The Role of Writing Quality in Effective Student Résumés

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While writing teachers view the résumé as a sophisticated rhetorical chal-
lenge, students tend to see it as a "technical specification" of their employment
qualifications. This study investigated the reader's *perspective by examining*
how writing features influence recruiters' assessments of résumés. Eighteen
recruiters rated 72 résumés describing fictitious mechanical-engineering stu-
dents. Four résumé features were systematically varied: relevance of previous
work experience, elaboration of independent coursework, stylistic quality, and
mechanical correctness. The major result suggests that technical work experi-
ence is important but not sufficient: If the résumés of technically well-
qualified applicants contained grammatical errors, recruiters rated these
résumés lower *than résumés listing less experience but containing more accu-*
rate writing. [1]

A common writing assignment in upper-level business-writing and
technical-writing courses is the résumé. Not surprisingly, students
take the résumé assignment very seriously; it is one of their first op-
portunities to apply writing strategies to a rhetorical situation with
immediate and important consequences for their careers. Nor is it
surprising that students and teachers perceive the purpose and re-
quirements of the résumé quite differently. Many students tend to
view the résumé simply as a technical specification: a dry, factual
listing of their qualifications and accomplishments. In contrast,
writing teachers see the assignment as a sophisticated rhetorical
challenge: The writer of a résumé must find ways to be persuasive,
expressive, and informative within a tightly constrained and homog-
enizing framework.

In presenting the résumé assignment, writing teachers recom-
mend a variety of rhetorically plausible strategies: generating rele-
vant and persuasive information; selecting specific details; present-
ing points in a logical order; labelling sections clearly; using a

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concise, active sentence style; checking the accuracy of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Instructors argue that these features of the writing directly influence the persuasiveness of the résumé by contributing to or detracting from the writer's credibility, and by engaging or distracting the reader's attention. But when students ask for evidence that these features actually improve their chances of obtaining a job interview, instructors have little more than intuition to support them. Clearly, both students and teachers need to know more about how members of an intended professional audience respond to variations in résumé writing.

Oddly enough, most empirical research on résumés has focused on demographic information: the job applicant's gender, age, race, marital status, grade-point average, and field of study (e.g., Oliphant and Alexander; Renwick and Tosi). While some demographic characteristics significantly influence a recruiter's willingness to interview an applicant, such characteristics are facts that students cannot normally change to strengthen their résumés. Even though writing is something that students can presumably improve, few studies have focused specifically on writing quality. Some studies have established recruiter preferences for particular résumé formats and the importance recruiters assign to various parts of the résumé (McDowell; Penrose; Helwig). However, no experimental study has directly investigated the effect of writing features such as style, organization, and sentence structure on recruiters' assessments of résumés.

Purpose and Scope of the Study

We therefore conducted an experiment to see which writing features or combinations of features influence the primary readers of résumés, recruiters who interview students for jobs. Although there are many writing features of potential interest, in this study we focused on three: sentence style, mechanics, and elaboration. While many instructional texts on résumés present advice on these features, the available research suggests that their effect on readers (including recruiters) is imperfectly understood.

Sentence Style

A wide variety of guides to résumé writing (e.g., Houp and Pearsall; Eisenberg) recommend verbal sentence style, a style that favors simple agent-action-goal sentence structures, and avoids nominalizations and other sources of wordiness (Williams). Verbal style seems appropriate for résumés both because it helps writers deal with constraints on length and because it creates a desirable tone. In theory, writers using verbal style sound active, direct, forceful, and energetic—qualities presumably attractive to employers. Furthermore, several studies (reviewed in Felker, *et al.*) have shown that short, simple, active sentences are easier for readers to understand and remember.

Although the rationale for recommending verbal style is straightforward, its efficacy remains uncertain. There is little evidence that readers generally prefer texts written in verbal style and no evidence at all on the extent to which style influences the professional judgments of recruiters. In fact, Hake and Williams found that while English teachers often criticize the use of nominal style in class, they tend to rate versions of essays written in nominal style more highly than those written in verbal style. If English teachers respond more favorably to writing in nominal style, then nonacademic readers (who are often berated for turgid bureaucratese) may also be likely to favor it.

Mechanics

Anecdotal evidence suggests, and empirical research confirms, that nonacademic readers as well as writing teachers are sensitive to errors in mechanics (Hairston; Freedman). Surveys also suggest that recruiters are bothered when conventions of grammar, punctuation, and spelling are violated in résumés (McDowell). The surveys, however, provide no direct evidence of the weight that mechanics carries in the recruiter's overall evaluation. Do recruiters give more weight to mechanics than to career-related training? Surveys also cannot tell us how consistently recruiters apply their standards. Do they penalize faulty mechanics to the same extent in any résumé, without regard to the applicant's other qualifications? Or are recruiters more willing to tolerate grammatical errors in résumés from highly qualified applicants than in those from marginally qualified applicants? Writing teachers, of course, would be gratified to learn that recruiters weight mechanics fairly heavily and apply a consistent strategy. In this case, a student who writes well but has relatively little technical experience might come out ahead of a student with greater experience who cannot describe that experience as effectively.

Elaboration

The current wisdom on elaboration in résumés is to avoid it; most textbooks and guidelines for résumé writers emphasize brevity. This advice is consistent with surveys of recruiter preferences (e.g., Feild and Holley) and with Helwig's finding that recruiters rate traditional, short, list-format résumés more highly than long, highly elaborated, narrative résumés or qualification briefs. Current research does not clarify, however, whether recruiters object to lengthy elaboration *per se* or object just to rhetorically inappropriate elaboration. After all, the appropriateness of elaboration has proved important in other research contexts: Computer users tend to benefit from manuals that elaborate how to give computer commands, but users tend not to benefit from manuals that elaborate the concepts underlying the computer's functions (Charney, Reder, and Wells). Even Helwig's recruiters (who opted in general for a list format) preferred more elaboration in one spot, the career objective.

If only the right elaboration improves a résumé, then the question becomes deciding what the right elaboration is. Perhaps only elaboration that speaks to the writer's specific abilities, accomplishments, and goals is effective. Or perhaps elaboration is only effective if it bolsters otherwise weak areas of a student's credentials. These two hypotheses suggest quite different strategies for the use of elaboration. Suppose, for example, that an engineering student has had little paid work experience but has completed a class project in which classroom knowledge was applied to a realistic engineering problem. If the "bolstering" hypothesis is correct, then this student might benefit *more* from including a description of this project in a résumé than a student who has extensive work experience. If only the specificity of the elaboration matters, then both students might benefit equally from specific elaboration, and both might be hurt equally by overly general elaboration.

In short, by focusing on these writing features in our study, our goal was to address three major questions:

- How much weight do recruiters assign to writing quality when evaluating an applicant's résumé?
- What features of writing quality most influence recruiters' judgments (i.e., choice of sentence style, presence of mechanical errors, amount and kind of elaboration)?
- To what extent do recruiters' judgments of writing quality interact with their appraisals of the applicant's technical qualifications? That is, are recruiters more tolerant of infelicitous language from otherwise highly qualified applicants?

Experimental Method

In this study, we asked recruiters to read a set of résumés and indicate (on a 4-point scale) how strongly they would want to interview the students described. The task closely paralleled the recruiters' ordinary procedure for assessing résumés. The recruiters represented companies that were currently hiring entry-level mechanical engineers. The résumés described fictitious college seniors, all majoring in mechanical engineering and applying for a particular mechanical-engineering position. As the recruiters themselves noted, the task itself was fairly routine: Recruiters typically determine which students to interview by quickly reviewing large numbers of résumés.

Participants

The participants were 18 campus recruiters who represented various industries—electronics, aerospace engineering, and public utilities—that typically employ mechanical engineers. As a group, the participants covered a wide range of recruiting experience, from young part-timers who had no formal training in recruiting to full-time recruiters who had decades of experience. The recruiters were all college educated, most were male, and about a third were them-

selves engineers. Only recruiters who came to campus to hire mechanical engineers were approached to participate in the study. Those who participated were not compensated in any way.

Job Description

To enable the recruiters to evaluate the résumés against a common standard, we gave recruiters the following description of a job opening in mechanical engineering that they were to try to fill and that they referred to while rating the résumés:

> Positions are available for mechanical engineers in product design, structural and systems analysis, new product development, and current products engineering. The positions are specific disciplines within the Engineering Team which has total responsibility for all product-engineering activities including concept design and specification, research and evaluation, equipment procurement and installation, and full production manufacturing. Tasks in each area focus primarily on product improvement and cost reduction.

Based on descriptions that companies sent to the placement office, this job description was broad enough to permit a wide range of qualifications. The résumés were constructed to fall within this range.

Résumé Construction

Standardized Features

We constructed 72 résumés that described the fictitious mechanical-engineering majors. We standardized certain features of the résumés in order to limit the factors that might influence the recruiters' ratings. For example, all résumés listed the same degree program, educational institution, and grade-point average. All résumés employed a traditional résumé format, with labelled sections for education, work experience, honors and activities, and so on, and all résumés were printed on the same kind of paper with the same size and style of type. Sample résumés are provided in Figures 1 and 2.

The job objectives, titles of courses, descriptions of senior projects, descriptions of summer jobs, and listings of honors and activities were based on items found in actual résumés of mechanical-engineering majors. When we extracted information from actual résumés, we always replaced real names with fictitious ones. In addition, half the résumés listed male names and half female names.

Experimental Variations

The résumés were constructed to differ systematically in four aspects of content and quality:

RELEVANCE   The relevance of the student's previous work experience to a position as mechanical engineer (high, moderate, or low)

KATHY W. MYERS

Current Address: Permanent Address:
520 N. Atherton St.   194 E. Plumstead Ave.
State College, PA 16803   Mechanicsburg, PA 19055
(814) 555-1212   (215) 555-1212

OBJECTIVE: A career as a Mechanical Engineer, working to design,
             fabricate and evaluate products.

EDUCATION: The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.
             B.S. in Mechanical Engineering expected May 1987.
             Grade Point Average: 3.2/4.0

             Relevant Coursework:

             Stress Analysis   Chemistry
             Computer Programming   Heat Transfer
             Mechanical Design   Modeling Dynamic Systems
             Engineering Design   Machine Dynamics

             Senior Project: Fuel Fill Controller. Built a device that
             prevents gasoline from spilling out of service station
             nozzles. The design includes a level-sensing mercury tilt
             switch that determines when the gas tank is full; an
             electronic pump then sprays gas against the automatic
             shut-off sensor in the nozzle.

EXPERIENCE: Engineering Trainee. DLR Corporation, Newton, PA.
             Summer 1986. Conducted efficiency analysis of electronic
             subassembly; prepared and submitted proposal for
             automated solderer; updated manufacturing orders;
             maintained shop equipment.

             Crew Leader. Genovese Nursery & Garden Store, Erie, PA.
             Summer 1985. Supervised a crew of six. Responsible for
             seeding, transplanting, planting and maintaining a garden
             of over 100 varieties of flowers and vegetables.

             Asst. Manager. Don's Lumber. Fayette, PA. Summer
             1984. Managed a five-man crew. Responsibilities
             included hiring, training, and monitoring productivity.
             Achieved perfect record of meeting shipping deadlines.

ACTIVITIES: American Society of Mechanical Engineers
             Pi Tau Sigma, Mechanical Engineering Honor Society
             Student Advisory Board

REFERENCES: Available upon request

FIGURE 1.   RÉSUMÉ WITH LOW RELEVANCE, METHOD ELABORATION, VERBAL STYLE AND ERROR-FREE MECHANICS

KEVIN G. WASSON

Current Address: Permanent Address:
3207 W. Prospect Ave.   40 Spring Street
State College, PA 16803   Philadelphia, PA 19149
(814) 555-1212   (215) 555-1212

OBJECTIVE: Pursuing a career as a Mechancial Engineer incorperating
             design, dynamics and analyzing system failures.

EDUCATION: The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.
             Expect B.S. in Mechanical Engineering to be awarded in
             May 1987. Grade Point Average: 3.2/4.0

             Relevant Coursework:

             Thermodynamics   Mechanical Design
             Machine Dynamics   Vibration Analysis
             Engineering Design   Modelling Dynamic Systems
             Heat Transfer   Internal Combustion Engines

             Senior Project: Finger Goniometer. This involved an
             electronic ocupational therapy device called a finger
             goniometer that was designed to be worn during hand
             exercizes. Range of motion is measured so progress can be
             evaluated.

EXPERIENCE: Student Engineer. Duquesne Electric. Erie, PA. Summer
             1986. Analysis of a power plants piping system. Also
             testing and verification of a graphics program was done by
             modelling piping systems. Also used computerized
             techniques for static and dynamic analysis.

             Designer/Draftsman. Grayson Inc. Somerset, PA. Summer
             1985. Involved in the redesign of a mechanized sorter used
             for material handling purposes. This project involves
             vendor contacts for procurement of needed parts and made
             design calculations on various piece parts (an IBM 5080
             graphics workstation was used).

             Technical Asst. NEL Electronics. Erie, PA. Summer 1984.
             Performed a sensor investigation. Several sensor options
             for an underwater tracking system were located. Criteria
             used as basis of evaluation were cost and weather sensor
             would be reliable. The findings were included in a report.

ACTIVITIES: American Society of Mechanical Engineers
             Pi Tau Sigma, Mechanical Engineering Honor Society
             Orientation of Incoming Penn State Students

REFERENCES: Available upon request

**FIGURE 2.   RÉSUMÉ WITH HIGH RELEVANCE, NOMINAL
              STYLE, PURPOSE ELABORATION AND
              ERROR-LADEN MECHANICS**

ELABORATION	The amount and kind of elaboration in the description of a senior project (title, purpose, or method)
STYLE	The quality of the writing style (verbal or nominal)
MECHANICS	The accuracy of grammar, spelling, and punctuation (error-free or error-laden).

The four factors—relevance, elaboration, style, and mechanics—were orthogonally varied in a $3 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$ within-subjects design, creating 36 possible combinations of the factors. The 72 résumés, therefore, represented two complete replications of the design.

Relevance

In order to test the plausibility of the résumés (i.e., whether résumés listing more relevant work experience would be rated higher) and in order to test the consistency of the recruiters' ratings (i.e., whether recruiters apply less stringent writing standards to more technically qualified applicants), we varied how closely the summer jobs listed on the résumés were related to the hypothetical mechanical-engineering job described earlier. Using a technique adapted from Oliphant and Alexander, we asked two independent recruiters to rate descriptions of summer jobs for their relevance to the mechanical-engineering job. We used the ratings to identify a pool of relevant jobs (e.g., interning at an electronics company) and a pool of nonrelevant jobs (e.g., working at a fast-food restaurant). We then created résumés representing three levels of relevance:

HIGH	Three job descriptions drawn randomly from the pool of relevant jobs. For an example, see the résumé in Figure 2.
MODERATE	Two job descriptions drawn randomly from the relevant pool and one from the nonrelevant pool.
LOW	One job description drawn randomly from the relevant pool and two from the nonrelevant pool. For an example, see Figure 1.

Of the 72 resumes used in the study, 24 listed work experience that was highly relevant, 24 listed experience of moderate relevance, and 24 listed experience of low relevance.

Elaboration

We studied the effect of elaboration in résumés by varying the descriptions of senior projects that students carry out as part of a required engineering design course. In a typical project, teams of students compete to design and build the best device for solving some problem. We took descriptions of senior projects, drawn from actual student résumés and from instructors' records, and recast the descriptions into three versions, with each version adding more elaboration. As the examples below illustrate, the *Title* version was least

elaborated, containing simply a brief title for the project. The *Purpose* version contained the title as well as a sentence or two describing the purpose of the device the students built. The *Method* version added one or two more sentences explaining how the purpose was achieved, usually by describing the application of some engineering technique or design option:

TITLE	Collapsible Cart.
PURPOSE	Collapsible Cart. Designed and constructed a cart that assembles onto a wheelchair so that a confined person can transport heavy items while maneuvering the wheelchair.
METHOD	Collapsible Cart. Designed and constructed a cart that assembles onto a wheelchair so that a confined person can transport heavy items while maneuvering the wheelchair. The design employed a spring-loaded aluminum frame to facilitate assembly and motion.

The three versions of the descriptions varied both the informativeness (or rhetorical appropriateness) of the elaborations and their length. By itself, the purpose elaboration adds information only about the device, but the method elaboration adds information about the student's abilities as a practicing engineer who is capable of reasoned design decisions. Thus, the three types of elaboration increase progressively in length, but only method elaborations address the rhetorical goal of demonstrating the student's ability to apply classroom knowledge. By constructing three versions of 24 senior projects, we ended up with a total of 72 descriptions, with one description appearing in each résumé.

Style

The résumés were written in one of two styles, verbal or nominal. The sentences in résumés with verbal style employed the active voice, used agent-action-goal structure, and contained few nominalizations or unnecessary words. The sentences in résumés with nominal style often employed passive voice and contained nominalizations, empty verbs, cleft constructions, noun strings, and other circumlocutions. The descriptions of the collapsible cart presented previously exemplify verbal style; the nominalized version of the method description looked like this:

> Collapsible Cart. This project was concerned with the design and construction of a cart with the capability of assembly onto a wheelchair. Cart allows transportation of heavy items by a confined person with simultaneous maneuvering of the wheelchair. A spring-loaded aluminum frame was chosen for facilitation of assembly and motion.

It is important to note that most of the passages, especially those in nominal style, were "found text," taken directly from student résumés and altered as little as possible. When we had to transform passages into nominal or verbal style, we followed the procedure of

Hake and Williams. Half of the final set of résumés were written in nominal style and half in verbal style.

Mechanics

For the purposes of this study, we defined two levels of mechanics: error-laden and error-free. The error-laden résumés contained 8-10 errors of various types including spelling, subject-verb agreement, tense, coordination, capitalization, and punctuation. The error types were selected from the "fairly serious" and "very serious" categories in Hairston's survey of professionals. The error-free résumés contained no grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors. Here is the Collapsible Cart description in error-laden form (the versions presented previously were error-free):

> Collapsable Cart. Designed and constructed a cart that assembles onto a wheelchair so that a confined person can simultaneously transport heavy items & maneuvering the wheelchair.

Of the final set of résumés, half were error-free and half error-laden. As in the style factor, we were careful to use a high proportion of "found errors." Further, we attempted to introduce only those types of errors observed in actual student résumés. We introduced a fairly high degree of error in the error-laden résumés in order to be sure of creating a clear distinction between the two conditions, though we plan to experiment with other degrees of error in later studies.

To facilitate comparisons, the examples in this section have all been variations on the same description of a senior project. The overall effect of the four factors is easier to see by examining the two sample résumés. The résumé for Kathy Myers (Figure 1) combines low relevance, method elaboration, verbal style, and error-free mechanics. The résumé for Kevin Wasson (Figure 2) combines high relevance, purpose elaboration, nominal style, and error-laden mechanics.

Experimental Procedure

We asked the recruiters to read the 72 résumés and rate each one on a 4-point scale indicating their desire to interview the fictitious applicants for a hypothetical mechanical-engineering job. Recruiters were told that the résumés were fictitious: that they contained information provided by real students, but that names, dates, and locations had all been changed. To avoid order effects, we created two random orderings of the 72 résumés and gave one of the two to each recruiter in the form of a stapled booklet. After rating the résumés, the recruiters completed two surveys, one that elicited demographic information about themselves and their companies, and one that asked them to rate the importance of various features of résumés. We allowed for a reading speed of one résumé per minute (as in Oliphant and Alexander); most participants completed the ratings and the surveys within 90 minutes.

Analytic Techniques

The recruiters' ratings were analyzed by means of a $3 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA with relevance, elaboration, style, and mechanics as factors. Averages of the ratings were computed for each combination of factors; higher ratings indicated greater interest in interviewing the applicant.

Results and Discussion

Each of the factors that we varied in the résumés—relevance, elaboration, style, and mechanics—had some effect on the recruiters' ratings.

Factors

Relevance of Work Experience

The relevance factor varied how closely the summer jobs listed on the résumés were related to mechanical engineering. Figure 3 presents the recruiter's average ratings for résumés with each degree of relevance, separating out the averages for résumés that were error-free and error-laden. As we expected, recruiters assigned significantly higher ratings to résumés that listed more relevant work
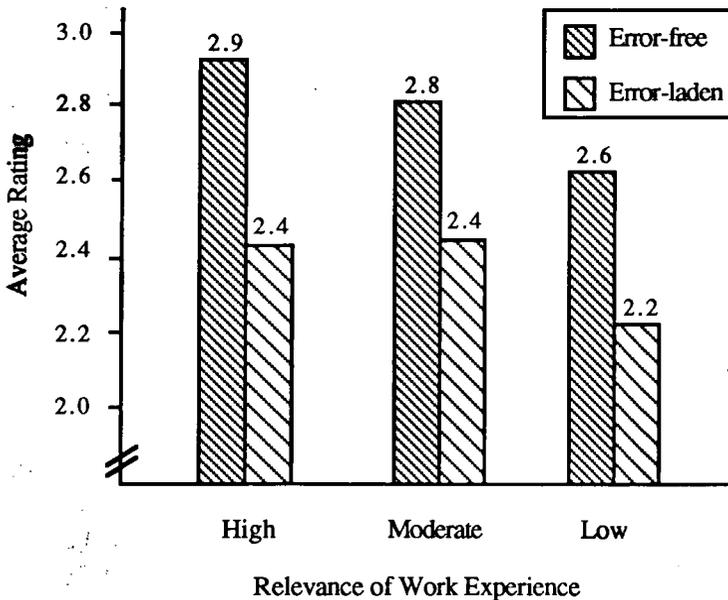

FIGURE 3. RECRUITERS' AVERAGE RATINGS OF RÉSUMÉS AS A FUNCTION OF WORK EXPERIENCE AND MECHANICS

experience, $F(2, 34) = 3.41, p < .05$. The watershed in the ratings came between the résumés of moderate and low relevance. Overall, the average rating for high relevance résumés did not differ significantly from the average rating for moderate relevance résumés (2.63 versus 2.59, respectively). But the rating for moderate relevance résumés was higher than for low relevance résumés (2.59 versus 2.41, respectively), and this difference was statistically significant, $t(17) = 2.18, p < .05$. While these results are not surprising, they do confirm that the résumés were fairly realistic and that the recruiters treated them as such. The fact that we successfully created résumés with differing degrees of technical qualifications allows us, in the following discussion, to compare the relative weight recruiters assigned to technical experience and the other writing features.

Mechanics

Half the résumés contained mechanical errors and half did not. As Figure 3 indicates, the error-free résumés were rated significantly higher than the error-laden résumés (2.75 versus 2.33, respectively), $F(1, 17) = 28.94, p < .01$. This result is gratifying but hardly surprising, given the objections nonacademic readers regularly voice about faulty mechanics.

A more interesting result is that recruiters were consistent in penalizing faulty mechanics regardless of the applicant's technical experience (as measured by the relevance factor). This consistency is indicated by the lack of an interaction between the relevance and mechanics factors. Rather than tolerating errors by better qualified applicants, recruiters tended to penalize all error-laden résumés by about 0.4 points. Another interesting aspect of the results is the relative weighting of technical experience and mechanics. The penalty for error-laden mechanics (0.4 points) is twice the size of the penalty for lack of technical experience (0.2 points). Therefore, résumés containing low-relevance work experience but error-free mechanics were rated *higher* than résumés with highly relevant work experience but faulty mechanics (2.6 versus 2.4, respectively).

Elaboration

By including the elaboration factor, we hoped to answer three questions:

- Does the sheer length of the elaboration influence recruiters' judgments?
- Is rhetorically appropriate elaboration more acceptable than rhetorically irrelevant elaboration?
- Do elaborations of senior projects compensate for a lack of relevant work experience?

Length

The sheer length of elaboration did not influence the ratings. Figure 4 presents the recruiters' ratings as a function of elaboration and
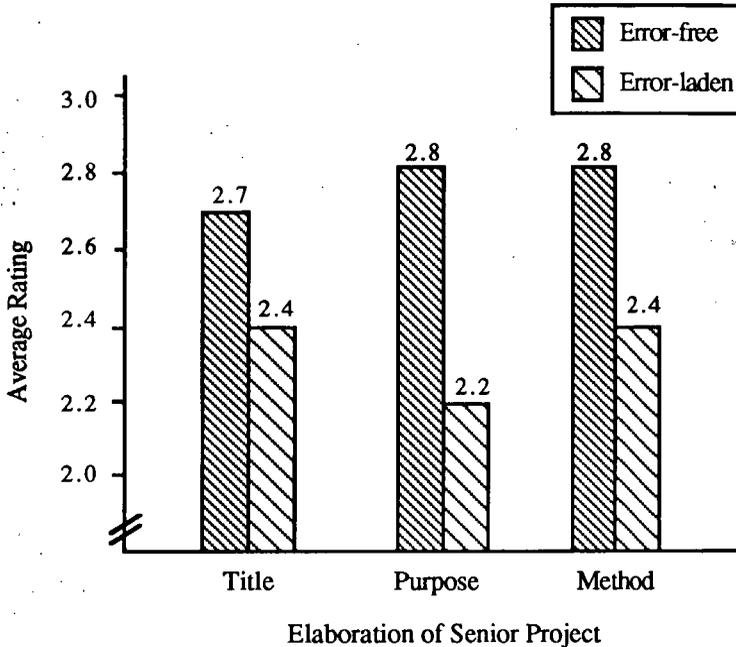
FIGURE 4.   RECRUITERS' AVERAGE RATINGS OF
            RÉSUMÉS AS A FUNCTION OF TYPE OF
            ELABORATION AND MECHANICS

mechanics. As the three pairs of bars indicate, the ratings for all three types of elaboration were fairly similar. Since the types of elaboration progressively increased in length from title to method elaborations, the similarity in these ratings suggests that recruiters do not oppose lengthy elaboration *per se.*

Rhetorical Appropriateness

We speculated that the purpose elaborations would add little to the résumé writer's *ethos* as a practicing engineer since these elaborations describe only the topic of the project. We expected the method elaboration to provide more evidence of the writer's abilities as an engineer. The overall similarity in ratings for the three types of elaboration suggests that these rhetorical differences did not have an overall influence on the recruiters' judgments.

However, the content of the elaborations did have an effect under certain circumstances. The ANOVA revealed that the elaboration factor significantly interacted with mechanics, $F(2, 34) = 4.88, p <$ .05. The recruiters did not distinguish between the elaboration types when the résumés were error-free (the dark-shaded bars). But when résumés were error-laden, recruiters tended to penalize résumés with purpose elaboration; the recruiters significantly preferred plain ti-

tles over purpose elaboration, $t(17) = 2.73$, $p < .05$, and method elaboration over purpose elaboration, $t(17) = 2.38$, $p < .05$.

What might have caused this interaction? Since recruiters seemed to prefer both the shortest form of elaboration (title) and the longest form (method), the interaction cannot result from length. An interaction caused by length would probably show increasing penalties for increasing length. Assuming then that the rhetorical appropriateness of the elaborations played a role, the interaction might be interpreted as follows: Recruiters will only tolerate uninformative elaboration if it is accurately expressed. Accordingly, when the résumés are error-free, recruiters do not penalize the uninformative purpose elaborations. But when the résumés contain errors in mechanics, then the rhetorical deficiencies of the purpose elaboration appear more glaring. So recruiters penalize résumés with purpose elaboration relative to résumés with no elaboration (title) or rhetorically appropriate method elaboration. We hope to test this interpretation in future research by independently varying the length, informativeness, and correctness of elaborations.

Compensation

The possibility that an appropriately elaborated senior project might compensate for a relative lack of relevant work experience was not supported by the data: The ANOVA revealed no significant interaction between elaboration and relevance.

Style

The recruiters were not sensitive to variations in sentence style; they gave equivalent ratings to résumés written in nominal and verbal style, as illustrated in Figure 5.

There is evidence, however, of a preference for verbal style in certain circumstances. A three-way interaction between relevance, elaboration, and style was significant, $F(4, 68) = 6.34$, $p < .01$. To illustrate this interaction, Figure 5 shows the ratings just for résumés that contained method elaboration, as a function of work experience and style. As the first and third pairs of bars indicate, recruiters tended to prefer verbal style over nominal style when résumés contained work experience of either high or low relevance. The preference for verbal over nominal style was significant for highly relevant work experience (2.8 versus 2.4), $t(17) = 2.04$, $p < .05$, and for work experience of low relevance (2.9 versus 2.3), $t(17) = 3.63$ $p < .01$.

Recruiters might reasonably prefer an active, verbal style for the long, informative method elaborations. However, it is puzzling that the same preference for verbal style does not also appear for résumés with moderately relevant work experience. In this case, while résumés with nominal style appear to have received higher ratings than those in verbal style, the difference was not statistically significant. Equally puzzling is the fact that the recruiters did not seem to notice the variations in style in other parts of the résumés. We are, therefore, inclined to place little weight on these results until additional research sorts out these effects. We merely note that when re-
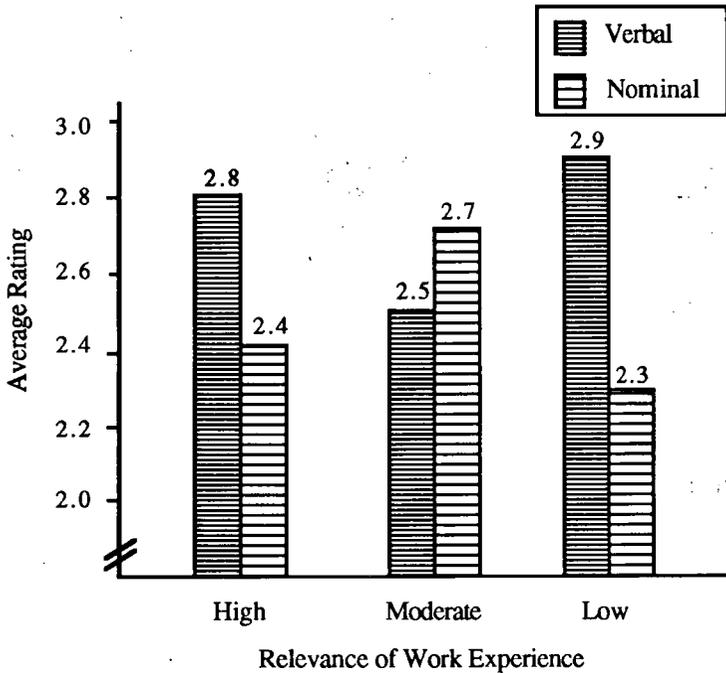
FIGURE 5. RECRUITERS' AVERAGE RATINGS OF RÉSUMÉS AS A FUNCTION OF WORK EXPERIENCE AND STYLE (METHOD ELABORATION ONLY)

cruiters do show sensitivity to style, they seem to prefer verbal over nominal style.

Survey Questions

After they had rated the résumés, we asked recruiters to explicitly rate the importance of various features and functions of résumés in general. We collected this information in part because we wanted to see whether raters' introspective judgments of what they consider important in résumés would be consistent with their ratings of sample résumés.

The survey indicates that recruiters view the résumé primarily as a formal, communicative document. The recruiters considered the primary function of a résumé to be demonstrating communication skills. Recruiters rated this function above those of documenting academic training, on-the-job training, intelligence, or well-roundedness. With respect to features of résumé presentation, recruiters rated clarity and correctness as most important, followed by neatness, layout, and length.

In general, the emphasis on correctness is consistent with previous surveys on résumés (e.g., Feild and Holley; Helwig). This privileging of correctness is also consistent with the large effect we found for mechanics. Our experimental design clarified how correct mechanics enters into an overall assessment and pointed at a watershed where mechanical errors begin to outweigh technical experience. Interestingly enough, the emphasis on clarity in the survey is less well supported by the ratings of the résumés, at least to the extent that verbal style is expected to improve clarity.

Conclusions

Our goal in this study was to answer three major questions:

- How much weight do recruiters assign to writing quality when evaluating an applicant's résumé?
- What features of writing quality influence recruiters' judgments most?
- Do recruiters' judgments of the quality of the writing interact with their appraisal of the applicant's technical qualifications?

We found that recruiters do give considerable weight to writing quality, particularly mechanics, just as the work by Hairston and others would suggest. Further, when recruiters indicated a preference for style, they preferred verbal over nominal style. This result supports the advice teachers normally give about résumés, though the result is not completely consistent with Hake and Williams' findings. Since the recruiters' preference for verbal style was not decisive in this study, more research is needed to confirm this result. Finally, contrary to current wisdom on elaboration, recruiters did not object to lengthy elaboration *per se*. While the evidence is somewhat mixed, recruiters seemed to prefer either minimal elaboration or long elaboration that was rhetorically appropriate. They tended to penalize moderately long elaboration that was rhetorically uninformative.

The results indicate that of the three features of writing quality, recruiters were most sensitive to mechanics. This result is not surprising. Errors in mechanics are relatively easy to detect. Recruiters may feel more objective in judging errors in mechanics than stylistic choices. Further, they may take errors in mechanics as a sign of the applicant's carelessness in a situation in which making a good first impression is critical. The importance of mechanics is probably heightened by the speed with which recruiters must weed out applicants whom they do not want to interview. Future research might address whether or not mechanics is as important in later stages of the hiring process, when prospective employers may have more time to carefully consider the content of the résumés.

Finally, we found that recruiters were relatively evenhanded in their judgment of writing quality. They were no more tolerant of language errors in the résumés of highly qualified applicants than in the résumés of less qualified applicants. Given the relative weighting of

mechanics and work experience, recruiters may prefer a student with minimal experience who abides by the conventions of standard English (Figure 1) over a student with more experience who frequently violates those conventions (Figure 2).

Since we confined our study to mechanical engineering, this study does not address the question of whether recruiters vary their expectations for writing quality according to the position being filled. Would recruiters be even more sensitive to writing features when they are filling positions that require greater communication skills (e.g., positions in management, marketing, or technical writing)? We plan to address this question in future research.

Recommendations

While our study is not conclusive in every respect, we can draw some recommendations for technical-writing teachers. First, teachers should continue to stress the importance of correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation in résumés. Teachers should tell their classes that students with minimal experience and correct mechanics can come out ahead of students with stronger training but faulty mechanics. This result will encourage students who are discouraged about a lack of relevant experience and will alert students to the ineffectiveness of relying on their technical expertise to carry the day.

Second, teachers should encourage students to use rhetorically appropriate elaboration, rather than avoiding elaboration altogether or including generalizations or details that add little to students' *ethos*. Finally, teachers should stress to their students that a résumé is not a technical specification but rather a highly rhetorical piece of discourse that showcases rhetorical sophistication.

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