

Using Keywords to Enhance Your SES Resume

What are keywords? Sometimes referred to as “buzzwords,” keywords are terms and phrases that are relevant to a certain specialized field or industry at a given time. In addition, they can refer to anything, from politics to information technology. For instance, what is “the war on terror” but a buzzword that refers to the ongoing military operations focused in the Middle East. Additionally, if you’ve ever designed a blog or website, or read an article online, you may have noticed keywords or tags that told you the main topics and helped to categorize things.

The same thing happens in federal hiring, where keywords are the important words or phrases that are repeated and stressed throughout a job announcement. They are also *hints*—the hiring agency’s way of saying, “Hey, here’s what’s important to us.” If it’s important to them, then it should be important to you, as well.

Let’s apply this to you, the potential SES candidate who is currently drafting your best resume *ever*. Where do you find keywords, and how can you use them to enhance your SES resume?

Although the hiring agency will not provide an actual list of keywords it wants to see, it is well known that all the keywords you really need are right there embedded in the job announcement. Some of the best places to look are in the Major Duties section, in the Qualifications section, in the Technical Qualifications, and in the online questionnaire. For example, a vacancy announcement for Program Analyst might include such keywords as “analyze,” “improve,” and “program review.”

In some cases, agencies actually use an optical scanner to weed out unqualified applicants by searching for specific keywords even before a human being ever reviews the resume. In these cases, people often go to great lengths to match their experience with the keywords in the job announcement as much as possible to get past the scanner and land that interview. These optical scanners are not typically used in the SES world, so don’t try to “trick” the machine. In other words, a Human Resources (HR) representative somewhere is going to review your SES resume, and if you lack the desired (or required) skills and experience, then no amount of keywords is going to land you the interview.

Having said that, using keywords intelligently can help you to organize and optimize your SES resume. Just use the following list of Do’s and Don’ts:

Do...

- Review the various sections of the job announcement and make a list of relevant keywords and phrases. Hint: If the announcement keeps mentioning “interagency relationships” and “executive communications,” then those are probably good keywords to use in your resume.

- Highlight your specific and relevant accomplishments about your own skills and experience by turning keywords and phrases into self-assessment questions. For example, “Is [insert keyword or phrase here] something I’ve done in the past 10 years or so? What actions did I take to overcome a particular challenge? What are the quantifiable results of my actions?”
- Use keywords and phrases as major “headlines” or categories to organize your duties and accomplishments in the resume.

Don’t...

- Overdo it. If the keywords in the job announcement don’t match your experience, you shouldn’t try to embellish or make anything up just to get keywords in there. Transparency is the best policy.
- Focus too much on keywords as you develop your resume. If you have done your homework on the position, and you are applying for something that is a natural progression of your career path, then it’s a good match. Consider the keywords and try to integrate them, but don’t get so caught up in worrying about keywords that you talk yourself out of applying.

At the end of the day, you should consider keywords a part of your overall SES resume; guideposts by which to organize and enhance your experience. However, your SES resume should not be a keyword list; it should be an accomplishment-based document that demonstrates how your skills and experience match the duties and experience in the vacancy announcement.

The best thing you can do is apply for SES jobs that not only stretch you professionally, but also align well with your own skills and experience. Before long, you’ll be commuting across D.C. one morning for your first SES interview!

Barbara Adams is the President and CEO of CareerPro Global, Inc. (CPG). She has been on the leading edge of SES application development for decades. Committed to providing world-class service, she has also built an SES writing team that has assisted more than 2,500 clients develop their application materials. Ms. Adams has been featured on T.V. and the radio, and as a presenter at numerous career conferences. CPG recently sent a team to instruct senior officials at Warner Robins Air Force Base, Georgia in best practices for developing their SES application materials. She is the co-author of the new book, Roadmap to the Senior Executive Service: How to Find SES Jobs, Determine Your Qualifications, and Develop Your SES Application.