

Imagine that you are full-time job-hunting. You are continuously coming into contact with employers through e-mail and phone conversations, during face-to-face meetings at conferences, through chance meetings in lobbies or hallways, and perhaps even at dinner parties with friends. Potential employers will most certainly ask “Tell me about yourself.” On a moment’s notice, you must be prepared to say who you are and what skills you have. Time is short and you have to impress immediately: YOU NEED AN ELEVATOR PITCH. This is a short marketing message about your professional self.

Most job hunters have a very hard time describing their skills; you need to have prearranged two-sentence and two-paragraph descriptions of your professional self. The message has to be short, clear, and it has to describe your *professional* self in the best way possible.

Imagine now that you are on the phone with an employer who asks “Tell me about yourself.” You have done your homework and you have in your arsenal of job-hunting techniques a pre-arranged 30-second sound bite – a two-paragraph, professionally-worded description of all that you are. The wording and ideas in these few sentences flow effortlessly. They are communicated with confidence. As the conversation progresses, your short description ties in the ideas you have developed in your longer resume and covering letter. You have labeled and compartmentalized your skill sets so that you can now list them, and then elaborate on each. You demonstrate confidence because you know yourself and have the professional words needed for describing who you are in the workplace. You now have the ability to grab an employer’s attention.

Once you have a clear idea of who you are and how to express it, contacting employers becomes easier and easier.

Why You Need a Short Description of Your Professional Self

You need it because:

- It helps you get focused in your job search.
- It forces you to figure out what your major skill sets are and therefore what makes you valuable.
- It helps you figure out what to emphasize on your resume.
- It helps demonstrate your confidence and communication abilities when employers say “Tell me about yourself.”
- It grabs the attention of potential employers when you contact them by phone, e-mail, or in person.

Where to Start – Your Career Labels

You can begin writing your short description of your professional self by choosing two or three career labels that summarize who you are. Try to imagine what a recruitment officer would notice about you when shuffling through a pile of resumes. You are deciding on a focus here, a few labels that will sum you up and tell employers what your interests and skills are. Hard skills are generally the easiest to insert here. Begin with your education or areas of career experience. Follow this with your most dominant soft skill.

Examples of Career Labels

- International Trade and Immigration, strong writer
- MA International Relations, aptitude for policy analysis
- BA History & LA Studies, advanced multilingual skills
- Agricultural Engineering, excellent organizer
- MBA, Finance and IT systems, cross-cultural negotiations

What to Write

Many different formulas work, but there are generally two main ideas that need to be covered when composing your professional description: You need to mention your hard skills and your soft skills. Strategy One below gets these ideas across:

- **Strategy One: The two-paragraph description:** In the first paragraph, discuss your hard skills. Highlight your professional qualifications: work experience, field of expertise, language skills, and education. In the second paragraph, you discuss your soft skills. Speak about the personal qualities that define you in the workplace. Mention your reasons for success, what captivates you, what sparks your interest, what qualities you are known for, and what attracts you to certain types of tasks.
- **Strategy Two: Open with three main areas of expertise, then describe each:** Example: “*I have three areas of expertise and interest: Latin America, Community Health, and Information Technologies.*” Alternatively, you can start by announcing, “*I have three areas of interest,*” followed by sentence descriptions of each.
- **Strategy Three: Start with a theme and carry it through your description:** This can be effectively used to tie in disjointed experiences. Example: “*A common theme that runs through my professional profile is my attraction to cross-cultural / intercultural environments. I have just completed a BA in social anthropology from Saint Mary’s University, where I focused on Latin American cultures. I have had three international work experiences. I interned this past year for four months in Brazil with the Canadian embassy as an assistant to a trade officer. I am an experienced TESOL teacher, having taught foreign students in Atlanta and also in Brazil. In 1997, I traveled to West Africa. I am interested in working as an administrator in a multicultural work environment. I like the challenge, creativity, and intellect required to interact across cultures. I especially enjoy cross-cultural interaction with my students. I like being organized and my past employers tell me that they appreciate my attention to detail.*”

Writing Tips

It can be very difficult to write these types of descriptions. Be cautious. Here are some common mistakes that people make:

- **Don’t be too formal.** Remember that your words must flow like normal conversation, not be read as an academic paper. If you read your description aloud and it sounds pretentious or wooden, you will need to revise it. To make your description less formal, use “I” in the sentence structure. Examples include “*I was known for...*” “*Past employers mentioned that I ...*”
- **While the sentences are written in a “spoken style,”** the wording and ideas must be professional, not personal.
- **Don’t forget to include international skills** when applying for international work. These may be hard skills, like actual work and travel experience, or soft skills such as abilities to cope, communicate, and adapt to new environments.
- **Don’t focus on personal goals.** For example, do not say something like “*I like to travel.*” Instead, say “*My travel experience has taught me how to be successful in cross-cultural work environments.*”
- **You may want to close with a mention of your immediate career goals.** Make the link between your experience, your soft skills, and your career goal.
- **Writing a professional description of yourself can be difficult.** In the final analysis, you must be comfortable with the text and it must suit your personality. Don’t write a complex description that does not match your personality.
- **Once completed, learn the text by heart** so that it flows as normal conversation.

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How Does Your Description Relate to Your Resume?

- You generally write your description before writing your resume. The decisions you make while writing your two-sentence and two-paragraph descriptions will help you decide what is important about you and what to include in your resume.
- Before you start any writing you will need to decide on a career objective (See chapter on International Resumes). The short description of your professional self must be written in a manner that supports your career objective.
- Your description will provide focal points when writing your resume. It will be especially important when you write the Skills Summary section of your resume, since you will have already highlighted your best skills - the ones that make you shine and attract employers.
- If you are having trouble writing your description, don't be overly precise or cautious about choosing the most accurate skills. Remember, you can revise your description later.

Example: A Two-Paragraph Professional Description

FIRST PARAGRAPH: Your Hard Skills

This paragraph is a succinct description of your professional experience and training:

"I am fully bilingual, having completed a Bachelor of Business Administration from West Virginia University in English, and Master's in Political Science from l'Université Laval in French. I have two years management experience in the planning department at General Motors head office in Oshawa. I have four international areas of experience: as a volunteer English teacher in Ghana, West Africa, as an assistant to the Director of the German Volunteer Service in Ghana, four months of cross-cultural travel experience throughout Africa, and finally, four years of active volunteer service with international organizations in the US."

SECOND PARAGRAPH: Your Soft Skills

This paragraph puts the above paragraph in perspective; it tells employers who you are and how you operate.

"I am especially known as an organizer and planner. I believe that I was successful as a manager in West Africa because I always applied a follow-up management style, whereby I continuously confirmed each "yes" or "no" with two or three different parties. My colleagues liked working with me because I remained humorous under pressure and despite difficult socio-political and economic conditions. I am an ardent cross-cultural observer and have a well-defined career goal of becoming an administrative manager working with an NGO in Africa."

Other Elevator Pitch Examples

Here are examples from a group of interns who specialized in Latin American studies. An important feature is to write the description so the words flow as normal conversation. These descriptions are not formal:

- **Career label - BA in International Relations with program management experience:** *"I have a BA in International Relations, and very strong language skills; I am fully fluent in English, Italian, and French, and functional in Spanish. I am also known as an excellent organizer with clear writing skills and strong interpersonal abilities. My immediate career aspiration is to gain experience in ... so that I can work as a program manager for an international organization once I complete my Master's degree."*
- **Career label - Administration & Science:** *"As a Science graduate with a BA in ecology, I have a somewhat unconventional combination of interests in management, administration, and the cross-cultural side of science. I enjoy the organizational / personal side of management: keeping track of numerous tasks, somewhat like an entrepreneur. I also have a fair amount of cross-cultural experience, including a four-month internship with the OAC in Washington, volunteer experience with international organizations in Canada, as well as six months of cross-cultural travel experience in Central America and the Caribbean. I am proficient in French and Spanish."*
- **Career label - Latin America Specialist & ESL Trainer:** *"I have a strong interest and broad experience in Latin American socio-political issues. I have a BA in Latin American studies, and completed a four month Washington-based internship with the Organization of American States and a number of research and volunteer positions. Being fluent in English, Spanish, and Italian, I have strong language skills and have gained valuable cross-cultural and training experience as an ESL instructor first in the US and then for two years in Japan."*
- **Career label - Latin American Program Officer with International Organization:** *"I have three years of multi-faceted work experience dealing with Latin America. Always recognized for my organizational and communication abilities, I have worked for the OAC in Washington as a program officer / intern, as an administrative assistant on a Peruvian project with a Seattle-based mining firm, as a media relations officer with the 2004 APEC conference in Seattle, and as an executive bilingual secretary with the Consulate General of Peru in Los Angeles. I have a Master's degree in international studies from the University of Barcelona in Spain. I am an accredited Spanish translator and am functional in French and Catalan. My greatest interest is to work in public relations or communications where I can make use of my writing and communication skills. I enjoy and am attracted to teamwork."*

Get cracking! Determine your skills, determine your interests, distill your experience and create a pitch!

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