

From Student . . . to Professional

by Marianne E. Green

You're not exaggerating or bragging if you accurately, but positively, interpret what you have accomplished.

Many seniors can tick off their laundry list of co-curricular and career-related activities they believe will enhance their marketability. But before you write a resume or start your job search, take the time to fully evaluate the *meaning* of your experiences. How you portray your experiences on your resume or in the interview will either forge links from your student-based activities to a professional career or leave employers asking, "So what?" Help employers view you as a potential colleague and contributor to their organization by using these nine tips to effectively interpret your experiences and reveal their career-related implications.

Acknowledge the fact that your experience counts!

You're not exaggerating or bragging if you accurately, but positively, interpret what you have accomplished in jobs, internships, and activities. If you think of yourself as "just" an intern, "only" a volunteer, or "merely" a club member, and express this attitude in words and writing, employers will tend to see you in this light as well. Instead, start thinking of yourself as a young professional who has taken the first steps toward active participation in a field.

Use the vocabulary of your chosen field whenever possible on your resume and during the interview.

Every occupation has a unique set of words to describe tasks and activities. Familiarize yourself with these terms, phrases, and buzzwords, using them whenever applicable. Are you a budding sales professional? Incorporate the terms "prospect strategies," "strategic marketing," "cold calling," and "value-added selling." Is an advertising job in your future? Use the phrases "page layout," "client presentations," "ad order placement," and "prospect identification" to describe your internship experiences. Many organizations will select resumes for review on the basis of a search for specific words and phrases. Make sure, though, that you use your field's specialized vocabulary correctly and in the right context.

Examine and narrate your out-of-class experiences through the "lens" of your career goal.

Choose to write and speak primarily about tasks, events, and situations that reflect your field of interest. You may want to minimize or leave out unrelated duties. When Jed, a criminal justice major, described his summer position at a supermarket, he focused on his training in theft prevention techniques and store security, rather than on other duties such as working the cash register. Similarly, when Maggie was looking for a technical writing job, she detailed the memos and letters she had composed as part of her summer clerical job, and just mentioned other tasks she performed, such as data entry and mail merges. It is up to you to draw the connection between your jobs and your field of interest.

Convey what you learned as well as what you did in your job, internship, or activity.

Even if your role in the organization was limited to observer or gofer, you probably gleaned some critical "insider" information pertinent to your field. Perhaps you attended a board of directors' meeting or shadowed a news reporter as she pursued a story. Maybe you sat in on a city council meeting or observed the proceedings in family court. The insights you may have gained about a particular organization and working environment can

be communicated on your resume and during the interview process. Prior knowledge of a field, however basic, can assist employers in seeing you as a future colleague.

Quantify your actions whenever appropriate.

Use numbers to vividly portray your experiences, letting employers appreciate the scope of what you have accomplished. Speak about the 20 articles you published in the student newspaper. Refer to the 10 new employees you trained in the course of your summer job. Write about the \$2,000 in fees you collected weekly. Larger numbers can suggest intensity of effort, diligence, and a level of accomplishment. If you must estimate the number, use qualifiers such as "up to," "more than," and "approximately." For example, in an interview for a marketing position, Jodi mentioned that her campaign strategy to attract new sorority members had resulted in an increase in membership of nearly 12 percent.

Control the way your information impacts employers through sequencing and amplification.

On your resume, it's sometimes best to cluster your career-related experiences in a separate category labeled "Related Experience," rather than lumping all your experience into one general "Experience" category. Position this category toward the top of your resume to ensure that it's seen early in the resume scanning/skimming process. It's also helpful to add rich detail to the relevant job and internship descriptions, and minimize the descriptions of the irrelevant material. This strategy focuses the attention of the reader on the most compelling evidence you have to offer in support of a position.

Take credit for your contributions.

What value did you bring to your workplace, internship, or activity? How did your actions and tasks contribute to the mission of the organization? What part, however small, did *you* play in cutting costs, generating revenue, increasing productivity, improving quality, saving time, and motivating others? Don't hesitate to claim some small share of the credit for organizational success that occurred "on your watch." Use the inclusive "we" when discussing your role in meeting or surpassing organizational goals. Choose your words carefully to portray yourself as a vital contributor and team member without stretching the truth. For example, Jordan mentioned on his resume that the Walkathon he helped organize during his internship raised \$3,000, 9 percent more than the previous event.

Take stock of occurrences that spotlight your personal attributes.

Be prepared to provide "talking points" to employers to demonstrate how you dealt with problems, overcame obstacles, managed people, met deadlines, multi-tasked, persisted in reaching your goals, and so forth. Volunteer positions, athletics, and leadership activities, as well as jobs and internships, are excellent springboards for discussion of many attributes tied to career success. Desirable personal attributes are cultivated and sharpened in many settings. Use the interview to explain to employers how your summer job at a camp honed your conflict-resolution skills. Spell out how your heavy academic schedule and part-time job with the college dining services during the school year show your ability to juggle several obligations successfully.

Showcase your skills and talents with a portfolio.

Assemble documents that demonstrate skills relevant to your career choice: writing, coordinating, public relations, budgeting, designing, counseling, teaching, marketing, and so forth. Include letters of thanks, merit, and recommendation. Have your portfolio at your side during the interview so that you can bolster your points with visual evidence. Success with past projects is seen as a predictor of future success.

Nationally known career consultant Adele Scheele refers to an individual's past performance in jobs, internships, and activities as "raw material" that can be "shaped" to present his or her "best self" on the resume and in the interview. Without exaggerating, bragging, or stretching the truth, you can interpret your experiences to reveal a closer match of your skills, abilities, and attributes to the requirements of a particular job or career field. Don't just *tell* others the facts; *interpret* the facts for them with compelling language and visual aids. Employers can only consider and appreciate what you reveal to them!

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