpful in case pages get separated.

Include your name, highest degree (if Master's or higher), email, and cell phone, e.g.

Janelle Smith, M.Ed

555-555-5555 | janelle.smith.med@gmail.com

Physical Address:

- Including your mailing address on your résumé is optional—but a good idea if you're local to the position for which you're applying.
- Consider omitting your mailing address from your résumé and cover letter if you live far away.
- If anyone needs it (unlikely at the screening stage), your address will be on your application, where it won't influence the screening process as heavily.
- Use a separator like | (shift-backslash) or • (bullet character) to fit your entire address on one line: 123 Main Street | Anytown, ST 12345 | 555-555-5555 | janelle.smith.med@gmail.com
- Avoid using odd characters like * and ~ as separators

Email Address:

- If you're applying for a new position with your current employer, simply use your organizational email.
- Be sure to include a non-work email address if you're applying for jobs with other employers.
- Choose a professional-looking email service provider for your personal email account. Gmail.com, Yahoo.com, Outlook.com, and custom domains such as yourname.org are good choices.

- Avoid hotmail.com, aol.com, NetZero.com and junos.com, which are extremely dated and convey an unprofessional image.
- Make sure your email address is reasonably close to your name, and not a subtle brag or an address related to a consulting practice. For example, avoid addresses like "InspiredEducator66@gmail.com" or "Steve@StudentsComeFirstLLC.com" as this can suggest a side business that would compete for your time.

Phone Number:

- Include your cell number so you can be reached at all times—interviews are often scheduled with little notice. No need to list a separate home number.
- If you're applying for jobs far from where you currently live, or happen to have a cell phone from another area code, consider getting number with a local area code, and forwarding it to your cell phone, using a service such as Google Voice.
- Double-check your voicemail greeting and be sure it's up-to-date and professional.

Header Checklist:

- ☐ Repeated on every page
- ☐ First Name, Last Name, Degree (if Master's or higher)
- ☐ Mailing address (if local)
- ☐ Cell phone (local area code)
- ☐ Email address (internal or personal)
- ☐ No odd separators (*, ~) or formatting

Professional Objective

Describe The Fit

The first section on your résumé should be a professional objective—that is, a clear statement about the kind of role you’re looking for, the context you’d like to work in, and the impact you aim to make.

Unlike a “candidate profile” or “overview,” a strong professional objective steers clear of making claims—especially one-word claims like “talented,” “innovative,” or other adjectives. For example, “Transformational leader seeks a principal position...” make the claim that the candidate is a transformational leader, without providing evidence.

Instead, simply describe yourself as “experienced,” a claim which can’t be denied and won’t raise the reader’s skepticism. For example:

- “Experienced middle-level leader seeking a principal position in a diverse 6-8 school to create an inclusive learning environment for all students.”
- “Experienced elementary educator seeking an assistant principal role in a Catholic school setting to provide social-emotional supports for all students.”
- “As an experienced instructional leader, my goal is to serve as principal in a diverse elementary school in the Plano area focused on closing achievement gaps and preparing all students for citizenship.”
- “Experienced central office leader seeking a superintendent role in a diverse mid-sized district in the Bloomington area to ensure instructional excellence for all.”

In each of these examples, note how the following are called out:

- The specific type of experience the candidate possesses, e.g. “Experienced central office leader”
- The specific role the candidate is seeking, e.g. assistant principal
- The specific setting the candidate seeks to work in, e.g. a diverse elementary school in the Plano area
- The specific impact the candidate aspires to make, e.g. to provide social-emotional supports for all students

A general format to use:

“Experienced [current role] seeking a [new role] in a [organization type & setting] to [impact].”

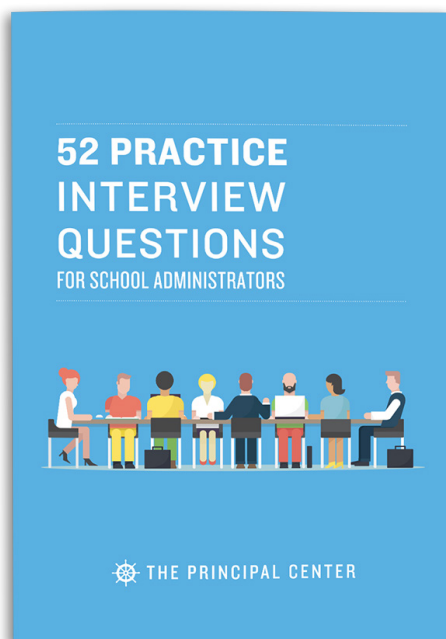
Name the specific geographic region or setting (e.g. “Plano” or “rural”) as well as the sector of the school to which you’re applying, e.g. public, charter, Catholic, Jewish day school, international, etc.

Professional Objective Checklist:

- ☐ No adjectives or other unsupported claims
- ☐ Specific role identified
- ☐ Specific type of organization identified
- ☐ Specific geographic area/sector identified
- ☐ Intended impact described

Practice Interview Questions

It’s never too early to begin practicing for interviews. Download 52 practice interview questions at:



PrincipalCenter.com/interview

Professional Experience

Work History with Specific Accomplishments

The most important section—and the easiest to get wrong—is the “Professional Experience” section of your résumé. This section tells the story of your career trajectory. Even if your career has been brief up to this point, or if you’ve spent many years in the same role, it’s essential to paint a picture for the reader.

What kind of picture? You want the reader to see you as a leader on the move—as a rising star who will end up making a difference at every stage of your professional journey.

How To List Your Work History:

- List your current role first, and list your previous roles in reverse-chronological order (newest to oldest). This takes advantage of the Primacy Effect, and positions the job you’re applying for as your next logical step
- Provide more detail for more recent & relevant roles, and less detail for older roles that are less relevant.
- Word everything in past tense, so it reads as a series of accomplishments rather than current duties.
- Condense or omit dates for older roles, especially if you’ve been in the profession more than 20 years. For example, if you had a different position each of your first four years of teaching due to budget-based layoffs, condense these into a single section with a date range (e.g. “Music Teacher, Douglas County Schools, 2001–2005”).
- Omit most non-education roles, such as jobs you had in high school, college, or before becoming a teacher. Include graduate fellowships or teaching assistantships in higher education, if applicable.
- Don’t divide your experience into separate sections for leadership, teaching, professional development, etc—list each role in reverse-chronological order, or you’ll risk confusing the reader.

For Each Role, Include:

- Role / Location / Dates, e.g.:

Assistant Principal, Logantown High School, 2017–Present

- Overview Paragraph:

“Hired with a mandate to reduce out-of-school suspensions and office referrals for disruptive behavior, I have taken a restorative and relationship-building approach to improving climate and student success.”

- Accomplishment bullets—4 to 6 detailed, sentence-length descriptions of specific accomplishments—not duties or efforts.

Overview Paragraph:

The overview paragraph, which is optional but usually a good idea, sets the context for your accomplishments. This paragraph should be brief, and may include:

- The settings and demographics of the school (e.g. rural, 90% free/reduced lunch, 24% ELL population, etc.)
- The mandate under which you were hired, if applicable, e.g. school turnaround, leading a specific new program, improving math scores, reducing disproportionality, etc.
- Your philosophy or approach to the role, especially with regards to implementing change (e.g. shifting to a restorative justice approach)

Accomplishment Bullets:

The biggest mistake candidates make in this section is to describe routine duties, rather than specific accomplishments for each role. Any duties that can be safely assumed by the reader can be omitted, so you have more space to detail your specific accomplishments.

For example, discipline and scheduling are common duties for an assistant principal, so there’s little value in listing them in your résumé—in fact, listing expected, routine information may cue the reader to start skimming, and stop paying close attention.

Instead, focus on specific accomplishments that are not only relevant to your current role, but relevant to the role for which you're applying—that is, accomplishments that indicate your readiness for the next level. For example:

- *"Implemented restorative justice program to reduce out-of-school suspensions, resulting in a 50% increase in peer mediation and a 63% decrease in the number of students receiving out-of-school suspension."*
- *"Reduced monthly out-of-school suspensions by 32% from Fall to Spring 2018 by implementing Innocent Classroom training for staff and working with students to develop personalized support plans."*
- *"Developed an early attendance intervention system to identify and provide targeted support for students at risk of disengaging with school, increasing average daily attendance from 97.2% to 98.7%, and reducing active truancy cases from 17 to 4."*
- *"Piloted and implemented Writing Workshop training and curriculum to improve writing instruction, with 96% of teachers reporting increased readiness to implement the new curriculum after initial training."*

Describe each accomplishment with active, past-tense verbs, e.g. "Developed system for..." rather than "Participated in committee to..." so that it's clear that you had an impact and weren't just a passive participant.

Group related items together—and explain what they say about you—rather than listing them in separate bullets. For example: *"Trained in numerous behavior de-escalation techniques, including SafePlus, SRS, PBISStar, and Novigen."*

Additional Considerations

- Use date ranges and summaries to cover gaps in your work history. For example, if you took 2007–2011 off for family reasons but otherwise spent 2004–2015 working for the same employer, include the overall range and the positions you held (detailed separately), but without exact dates. Too many dates will increase the cognitive load on the reader.
- If you have unusual circumstances—such as a 1-year grant-funded position

that came to an end—be sure to explain it briefly so the reader doesn't wonder whether you were terminated. In some cases, it may be more natural to explain such circumstances in the cover letter.

- Avoid dividing your professional experience into sections, e.g. "Teaching Experience" and "Leadership Experience." List each role, newest first, in reverse-chronological order, in a single section.

Professional Experience Checklist:

- ☐ Ordered newest to oldest
- ☐ For each role:
 - ☐ Role / Location / Dates
 - ☐ Overview paragraph
 - ☐ 4-6 accomplishment bullets

Feeling Stuck?

If your job search has stalled out, get a free, instant diagnosis from the Ascend Job Search Diagnostic:



PrincipalCenter.com/job

Education & Certifications

Provide the Facts Clearly

This section is very straightforward—as with Professional Experience, list your most recent degrees first, in reverse-chronological order (e.g. highest degree first), followed by your professional certifications/licenses.

You can also include noteworthy professional development you've attended, but be very selective, and ensure that anything you list is valued by the district and relevant to the role.

Additional Considerations:

- Include professional license numbers and expiration dates only if required in your area
- Do not include GPA, Dean's List, or other academic honors
- If relevant, include original research such as a dissertation or thesis title
- Place this section after the Professional Experience section, and before References. The reviewer may look for this section, but it's not worth occupying the first page of your résumé, where relevant experience should be front and center.

Education & Certifications Checklist:

- ☐ Degrees listed, most recent first
- ☐ Required certification info for role & state
- ☐ Any PD listed is relevant to organization/role

References

Beyond “Available Upon Request”

References can be your résumé’s secret weapon, because they can do more for you than answer the phone. Ask your references to write a draft recommendation letter for you as soon as possible, so you can get their feedback as well as a sense of what they might say about you when asked to provide a reference.

Never say “References Available Upon Request” in your résumé—instead, list the full contact information for at least four references:

- Include name, role, phone, and email for each reference
- List the most important references first—most recent supervisors, senior leaders, etc., and weaker references (e.g. colleagues or professors) later
- Omit references with whom you have a bad relationship—for example, if you know your current supervisor will provide a bad reference, list another supervisor at a similar level instead
- List as many strong references as possible, to show that you have a robust professional network willing to vouch for you

To truly take your résumé to the next level, don’t just include a list of references—include full recommendation letters in your résumé PDF whenever possible.

While online application systems may not allow you to upload recommendation letters, they’ll usually allow you to upload a PDF of your résumé—and this PDF can include as many pages as you’d like. Take advantage of this, and incorporate recommendation letters into the résumé file.

References Checklist:

- ☐ References include multiple supervisors & colleagues
- ☐ Recommendation letters included—sequence:
 - ☐ Résumé
 - ☐ Reference list
 - ☐ Recommendation letters, strongest first

Get In The “Yes” Pile

Reduce the Reader’s Cognitive Load

Your résumé’s job—in conjunction with your cover letter and other application materials—is to get your foot in the door for an interview. It’s unlikely that reviewers will read every word of your résumé carefully. They’ll skim, looking for interesting information that makes you stand out as a candidate—so it’s essential to make it easy for the casual reader to grasp the key points.

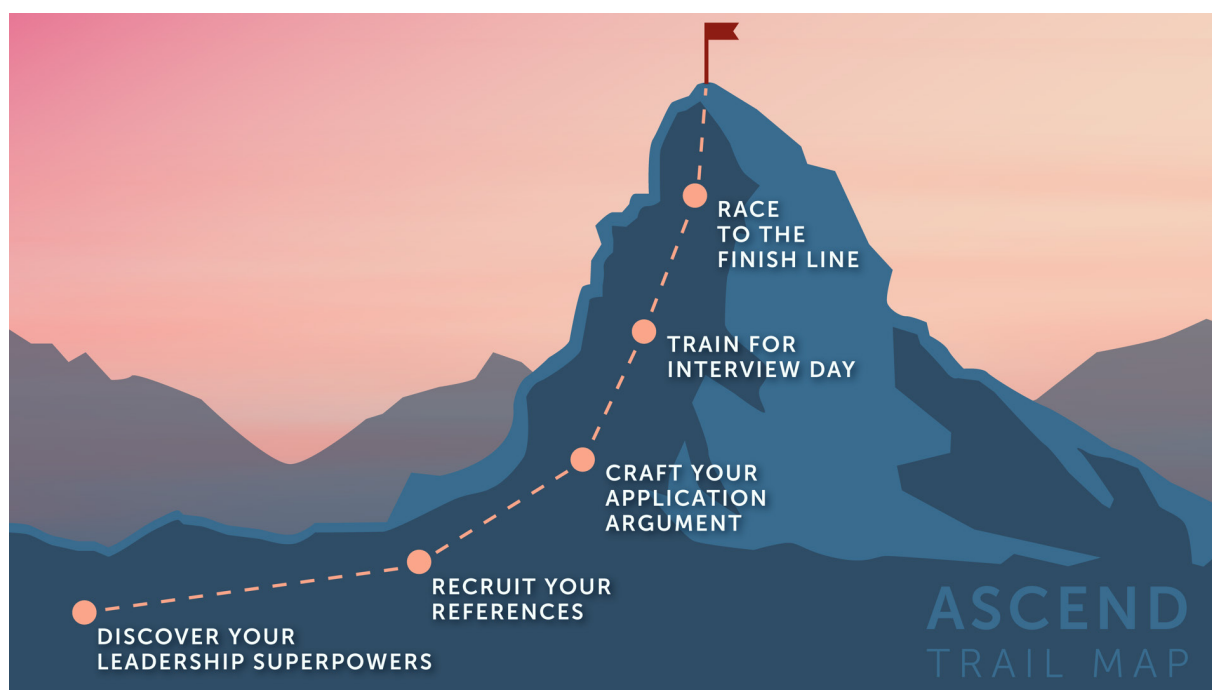
Make it easy for the reader to notice what makes you stand out, by reducing the cognitive load imposed by your résumé.

Here are a few examples of problems that increase the reader’s cognitive load:

- Large blocks of text
- Inconsistent verb tenses (especially present-tense variations, like “supervise,” “supervising,” etc.)
- Excessively long lists, with 7+ items, whether in sentence or bullet form
- Reliance on acronyms which may be unknown to the reader or have multiple meanings

Reducing Cognitive Load:

- ☐ Use headings to clearly delineate each section
- ☐ Strive for parallelism—make each item in a list read the same way
- ☐ Use past-tense verbs consistently, and avoid present-tense verbs like “Supervise”
- ☐ Keep sentences active and direct, without complex phrasing or passive verbs
- ☐ Avoid unusual or hard-to-read fonts; stick with traditional fonts like Times New Roman
- ☐ Use a reasonable font size (10pt to 12pt) and ample margins (3/4” to 1”)
- ☐ Keep lists relatively short—no more than 6 bullet points per list
- ☐ Spell out acronyms



01 DISCOVER YOUR LEADERSHIP SUPERPOWERS

Discover your leadership superpowers, so you can articulate how you'll meet the organization's needs.

You are more than your degrees—you have unique strengths that need to shine through in the hiring process.

02 RECRUIT YOUR REFERENCES

Let your references know you'll be looking, so they'll start drafting recommendation letters and putting in a good word for you.

Don't let a surprise reference check be the first they're hearing of your job search.

03 CRAFT YOUR APPLICATION ARGUMENT

Craft your application argument, so you're not just sending in paperwork, but making a strong case that you're the best candidate for the role—even before your interview.

Your résumé and cover letter aren't just cold facts on paper—they're an impassioned argument for your candidacy.

04 TRAIN FOR INTERVIEW DAY

Practice on video, so you're ready for any question—cool, collected, and ready to use the stories you've prepared to illustrate why you're the right person for the job.

Most people are uncomfortable in interviews—including the hiring team! If you prepare the right way, you'll be at ease—and your interviewers will hang on every word you say.

05 RACE TO THE FINISH LINE

Race to the finish line, so you get two or more job offers, and don't have to settle for waiting another year or taking a position you don't feel great about.

This is marathon, not a sprint. Success requires training and preparation for every stage of the hiring process.

Learn more about the Ascend Masterclass at:

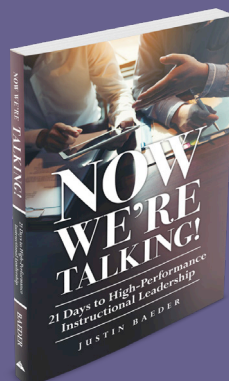
PrincipalCenter.com/ascend



ABOUT JUSTIN BAEDER, PhD

Justin Baeder, PhD is Director of The Principal Center, where he helps senior leaders in K-12 organizations build capacity for instructional leadership. A former principal in Seattle Public Schools, he is creator of the Instructional Leadership Challenge, which has helped more than 10,000 school leaders in 50 countries around the world:

- Confidently Get Into Classrooms Every Day
- Have Feedback Conversations That Change Teacher Practice
- Discover their best opportunities for school improvement



Dr. Baeder is the author of *Now We're Talking! 21 Days to High-Performance Instructional Leadership* (Solution Tree). He is the host of Principal Center Radio, a podcast featuring education thought leaders, and Ascend Live, a video show on the ed leadership job search.