Students cannot cross résumé borders: A case study of transfer of learning

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Abstract

The concepts of audience awareness and transfer of learning have been extensively investigated in several written genres. This study probes into the application of these concepts in the process of compiling one's résumé. Specifically, it addresses the résumé's content and formal schema, and which of these two aspects is more transferrable than the other. The analysis is hinged on Grice's four maxims: quality, quantity, manner and relevance. The results indicate that there are no cases of complete transfer of learning. That is, in all the résumé that the participants in this study created there were always positive signs of transfer of learning. Yet, transfer of formal aspects was more prevalent than content transfer. These shortcomings are addressed through the use of peer editing and explicit teaching of résumé writing skills.

Key Words: Formal and content schema, résumé writing, learning transfer, audience analysis, peer editing.

Introduction

Audience awareness in writing is an important feature that has to be taken into serious consideration when writing one's résumé. In this regard, Flower (1979, p. 19) draws a fine distinction between writer-based prose and reader-based prose. By the former she means "verbal expression written by a writer to himself and by himself'. The latter applies to cases when "a deliberate attempt to communicate something to a reader" exists. Lapp, Shea and Wolsey (2011) argue that "audience awareness is an abstract cognitive concept with which even accomplished adult writers struggle from time to time." (p. 42). This study details the experiences the writer has been through when teaching College of Engineering students at a private university in the United Arab Emirates how to create a résumé; an important component of the technical communication skills course taught to students during their junior year prior to starting their internship. The students described in this article, most of whom have advanced skills in science as well as in English, will be searching for internship positions with regional and international engineering firms. Thus, before completing this course, they have to apply for an engineering corporation in their respective fields to do their internship. One of the requirements for this is writing a résumé and forwarding it to prospective trainers. Wright, Domagalski and Collins (2011) note the importance accorded to the résumé in the below quote:

> Employee selection currently depends on the use of the traditional
> resume—a document long acknowledged as being problematic with
> highly manipulated content and terse to the point that it may not well
> represent the candidate. Yet it is on this document that recruiters
> typically rely in selecting candidates for interviews (p.282).

A careful examination of a résumé shows that it is a written genre with specific characteristics. Bhatia (1993) defines a genre as:

> a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of
> communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by
> the members of the professional or academic community in which
> it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and
> conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in

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terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognized purpose(s) (p. 13).

Therefore, teaching students how to create a résumé, requires good knowledge of its formal and content schema and an excellent awareness of its readers' knowledge and expectations.

Review of Previous Studies

Copious studies have investigated and examined various issues related to writing a résumé. Randazzo (2012:377-378) aptly summarizes that "Most discussion about the genre revolves around six main themes:

1. The mechanical "how to" of writing résumés, including formatting constraints, layout choices, grammar considerations, and writing for different modalities (e.g., the Internet; Jones, 1997; Priest, 2008, 2009).

2. The procedural "how to" of creating a résumé, usually including steps such as making a personal inventory (Becze, 2008; Santiago, 1999; Smart, 2004).

3. The rhetorical "dos and don'ts" of tone, style, content, and submission, often accompanied by some form of audience analysis such as the employer's values or submission preferences (Brown, 2008; Foster, 1997; Hutchinson & Brefka, 1997; Potvin, 2009; Schullery et al., 2009).

4. Discussion of the Internet's and social networking's impact on the design, rhetorical situatedness, and very existence of the résumé (Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Killoran, 2009; Krause, 1997; Marx, 2011; O'Brien, 2010).

5. Examinations of the psychology of application reviewers, including biases (Arnulf, Tegner, & Larssen, 2010; Kaplan & Fisher, 2009).

6. Recently, its ethical complications and pedagogical usefulness in teaching students ethics (Amare & Manning, 2009; Kaplan & Fisher, 2009; Kidwell, 2004; McQueeney, 2006; O'Rourke, 1995). Conn (2008) took this perspective even further by exploring how résumés provide opportunities for *integrating* the teaching of writing skills and ethics".

Furthermore, Randazzo (2012, p. 378) rightly argues that writing résumés provides students practice in developing "their capacities to reflect-on-action, reflect-in-action, and be reflexive". He further points out that although the résumé genre is extensively studied, research has failed to consider its potential in inculcating and enhancing such critical thinking skills in the students. Schullery et al. (2009), in a study probing into companies' preferences for résumé styles, point out that writing and submitting a standard chronological résumé is still very much the practice for getting a job. Ding and Ding (2013:239) propose "the use of a four-component multimodal employment project" in which students move in four stages: write résumés, cover letters, conduct mock interviews, carry out video resume analysis and do peer critique of social media profiles.

The aforementioned studies have discussed the how of writing a résumé, but lacked any reference to whether the skills taught are retained by the learners or not. Furthermore, nothing is said concerning whether résumé is a one stage writing process or more. It is our contention that the résumé should go through several writing stages with feedback from peers and the instructor or both until a professional résumé is produced. Even when a satisfactory résumé is accomplished, the résumé writer will need to add to it with time and keep it up to date. On the other hand, several studies have probed into the possible transfer of learning from writing courses into other courses. This issue has, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, received no attention when it comes to the skills learnt from writing a résumé.

Transfer of learning has been the subject of various studies (e.g., Carter, 2003; Hyland, 2002; Johns, 1988a; Leki, 2003; Wardle, 2009). Those scholars have put into question whether learning can lead to transferable skills and learning outcomes. In other words, when students are taught how to create a résumé, it is expected that they will implement and reflect these skills in their own résumés. The aim is to help the students develop self-regulation. Carvalho (2002) notes that self-regulation "… may not only contribute to immediate performance but have more long-range educational significance as the internalisation of these processes results in cognitive development in general, and writing development in particular"(p. 274).

Objective of the Study

This study comes as a response to Randazzo's (2012:389) statement that:

> Since the genre is so widely assigned, it would be beneficial to understand which pedagogical changes could yield a powerful tool that business communication educators can use to help students better learn and retain the skills we try to help them cultivate (through reflection) and become more engaged and ethical citizens (through reflexivity).

It is, therefore, the purpose of this study to report the procedures the present writer adopted in teaching engineering students how to design and create their résumés. Specifically, it investigates the transfer of the skills into one's own résumé and from writing one's résumé to being able to offer sound and appropriate feedback on résumés written by other students in the same class. From this perspective, it is worth considering the efficacy of résumé writing instructions from a transfer perspective. Grice's (1975) four maxims of: quality, quantity, manner and relevance are utilized as tools to measure and assess the quality of the résumés. Details of Grice's maxims are:

Quantity

- Make your contribution as informative as required. (Don't say too much or too little.)
- Make the strongest statement you can.

Quality

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation

- Be relevant. (Stay on topic.)

Manner

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- Be orderly.

Methodology

The total number of résumés used for this study exceeded 200 résumés, collected from students over a period of one academic year. The students were told that their résumés would be used for research purposes with the condition of keeping identities anonymous.

Procedures

These résumés have been produced through the following stages:

1. Students are presented with various résumé sample templates to choose from and imitate (see Appendix A for examples).
2. These samples are subjected to intensive discussion in terms of their layout and content.
3. Students are told that they can choose any sample; variety was made a requirement.
4. Students are presented with some résumé writing guidelines (see Appendix B).
5. Students write their own résumés.
6. Individual students are paired with other classmates and are asked to do the following:
   a. Send their résumé, in Microsoft Word Document, to the classmate they are paired with via university email and cc the course instructor.
   b. Save the résumé on desktop, read it carefully, make constructive comments; when necessary, using the Microsoft Track Change feature, save and send to the writer.
   c. The other student does the same.
   d. The résumé recipient reads the comments and implements the recommended modifications/changes, if convincing and make sense.
   e. In the final stage, the modified résumé together with the one with the comments are sent to the course instructor for more feedback and are later sent to the student.
   f. Students implement the instructor's recommended changes and submit hard copies of all the résumés to the instructor.
   g. Random samples of these résumés are selected for the analysis. In this stage, the focus is on comparing the draft résumés with the ones produced after feedback from peers and the instructor is implemented.

Analysis

To identify signs and instances of transfer, students' final written résumés were examined. Positive learning transfer signs were counted by the number of résumés that exhibited positive transfer versus those that did not show much change in comparison with the original résumé (i.e., the first drafts). Signs of transfer in these résumés were examined according to some of the learning objectives that had been targeted explicitly in the course. These objectives are: organization, sections' headings, sections' contents, font size, alignment and under-informativity /and/or over-informativity. Each résumé was analyzed for evidence of application of these targeted learning outcomes. When analyzing the samples for applications of learning outcomes, use of targeted skills was considered an indicator of learning transfer. Each written sample was coded according to whether any of the learning outcomes had or had not been applied. These were rated from 1 (no use of learning outcome), 2 (minimal use of learning outcome), 3 (moderate use of learning outcome) and 4 (extensive use of learning outcome). This was adopted from James' (2009) study on learning transfer. Although I found other studies using different methods such as 'yes' for learning transfer and 'no' when there is no learning transfer, I found James' (2009) approach more appropriate as I hardly found full or no transfer of learning outcomes.

Grice's four maxims and the accompanying principles are applied to the résumés in the manner explained below.

1. A résumé is considered uninformative if it lists initials/acronyms/abbreviations without mentioning the full words these stand for.

2. An objective section is considered wordy and irrelevant if it is not tied to the job/position being applied for.

3. The quality of the supplied information is deficient unless all reported actions are substantiated by evidence. This evidence could be the work duration, details of the employer, tasks/duties carried out, etc.

4. Entries listed under the wrong section(s) are considered irrelevant.

5. The résumé is deemed as violating the genre conventions if it is not structured like a résumé.

6. More recent entries should appear before old ones (i.e., chronological order), etc.

Results

Findings show that student writers were able to improve their résumé writing based on the near-immediate feedback provided by their peers and the course instructor; students were able to provide substantive feedback on the work of others; and students were motivated to revise their work based on the feedback they received from their peers and the instructor. Although traces of transfer of learning of résumé formatting were clear, there were still indications of students' inability to use features such as layout, spacing, font size, etc. Analysis of résumés also shows that résumé peer editing exercises lead to much improved performance when asked to edit others' résumés. That is, students are able to detect shortcomings with layout, formatting, typos, under-informativity, categorization and grouping of entries under their relevant sections, etc. This corroborates Bifuh-Ambed's (2013); Ding and Ding's (2013); Pearce's (2007) and Schaffer's (2009) conclusions that peer editing enhances students' revising and editing skills.

Analysis of students' written samples has also demonstrated various degrees of learning transfer. The big majority reflected 'extensive use of course learning outcomes' while others showed 'moderate use of learning outcomes'. The résumés were well-organized, using headings and subheadings accurately. However, there were many missing sections and subsections in the résumés. The results also underscore the value of feedback in the résumé writing process, i.e., where writing is seen as stages; drafting, editing, redrafting, etc., rather than as a product. In writing a résumé, it is important to know whether writing instructors read drafts of students' written résumés or just read or mark the final version. Hyland and Hyland (2006, p. 86) mention that "commentary on a draft is likely to serve more immediate pedagogical goals than that given on a final product". Likewise, Scrivener (2005, p. 199) states that "feedback on writing isn't something to save up until the entire text is fully completed" and "it is of very little use then, as the thing is over and students will probably just want a complementary comment and then to forget it." In the same vein, Minton (2005, p. 113) argues that feedback on writing should help students to identify what needs to be improved. Another positive aspect of peer feedback is that it creates strong personal bonds amongst the students and makes them open to others' viewpoints.

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However, there are still signs that some students are not able to do the same for their own résumés; they seem to be writing for themselves or people who are in the same environment. An example of this is the information given in the personal and contact details sections. Some students, for instance, only provide their cell phone numbers without using the international dialing code, even when the résumé is intended for an international audience. Is this a case of an oversight or ignorance of résumé readers' needs? This could be a problem of being self-centered and tied to the local environment the résumé writers reside in.

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Reflections and Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that students differ in their noticing of the résumé problematic areas. Yet, no one single student was able to write a 100% perfect résumé in the early stages of the course. This was only achieved after explicit and extensive feedback from peers and the course instructor. Worth noting here that researchers (e.g., Braine, 1988; Johns, 1988b; Zhu, 2004) have pinpointed that writing instructors can help in improving and assessing students' résumé writing by employing authentic exemplar résumés. This encouraged me to use a deformed and deficient résumé for explicit instruction on résumé editing (see Appendix C). This résumé is projected in class and students have to point out the issues that need elaborations/modifications. This exercise has proved to be very useful in opening students' eyes to deficiencies in résumés and has become a common practice in my teaching of the résumé writing exercise.

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Appendix A

Sample 1

résumé **Template**

Name

Address (home and term)

Telephone (home)

Telephone (mobile)

E-mail

Date of Birth   Nationality

Personal Profile

Summary about what you have done (degree, relevant experience), the skills you have to offer (target towards the advert/job description) and what you are looking to do. 3 lines max.

Education and Qualifications

Date	University, Course, Qualification (grade or predicted grade)
	Subject
	Modules studied, dissertation
Date	School / FE College
	A Levels (grades if good) / Other qualifications
Date	School
	GCSE – number of subjects, including Maths and English

Work Experience (most recent first)

Date	Company Name, Job Title
	Main responsibilities
	Skills gained (communication, team work, interpersonal, problem solving, etc

Skills

Languages

IT skills

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Other relevant skills

Interests and Activities

Not just a list – try to make them relevant to what the employer is looking for – eg. Travelling around Europe helped develop my communication skills through meeting a variety of people.

References

Available on request

Sample 2

Jack Doe

90 WoodAvenue, Apartment #23

TeacherHill, MA 01832

978-212-60447

e-mail: jackdoe@yahoo.com

Career Objective

A full-time position in *Sales* where I can demonstrate my technical and business skills and contribute to the company

Summary of Qualifications

- MBA
- Professional Engineer (P.E.)
- Product Marketing
- Project Management
- Compound Semiconductor

- Application Support
- P&L Responsibility
- Contract Negotiations
- Quality Control
- Wastewater Treatment

- Chemical Engineering
- OEM Sales
- Account Management
- Business Development
- Pre and Post Sales Support

Achievements

- **BOC Group Stock-Option Award for Outstanding Performance**   2002
  One of a dozen employees selected out of 45,000 employees worldwide
  to receive this award

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• **Best Sales Specialist Award – BOC Edwards**	1999
• **Professional Engineer (P.E.)**	1997
• **Fellowship and Research Assistantship Awards**	1990-1992
University of New Hampshire	
• **Two Technical Publications**	1996 and 1999

Professional Experience

♦ Managed all technical and commercial aspects of a five-year, $8 million, IBM 300mm contract.

♦ Developed sales' tools and grew eastern region's sales from $1M in 1999 to $6M in 2003.

♦ Championed a new product-line (Zenith) for MOrésuméD application and sold the first six systems, $250K/system, in USA.

♦ Performed day-to-day product sales, marketing, and service activities.

♦ Provided technical and application support to Compound Semiconductor, MEMS, Automobile, Nano-technology and several high-tech industries.

♦ Identified and developed a new market for vacuum and abatement products – Compound Semiconductor.

♦ Supervised and managed quality assurance of $27M equipment decontamination at a Superfund site.

Education

• **F. W. Olin Graduate School of Business at Babson College (Wellesley, MA)**	2002
Master of Business Administration (MBA) with concentration on marketing	
• **University of New Hampshire (Durham, NH)**	1992
Master of Science degree in Chemical Engineering	
• **Osmania University (Hyderabad, India)**	1990
Bachelor of Science degree in Chemical Engineering	

Employment History

• **BOC Edwards (Wilmington, MA)**	1996 –

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Sales and Marketing Specialist   Current

- **Nobis Engineering (Concord, NH)**   1994-1996

  Project Engineer

- **National Environmental Systems (Seekonk, MA)**   1993-1995

  Applications Engineer

References

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Available upon request

Sample 3

résumé **Template**

Here is a simple résumé **template which you can use to create your own** résumé

JoeBbggs

Summary   "[Click here and type a BRIEF summary of your skills]"

Experience   2000 – Current   ABC Company   Wellington

National Sales Manager

ABC Company is a national organisation providing outsourced technical services to a range of mid – large sized companies. We manage their pay roll utilizing our systems.

Responsibilities

- Managed a team of 8 staff developing technical solutions for our clients

- Managed and worked on a number of RFPs

- Liaised with the implementation team once RFP won

- Followed up with client Post Sales to ensure satisfaction and on-going business

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Achievements

- Increased sales from $10 million to $32 million.

- Doubled sales per representative

- Suggested new products that increased earnings by 23%.

1994–1999   Ferguson and Biggs   Lower Hutt   **17**

District Sales Manager

Ferguson and Biggs is a company specializing in the supply of IT financial packages for mid – large businesses. It holds the franchise for a range of products and this office covers the lower North Island.

Responsibilities - Managed a team of 5 staff

- Looked after the top 5 clients personally

- Managed training for all staff

- Developed sales methodologies in conjunction with the team

- Liaised with the implementation team

Achievements

- Increased regional sales from $3 million to $10 million.

- Managed 5 sales representatives in 3 different locations.

- Implemented training course for new recruits — increasing profitability.

1990–1993   Duffy Vineyards   Hastings

Senior Sales Representative

Duffy Vineyards had just increased its production to the point where it needed to more actively market their products nationally and overseas.

Responsibilities - Developed a sales strategy

- Worked in conjunction with a marketing company to establish

branding for local and overseas markets

Achievements
- Expanded sales team from 1 to 3 representatives.
- Tripled revenues for the company.
- Expanded sales to include mail order accounts.

1987–1990   LitWare Ltd   Napier

Litware supplies specialized lighting equipment to commercial premises

Responsibilities
Sales Representative
- Worked with the Sales Manager to identify potential markets in the Hawkes Bay and surrounding regions
- Cold called on a number of potential customers and developed business with about 25% of these
- Developed a mail - out campaign and then followed up with good success

Achievements
- Maintained contact with customers and obtained follow up business
- Expanded territorial sales by 200%.
- Received company's highest sales award two years in a row.

Education
1983–1986 University of Waikato
- B.B S., Majoring in Business Administration and Information Science.

Technical Skills
"[Click here and type a summary of your technical skills"

Interests
Running, gardening, carpentry, computers.

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Appendix B

The résumé and job application letter are two separate professional documents covered in ENG207 as two individual assignments carrying 8% and 7% respectively. However, in business they should be sent together to recruiters by students / job applicants seeking internships and job positions.

The résumé is a carefully thought and written account of a job seeker's academic and professional qualifications and experiences and a summary of their competencies and skills relevant to the internship / job position advertised. These skills include teamwork, management, verbal and written communication, computer skills and languages. It is important to tailor the résumé to the needs of the recruiter and the advertised job. The purpose of the résumé is to kindle employer interest and generate an interview. In most cases, a résumé needs to make a positive impression within 30-45 seconds; only then will someone read it in detail. Therefore, it should not list all the applicant's skills and abilities (only the most important ones and those relevant to the internship / job position advertised or sought. The résumé should be written in a positive, honest way. Failing to do so may result in adverse consequences and end of employment.

The following measures and criteria should be taken into consideration when writing résumés:

1. **Language**: The résumé should employ accurate language, action verbs, and power words. It should avoid jargon, vague statements and any inappropriate abbreviations.

2. **Sections**: The résumé should have a number of sections starting with the most important and ending with the least important, given the fact that recruiters scan résumés at the initial stage. Such sections mainly include the applicant's education, work experience, skills (soft skills which are contextualized in statements rather than listed, computer skills, and languages), and references (available upon request). Other sections can be added by applicants if they deem them necessary, such as the optional introductory statement titled "Objective," and sections covering their awards, achievements, training, workshops, conferences and publications if any.

3. **Formatting:**

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- Appropriate address (including the applicant's name, city and country, telephone number and a professional email that contains an appropriate username)

- The information in the "Education" and "Work Experience" sections should be arranged in reversed chronological order (from the most recent to the least recent). Dates of institutions attended and tasks in work-related experiences should be given.

- For students, degree statement should be accurate and have the following details: the applicant's major of study, name of institution, current standing, GPA, and expected graduation.

- Suitable use of white space

- Standard constant font use

- Left justified

- Non-intrusive punctuation

- Minimal use of lines and boxes

- Significant information highlighted (preferably through boldface)

- Consistent capitalization

- Suitable length

Appendix C

Q.1. Ahmed, a senior II chemical engineering student, has written the résumé below, but some of Ahmed's friends say that it could be significantly improved. Write 12 significant notes and comments to show how the résumé could be improved. You may mention comments to do with the résumé's content (missing information), ordering of contents, layout and format.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name: Ahmed Saleh Awad

Date of Birth: 24th of June, 19991

 Nationality: Sudanese

CONTACT DETAILS

Mobile: +502281200

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Email: Ahmed_Saleh@gmaill.com

Address: P.O.BOX 6677

EDUCATION

- High School Diploma, Sharjah British School

  B.Sc. in Chemical Engineering with a Minor in Engineering Management, College of Engineering, AUS, UAE

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EXPERIENCE

- Worked as a grader for an engineering course.

RESEARCH

- Research Paper on ' Fire Resistant Steel' for Engineering Multi-Disciplinary Project for Technical Communications Course.

MEMBERSHIPS

Member in the following:

- Student Council President in IPS
- Member of the Swimming Team

VOLUNTEER HOURS

None

Awards

None

SKILLS

- Spoken & Written Arabic and English

Computer Skills

- AutoCAD , ETABS, Minitab, SAP 2000

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Communication Skills: Completed an entire course in Technical Communication (February 2011– May 2011)

CONFERENCES ATTENDED

Attended a Leadership conference and workshop (April 26, 2011)

REFERENCES

Answer Key:

PERSONAL INFORMATION (SECTIONS' HEADINGS ARE INCONSISTENT IN TERMS OF FONT, SPACING, AND OTHER TYPING FEATURES (THE USE OF ITALICS, BOLDFACE, CAPS LOCK, AND UNDERLINING)

Name: Ahmed Saleh Awad

Date of Birth: 24th of June, 19991 An extra digit is added in the year (mentioning nationalities is occasionally important, but I usually tell my students to avoid mentioning their birthdays and nationalities so that the likelihood of being contacted by companies remains higher than when employers know their age and nationality. What do you think?

CONTACT DETAILS

Mobile: +502281200 International country's code is missing and there is no need for indentation

Email: Ahmed_Saleh@gmaill.com (typo in writing "gmail" and constructing the username)

Address: P.O.BOX 6677 Which emirate/city and country?

EDUCATION

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- High School Diploma, Sharjah British School Where is this school (country) and when was it attended/completed?

B.Sc. in Chemical Engineering with a Minor in Engineering Management, College of Engineering, AUS, UAE. It is better to mention the full name of the country and university rather than using acronyms. Expected graduation is not mentioned. A bulleted list is not maintained. Besides, this should have been listed first, before the school (reverse chronological order is not established).

EXPERIENCE

- Worked as a grader for an engineering course Where, when and under whose supervision?

RESEARCH

- Research Paper on 'Fire Resistant Steel' for Engineering Multi-Disciplinary Project for Technical Communications Course Where and when was this research conducted? Was it published?

MEMBERSHIPS

Member in the following: No details are provided concerning the place of the memberships or their duration

- Student Council President in IPS What do the initials stand for?
- Member of the Swimming Team

VOLUNTEER HOURS

None If there is nothing to list under a section, it should not be included in the résumé

Awards Headings of sections are not consistent in terms of spacing and formatting features (boldface, caps lock, and italicization)

None Same as above

SKILLS

- Spoken & Written Arabic and English How good Ahmed is at these?

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Computer Skills

- AutoCAD , ETABS, Minitab, SAP 2000   How good Ahmed is at these?

Communication Skills: Completed an entire course in Technical Communication (February 2011– May 2011)   Where was this course taken?

CONFERENCES ATTENDED

Attended a Leadership conference and workshop (April 26, 2011)   No details of conference venue and exact dates are given

REFERENCES No references/details are given, not even "Available upon request".

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