

7 Resume Mistakes That Get Qualified Candidates Rejected by Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS)

(And How to Fix Them Fast)

By Danielle Lawson, PhD



© 2026 creativeSMARTS.

For personal use only.

Do not copy, share, or distribute without written permission..

First — A Quick Reality Check

ATS systems (Applicant Tracking Systems) are not evil robots trying to destroy your career, but it often feels like that.

They are database filters designed to scan resumes, extract specific information, and match keywords against job descriptions. Essentially they perform the preliminary review function that used to fall to Human Resources/Recruiting assistants.

When resumes get rejected by an ATS system, it is usually because they were not written or formatted in a way the system could understand.

With over 20 years as a corporate trainer and human resources administrator, I've developed resume review scoring procedures and see how the influx of AI oriented human resources software has changed the face of hiring. I know first hand how ATS platforms are set up and how their algorithms are used to scan and reject unqualified AND *qualified* applicants.

Let's fix that.

Here are the top 7 resume errors that often result in a resume being rejected by an ATS system.



Mistake #1: Fancy Formatting That Breaks Parsing

The Problem

Using text boxes, tables, multi-column layouts, graphics, or design-heavy templates can scramble your content. ATS systems read left to right, top to bottom. When formatting interferes with this scanning process, your resume content may not be scanned accurately.



The Fix

- Use a clean, single-column layout.
- Avoid tables, text boxes, images, and graphics.
- Use standard section headings like Experience, Education, and Skills.

Mistake #2: Using the Wrong Keywords (Or Not Enough)

The Problem

ATS systems match exact language from job descriptions.

If the posting says 'stakeholder management' and your resume says 'worked with internal partners,' you may not match.



The Fix

- Mirror 8-12 core skills ***directly*** from the job description.
- Use both acronyms **and** spelled-out versions when relevant.
- Integrate keywords naturally into bullet points.

Mistake #3: Writing Job Descriptions Instead of Results

The Problem

Listing responsibilities instead of measurable impact weakens your ranking in ATS scoring systems and reduced your appeal to recruiters/hiring managers.

The Fix

- Use: Action Verb + What You Did + Measurable Impact.
 - Example: Reduced onboarding time by 25% by redesigning training documentation.
- Quantify your results wherever possible (% , \$, time , scale).

Mistake #4: Overloading the Skills Section

The Problem

Listing 40–60 skills dilutes relevance and confuses keyword weighting.

The Fix

- Curate 10–20 targeted skills.
- Prioritize those listed in the job description.
- Group related skills logically.



Mistake #5: Saving as the Wrong File Type

The Problem

Some ATS systems struggle with PDFs, .pages files, or unusual formats.

The Fix

- Unless stated otherwise, save as .docx.
- Use a simple file name: FirstName_LastName_Resume.docx

Mistake #6: Missing Context Around Job Titles

The Problem

Internal company titles may not translate externally.

The Fix

- Clarify roles using standardized titles.
 - Example: Customer Experience Manager (Internal Title: Customer Success Manager).

Mistake #7: Using One Resume for Every Application

The Problem

Submitting the same resume for every job lowers your algorithm ranking because ATS platforms are scanning resumes for those that meet specific parameters – the keywords for which can be found in the job description.

The Fix

- Create a Master Resume.
- Tailor your summary, top skills, and bullet emphasis for each role.



Quick ATS Survival Checklist

- Single-column format
- Avoid organizing your layout using tables
- Tailored for this specific role
- Standard section headings
- Keywords aligned with the job description
- Standard job titles instead of 'trendy' titles
- Results-driven bullet points
- Targeted skill list
- Saved as .docx

Ready to Go Further?

Now that you know the most common ATS mistakes, the next step is simple:
Find out how your resume actually scores.

The **ATS Match Scorecard** uses the same type of scoring/ranking system used in many ATS platforms to compare your resume directly to a specific job description and tells you whether your resume is competitive — or needs strengthening — **before** you apply.

- [Click here to learn more.](#)



If you're ready to optimize your entire resume and cover letter strategically, explore the **ATS Advantage Toolkit**.

Inside you'll get:

- The AI Resume & Cover Letter Assistant
- ATS-optimized templates
- Tested AI prompts
- A structured workflow for tailoring applications quickly



Start small — or go all in. Either way, take the next step.

- [Click here to learn more.](#)

**Prepare without panic.
Apply with confidence.**

About Danielle Lawson....

Danielle Lawson, PhD, is the founder of creativeSMARTS, part of the DigitalDiva Learning Lab. With over 20 years of experience in Corporate Communication, HR, training, and leadership development across Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and universities, she helps professionals navigate career transitions without panic.

She is a certified Agile Scrum Master and Agile Coach who applies practical, structured systems to modern job search strategy. Her approach combines smart technology, real-world hiring insight, and calm, actionable guidance.



Results Disclaimer (No Guarantee of Employment)

The materials, tools, and resources provided by creativeSMARTS are intended for educational and informational purposes only. They are designed to support job seekers in strengthening their application materials, improving their job search strategy, and increasing their confidence throughout the hiring process. However, creativeSMARTS does not guarantee employment, interviews, job offers, salary outcomes, or any specific career results. Use of these materials does not constitute a client, coach of consulting relationship of any kind.

Individual outcomes vary based on many factors outside the author's control, including but not limited to personal effort, experience level, job market conditions, hiring practices, geographic location, industry trends, and economic factors. By using these materials, you acknowledge and agree that you are solely responsible for your job search decisions and results.

This product is intended for educational and informational purposes only. The strategies, templates, tools, and recommendations included herein are provided in good faith and based on commonly accepted career development and job search practices. However, no express or implied guarantees of employment, interview offers, or job placement are made.

By using this product, you acknowledge and agree that the author and publisher shall not be held liable for any outcomes, direct or indirect, resulting from the use or misuse of the information contained within.