

## Get to Work: Crafting Cover Letters and Résumés for Emerging Professionals

By Michael Dove and Krista McCracken

**P**ublic history employers come in all shapes and sizes and emerging public history professionals need to know how to present themselves to a wide range of organizations. This is especially important when you are on the job market. Maybe you are looking for your first full-time public history position, aiming to change your area or expertise, or searching for your dream job. This technical leaflet aims to demystify best practices in the public history field for résumé and cover letter creation to better enable you to reach the interview stage. It offers practical advice relating to formatting résumés, tailoring cover letters, highlighting one's strengths, building and maintaining an online presence, and successfully plying the application process.

### Who Are You?

Your first step in the process of finding satisfying employment in the field is to find out who *you* are. Identifying your skillsets, interests, strengths, as well as your dislikes and weaknesses, is crucial to understanding where you want to work and the type of work you desire and are able to perform. Knowing this information is the key step to effectively expressing your value to potential employers.

As the field of people analytics matures, employers are looking to emotional intelligence tests and personality assessment tools as useful means of uncovering and understanding an applicant's capacity for achievement; limitations; and their needs, motives, and preferences. Becoming familiar with these types of assessments, therefore, is advised.

Self-assessment is also key. Recall what you have done and consider these experiences in terms of hard skills and soft skills.

### Top Ten Skills Sought By Employers

- **Attention to Detail:** thorough; meticulous; accurate; organized
- **Digital Media Management and Production:** software applications and programs; digital history; social media
- **Financial Management:** budgets; basic accounting
- **Fundraising and Grant Writing:** revenue generation; event planning
- **Interpretation:** engagement; interactivity; digital technology; social media; graphic design
- **Project Management:** coordination, organization, and planning; logistics; managing your time; meeting deadlines and budgets; multi-tasking
- **Public Programming:** outreach; customer service; marketing and promotion
- **Research:** primary and secondary sources; critical thinking and analysis; historiographical knowledge
- **Strong Oral and Written Communication:** public speaking; varied audiences; professional correspondence; publications
- **Teamwork:** interpersonal skills; any groupwork, including committees, sports, and music

**Hard Skills** refer to functional skills or the expertise you possess, as obtained through education and training, whether through college/university programs or additional certifications and qualifications.

**Soft Skills** refer to general competencies or transferable skills that can really serve to differentiate you from others. They are often acquired or honed through volunteer work and participation in academic and community societies, associations, and clubs. Among the most valued of these for employers are dependability; enthusiasm; and the capacity to think critically, be an adaptable team player, and an effective communicator. Employers are especially concerned about the applicant’s ability to navigate the social environment and function within a professional workplace. They need to know that you understand there are social norms, policies, and protocols that exist within offices and organizations and that you will appreciate and respect the existing organizational culture.

### Who Are They?

Communicating your value to an organization requires knowing who you are and being aware of who the potential employer is and wants to be. Applicants should research the organization beyond what appears in the job posting. Locate and understand the organization’s mission and vision statements. If these align with your values and goals, then consider what you can offer them. Taking these initial steps is important to understanding if the organization is a good fit for you and if you are a good fit for the organization. Both parties need to easily envisage the applicant working there.

### Projecting Your Value in Cover Letters and Résumés

Your cover letter and résumé are used to convince the organization that you are an excellent candidate for the job and that you should be granted an interview. If there is a universal rule of thumb when crafting a cover letter or résumé, it is that there is no universal cover letter or résumé. Each job requires a unique application.

Express your experience, skills, and interests as complementary to the organization’s mission and vision statements. Today’s job market is a competitive one. Assume that 80 percent of those applying for the job will have met the minimum requirements, so it is vital to use your application to highlight your unique suitability for the job. Traditional assets such as historical knowledge, research, analytical ability, and writing remain fundamental, but these need to be combined with other skillsets. Breadth and diversity of experience are essential. Many employers prize versatility, adaptability, resourcefulness, and knowledge of multiple types of historical practice. Generalist, well-rounded candidates are often highly attractive to employers.

In both your cover letter and résumé, focus on the applied nature of your previous work and the significant outcomes of that work. Employ action words when describing accomplishments.

**The cover letter** is used to address the job posting and to tell your story in a condensed fashion. This is not simply a summary or reiteration of your résumé. It is a place to express your passion

### Additional Skills and Traits Highly Sought by Employers

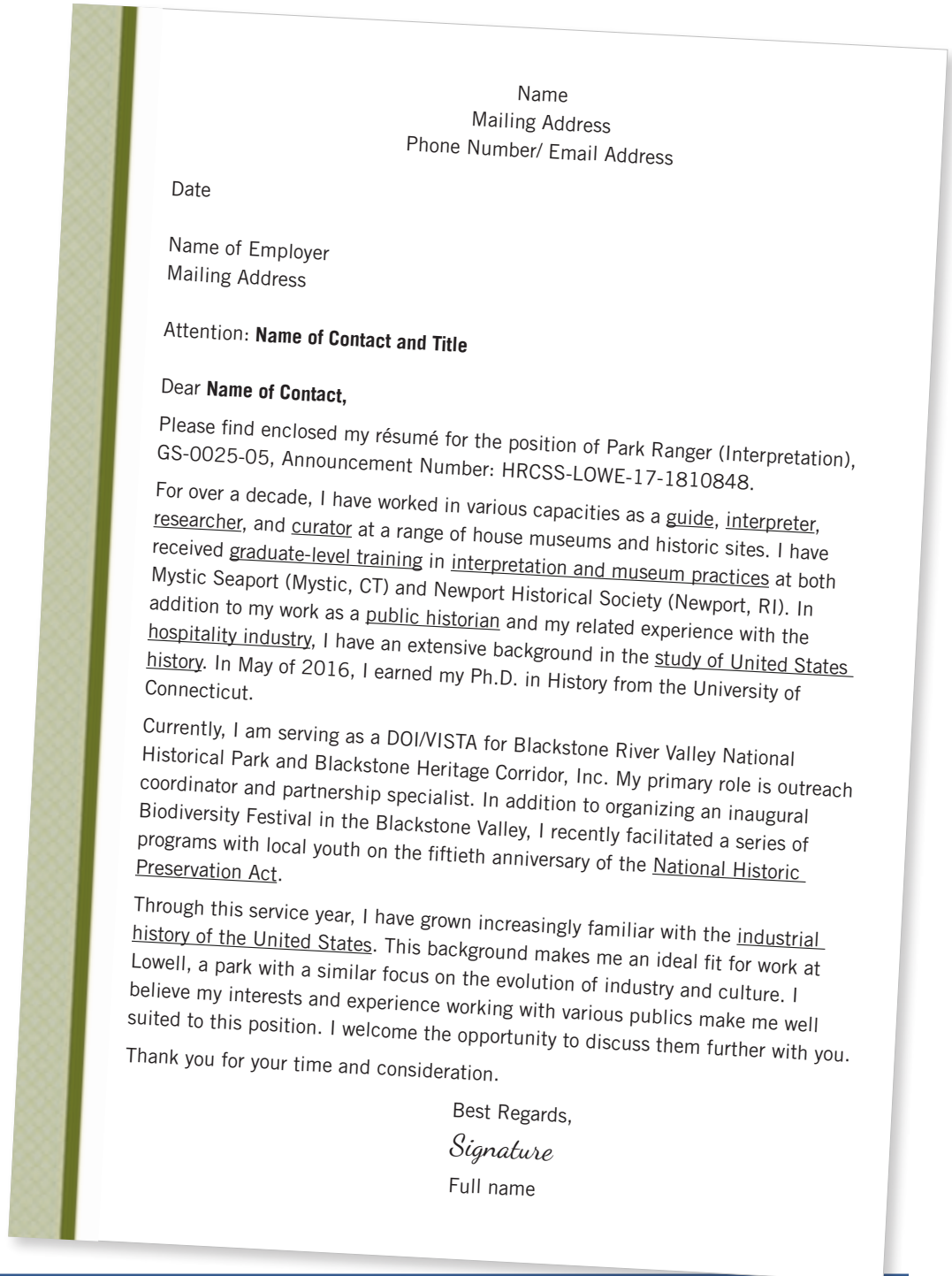
- Adaptability
- Conscientiousness
- Creativity
- Curiosity
- Enthusiasm
- Flexibility
- Initiative
- Leadership
- Problem-solving
- Professionalism
- Responsibility

for the position, to highlight your skills and experiences that relate directly to the job, and to convince others that you can do the job as described.

Use your cover letter as a way of introducing yourself to the potential employer and connecting the dots between your particular set of skills, experience, and interests and those contained in the posting. Market yourself for the job that the organization is looking to fill. You must provide evidence for your statements, so be specific as to how your experience exemplifies the required and asset skills listed in the job ad. The industry standard for length is between one and two pages.

► **Sample Cover Letter: Park Ranger (Interpretation)**

*Note: Keywords from job posting are underlined.*



**Skills Highlighting Action Verbs**

**Attention to Detail:** arranged, cataloged, classified, coded, inspected, monitored, recorded, registered, reviewed, screened, systematized, updated, verified

**Communication:** addressed, consulted, contacted, drafted, explained, facilitated, interacted, interviewed, mediated, negotiated, presented, promoted, represented

**Project Management:** administered, coordinated, developed, established, generated, implemented, incorporated, led, managed, organized, planned, prepared, produced

**Research:** analyzed, clarified, collected, compared, conducted, determined, evaluated, examined, explored, formulated, identified, interpreted, investigated, measured, tested

The **résumé** showcases your education, skills, and experience that relate to the duties, responsibilities, and requirements described in the job advertisement. The résumé should show, rather than simply tell, the employer what you are able to do. Though résumés are generally two to three pages in length, refrain from removing material that is relevant to the stated job description. Express your accomplishments in bullet point format rather than a narrative style. Employers generally spend on average no more than thirty seconds to a minute reviewing the initial application. Consider embedding links to completed projects and any media attention that was generated from them.

A focused career résumé will feature several standard headings, namely: Education; Work Experience; Additional Experience and Qualifications; and References (if required). Depending upon the job posting, your résumé may also include separate headings such as Awards; Digital Media; and Publications. Related work experience and education should appear either first or second on your résumé, depending on how long one has been out of school. It is usual practice to lead with experience and move one's education further down in the résumé once you have begun your professional career.

## Tailoring Your Application

Emerging professionals enter the job market bursting with new ideas, fresh training, and expectations for their ideal workplace. How can you communicate your passion while being mindful of established best practices and existing workplace culture? One of the most important things job seekers can do is research the organization to which they are applying and make sure they are tailoring their application to it. Your cover letter should clearly outline why you are qualified for the position and why you are interested in working for the organization. Ideally this interest should be framed in relation to your future career goals and also draw on your past experiences.

You should also look at the original job posting for keywords and phrases. Once you have identified those, incorporate that language into your cover letter. The inclusion of these keywords can be particularly important when applying to organizations that utilize résumé-sorting software programs. Not including them may mean your résumé does not make it past the first round of review.

You should also use detailed, non-institutional specific language to describe your work. Instead of saying you worked on “exhibit development,” highlight all of the dimensions that involved exhibit development skills: research, artifact selection, exhibit text and caption writing, and exhibit guide creation. Focus on the skills you have that can help the organization meet its current needs. People love a good story. If you have a particularly memorable experience that highlights how you are a good fit for the job, you should include it in your cover letter.

## Your Online Presence

There are definite benefits to having a digital presence when you are searching for a job. Online examples of your work can supplement your résumé and highlight your ability to engage with a public audience. A digital presence is also a good reflection of your level of career awareness and preparation.

There are several ways to create and maintain an effective digital profile. A wide range of digital platforms are available, and the most popular ones offer basic plans free of charge. You should think critically about how you want to present yourself digitally. Each type of digital platform can serve a different purpose in crafting a digital identity. For example, creating a website or a blog aids in self-promotion, creating a personal brand, and helps demonstrate your digital media skills. Using networking sites such as Twitter or LinkedIn can be a way to build networks beyond your geographic region, promote your work, and learn about upcoming employment opportunities.

## Quick Tips When Crafting Cover Letters and Résumés

- **Create original letters and résumés.** An experienced employer will identify form letters and templates right away.
- **Mirror the language** of the job posting by cutting and pasting its keywords.
- **Proofread.** Check for spelling, grammar, and consistency in organization, font style, size, and spacing.
- **Use a widely accessible file format** when submitting applications electronically; embedded files should be easily convertible.
- **Use familiar font styles** such as Arial, Calibri, or Times New Roman.
- **Keep text** at an 11 pt. or 12 pt. font size.
- **Number** your pages.

## Sample Résumé: Park Ranger (Interpretation)

Name  
Mailing Address  
Phone Number; Email Address  
Address of Online Profile

### EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

#### Park Ranger

Blackstone River National Historical Park, Whitinsville, MA, 2017–Present

- Presented informal and formal talks/tours to diverse audiences while responding to visitor inquiries for information, direction, and guidance
- Researched scientific, technical, and historical sources to develop publications and educational programs for diverse audiences
- Prepared and presented monthly reports related to accomplishments and programmatic needs for supervisors and park management
- Assisted in the day-to-day operation of the park's office-based interpretive station as well as "pop-up" interpretive stations in park nodes
- Worked with partner sites to develop several new, archival-based researched interpretive programs (including weekly "Walkabout" tours)
- Launched a pilot "Bark Ranger" program that aligns with the Healthy Parks/Healthy People initiative of the National Park Service
- Researched a Women's History Trail for the Blackstone River Valley
- Assisted with the planning and execution of the "17 Saturdays of Summer Fun" citizen-science programs for 2017
- Coordinated with the 2017–2018 DOI/VISTA service member to plan a second Biodiversity Festival

#### Community Outreach and Partnership VISTA

Blackstone River National Historical Park and Blackstone Heritage Corridor, Whitinsville, MA, 2016–2017

- Served as a liaison between Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park, Blackstone Heritage Corridor, Inc., and local partners
- Conceptualized, planned, and facilitated an inaugural Biodiversity Festival within the park; this event created new partnerships and built capacity among conservation and environmental groups
- Offered interpretation programs aligning with STEM curricula
- Worked with a local university class on eco-tourism research
- Developed site-specific youth programs for the 50th Anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act
- Increased park visitation by creating informal interpretation and education stations in libraries throughout the park
- Assisted with centennial programming in line with Call to Action initiatives
- Researched and conducted a new interpretive program in Hopedale, MA, and a driving tour of Auburn, MA
- Completed courses in Resource Development (Fundraising and Grant Writing) and Volunteer Mobilization, respectively
- Assisted with several grant applications (valued between \$3,000–\$300,000)
- Provided technical assistance for a community-based dialogue pilot to be held at Coltsville National Historical Park

#### Graduate Assistant and Lecturer

University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, 2015

- Worked on a variety of specialized topics courses, including: immigration in the United States; Latin@s in the United States; American foreign policy in the 20th century; conceptualizations of race, class, and gender in the United States; and American Indian history
- Graded student papers, led student discussions, and facilitated group projects
- Designed/taught an upper-level course: Women in America 1850–Present
- Elected to serve as an officer in the History Graduate Students Association
- Organized and promoted the History Department's biennial lectures
- Conceptualized and ran an event series on careers in public history
- Researched local history for *Virtual Hartford*, a digital humanities project including archival research and curation
- Served as a project coordinator for *PaperTrail*, a digital humanities project and writing tool for students
- Awarded several competitive writing and finishing fellowships for dissertation
- Demonstrated proficiency with programs including Microsoft Word, Excel, Access, and Outlook; achieved translation proficiency in Spanish



### **Museum Guide**

Preservation Society of Newport County, Newport, CT, 2012–2015

- Interpreted programs for groups of up to 40 visitors
- Learned seven separate house tours and a behind-the-scenes specialty tour
- Acquired a mastery of architectural terms along with techniques for interpreting material culture to the public
- Managed the audio equipment for self-guided tours at four properties
- Used ticketing systems connected with the museum
- Wrote daily summaries and reports on visitation and customer service
- Granted four awards (one each season) for distinguished customer service

### **Buchanan/Burnham Graduate Intern**

Newport Historical Society, Newport, RI, 2011

- Interpreted Newport, RI, history on two separate walking tours, further refining my oral communication skills
- Provided interpretation at a stationary, visiting exhibition
- Assisted with major fundraising programs and other public history events
- Researched and curated an exhibit entitled *Cases and Types: The Lives and Works of Early Newport Printers*

### **Museum Guide/Graduate Intern**

Mystic Seaport, Mystic, CT, 2010

- Interpreted 19th-century maritime history in two exhibits
- Used museum software and research systems including PastPerfect
- Co-authored a script for an exhibition entitled “Sinister Seas”
- Completed a graduate-level seminar on museum studies; visited dozens of museums and cultural sites to analyze best practices and visitor education techniques

### **Guide and Student Admissions Associate**

Trinity College Admissions Office, Hartford, CT, 2006–2009

- Led guided tours and visitation programs on the Trinity College campus for prospective students
- Offered specialized programs for at-risk youth groups brought to campus for exposure to higher education
- Wrote emails and answered calls related to public relations and outreach
- Received a promotion to the position of Student Admissions Associate (2008-2009); facilitated informational sessions and student interviews
- Completed comprehensive evaluation reports related to students' admissions files

### **EDUCATION**

Ph.D. in History, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, 2016

- Extensive study and research in African American history, women's history, and the history of the family. Special emphasis on analyses of “women's work” and labor

Page 2 of 3

Once you have an online presence you also need to think about the ongoing management of that presence. Employers regularly Google prospective candidates and it is important for you to be aware of what they will find when they do. Ensure that you keep private and professional profiles separate, learn about the privacy settings of the social media platforms you are using, and curate your content to make sure you are putting the best example of your work out there.

### **Conclusion**

This leaflet has provided practical résumé and cover letter advice, that Emerging History Professionals can

incorporate into their job applications. We encourage new professionals to connect with established practitioners within their area of public history. These connections can provide insights into specific application processes and help build relationships within the field. Professional organizations such as AASLH, NCPH, and AHA can also provide a wealth of resources for those entering the field.

Ultimately, of course, it is up to you to promote yourself to others and to convince them that you have the right stuff. Sing your own praises while remaining honest and respectful to the employer and the application process.

- MA in History, University of Connecticut (2011)
- Extensive study and research in colonial American history, social change and movements in 19th c. U.S., urban studies, and topics in Caribbean history.
- BA in History/ American Studies, Trinity College, Hartford, CT (2009)
- Concentrated study and research in classical literature and history, American Studies methodology, and histories of Progressivism, slavery, and gender in the U.S. from the colonial period to the present.

**AWARDS**

- University of Connecticut Humanities Institute Fellowship 2015–2016
- University of Massachusetts Public History Conference Paper Prize, 2016
- New England Historical Association Best Graduate Paper 2015
- University of Connecticut Liberal Arts and Sciences Fellowship 2015
- Albert E. and Wilda E. Van Dusen Scholarship 2011; 2014
- University of Connecticut Graduate School Doctoral Travel Award 2014
- Flemmie Kittrell Lecture in Human Ecology, Cornell University 2014
- Dean’s Fellowship in Human Ecology, Cornell University 2013
- Bruce and Sondra Stave Prize in Recent American History 2013

**SELECT PRESENTATIONS**

- Boston National Historical Park “Rosies Invade the Yard” Event, invited talk on “Race and Rosie,” Charlestown Navy Yard, Boston, MA, August 13, 2017.
- Berkshire Conference for Women Historians, “Good Will Ambassador with a Cookbook,” Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, June 1, 2017.
- Connecticut State Library in partnership with Connecticut Digital Newspaper Project, invited talk on “Play, Recreation, and Childhood in the Progressive Era,” Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT, May 11, 2017.
- University of Connecticut Dodd Center, invited gallery talk “The Land Grant College at War: A Centennial Retrospective,” Storrs, CT, April 6, 2017.
- Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park Civic Dialogue on Women’s Equality, moderator, Hopedale, MA, March 26, 2017.
- Nichols College History Department invited talk, “Working as a Public Historian,” Dudley, MA, November 11, 2016.
- University of Massachusetts Public History Conference on “Making History Work,” “House/Museum: Reflections of a Public Historian,” Amherst, MA, March 5, 2016.
- Association for the Study of African American Life and History Centennial Conference, “Race and Biography: The Good Will Ambassador with a Cookbook,” September 25, 2015.
- University of Massachusetts Amherst Conference on Race and the Imposition of Deviance, “The Family of Man: Race and Multiculturalism in the History of Home Economics,” Amherst, MA, March 27, 2015.

*Note: In this case, sections on Awards and Presentations are relevant to the job posting, which asks for knowledge of American history and evidence of oral communication skills.*



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in Public History at Western, serving as both the Acting Director and the Internship Coordinator. He has also taught courses in Organizational Behavior and Human Resources Management for Western’s DAN Department of Management and Organizational Studies. Mike regularly participates in professional development sessions, including résumé-building and internship/job search workshops. He can be reached at mdove2@uwo.ca.



Krista McCracken holds an M.A. in Public History from Western University. She is an Archives Supervisor at Algoma University’s Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre and

Arthur A. Wishart Library. Since 2010, her work has involved hiring public history professionals, and she has helped organize the NCPH Résumé Review Workshop since 2015. Krista can be reached at krista.mccracken@algomau.ca or on Twitter at @kristamccracken.

## Resources

AASLH Career Center, [about.aaslh.org/career-center/](http://about.aaslh.org/career-center/). Includes sample cover letters and résumés.

Careers for Students of History, AHA and NCPH, [www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-resources/careers-for-students-of-history](http://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-resources/careers-for-students-of-history).

Debbie Ann Doyle, “Practical Advice on Getting a Public History Job,” American Historical Association [www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2006/practical-advice-on-getting-a-public-history-job](http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2006/practical-advice-on-getting-a-public-history-job).

NCPH Jobs, [ncph.org/jobs](http://ncph.org/jobs).

*Tips For Getting a Job in the Public History Field* by NCPH, UTEP, and AASLH, [imeo.com/113961817](http://imeo.com/113961817).

USAJOBS, [www.usajobs.gov/Help/working-in-government/unique-hiring-paths/students](http://www.usajobs.gov/Help/working-in-government/unique-hiring-paths/students).

*What Do Public History Employers Want? Report of the Joint AASLH-AHA-NCPH-OAH Task Force on Public History Education and Employment* (PDF), [goo.gl/v3j2T2](http://goo.gl/v3j2T2).

## FAQ's

*“What is the difference between a CV and a résumé?”*

A CV, or curriculum vitae, is a full history of one’s credentials. It is used primarily when applying for academic positions or grants and fellowships, though it may be requested when applying for senior professional jobs such as museum curator or executive director.

A résumé is a concise summary of your skills and qualifications for a specific position. It is much shorter than a CV (between two and three pages), and is usually preferred by those in industry, nonprofits, and the public sector.

*“Do I include unpaid and volunteer work under work experience?”*

Yes. Employers are fully aware that people gain some of their best experience as unpaid interns or as volunteers, whereas the work performed as a paid employee may not have been as varied or professional in scope.

*“What do I do if there are some noticeable chronological gaps in my résumé when it comes to education and employment directly relating to the job posting?”*

You should address in your cover letter any obvious breaks in schooling and work experience that directly relate to the job. This may have been due to a leave or a switch in career. Regardless, you can use this to your advantage by presenting it as another example of life experience, an additional skill or interest, and/or by describing any further training or volunteering you gained during the period. For example, employment in the retail and restaurant industries can be used to highlight your customer

service and teamwork skills, experience with supervising and training staff, or the logistics of operating a complex organization.

*“What is a portfolio?”*

A portfolio is another method of documenting your skills, education, and work experience. Similar to a CV, it is lengthier than a résumé and intended to provide a record of your personal development over an extended period of time. Rather than a description of previous accomplishments, however, the portfolio presents *evidence* of these accomplishments.

It should consist of sample work (copies of exhibit, walking tour, or special event brochures; screenshots of online projects; publications; etc.) and may include awards; certificates of completion for professional development; evaluations or assessments of one’s work from previous supervisors; letters of reference on official letterhead; photographs and copies of any media attention you have received for your projects. A portfolio is an excellent personal marketing tool.

*“Do I need one to apply for a job?”*

Yes and no. The vast majority of job postings will not ask for a portfolio as part of the application package that you submit, though some may allow you to upload or attach additional documents when initially applying. Portfolios are, however, becoming more common in industry, education, and public sector hiring, and you should consider carrying a hard copy portfolio to your interview. We would also encourage you to create an online portfolio and embed into your résumé links to sample works and media coverage for electronic application submissions.