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Resume as Narrative: A Linguist reflects on the process of professional storybuilding

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Abstract

While professional identities (like all identities) are largely discursively accomplished, the specific contextualized components which constitute "sounding professional" are often poorly understood, or indeed recognized more often in their absence. This presents an interesting challenge to those tasked with learning these ways of talking in securing a job, for example graduate students in a professionally-oriented MA program in sociolinguistics. This paper considers the linguistic process of presenting a professional identity, with particular focus on the resume as a very carefully constructed storyworld in which every linguistic choice (i.e. referring expression) contributes to positionings that construct and convey identity. Just as with any story, through the choices that we make in highlighting one aspect of a job over another "our identities as social beings emerge as we construct our own individual experiences as a way to position ourselves in relation to social and cultural expectations" (Schiffrin 1996).

This paper considers the linguistic process of presenting a professional identity, focusing on how this gets narratively constructed in the resume. Resumes are the genre par excellence for studying professional identity as, at least in the U.S. context, there can be no professional self without this document. Resumes are also compelling as a site for analysis because the specific contextualized components which constitute "sounding professional" in this context are often so poorly understood that they are only recognized in their absence. Here I explore the linguistic choices made in creating this document as well as the contextualized meanings of resources including referring terms, narratives, and lists, which get drawn upon in the discursive construction of professional identity for this genre.

I begin by providing a brief overview of the larger project from which this study is drawn as well as a brief overview of some of the linguistic and career exploration literature on resumes. I turn then to analysis of data in the form of interviews with jobseekers about resumes, using conceptual metaphors to unpack some underlying assumptions about this document and how it gets used, as well as Dell Hymes' SPEAKING mnemonic to think about how this is all changing. Finally, I focus on data taken one interview with Kathy, a jobseeker who discussed several versions of her resume recently utilized in a

successful jobsearch. Ultimately, I suggest that resumes are a blended genre, demonstrating the writer's skillful combination of lists and narratives, informed by contextualized understandings of intertextuality and the norms of this genre.

This work is rooted in an ongoing ethnography examining the linguistics of the transition from student to professional, borne out of my experience as an advisor working with professionally-oriented graduate students in linguistics. A subject that receives a great deal of attention in the professional development literature is the need to cultivate a "voice" that sounds "confident" "persuasive" or "professional." But whatever its label, as a sociolinguist, I know that what it means to "sound professional" will always be contextually situated. Thus, in advising students through the process of professional self-presentation, I bring the perspective that this must itself be informed by the analytical skills they possess which have been cultivated by the study of sociolinguistics - the ability to observe and describe language as it is used in context - and that jobseekers must recognize the role this document plays in the meaning-making processes that comprise the interactions that support this text. In this analysis, I demonstrate what such awareness looks like, including unpacking the contexts of use, and recognizing how these shape expectations about language use in the document itself.

Background

This high-stakes document is so highly dependent on language that it seems impossible that resumes have not received more scholarly attention from researchers in linguistics, but to date, there has been very little academic work focusing of this facet of professional-self presentation, Pan Scollon, Scollon (2002) being a notable exception. Their study compares resumes from three cultures (Beijing, Hong Kong, and Finland), and begins by asking two main questions:

> *What do members of a corporate group select as crucial aspects of their self-presentations? That is, how do they present themselves when they are trying to put forward their best image?*
>
> *How do nonmembers, especially those from another cultural group, respond to these presentations? (p.9)*

Their analysis reminds us that while our ways of constructing experience in a resume are taken very much for granted, they could in fact have been very different. And in fact norms surrounding resumes are constantly evolving and highly variant. For example, those who read resumes, whether they are aware of it or not, are listening for a professional identity that makes sense within an organization or a sector's evaluative framework.

One feature of resumes that has received scholarly attention involves their relationship to time. Larson's (2008) analysis keys in on the concept of a "self projectable into the future," focusing on data gathered from a CV workshop in Post-socialist Slovakia. Resumes looks forward by looking back, saying something like: "these are the things from my past and current jobs that I would most like to continue doing going forward." But the process of narrating experience can itself lend to an interpretation of linearity and inevitability, seeming to present a straight path, a straightforward progression of "this led to that and then as you can see very clearly (and I presumably knew all along), that would inevitably lead to the next thing." This is not how most of us experience our work, but the process of narratively interpreting it through a resume lends an interpretation of false linearity and movement through time.

In seeking to understand resumes, including how they are used and how they change, I also explored resources about resumes including the *Gallery of Best Resumes*, whose author David Noble adopts a deductive and inductive approach to resumes:

> if Plato had been asked, "What is a resume?" he would have asked the questioner what it was for, how it was used, and what it did. Plato would then have tried to imagine the ideal form that a resume should take to fulfill these functions.

That, David explained, is deductive reasoning (an advanced form of intuition).

> Aristotle, a pupil of Plato, responding to the same question, would have asked, "Who makes resumes?" and asked a number of those persons to show him examples. Aristotle would then

> have sorted through those examples and arrange them into types. From this, he would have determined what a resume is (2040: vii).

That, David explained, is inductive reasoning (a scientific method).

As an analyst (and by extension for jobseekers to apply my insights), I draw from both top-down and bottom-up approaches as both are necessary to understand how resumes are created and how they are used, seeking first to identify ideas that participants carry in their heads about resumes, otherwise likely to be unrecognized until such time as expectations are violated, for example when direct feedback is given about how a resume does not conform with assumptions in some specific way. However, resumes (like all language in use) are constantly changing, and ideas about what a resume is will constantly be shaped in both directions, both by the ideas and expectations that those in positions of power hold about resumes and what they should look like, and by resumes created by jobseekers in attempts to receive attention, which constantly introduces variation into the system.

I adopt a discourse variation approach to examining language use in context by asking 'what I need to know in order to understand this person's (group's) way of using language (in this situation)' (Schiffrin, 2006 p. 11) and additionally, how this is changing. To capture and organize research participants' observations, Hymes' SPEAKING grid pneumonic provides a means for presenting some of the more salient observations about the various aspects of context at play analyzing the speech event of looking at a resume: Setting, Participants, Ends, Acts, Keys, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genres.

Starting at the level of Participants and considerations at the level of Instrumentalities, one major change experienced in the last ten years to resumes is that while the vast majority of resumes used to be mailed, now they are often shared electronically, often by a mutual acquaintance via e-mail. Thus, while it used to be of primary importance to have thought about things like paper, it now becomes crucial to think about how a resume is experienced via a screen. Choices including use of white space, amount of text, placement, number and ordering of bullets, as well as layout generally will all be experienced differently on a screen than in printed form. Formatting may also get altered through dissemination or uploading to a resume or job bank. Additionally, when sharing through an acquaintance, not making this mutual acquaintance look foolish for choosing to pass an unacceptable resume along may become one of the primary Aims of both parties (job seeker and acquaintance). And finally, the Ends or goals of each are likely to be quite different. The jobseeker's ends in using this document are likely to be first and foremost to get a job, while in passing on a good resume, the shared acquaintance is likely trying to show awareness of the needs of the organization, and quite likely trying to earn some credit with the boss in the process. An employer's ends in turn, are likely to include needing to be reassured that he or she is not making a hiring mistake. To introduce language back into this discussion, we can see how something like a typo carries significant meaning for each participant in the interaction but in slightly different (although related) ways having to do with their different Aims and Ends.

Use of Keywords reflects another shift in Act Sequence contained in a resume: while traditionally, resume guides exhorted writers to find a "kicking verb," now the orientation seems to be much more around keywords. This highlights another important shift in Participants in that the first "person" who reads your resume nowadays may in fact be a computer, who has been programmed to search for and calculate the use of particular words. Thus, in a resume, it may be more important to use the word itself as given in a job announcement than it is to break down and provide rich description of the skills which comprise an ability like "project management" for example, as we will discuss below. That is to say that it may be more important to simply use the term "project management" to describe the research process involved in creating a dissertation in a resume than it would be to describe how conducting independent research requires the coordination of many participants, and the sequencing and prioritizing of multiple competing demands and influences. And of course, this observation belongs most closely to the resume Genre than other of the jobseeking genres.

In conjunction with this change, another important shift in the resume Genre is a shift from a strictly chronological format to one that is more functional – or hybrid. This in turn shapes Norms such as what is understood as being more active or passive in this genre. Act Sequences (speech acts) have shifted from the previous placement of a "career objective" or "keywords" list at the top of a resume to interviewees reporting they now lead with a summary or an overview section. This is another example of a change initiated by Instrumentalities (changing technologies) shaping the ways that resumes are created and used. Years ago, with technological limitations, it used to be understood that applicant tracking systems would

only search the first 100 words of a resume. This led to resume writers cramming in as many keywords at the very beginning as possible. Nowadays, such technological limitations no longer apply, and resume creators spread keywords throughout the document. The summary or overview section as it is now used serves as way to help actively "frame" (Goffman 1974) experience for those who read it, especially if they do not want it to be read strictly chronologically.

Such "hybrid" resumes as they are called (which blend a functional and a chronological resume) will be the focus of the rest of this investigation, more like a narrative than a list, but a narrative itself comprised of lists. For each job, there is a list of activities, and then within the broader category of "experience," there is a list of jobs for the narrator to manage. Like all contextualized language, here, these reorderings "are mediated by speaker and hearer who jointly manage and negotiate emergent relations of what is said, meant and done" (Schiffrin 2006, p.18). Placing something second in the list as opposed to fourth means something. It can suggest something about relative importance, it may also be designed to conform with expectations about chronology, or it may also emulate taxonomies, hierarchies, and orderings which appear in the job announcement or job description that the resume writer is responding to.

Data

Data are drawn from interviews conducted with graduate students and alumni of a professionally-oriented MA program in linguistics. Additionally, these same research participants contributed resumes as data for analysis. In the interviews, I began by asking directly about choices made in constructing their own resumes as well as changes interviewees are witnessing to this document, seeking to capture intuitions about why for example "this" resume is better than "that" one. I supplement my understanding with resume examples and advice given in resume guides. I began by asking participants directly "what is a resume?" and these were some of the answers I got:

1. A baseball card: It lists the teams I have played for, the positions that I played, and my stats.

2. A brief listing of skills you have acquired, past jobs, certifications, things that make you qualified. You really have to tailor it for each job.

3. A self-created summary of past experiences and knowledge that is also sort of designed for the position that you want: A history plus a projection.

4. If my life is a pond, a resume shows the rocks on the surface that you can step on to navigate your way across.

5. Something to help you weed people out.

6. A door-opener.

7. A conversation-starter: A checkmark in a box to say that you can proceed to the next level.

From these seven very different answers, a primary duality emerges: resume as something one either sends or something one receives. Although "you" is the pronoun used in many of these, in answers 2 and 3 that "you" is used to refer to the job seeker, and in answers 4 and 5, the employer. And while in answer 7, we see a "you" deictically anchored to the jobseeker, the implied deictic center of "conversation" suggests that the desired context (and thus the focus of the resume creator) is located somewhere beyond that of the context in which the resume is initially read.

And deixis is tremendously important when it comes to thinking about resumes. Many resume guides suggest that thinking from the employer's point of view will lead to greater success in use of this document. Thus, talking in ways that index this shift in perspective as exemplified though this simple analysis of deictic markers (pronouns, verbs, adverbs which indicate time, relative location and distance) are significant.

We also see a number of conceptual metaphors here. Using Koveces' (2010) recent work - itself heavily influenced by pioneers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, among many others - we can first explore the metaphors from the deictic center

of the person looking for a job. Broadly, the process of finding a job is often conceptualized as a search, a journey, which casts the potential candidate as a seeker, someone on a quest. Probably the most significant way that this conceptualization shapes thinking is that is seems to entail that there is a job out there waiting to be found (rather than created), and also, suggests that there is just one job, THE job, a singular destination, which we see here in the conceptualization of resume as "door opener." If a job is like a door, the resume is the key to entry.

From the speakers who adopt the perspective of those who receive resumes, we see different metaphorical domains here: gardening (in "weed them out"), busywork (checkmark in a box), or navigation across a pond (resume as "rocks on the surface that you can step on to navigate your way across"). Interestingly, this last conceptualization presents a journey of understanding: the scope of the journey is slightly smaller, that of getting to know the candidate, and it casts the employer as seeker rather than the job candidate. As such, each conceptualization provides its own frame for reading resumes, which position the participants in different ways, and which may shape the crafting of the document itself, for example, mapping on to understandings of a resume as something that is more like a story or a list, a history, or a summary.

Analysis

I now turn to close comparison of three versions of a resume, contributed by Kathy, who had crafted these for three different jobs she had been interviewed for in the weeks immediately proceeding our conversation. I explore aspects of her professional identity that Kathy selected to display in three resumes designed for three different jobs: a position at a non-profit communication research firm with an academic bent, an experiential marketing firm, and an advisory organization, exploring the subtle linguistic changes from one version to the next to illuminate further ways that resumes change and are constantly changing as well as to establish a conceptualization of resume as a blend of list and narrative. Note: she has asked me to use a pseudonym and to keep information about particular jobs and organizations confidential.

I focus here on the linguistic accommodation that Kathy engages in when designing her resume, showcasing how she tailors the resume for each position, exploring how such audience-designed choices manifest linguistically on the resume itself in use of elements like referring expressions and structural reordering. I also consider how she discusses these aspects of variation in metadiscursive commentary (talk about talk) in the interview with me. Ultimately, I suggest that the resume is a list comprised of a series of lists. But not just any list: carefully curated lists that are designed to themselves tell a story, for intended audiences who can correctly read and interpret the intertextual reordering (changes in the order of sequence in which items appear relative to one another).

In a resume, every linguistic choice (i.e. referring expression) contributes to positioning that construct and convey slightly different identities for the resume writer. Of course Kathy has performed many duties as part of her current job. On a resume, she must select to present them in a particular order. When I asked her about this in the interview, she focuses on her experience as a writer and in brand management, digital strategy, and information architecture. Example 1 below is an excerpt from the interview where Kathy offers a description of how she arranges these referring terms:

Example 1

1.	*Anna:*	*When you think about it as self-presentation*
2.		*it's a choice to say skills or qualities*
3.		*For you would you say the experience section talks about skills*
4.		*whereas your summary talks about qualities*
5.	*Katie:*	*Yeah, in broad buckets*
6.		*So it I changed these:*
7.		*Writing, brand management, digital strategy*
8.		*Proposal writing, brand management, digital strategy*

9. *This is user-center designed cognitive models competent strategy information architecture*

10. *I've done all of them, but depending on what the job's asking for,*

11. *I bucket them*

Through this discursive grouping of these key referring expressions, or "bucketing" Kathy is constructing different relationships among the items on her list. These intertextual relationships are audience-designed, depending on "what the job is asking for" (line 10), and what she anticipates about the reader.

For example, comparing the resumes, the bullet describing her "managerial experience," varies in some important ways, first in the order which it appears relative to the other bullets describing her experience, in terms of which specific nouns it is that "manage" is being used to modify, and then also use of the term strategy.

As may be seen in the chart below, on resumes #1 and #3, this "manage" bullet is the second one, whereas in resume #2 it is the fourth. Note that "UX" is user experience.

Which resume	**How managerial experience described**	**Where**
Resume 1 Non-profit w/ academic bent	manage UX, content strategy, and information architecture…	2nd bullet
Resume 2 Exper. marketing firm	manage UX, content and digital strategy…	4th bullet
Resume 3 Advisory org.	manage content strategy, UX, and information architecture…"	2nd bullet

So let's investigate how the scope of concepts like change "manage" and "strategy" and ordering of these elements does things by organizing concepts in meaningful ways. To the communication research firm (resume #1), and the experiential marketing firm (resume #2), UX (user experience) is that which is managed, but in resume #3 it is "content strategy" which is managed. Not only the focus but the relative ordering conveys information about which of the concepts is most important (only one of them can appear first). The third resume seems to suggest that UX and information architecture are aspects of content strategy, as opposed to content strategy and information architecture being part of UX in the second. In the first, use of parallel construction and commas suggests less of a hierarchical relationship among the three concepts of UX, content strategy and information architecture, but the framing literature leads us to know that the thing which appears first will shape how that which follows is read, interpreted and understood. Even with a parallel construction, this resume says something about what content strategy and information architecture mean by virtue of how they can be managed (i.e. through a user experience lens).

This observed variation not only demonstrates a richness of exploration of different ways of understanding strategy. To the different audiences, these ideas about managing have different conceptual relationships in terms of scope, specifically in how they are understood and applied in their unique business context. Thus, doing intertexuality in this context entails reordering items in a way that demonstrates insider knowledge of how these concepts are understood to be interrelated by this group. The resume write must tell the right story to the right audience.

Moving now from the relationship among tasks within a particular job to the relationship among jobs, or moving up a tier in the "list within lists" conceptualization, Example 2 is taken from my interview with Katie, when I asked her what advice she gives to others about their resumes, or what she might say if she were given 10 minutes to workshops someone's resume with them. In response to this question, she gives insight into some of the important decisions she has made in her

own resume especially in 13 when she says “it was important for me to show how these transitioned one to the other” - meaning how she got from one job to the next. This gives a sense for one of the listing constraints, the concern for “conveying temporal continuity” that she takes into consideration when crafting this document, as well as assumptions she is making about those who are using it (namely, that they are going to be paying particular attention to moments of transition, one way of reading a narrative).

Example 2

1.	*Anna:*	*If you had 10 minutes to workshop on a resume*
2.	*Katie:*	*Um, I mean for this one I think that’s a that’s a big hole*
3.		*Um, something that I have found um helpful*
4.		*And I feel like I did it,*
5.		*but um I’ve done it with other people when I’ve looked at theirs*
6.		*Is filling in the gaps between the two*
7.	*Anna:*	*Uh huh*
8.	*Katie:*	*And so*
9.		*and these are just my little like*
10.		*just my mnemonic devices to remember what I would say*
11.		*But why there’s a jump*
12.		*And not so much why but kind of how*
13.		*It was important for me to show how these transitioned*
14.		*one to the other*
15.		*Um*
16.	*Anna:*	*Is that worked into the resume itself?*
17.	*Katie:*	*Uh, no, it’s just something about in the interview,*
18.		*how I would talk about it*
19.		*Um because I would always start with*
20.		*When someone would say “tell me about yourself”*
21.		*I would always start with the most recent*
22.		*And say “here’s what I do now*
23.		*But here’s how I got there*
24.		*And go all the way back and then come back up to it*

25. *I fell like it gives people a better frame*

26. *Rather than starting "well, I started back-"*

27. *You know, "I had a college degree in this-"*

28. *And they don't know really know where its going*

29. *And so I kind of go like <sweeping gesture> this*

30. *Then that helps them*

To understand who she is as a resume writer, Kathy shows who she is NOT in a fun bit of discursive othering in lines 26 – 27, using constructed dialogue to show you how her active stance and her discursive work differs from that of a candidate who will thoughtlessly construct a professional identity that metaphorically "makes the organization come to them." In the interaction, she leaned back in her chair at this point to render the voice of this other: "well, I started back-" or "I had a college degree in this-" (lines 26 & 27) presenting experience in a way that doesn't give the interviewer any access to "where its going" (line 28). At the very end of this passage, in line 29, Kathy gives an iconic gesture that captures something of crucial significance about her conceptualization of a resume's relationship to time. Describing this as a process of "framing" Kathy explains that she helps the interviewee by starting with the present, line 21 "I would always start with the most recent" and then going back to show how she got there, which then projects her into that future employee self. By taking an active role in the interview in this way, she gives her interviewers a preview of what she would be like to work with.

Additionally, this is a bit of a "noisy silence" attending not to the resume itself, but to the interactions and activities which surround it, and specifically how a resume is used in a job interview. Even after I redirected the question to focus on the content of the resume itself, she talks about a primary context of use, discussing how she uses a resume to prepare for a job interview. In carefully and strategically designing a story that she will tell in a particular context, namely the interview Kathy's concern here is negotiating transitions. This level of intertextuality is managed verbally, at the job interview, while the relationships one level lower (the tasks and activities associated with individual jobs) are managed textually as observed through variation on the resumes for different organizations. Conceptualization of how a resume is used embeds an awareness of Mishler's metaphor of the "double arrow of time," showing how "temporal ordering is a function of both cultural preferences for well-formed stories and the situated nature of storytelling" (2006, p. 30). In this context, strategic blending of the list and narrative genres help to situate the stories being told therein.

Discussion

As with any story, in highlighting one aspect of a job over another "our identities as social beings emerge as we construct our own individual experiences as a way to position ourselves in relation to social and cultural expectations" (Schiffrin 1996, p. 199). As analysts of storytelling, we know that the teller cannot say everything. She must choose. And such choices carry meaning. Schiffrin continues "our transformation of experience into stories, and the way we carry it out, is thus a way to show our interlocutors the salience of particular aspects of our identities " (199). Lists also are constrained. Something must to be chosen to appear first, which means that other things come after (Schiffrin, 2006). These choices in ordering carry meaning, and in a resume may be shown to have real-life consequences, for example as was seen above, the ordering of competencies can suggest an evaluative orientation to a skillset as being central or peripheral to the field. In sociolinguistics in the United States, for example, one major approach to data collection and analysis is quantitative and variationist. For researchers in this paradigm, discourse analysis (a more qualitative approach informed by pragmatics) is understood to be so different that it is not comprised by the referring term "sociolinguisitcs," and so research competencies on a variationist's resume might be listed as "sociolinguistics and discourse analysis." To do so would be to subtly suggest that discourse analysis is not a type of sociolinguistics, and could be read as such by keen-eyed inside observers.

Within the world of the story, referring expressions (how the speaker chooses to refer to the other people and things in the story world), are illuminating because they reveal information about the speaker's attitude toward the referent, and the

relationship among speaker and hearer (Schiffrin, 2006). As we have seen, in a resume, the specific referring expressions used and the order in which they are ordered within nested lists can display different kinds of knowledge including:

the sequence of work processes

the ways in which concepts are related

highlighting the relationships of concepts, including primacy of one skill.

Thus, referring expressions reflect and construct relationships with past experiences, and with the reader of the document itself. Intertextuality, the relationships among texts and the ways that texts come together and shape one another, helps us to understand how it is that when actions and experiences transform themselves through textual representation, as words, they gain meaning through their relationship to one another, as well as their relationship to general themes or plots. An attuned audience reads the HOW in addition to the WHAT of such intertextual moves (Trester, 2012).

Such playing with representations of time and ordering are but one (culturally embedded) way to adopt an active, agentive voice that speaks to the needs of the employer, rather than the needs of the employee. Another way we have seen this manifest in the resume, is through referring expressions which could have been made easier for the employer to identify and interpret, but are left purposefully opaque, demonstrating insider knowledge (e.g. "UX" user experience). The goal is to position oneself as a professional through decontextualizing experience. Additionally, we have seen how in managing her perceived expectations about one aspect of narrative interpretation (namely that her potential employers are going to be paying particular attention to moments of transition, or decision), Kathy manages her presentation of self through the resume by anticipating questions that she might be asked and building their answer into the narrative she constructs.

Critically, shifting to an agentive voice requires ceasing to think about a resume as merely a list of job duties and responsibilities performed, an instead as a document that narrates the future by telling about skills and talents that the jobseeker would most like to use again. This kind of a resume goes more than halfway to meet the reader, anticipating their questions and want of supporting evidence. Skills and abilities will be the reason that a candidate is hired, and they will continue to be essential in the actual doing of your job, but to actually get the job, these need to be conveyed in a way that communicates passion and reassures the employer that this candidate is the correct match for the organization's needs and goals.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the only real constant about resumes is that they are constantly evolving, and shifting even as we speak. And this is true down to the microculture of a person, a hiring committee, a department, an institution. Indeed if the resume is an opportunity for narrating experience including skillful blending of the list and narrative genres, a future orientation and use of keywords in audience design, interviews are important contexts for learning things about resumes and how they are used. More than one of my respondents spoke to being on the other side of the table as being the thing that has taught them the most about what resumes are. We learn how to tell these stories in our resumes socially, in interactions with interviewers, and (as it turns out) interviewees. Expectations about resumes are shaped by the organizations and individuals who use them.

In a resume, and in "key situations" surrounding use of resumes, myriad visual and linguistic aspects contribute to the construction of "voice," which in turn give nuanced interpretations of "confident" or "professional," which are in fact quite culturally specific and under constant negotiation. Given that identity is dynamic, situationally and discursively negotiated, to conceptualize the resume as a very carefully constructed storyworld means that every linguistic choice (i.e. referring expression) contributes to positioning that construct and convey identity. And if, as Polkinghorne (1988) suggests, narrative structure is a way to arrive at an understanding of the self as a whole, in this context, it is the relationships among lists and narrative in the resume genre which merits particular attention for those learning how to craft a resume in making the transition from student to professional.

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