

# THE MULTIMODAL EXISTENCE OF RÉSUMÉS

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Evelina-Mezalina GRAUR

[evelina.graur@usv.ro](mailto:evelina.graur@usv.ro)

Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava (Romania)

**Abstract:** *We start from the assumption that new communication media are likely to trigger modifications of existing genres and enable the emergence of hybrid forms as a result of new communicative purposes and requirements. The article discusses the résumé genre rooted in print media and argues that it is on the verge of breaking out of its formula in the new environment of the Web, which accommodates sophisticated online résumé builders. At the same time, the deeply entrenched multimodal essence and page-based nature of résumés are called in to support the discussion of new ways of conceptualizing, constructing and making use of these artefacts.*

**Keywords:** *genre, genre systems, multimodal artefact, page, résumé.*

## Résumés as multimodal artefacts

Disciplines such as linguistics, semiotics and sociology have studied different forms of meaning since well before the term *multimodality* was introduced in the middle to late 1990s. The term, however, was not meant to remind us that people use multiple means of creating meaning, but to announce and mark a conceptual shift, a significant turn in theorizing and analysing meaning: *in the real world, the different means of making meaning are not separated; they occur together and function in integrated wholes.* Jewitt, Bezemer and O'Halloran describe this major change of perspective in the following terms:

“It was a recognition of the need to move beyond the empirical boundaries of existing disciplines and develop theories and methods that can account for the ways in which we use gesture, inscription, speech and other means together in order to produce meanings that cannot be accounted for by any of the existing disciplines. This fact only became more noticeable with the introduction of digital technologies, which enable people to combine means of making meaning that were more difficult or impossible to disseminate before –for the majority of people anyway (moving image being one pertinent example).” (Jewitt, Bezemer and O'Halloran, 2016: 3)

In many of today's documents, the written text is no longer the main carrier of information, but a conspicuous ingredient in "a complex presentational form that seamlessly incorporates visual aspects 'around', and sometimes even instead of, the text itself" (Bateman, 2008: 1). Bateman refers to these visual aspects as "*modes of information presentation*" which combine and interact within a single artefact called *multimodal document*. Consequently, to say that a résumé is *a multimodal document* is to acknowledge the fact that its construction is based on "a complex interplay of verbal text and images (when a photograph of the applicant is included) as well as a range of typographic features combined in a visual design by means of layout" (Lipovsky, 2013: 429). Linguistically, collocations such as *to make/create/build a résumé* and compound nouns such as *online résumé builder* reflect our metaphorical thinking and our conceptualization of résumés in terms of 'objects that are produced'.

A résumé is an artefact with a page-based existence, and yet the 'canvas' or 'material substrate' supporting the 'edifice' turns out to be more than just a sheet of paper. Baldry and Thibault (2005: 57-58, cited in Hiippala, 2016: 10) consider that "in modern society the page is an important textual unit", whose recognition is "clearly reflected in the growing list of expressions that identify the page in terms of different social functions." Hiippala (2016: 10) finds convincing support for this view when he mentions the *cover page* as a "contact text" composed of "typographically emphasised written language, combined with professional and studio photography". In résumés, the text and the semiotic resources of textual typography (i.e. paragraphs, headings, bullets, typefaces, fonts, spacing, white space, hierarchy, colour) are dominant. What really matters in the reception of résumés as 'page-printed multimodal documents' is their readability, which is under the control of *textual typography*, the semiotic resource that allows us to work with the distribution of content on the page.

Furthermore, the concept of 'layout' can bring us closer to the understanding of *how* and *why* information can be organized in any *multimodal document* construed as "a carrier of meaning that draws on visual, spatial and verbal presentational modes in combination and co-operation" (Bateman, 2018: 7). According to Hiippala (2016: 11), 'layout' is an explicit selection and arrangement of different types of elements: "the composition of linguistic, graphic, and other types of content into a meaningful organization on the page". The reason why most résumé guides and professional writing manuals insist on page layout recommendations is convincingly captured by Hiippala (2016: 11) in the following passage, which establishes the functionality of layout:

"[...] layout provides an infrastructure for interacting with multimodal artefacts, signalling what they are intended for and how they are to be read. In this way, layout supports our daily interaction with numerous different artefacts, contributing directly to their recognition, which is «a core component of an individual's ability to function in modern society»." (Cohen and Snowden, 2008: 9)

The empirical study carried by Caroline Lipovsky (2003) on ten authentic page-based CVs<sup>1</sup> (five belonging to shortlisted applicants and five to non-selected applicants) focused on

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<sup>1</sup> The terms *CV* (*curriculum vitae*, mainly in Europe) and *résumé* (mainly in North America) denote a brief written account of someone's professional progress and career achievements. The major differences that arise

revealing and commenting on how well the employment documents managed to communicate *professional expertise* to recruiters and pinpointed the significant role played by visual semiotic resources in construing and negotiating ‘expertness’ along the three strands of meaning derived from systemic functional linguistics: *interpersonal*, *ideational* and *textual*.

When the page becomes “an event in the visual field” (Bateman 2008: 28) the question ‘*how do recruiters perceive a page-based résumé visually and what guides this process?*’ can receive a convincing answer if technology, psychology and brain sciences are summoned to help. Among the most recent findings involving eye-tracking technology and methodology to detect and measure *entry points* and *reading paths* in page-based résumés are the ones communicated by Ladders Inc. Their 2018 eye-tracking report reveals that recruiters spend an average of 7.4 seconds to review résumés and extract relevant employment information from the visual cues offered by layout and textual typography. In this respect, the report proposes a ‘good résumé paradigm’ and a ‘recommendations paradigm’. A summary of these paradigms is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

**Ways to optimize résumés following eye-tracking findings reported by Ladders Inc. (2018)**

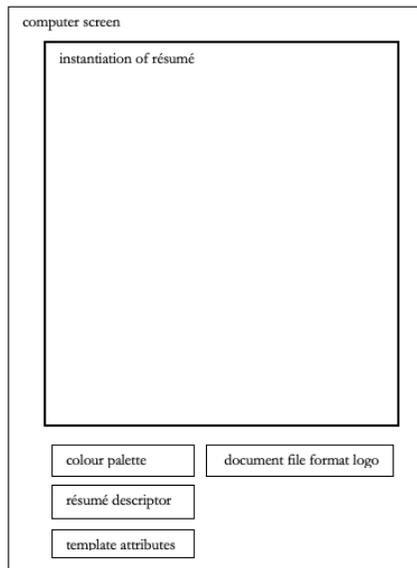
<b>Elements that make a good résumé</b>	<b>Informed decisions</b>
The adoption of clear, simple layouts with clearly marked section and title headers	Increase readability through a selection of simple layouts and fonts, as well as concise information
The selection of layouts that take advantage of F-pattern and E-pattern reading tendencies	Employ bold font in job titles and subheads
The usage of an overview or mission statement at the top of the first page of the résumé	Increase information memorability through short declarative sentences used in the accomplishments section
The adoption of clear fonts	Decide to include two pages if you are an experienced job seeker and ensure that the construction of the second page is as compelling as the first one
	Select mainly context-relevant keywords

Although résumés started out as purely paper documents, the possibility of electronically storing and transmitting them online brings us into the era of Web résumés. In other words, the document may be stored and sent in a *digital format*, which can be designed for *print* (such as Word or PDF) or for *search* (such as text or HTML). Interestingly enough, this change of ‘materiality’ is not without consequences: résumés lend themselves to the simultaneous reading of humans and machines and résumé templates are summoned to reify this ‘simultaneity’. The creation of Web résumés is dependent on templates, which are ready-made design frameworks or pre-designed layouts that only require custom content to become fully-fledged page-based résumés. The online offer of templates is confounding and may invite new conceptualizations of résumés in terms of ‘professional substitutes of ourselves’ in professional communication. We pushed the curiosity button and performed a search on Google for ‘resume templates’ and in only

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in the rhetorical structure of the artefacture governed by constraints such as *professional purposes*, *field/domain of activity*, *degree of data comprehensiveness and relevance*, *length* and *medium*.

0.57 seconds we got approximately 475,000,000 results. *Resume.io* was the first suggestion<sup>2</sup> in the list. What attracted our attention was the fact that each promised template was identified by a city name followed by a short verbal text, which summarizes the artefactual value of each advocated framework: the Toronto template is “a Web-inspired resume template for chatting up your achievements”, while the Vienna template proposes a “striking modern header” and “a professional two-column structure”. The computer screen gives us access to a *configuration of clickable visual elements* in which the résumé is instantiated as the end-product of customization (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. An arrangement of co-present clickable objects on Resume.io**

In the act of clicking on the desired template, one actually ‘declares’ the selection of a *professional avatar* and initiates the process of getting one’s document pulled together in the expected format. To put it differently, the on-screen element identified as ‘instantiation of résumé’ in Figure 1 functions as an avatar of our professional self. In print or online format, the résumé represents one’s professional proxy aimed at increasing one’s chances of getting shortlisted for a job interview. Symbolically, every time jobseekers choose one résumé template over another one, they actually adopt a ‘job avatar’ to help them stand out from the crowd (Figure 2). After all, it is common among most online résumé builders to make three big promises about their templates: a. the templates are specifically designed to

<sup>2</sup> We decided to click on that particular link because we simply wanted to give credit to a starred statement in the “In-depth guide to how Google search works”. The statement in question reads: “Google doesn’t accept payment to rank pages higher, and ranking is done programmatically”. In other words, it is about abdicating one’s power to choose what must/may/should come first in our selection and eventually accept not only a “correct” result of a mathematical calculation, but also the terms in which user relevance is established: “When a user enters a query, our machines search the index for matching pages and return the results we believe are the highest quality and most relevant to the user. Relevancy is determined by hundreds of factors, which could include information such as the user’s location, language, and device (desktop or phone). For example, searching for “bicycle repair shop” would show different results to a user in Paris than it would to a user in Hong Kong.”

be competitive and grab the attention of recruiters; b. the templates offer the best chances at customization; c. the templates are field-tested and tailored to meet recruiting expectations specific to various domains of activity.

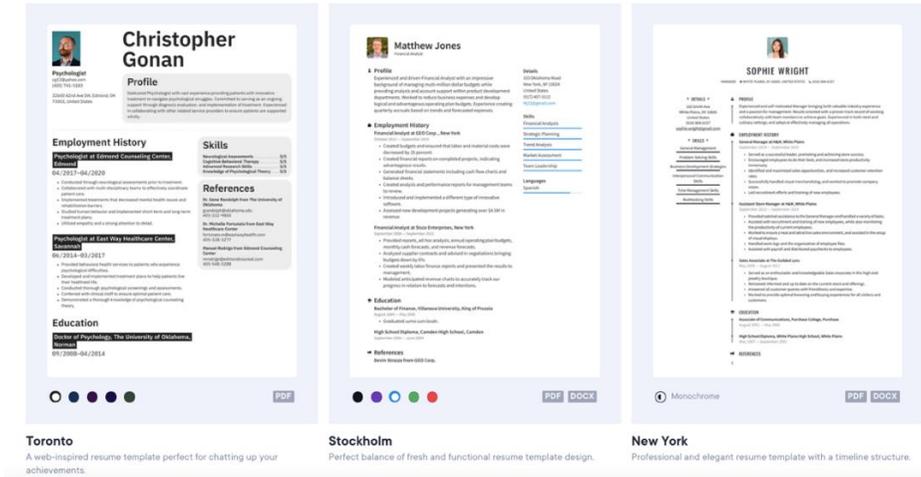


Figure 2. Web résumé templates functioning as avatars (Resume.io, <https://resume.io/resume-templates>)

The templates at *Resume.io* are distributed into four categories labelled *modern*, *professional*, *creative* and *simple* and the suitability profile for each category is delineated by overt references to three main aspects: *candidates' personality traits (or recommended category of users)*, *domains of activity* and *document layout*. The aspects and features included in Table 2 may function as a framework for our informed decisions on how to select résumé templates to match our professional needs.

Table 2. Major features of résumé templates proposed by Resume.io

Category of résumé template	Envisaged attributes of candidates/category of users	Suitable career or domain of activity	Design and layout features
Modern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>forward-thinking</li> <li>bold</li> <li>natural and sincere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>jobs in tech, design or start-ups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>blocks of colour</li> <li>strong lines</li> <li>added emphasis to name and title</li> </ul>
Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>career veterans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>business</li> <li>accounting and finance</li> <li>medicine</li> <li>education and law</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>crisp and clean formatting</li> <li>plenty of space for work experience and skills</li> <li>space for professional headshot or logo</li> </ul>
Creative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>think outside the box</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>artistic fields</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>colourful accents</li> <li>fun fonts</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• patterned backgrounds</li> <li>• space for professional headshot, logo or professional title</li> </ul>
Simple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students and career starters</li> <li>• people applying for entry-level positions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• manual careers</li> <li>• logistics</li> <li>• transportation</li> <li>• maintenance</li> <li>• construction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ideal ratio of white space and text</li> <li>• attractive headers</li> <li>• structured sections</li> </ul>

### Résumés as genre

Our understanding of ‘genre’ is in terms of a complex form of social practice in which text, context, production and reception are dialectically connected. More specifically, we embrace the perspective formulated by Yates and Orlikowski (1992: 299) in the analysis of electronic mail messages produced and exchanged in organizational communication and regard genres as “typified communicative actions characterized by similar substance and form and taken in response to recurrent situations”. Employment communication is a form of communicative practice in which the résumé functions as a *filtering tool*. In this respect, Bruce (2003: 35) rightfully considers that the résumé “is a «gate-keeping» genre in that it is a medium used to judge and sort through potential employees.”

As far as content is concerned, the résumé genre is expected to provide a generous overview of someone’s professional qualifications, including information about his/her relevant work experience, education, skills and notable accomplishments. Any jobseeker inevitably goes through a process of drafting and redrafting his/her document until the final selection and arrangement of professional facts and details matches his/her personality and aligns best with the position requirements. In the employment context, the genre is expected to promote abilities and experiences that will allow job seekers to land an interview and increase their chances of being hired. The tremendous effort made by applicants to recount their most relevant achievements reflects a highly conventional feature of the genre in question: *the intrinsic worth of the individual*. The prominence of this feature is also noticed by Yates and Orlikowski, who describe it in the following lines:

“[...] résumés conventionally recount the accomplishment of individuals. They are not generally authored by groups or teams and are not effective at conveying information about collective achievements. The expectations associated with résumés thus reinforce an ideology of individualism that prescribes an autobiographical narrative that charts a life in terms of individual successive engagements in sanctioned activities and legitimate institutions. Gaps in this personal timeline are seen as irregular and questionable.” (Yates and Orlikowski, 2007: 71)

In terms of form, the résumé genre displays well-defined section structures, the prototypical ones being announced by labels such as *contact*, *profile*, *qualifications*, *skills*, *employment history*, *education* and *references*. Although not all sections can easily be repositioned on the page (*i.e.* the contact section is generally ‘glued’ at the top of the page, while references, if any, occupy the bottom of the page), the way in which most of them can be (re)arranged results in three standard *résumé formats*: **a.** the *chronological format*, in which items are listed in reverse time order and the focus is on work history; **b.** the *functional format*, in

which the skills section takes precedence over work history and education in order to downplay any gaps in employment history and emphasize the skills and abilities that can link to job functions and duties; **c.** the *hybrid format*, which places equal emphasis on both skills and work experience.

Although time and place might appear peripheral discursive dimensions in résumés, one may certainly distinguish between explicit and implicit temporal references. Official documents are expected to carry a date that testifies the moment they were written and/or finalized, and yet résumés are *not* usually dated. Résumé guides recommend the construction of *time-oriented entries* because it is believed that formulations such as “assisted with twice-monthly payroll activities” can catch recruiters’ eyes. At the same time, it is evident that the work history section is inevitably constructed with explicit reference to time periods, the month and the year being the temporal specifications which are conventionally recommended. With reference to time, Yates and Orlikowski (2007: 70) rightfully remark that “because they [résumés] indicate the timing of an individual’s accomplishments, they implicitly reflect the boundedness of the information.”

The locational aspect also invites a twofold interpretation. On the one hand, résumé content must contain references to the places where the candidate performed his/her work or where he/she was educated. On the other hand, since employment communication involves an actual interaction between applicants and employers, it goes without saying that résumés need to be sent to a specific address, whether physical or electronic.

When job applicants take themselves as seriously as their potential employers usually do, they may discover that the résumé is one of the most complicated genres to compose in. The implications of what one decides to write down and of how one decides to arrange the information on the one-page document, the authority of the hiring experts and the competitive job market that encourages multiple applications might make the résumé genre look intimidating (Bruce, 2014).

Nevertheless, the source of intimidation does not always reside in the résumé genre per se, but in its manifest hybridizations with other genres. One case in point is the infographic résumé (or visual résumé), which borrows extensively from posters and infographics. An infographic résumé is a visually enhanced version of the classical résumé because it uses more graphic design elements and illustrations to display information. Although the verbal mode is no longer dominant, it compensates through refined typographical solutions, which increase both the legibility of the text and the readability of the entire artefact. Infographic résumés are lavish with icons, charts, graphs and timelines, which are summoned to participate in telling a professional story around a well-chosen concept or significant metaphor for someone’s career. Another interesting case of hybridization is the *mini résumé* (or *resumini*<sup>3</sup>), which takes advantage of the double-sided credit-card-sized paper card: the front carries the usual business details (*i.e.* name, contact details and brand logo), while the back contains a brief summary of the highlights and credentials of one’s profession. Interestingly enough, Killoran (2006) also noticed numerous transformations and modifications in the production and usage of today’s résumés and

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<sup>3</sup> Herb Richter claims ownership of trademark rights for the word *resumini* with the conspicuous spelling variant RESUmini™, which also denotes a tool designed to create a “miniature resume on a business card.” <https://resumini.wordpress.com/resumini-what-is-it/>

interpreted them in terms of the artefact's migration to other genre systems<sup>4</sup>. The meeting between the résumé and the business card, for instance, was explained in the following terms:

“Thus, a genre system, in which a business card begets a Web résumé that begets further contact, built on the business world's long-established genre system, in which a business card begets further contact, can perhaps overcome some limitations associated with the print résumé and its traditional genre system. Not only has the Web résumé found an alternative genre system to attach itself to, but that genre system seems so convenient and socially acceptable that it might even have encouraged the use of résumés for more than just their traditional purpose.” (Killoran, 2006: 444)

### Conclusive remarks

The very existence of new artefactual variants of the résumé suggests that the job-seeking genre system (*i.e.* job ads invite application letters and résumés, which in turn lead to interviews) is no longer the résumé's traditional genre system. Convincing evidence in this respect comes from the empirical research performed by Killoran (2006), who managed to identify a whole new set of motivations<sup>5</sup> behind people's decisions to post their résumés on the Web. The most frequent functions reported by his respondents imply that résumés tend to be regarded as ice-breakers for networking opportunities.

The disconnection of the résumé from the job-seeking genre system might also suggest that the artefact has reached the stage when its informative and rhetorical power is taken for granted. Résumés are already part of more specialized genre systems such as project management, where managers are expected to attach their résumés to the proposals they make, conference planning, where guest speakers submit their résumés to the organizers who will introduce them, or even in discussion forums, where professionals get to know each other better by using a résumé to introduce themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Bazerman (1994: 97) a genre system consists of “interrelated genres that interact with each other in specific settings” and they become important because they do not only support social activity, but also comprise it.

<sup>5</sup> Killoran (2006) identified the following purposes: to inform people who have no potential connection to one's employment about one's professional standard and reputation, to seek new clients for one's self-employment, to enhance one's profile among colleagues within the same profession or field of activity, to enhance one's current employment, to inform visitors to the rest of one's website about the creator of the site, to showcase one's Web design skills, to practice how to make a Web page or simply to make oneself part of the World Wide Web.

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