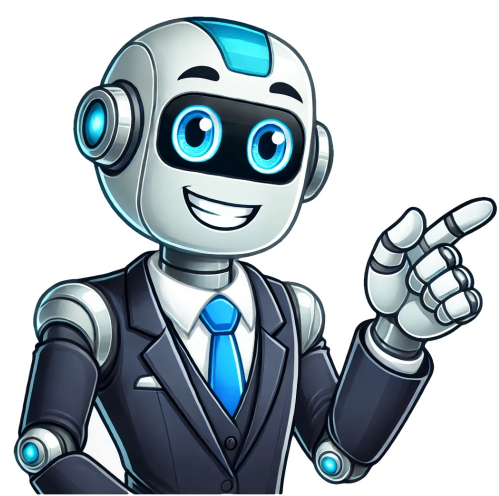I'm not a bot

Resume present tense or past tense

When writing your resume, sometimes it's the little details that matter the most — like whether to write in past or present tense. Both are valid choices; past tense makes sense when discussing your accomplishments, while present tense sounds fresh and immediate. So, which one to choose?The quick answer is you should always use past tense on your resume. This ensures you're focussing on accomplishments rather than responsibilities and is what most modern recruiters expect to see. In this article, we'll discuss how to decide what tense to use on your resume, provide examples of how and when to use the correct tense, and discuss how using the proper tense can boost your resume's readability and ATS compatibility.Key advice from a recruiter to keep in mind when considering whether to use past or present tense on a resumeShould your resume be in present or past tense?There's actually an easy answer to this one — resumes should be written in past tense. Why? Your resume should be about your accomplishments, not your responsibilities. In other words, you should write about things you've already achieved, not what you're currently working on, ergo: past tense! The biggest mistake people make on their resumes is listing job duties rather than accomplishments. Using the present tense in your bullet points is a good indicator that you're focusing on responsibilities rather than accomplishments. Examples of present tense resume statements:Manage a team of 10 people...Organize annual fundraising events...Examples of past tense resume statements:Designed training and peer mentoring programs...Led the transition to a paperless practice...When to use past tense on a resumeIn general, using past tense is always correct. This applies even to your current job.You should use past tense for your current job when listing accomplishments, such as completed projects or skills, and when quantifying your experience to show the result of your work. When listing achievements that are currently ongoing, you can still use the past tense, if you prefer, to maintain consistency throughout your resume. Using past tense verbs like "analyzed" and "designed" is the correct way to list accomplishments on a resume.When talking about past positions you've held, always use past tense. Never use present tense for a job you're no longer at. At worst, this could cause recruiters to reject your application because it shows a lack of attention to detail — so don't risk it when it's an easy thing to get right.When to use present tense on a resumeWhen talking about your current position, you're likely to have accomplishments that are still ongoing. This might include:General day-to-day responsibilitiesOngoing projects that haven't wrapped up yetIn this case, it's appropriate to write in the present tense on your resume when discussing your current job. For example, if you're currently mentoring interns or collaborating with other teams, it's acceptable to write that in the present tense.This means that, regardless of what you were taught in high school English, it's okay to mix tenses on your resume when writing about your current job. Just make sure you're doing it intentionally, to clearly distinguish between your ongoing responsibilities and your past accomplishments.Using the present tense on your resume can be used for ongoing accomplishments, while completed accomplishments should be listed in the past tense.A good way to check if you've used the right verb tense on your resume is to upload your resume to the tool below — it'll let you know if you have shown accomplishments and responsibilities the right way by analyzing each of your tenses. It'll also identify any grammatical and spelling errors and give you suggestions for improvements.How verb tense affects the readability of your resumeYour resume is often the first impression you make on potential employers. Using the correct verb tense not only demonstrates your attention to detail but also makes your resume easier to read.Using past tense for previous roles and accomplishments creates a clear, chronological flow for anyone reading your resume, helping recruiters quickly understand the progression of your career. Using the present tense for ongoing duties distinguishes your current responsibilities from past achievements, making it easier to see which roles and projects you're still involved in and which are completed. The key is to be consistent. Flipping randomly between tenses can confuse a recruiter trying to skim your experience and pick out your relevant skills. Using consistent verb tense on your resume (past for previous jobs, present for the current job) ensures the important information is easy for a recruiter to understand and, therefore, offers you the best chance of making a good impression.How resume verb tense affects ATSModern companies often use Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) to filter job applications based on predetermined keyword criteria. ATS can be very sensitive to how information is presented on your resume, including verb tense. For example, if the ATS software is looking for specific words, such as "taught" or "manage" on your resume, and you've written these in the present tense, as "teach" and "manage", the software might not register this as relevant experience, and flag your resume as not including the right keywords. To safeguard against this problem, if a job listing emphasizes past achievements, use past tense to ensure you capture those particular keywords, and only use resume present tense for roles that emphasize ongoing responsibilities.Examples of using the right tense on a resumeCurious about what past vs present tense looks like in action? Here are some examples that you can follow. Using past tense on a resumeUse the past tense on a resume for any accomplishments that you've already completed and all past jobs, for example:- Launched Miami office with lead Director and managed new team of 10 employees; grew office revenue by 200% in first nine months (representing 20% of company revenue).- Designed training and peer-mentoring programs for the incoming class of 25 analysts in 2017; reduced onboarding time for new hires by 50%.- Led the transition to a paperless practice by implementing an electronic booking system and a faster, safer, and more accurate business system; reduced cost of labor by 30% and office overhead by 10%.- Created a unique year-round adopt-a-school recruitment program which grew market share from 5% to 10%.- Directed agency fundraising revenue generation, daily program business operations, community outreach membership recruitment, and human resources in 30 suburbs in the city for organizations with assets of $8M.- Served as the product sale fundraising campaign manager and directed 100 volunteer chairpersons; increased fundraising donations by 40%.- Negotiated a settlement of a $2M lawsuit with under $5,000 of outside legal fees.- Increased customer retention 10% and reactivated dormant consumers through weekly email campaigns.- Took lead on the migration of the company's Microsoft SQL to MySQL project. This included updating 30 client-facing websites and one internal administration site- Promoted within 18 months due to strong performance and organizational impact (one year ahead of schedule).Using present tense on a resumeUse the present tense on your resume for accomplishments that are still ongoing at your current job, for example:- Manage a cross-functional team of in 3 locations (Palo Alto, Austin, and New York), ranging from entry-level analysts to vice presidents, and collaborate with business development data analysis, operations, and marketing.- Manage all aspects of a 10 person B2B appointment setting call center.- Provide administrative support and guidance to the CEO in day-to-day office operations.- Oversee a $7M budget and fifteen-member team.- Lead team members and vendors to manage the social media advertising strategy for more than 50 social media accounts- Train and mentor new and existing account executives and interns on solutions selling strategies, customer relationship management, and advanced product knowledge.- Supervise a team of 15 associates in addition to overseeing a staff of 60+ associates while managingdaily operations of the store.- Service and manage 150+ target accounts consisting of medical doctors, chiropractors, acupuncturists, nurses, dieticians, and nutritionists- Direct and coordinate a staff of 80 employees.- Manage a team of 15 outbound sales specialists.Are there any exceptions?Yes! There are a few times it's okay to use present tense in your resume instead of past tense.Ongoing accomplishmentsSome accomplishments may make more sense written in present tense. This doesn't mean you should write every bullet point from your current job in present tense, but you might include the occasional accomplishment that's still ongoing. A good example is leading a team — if you're currently managing other staff, it's fine to write your bullet point as "manage a team of 5" instead of "managed." If you don't like the idea of writing some bullet points in past tense and some in present tense, it's also fine to write everything in past tense, even if you're currently in the same position.Your resume summary is another section where it's fine to write in present tense. This also applies to a short (1-2 sentence) blurb you might include as a quick overview of your current job — overviews of past jobs should be written in past tense.Cover letterA lot of resume "rules" — like writing in past tense or not using "I" statements — don't apply to cover letters. It's fine to write your cover letter more conversationally than the rest of your resume, which means you can write in present tense about things you're currently doing.How to use action verbs in the past tenseUsing powerful action verbs on your resume helps demonstrate your accomplishments in a memorable way, highlighting the effectiveness of your actions.Action verbs are most commonly used in the past tense, as they describe your past successes and the positive results of your past work. Strategically using action verbs in the past tense, combined with specific examples and quantified metrics, can make your resume more engaging, memorable, and persuasive.Selecting the right action verbsThe key is to choose verbs that describe your experience and achievements. Here's a list of powerful action verbs categorized by the type of achievement:Leadership and management: Led, Managed, Directed, Supervised, CoordinatedInnovation and creativity: Developed, Designed, Innovated, Created, PioneeredProblem-solving: Resolved, Streamlined, Improved, Overhauled, ReconciledSales and revenue growth: Increased, Amplified, Boosted, Generated, AcceleratedProject management: Executed, Completed, Achieved, Realized, AccomplishedCustomer service: Enhanced, Delivered, Served, Supported, AssistedWhen incorporating these verbs into your resume, focus on quantified results to show the impact of your actions. For example:Instead of saying, "Was responsible for managing a team," say, "Managed a team of 10, enhancing productivity by 30%."Replace "Worked on project management" with "Executed a complex project within deadline, achieving a 15% cost saving."Common mistakes to avoid with resume verb tenseMake sure to avoid these common mistakes when deciding what tense to use on your resume.Mixing tenses in the same bullet point: While you can use both past and present tense to describe your current job, avoid mixing tenses within the same bullet point, as this can make your statements difficult to follow.Overuse of present tense: Using present tense for past positions can confuse recruiters about your employment history. Stick to past tense for all roles you're no longer engaged in, and only use present tense on your resume for your current position.Neglecting completed projects: When describing completed projects in current roles, used past tense to emphasize the accomplishment and its impact.Using present participles (gerunds): Using verbs that end in -ing, like "managing a team" or "organizing events", is less impactful and can lead more like job descriptions than achievements. Opt for simple past tense ("managed a team"), and simple present tense ("manage a team") for current roles. These phrases are more direct and convey a sense of completion or active engagement.What other grammar rules do I need to know to write a resume?Keep it simpleAlways write in simple past or present tense — analyzed, led, increased, manage. Never use the present participle form (eg. analyzing, leading, managing). Saying that you "manage a team" or "managed a team" is fine, but listing "managing a team" reads like a job description, not an accomplishment.Passive vs active voiceYou may have heard the advice to always use active voice, but what does that mean? Active voice is when you talk about things you did, e.g. "increased sales" or "trained new staff." Passive voice is when you talk about something that was done to you, e.g. "was asked to organize an event," or "tasked with training new staff." Active voice is always better — it's more straightforward, easier to read, and keeps the focus squarely on what you actually accomplished rather than just what you were asked to do.(Im)perfect tensePerfect tense is another thing to avoid on your resume. Perfect tense is when you add "have" or "had" to indicate that you've done something, e.g. "I have increased sales" or "I had organized 10 events." Leave out empty verbs like "have" and "had," which add nothing to your resume except hard-to-read filler.First or third person: what's better on a resume?The other thing to consider when writing your resume is point of view. Resumes are written in first person since you're talking about yourself and your own accomplishments. This means your bullet points should sound like they were written by you. For example, if you're talking about leading a team, you should write that you "managed" a team (or "manage," if it's your current position). Don't write "manages a team" as if your resume is being written by somebody else.You also shouldn't use "I" statements outside of your cover letter, eg. "I manage a team." Your resume is a formal document, so leave the "I" out of it.Related: Improve Your Resume by Eliminating AdverbsIf you're not certain whether you should list something in past or present tense, always default to past tense. Even in cases where present tense may be more appropriate, past tense is never wrong and is unlikely to look strange to a hiring manager. Using present tense incorrectly, on the other hand, may raise a few red flags. Grammar and consistency are key when it comes to your resume. Uniform and error-free writing not only makes your resume easier for a recruiter or hiring manager to understand, but it also shows that you are conscientious, pay attention to detail, and care about your job search. (Don't say you're meticulous, then submit a typo-filled resume!) And the verb tense or tenses you use are one vital way to make sure your resume is professional and easy to read. Trending SearchesSEARCH ALL JOBS "Using proper tense is an essential detail for a well-organized resume that will help you stand out to future employers," says Muse career coach Jennifer Smith. Resumes are primarily written in past or present tense. Past tense (think verbs ending in -ed, primarily) describes actions that are no longer happening, while present tense describes actions that are currently happening. But overall, the most important resume rule for verb tenses is to be consistent. When Smith was a recruiter, she "would notice if a resume [was] a mix of present and past without any consistency." Mixing tenses inappropriately makes resumes more difficult to read—which means you're less likely to move to the next stage. Most of your resume should be in the past tense because the bulk of your resume space is taken up by past work experiences. "Use past tense for sections of your resume you are no longer doing," Smith says. This means your previous jobs, completed accomplishments, volunteering or other activities you're no longer participating in, awards you've won, certifications you've earned, or education you've completed. A bullet point for a past job might look like this: Conceived, planned, scheduled, and wrote copy for 20+ social media posts weekly for Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook You'll use present tense on your resume anytime you're describing something that's currently happening. Present-tense verbs primarily belong in your resume summary and descriptions of your current job duties and ongoing accomplishments because those are about who you are and what you're doing right now. If your resume headline has a verb or if there are any activities, volunteer work, or projects you're currently working on outside of a full-time job, those should use the present tense as well. Basically, if the date range ends with "Present," that's a good indicator you should be using the present tense, Smith says. Here's an example resume summary that uses present tense: Personable and motivated SaaS account manager who takes pride in finding the right solutions and products for every client through individual attention and relationship building. Team player who is always willing to help others and has a strong track record of reducing churn. You should avoid mixing your verb tenses within the same resume entry or section whenever possible. The one exception is in the entry for your current job or any current volunteer work or activities—if you want to highlight accomplishments that are fully completed and not ongoing. When you have both past and present tense in the same entry, group the present-tense bullet points at the top of the entry and all of the past-tense bullet points at the end, Smith says. You might consider creating a "Key Achievements" or similar subsection under your current job and putting the past-tense bullets under that heading to make things even more clear for anyone reading your resume. For example, a project manager might write this about their current job: Project Manager | OrangeYellow Co | Cleveland, OH | August 2018-Present Lead the delivery of initiatives using Agile/Scrum methodologiesDefine timelines, budgets, KPIs, and milestones for each initiativeCoordinate a cross-functional team of 20+, delegating duties and allocating resources using Asana, Google Workspace, and AirtableCommunicate with key stakeholders from conception through completion Oversaw the creation of a new $100k client portal, meeting all key milestones on time and coming in 5% under budget, leading to a 50% increase in customer satisfaction and 20% increase in client renewals year-over-yearWon Manager of the Year 2020 for receiving the highest scores from direct reports in a company-wide survey on management styles and employee satisfaction Still confused? There's an easy fix: To keep things simple and ensure consistency, some people choose to keep every verb on their resume in the past tense, Smith says. So if you're not sure, sticking to the past tense is a safe bet. Start Building Your Resume TodayChoose from 50+ ATS friendly Resume & CV templates to land an interview quickly Should a resume be in the past or present tense?How sick are you of hearing that you must proofread your resume? The reason that proofreading is brought up so much is that it is of the utmost importance. If you take hours or even days crafting the perfect document and never discover grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors, your time has been wasted. There's more to proofreading than just using spell check, though. Your verb tense is also important for your overall resume writing style. Of course, that raises an important question: should your resume be in past tense or present tense?The short answer is, "It depends." In this post, we'll explore each of these tenses, examine the best practices for using each type, and offer some helpful tips you can use to ensure that your resume narrative is delivering the right message to employers.What is past tense? What is present tense? First, let's have a review of what past and present tense means. Is your sentence describing something that's happening now, or did it already occur? Past tense is anything that's already happened. The verbs that describe past tense often end with -ed. Of course, there are some exceptions like "oversaw." Reminder: every sentence of your resume should start with a verb.Present tense is anything that's happening now. You'd use present tense in the summary paragraph at the top and in the bullets that you use to describe your current job. Pro tip: The gerund form of present tense verbs often adds an -ing at the end. There is some debate as to whether the use of the gerund is appropriate for a resume. With that said, you should avoid using it.Related post: 11 Key Things to Put on Your ResumeShould I use past tense or present tense on my resume? You will likely use both the past and the present tense in your resume. However, it can get tricky because you don't want to mix both in the same section. If you have one-off achievements like successfully completing a project in your current role, you shouldn't talk about that in the present tense because it already happened. In the spirit of being consistent, here are some rules to help you recognize when to use past or present tense.When to use past tense on your resumeDescribe your education, past jobs, awards, and accomplishments using the past tense. Of course, that doesn't mean anymore, and you no longer work at your previous jobs. Therefore, they belong in the past. For example:Championed a 20% increase in sales by onboarding 30 new customers each month.Architected complex algorithms that improved the efficiency of gathering, scrubbing, and merging data from more than 20 disparate sources.Engaged in real-time troubleshooting with approximately 40 customers per day and achieved an 85% first-call resolution rate.When to use present tense on your resumeWhile much of your resume will be in the past tense, there are certain sections that should focus on the present. These include the resume headline, resume summary, and the first entry in your work experience section if you're describing your current position. Let's look at each one of these critical sections and examine why it's important to use the present tense to describe your skills and ongoing achievements.Related post: Seven Key Resume Sections and How to Organize Them1. Resume headlineYour resume headline should always be written in the present tense since you want to ensure that the employer understands that you're actively engaged in your role. Remember, the headline is a brief description of your job title and key specialties, so make it as compelling as you can. For example:Creative Marketing Manager Focused on Data-Driven Results in Branding and Client EngagementSolutions-Oriented Project Manager with 10+ Years of Team Building and Client Management SuccessInnovative Software Engineer with 5 Years of Experience Developing Industry-Leading Gaming AppsRelated post: 27 Great Resume Headline Examples to Stand Out2. Resume summaryYour summary goes right below your resume headline and should provide employers with a brief elevator pitch to sell your qualifications. Include three or four sentences that highlight your experience, skills, and notable achievements. The goal here is to emphasize your qualifications in a way that shows you're prepared to provide real value to any employer who hires you. Here's an example:Ambitious IT specialist with more than seven years of experience in network management and systems analysis. Expert troubleshooter and project lead with expertise in cloud platform, data migration, and client support. Proven track record of reducing network delays by 80+%, with 95+% reported satisfaction rating on troubleshooting calls. Resilient problem-solver, capable of working both independently and in collaboration with colleagues and clients.Related post: Resume Profile Explained (with Examples)3. Work ExperienceWhen you list your current job in your work experience section, it should always be in the present tense. The skills you list in this prominent section of your resume are skills you use all the time. This is the it-can-get-tricky part because you can also talk about your current position in the past tense – more on this in just a bit. Here are a couple of examples:Direct full-cycle hiring process, including telephone interviews, to ramp up department operations.Source, interview, hire, and onboard a new team of 7 developers. Train 6 associates and 2 clerks to ascertain the needs of clients and improve customer satisfaction.Of course, when you're listing achievements in your work experience section, you're primarily going to focus on things that you've already done. After all, if one of those achievements involved designing a new sales program that boosted revenues by 30% over two quarters, that's a one-time achievement, right? Obviously, that accomplishment needs to be presented using the past tense.Confused? Don't be. We'll explain how to handle that situation in our next section.When to use both past and present tenseYour resume is supposed to be a customized career marketing document that demonstrates you're the best candidate for a specific position. You sell yourself to new companies by highlighting career accomplishments. So, how do you handle talking about past and present items in the description of your current role if you shouldn't mix past and present tense within the same section of your resume? Take that example that we cited above. How would you include that type of achievement in the work experience listing for your current job? It's easier than you might imagine.The best way to deal with that situation is to separate the bullet points under your current role into things you do every day first and achievements last. Write your daily responsibilities in the present tense and your achievements in the past tense. This is what that would look like:Document, report, and present project milestones, performance KPIs, and status updates in weekly executive meetings attended by as many as 12 board members.Implement and execute all standard operating procedures to ensure adherence to protocols, mitigate risk, and improve overall safety rating to 0 incidents per month. NOTED ACCOMPLISHMENTS:Saved more than $300K by tracking spending, identifying waste, and authoring/implementing new project metrics that reduced costs.Nominated by leaders for the I'm-The-Greatest-Employee award, 2021. Another great way to manage this concern is to include a brief paragraph that highlights your ongoing achievements using the present tense while making sure that all your bullet point accomplishments are listed in the past tense. Below, we've provided an example of what that might look like:Marketing Director, ABC Marketing, Anytown Anystate, 2014 to PresentManage daily marketing operations, including strategic campaign development, overseeing multiple distributed teams, evaluating and monitoring staff, and managing client expectations. Collaborate directly with senior management, finance department, and sales team to facilitate operations and ensure that the company always remains on mission.Designed and implemented training program credited with 42% reduction in staff onboarding times.Developed multiple marketing and advertising campaigns that brought in $100+ million over a six-year period.Redesigned more than 20 failing client projects, leading to results that exceeded expectations by an average of 20%.Created company's innovative "Green Marketing" campaign that drew national exposure and led to 15% spike in new client acquisition.Tips to get the most out of your use of past and present tenseThe following tips can help you maintain your focus when you're creating achievement statements and highlighting your current qualifications.Resumes are not like standard prose documents. You don't need to stick to just one tense since you'll likely be highlighting both present skills and past achievements. Just remember to make sure that your reader can easily follow any tense changes that occur throughout your resume narrative.If you find yourself asking, "Should this part of my resume be in past tense or present tense" just take a moment and consider the message you're trying to deliver with that statement. If you're attempting to focus attention on your current skills and qualifications, then you'll probably want to use the present tense. If you're demonstrating value by highlighting an accomplishment from a previous job, use the past tense.Try to avoid mixing your tenses within any given bullet point section. Again, be consistent in different areas of your resume to avoid reader confusion.If you're struggling to decide how to use the different tenses within the same resume, try a different and simpler approach. Instead of using the present tense, simply present all your information using the past tense. Most employers are used to seeing past tense used in resumes and won't be put off by that approach.Related post: 17 Resume Tips to Get Seen and Hired FasterKnowing if your resume should be in past tense or present tense is easyThe next time you're wondering whether your resume should be in past tense or present tense, take a deep breath and focus on your narrative. Sometimes, reading your own resume a few times can help you gain insight into the message that you're delivering. Just keep things simple and remember what each tense is designed to convey to the reader. If you can successfully do that, you'll have a better chance of choosing the right tense and making the best possible impression on employers.Are you still confused about which resume tense you need to use? Get a free resume review from our team of experts today! "This article was originally written by Marsha Hebert and has been updated by Ken Chase."Recommended reading: