

# GETTING PAST THE ATS GATES

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**21 Simple Tips To Help  
Career Seekers Deal With  
Applicant Tracking Systems**

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There's only one type of person who submitted their resume to an online job posting that they thought there were perfect for, only to receive a rejection message.

That type of person can be described with just one word:

*Everybody.*

## **Introduction:**

All varieties of companies are using Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) to manage the influx of resumes from online postings. There are numerous reasons why companies use them, and we believe that ATS's will continue to be a fact of life for job seekers today and into the future. Every time you attach a resume to an online job application, there's a better than average chance the first person to read your document isn't a person, but an algorithm. Having a plan to deal with an ATS is vital to success

Much like a bouncer at a fancy night club, the ATS software decides who gets in and who stays outside. This means that you need to design your resume to be able to navigate this gauntlet to get inside to a human reviewer. Here's a series of tips to help you make sure you don't get the heave-ho out the door but instead get invited to the VIP section.

The following are some tips to help you build confidence that your resume is getting past the ATS to a human being for review.

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*First off, start with tweaking your approach to managing online applications.*

### **1. Get Organized**

The majority of job seekers mistakenly assume they need multiple resumes. The fact is that you only need one. What you're going to do is customize it each time you submit it for a job. Beyond that, it's important to stay organized so you know which resume you sent.

Start by making a duplicate of your resume and naming it "Backup Resume" and put into a separate folder. For each job you apply to, copy your resume into a new folder with the employer's name and a pdf printout of the job posting. As you save copies for each posting, be careful to edit that one, not the master copy. Of course, if you do accidentally delete or

overwrite your master copy, you'll be okay - because you have a backup copy!

## **2. Learn how to ID keywords and phrases**

A key tactic to getting past an ATS is to identify both the keywords and phrasing used in the job posting, because this is the most likely criteria that the software will use to determine if your resume is relevant or rubbish. So, the presence of keywords and associated phrasing will clue the ATS into seeing that your resume passes the scan.

Keywords can both be functions of the job (like supervision, change management, project manager) and specific skill needs/wants for the position (CRM, a SHRM Certification, Photoshop, etc.).

Phrases are like keywords, if they spell out 'Registered Nurse' or 'Training Facilitation' be sure to not rely on 'RN' or 'Training Facilitator' to be enough to make a match.

### **3. Don't neglect LinkedIn**

LinkedIn is a social network but it's also a publicly accessible online version of your resume. Make sure that you're using it to the fullest by filling out your profile completely so that when people do a search for you, they see you at your best. If you have no presence, a bad photo/no photo, or a half-finished profile it can signal you're not really that interested in finding a job.

### **4. Find referrals**

Much like a bank heist in a movie, you'll get further if you already have a person on the inside.

Check your network to see who you know that already works where you're applying. Not only can they provide insights into your potential employer, but their insights might help you get through the gate.

## **5. Simplify**

It's tempting to add in everything you've ever done to 'show' that you're the best candidate, but it can backfire. Not only can it throw off the scanning process, but it makes it harder for humans to read once you get it past the ATS. Try to keep things clear and concise using 1-2 pages.

## **6. Transferable skills**

Sometimes you don't have the exact match for a skill that the posting lists, so be sure to call out similar skills that might also qualify you. For example, if the post says "Must know how to teach using D2L eLearning system" but you only know Blackboard then be sure to say that you know how to teach using Blackboard eLearning system. Some ATS platforms know to look for similar keywords that might also be approved.

## **7. Leave out fluff**

Including extra information that has no bearing on the job, such as what business books you've read or what your Myers-Briggs type indicator is, should be left out.

However, be sure to include relevant volunteer and community involvement if they show special skills to a human reader. Include anything not related to work experience and education/certification at the end of the resume.

## **8. Save the fancy stuff for print**

Recently, some news outlets have talked about the need for an 'Instagram-worthy' resume full of graphics, icons, pie charts, etc. While those are perfectly fine for networking, do NOT use them for online job applications. This might cause the ATS to throw a fit and cause you to be thrown out.

## **9. Ditch the ‘Objective’**

This section is found in many resumes but think of it from the employer’s standpoint. Why should they care what you are looking for? They are more interested to learn if you can do the job. Replace it with a summary section that focuses on your accomplishments. This is also a great place to include keywords and phrases!

## **10. Be wary of ‘Free’ online ATS checkers.**

A quick search will turn up multiple sites offering to scan your resume for ATS worthiness for free. While we won’t say to not use these services, we will caution you everything that is free online almost always has a price associated to it. Stop to think about why the site is offering to scan your resume and what they might do with sensitive private data. Make sure the trade is worthy of your effort.

*Apply these tech tips as you write your resume.*

### **11. Formatting can trip up the process.**

You might assume that graphic elements enhance readability. For people that may be the case but computers can't make sense of them. Avoid text boxes, graphics, borders, underlines, and color. Make sure your text is left-aligned with normal margins. Bold text and capitalization are fine. Use lines that are inserted as elements, not underlines.

### **12. Check things out in plain text**

Curious how your resume reads from the ATS perspective? Try copy/pasting your content in a plain text editor (Windows – Notepad, Mac – Text Editor). If something seems amiss, it could throw off an ATS.

### **13. Upload .docx files**

Maybe you don't use Microsoft Word to write your resume, but when uploading to an ATS be sure to upload only .docx format. Anything else might not be able to be scanned correctly. PDFs are great for email, but they're not always machine readable.

### **14. Use standard fonts**

Never use a font that is smaller than 10 points or larger than 12 for the main text of your document. Header can be 14-16 points to stand out.

Stick to standard resume fonts such as Arial, Calibri, Garamond, Helvetica, and the like. Avoid dramatic typefaces and stick to one for the entire document if you can. Never use more than two different fonts.

## **15. Never use the headers/footer space**

At the very top and bottom of a digital document there is an area called the 'header' and 'footer'. If you're unsure about what this is, look it up in either the help section or online.

It is important to NEVER use this space because most ATS will never look here. If your name, email, and phone are located here then your resume might be flushed because you have no name.

## **16. Spell out acronyms, slang/jargon**

Sure, most everyone might know what an MBA or CPA is, but you can't assume that. Master of Business Administration (MBA) makes it better for humans. Either way, if the ATS is looking for CPA or Certified Public Accountant you'll be covered.

## **17. Be wary of keyboard symbols**

Have you ever seen a headline that should say “Can’t” but instead there are random characters instead of the apostrophe? This happens when the system is unable to understand what the character actually is. Avoid contractions if you can, just to be safe. When in doubt, try the trick in Tip #12 to see what happens.

## **18. Avoid TMI (Too Much Information)**

This applies to both people and computer systems. Your resume will get about 5-10 seconds of attention assuming it makes it past the ATS. Don’t bother including information more than 10-15 years old unless it’s vitally important. An ATS might throw you out if you have too much data.

## **19. Skills sections are both good and bad**

Unless you’re in a technical field, you might consider dumping a Skills section and instead include your skills with each job. If you have one, place it at the end of the document.

## **20. Use standard section headers**

The ATS will look for section headers such as Employment, Employment History, Experience, Education, Certification, etc. Creativity is nice just don't do it for section headers.

## **21. Don't use Grandpa's 'word salad' tricks**

You might be told by some to include all your keywords either in a block of text, a skills section, or (worst of all) white text at the bottom of the page. Systems are a lot smarter than they were when this was a good tactic. Just don't do it.

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### ***Bonus Tip!***

When concerned with ATS readability, remember this rule:

Computers are two things:

helpful and stupid.

ATS systems exist to speed up the job application process but they're only as smart as they are programmed to be. Do not let the idea that an algorithm will read your resume first be a source of stress for you. The system is actively trying to get your resume where it needs to go and keep out the riffraff.

Help yourself by making your resume easier for the ATS to read.

## **Afterward:**

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Thank you to everyone who's taken the time to review this short guide. We hope you have found these insights and strategies helpful. If you're uncertain as to your next course of action, please reach out to us on social media or via our website.

Best of luck to you in your career journey!

The Merrfeld Team

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