WRITING FOR THE ROBOT: HOW EMPLOYER SEARCH TOOLS HAVE INFLUENCED RÉSUMÉ RHETORIC AND ETHICS

Nicole Amare
University of South Alabama
Alan Manning
Brigham Young University

To date, business communication scholars and textbook writers have encouraged résumé rhetoric that accommodates technology, for example, recommending keyword-enhancing techniques to attract the attention of searchbots: customized search engines that allow companies to automatically scan résumés for relevant keywords. However, few scholars have discussed the ethical implications of adjusting résumé keywords for the sole purpose of increasing searchbot hits. As the résumé genre has evolved over the past century, strategies of résumé "padding" have likewise evolved, at each stage violating one of four maxims of the Cooperative Principle. *Direct factual misrepresentation violates the maxim of* quality *and is of course discouraged, but résumé writers have turned in succession to violations of* manner *(formatting tricks) and then more recently to violations of* quantity *and/or* relevance *with deceptive keywording techniques. The authors conclude by suggesting several techniques to business communication instructors that may encourage students to create more ethically sound résumés.*

Keywords: ethics; résumé; textbook instruction; keyword; searchbot; job searching

MOST BUSINESS COMMUNICATION teachers are familiar with the dos and don'ts of formatting a successful e-résumé: use a Roman sans serif font throughout; avoid decorative font styles and emphases; use font size 10 to 14; avoid folding the résumé (to make it scan more easily); and make sure page breaks and margins do not interfere with the scanning software. Moreover, students are commonly advised to make content changes from their print to online résumés, such as using nouns instead of verbs when describing job duties and packing the résumé full of keywords and fronting these keywords early and in a separate paragraph:

> The reason for including a separate section detailing key words on the electronic résumé and placing it at the top of the résumé is that some résumé scanning software quits reading after finding a maximum number of key words in each résumé it searches. (Quible, 1995, p. 7)

Students writing e-résumés are thus advised not only to make the résumés more scannable (by adjusting format) but also to "beat the robot eye" that scans the e-résumé (by adjusting content in the form of keywords).

Problems arise when our students go into the workforce and do not get any hits on their résumé, which is why business communication courses advise students to adjust their résumé rhetoric to encourage more hits, thereby increasing the likelihood of an interview. However, problems also arise when résumé writers make rhetorical choices that have ethical ramifications, a phenomenon that is not stressed enough in our field's discussion of résumé rhetoric and ethics. For example, we find current textbooks advising students, essentially, to copy job ad language directly into the résumé as a list of keywords and also to construe their résumé as a marketing tool, where no account is given of the difference between ethical and unethical marketing strategies. Such advice cannot help but influence the "rhetorical appropriateness" of writing for a particular audience (Charney, Rayman, & Ferreira-Buckley, 1992, p. 58).

Business communication teachers have struggled for years to convince students that the résumé is not a one-type-fits-all-jobs document but rather a highly persuasive, expressive, and "sophisticated rhetorical challenge" (Charney & Rayman, 1989, p. 36). This article explores how this vision of the résumé as a sophisticated document instead of a data sheet can endure in ever-evolving search engine environments, especially ones that may induce students to be less than truthful on their résumés. We find that as the résumé genre has evolved over the past century, strategies of résumé "padding" have likewise evolved. Although direct résumé fraud (i.e., misrepresented fact) is illegal, indirect résumé fraud (i.e., covert violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle) has become widely accepted. After discussing the ethical problems associated with these violations, the ways in which they constitute fraud, we suggest several techniques that business communication instructors might use to encourage students to create more ethically sound résumés.

TEXTBOOK DISCUSSIONS AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF RÉSUMÉ RHETORIC

Since the late 1990s, in parallel with the rise of the Internet, a print résumé has come to be described as "simply a sales brochure" (Jones, 1998), and online résumé writers may be encouraged to oversell themselves. Consider the following language taken from some of the most recent and most popular business communication textbooks:

1. Young's (2006) *Foundations of Business Communication: An Integrative Approach*:

Though résumé styles vary, most people in the United States would agree that the résumé is a tool used to 'sell yourself' to your potential employer. (p. 243)

Stress what you can offer the organization. . . . Stress how your skills can benefit the organization. (p. 319)

2. Guffey's (2007) *Essentials of Business Communication*:

[A persuasive résumé] does more than merely list your qualification. It packages your assets into a convincing advertisement that sells you for a specific job. (p. 383)

Focus on how you can contribute to the organization. . . . Show how you'll add value to the organization. (p. 385)

3. Bovée and Thill's (2008) *Business Communication Today*:

Until you're able to meet with employers in person, you are your résumé. (p. 561)

Your education is likely to be one of your strongest selling points, so think carefully about how you will present it. (p. 564)

4. Lehman and Dufrene's (2008) *Business Communication*:

Identify unique selling points and specific support. Determine several key qualifications and accomplishments that enhance your marketability. These are the key selling points you'll target in your résumé and later in a job interview. (p. 463, bold in original)

Fortunately, these textbook authors make an effort to balance the résumé-as-sales-brochure rhetoric with a corresponding emphasis on résumé ethics. For example, Bovée and Thill's (2008) "Keeping the Résumé Honest," Lehman and Dufrene's (2008) "Inflated Résumés: High Price of Career Lies," and Guffey's (2007) "Risking Your Future with an Inflated Résumé" all exemplify sections that discourage résumé fraud. In the section "Avoid Résumé Deception," Bovée and Thill (2005) offer a set of seven résumé honesty commandments, including "do not claim educational credits you don't have" and "don't exaggerate expertise or experience" (p. 410).

Therefore, the relevant question at this point is whether or not students understand the message of success seeking and self-marketing in the context of ethical practice, or whether they interpret the sales message as trumping or overriding any ethical requirement. To have at least an approximate answer to this question, we decided to assess our students' attitudes toward lying on résumés. Our findings are of course preliminary, but we offer them with the suggestion that business communication instructors might make a similar assessment of their own students' perception of the relative importance of success and ethical practice, be it in résumé construction or any other area of business communication.

A two-question email survey was distributed to a convenience sample of former students who had completed a professional writing course (with a résumé component) within the past 1 to 4 years. The two survey prompts were as follows:

1. To increase your chances for a job, would you work the phrasing on your résumé so that the right keywords would be visible to a person reviewing your résumé (say, in a qualifications or expertise section) and also so that the robot eye would pick up your résumé, even if the keywords do not necessarily reflect your actual job skills and experience? Why or why not?
2. To increase your chances for a job, would you enter invisible keywords that did not necessarily match your job background so that your résumé would be recognized by the robot eye and therefore accepted into the job application pool (possibly for interviews)? Why or why not?

Table 1.   Comments From Student Survey on Résumé Fraud With Deceptive Keywords

Yes, I Would Use Deceptive Keywords	*No, I Would Not Use Deceptive Keywords*
The only way that people are separated from the pack is to be different and to be noticed. Key words will assure that you get noticed.	I don't believe you should lie to get a job. Your lies will probably be found out by your employer.
If all the job applicants know about the invisible keywords strategy, then I think it is OK to use the invisible keywords. Because this way whoever is more smart or is able to use the space in a better way is more likely to be noticed for the interview. After all, the résumé is the first step to filter out all the good and smart candidates.	Creatively speaking, language is fun and you can always devise words that do fit your background and perhaps will help you stand out and get a good job interview. The basic problem I have with entering key words to make you look more attractive to a potential employer is the lack of integrity involved, the aspect of not being truthful and that is a big character issue.
In the technological age that we live in, we have to use every trick we can just to can an interview. Often, than means fudging just a little to get past the first level.	No, I really wouldn't bother with trying to tweak the résumé. I would just be as to the point as possible, giving all the facts.
Yes, if it's not too far-fetched and if it would be helpful in getting the job or give me a better chance, it doesn't hurt to try.	No, I feel that you must be honest in the résumé because the employer could ask questions and if you falsify your résumé it could look bad.
As long as the keywords were vague and not something far from the truth, yes I would add them if it gave me a better chance of getting the job.	I know that employers and electronic job ads do look for keywords, but I would stick to terms that accurately define myself, my capabilities, and my experiences.
Yes, I would. I've noticed employers will sometimes raise the bar for qualifications, even though they don't expect the perfect applicant. Also, I would like to be noticed and have the proverbial door open. After the interview, they can always say no thank you. The other option is to have the potential employer skim over your résumé and never take notice.	This is a tough question. Although I want my résumé to grab the reader's attention, somehow phrasing keywords that do not necessarily reflect my actual job skills or experience feels a bit like cheating and dishonesty. Therefore, I would not take this step to get my résumé noticed.

(continued)

Table 1.   (continued)

Yes, I Would Use Deceptive Keywords	*No, I Would Not Use Deceptive Keywords*
If the system is going to boot one's résumé on the basis that it doesn't have enough of the right key words, then yes, I think I would be more likely to do this. I don't really like the idea of a computer system scanning for résumés anyway; I think humans are much more equipped to cull through potential candidates, but I guess for time's sake this is sometimes necessary.	I believe prioritizing my résumé over the résumé of other (possibly) more qualified individuals would be unfair to the individuals who are more qualified; would be a waste of time and possibly a bit aggravating to the employer; and gives false hope to the individual who is seeking the position.
Yes, I'll use whatever tool I can to gain an interview.	No, it is much better to be the unexpected phenomenon than the overhyped disappointment.
Yes, because this could give you an edge over the competition. I have been told that several government agencies use the robot eye to select potential candidates for a job. So allowing yourself to get a leg up in any way will be to your advantage.	No, I would not be willing to enter key words that did not match my profession. I want a job that is suited for me and my qualifications. If I do get the interview, I don't want to have to explain why my résumé doesn't match my qualifications.
Yes, I would use it. When hunting a job, the first step is to get noticed and that is what the keywords would do. Qualifications on your résumé mean nothing if the potential employer doesn't review your résumé.	No, this is deceptive and wrong. The act of using keywords, especially invisibly, is sneaky. Again, if my résumé cannot get me the job truthfully, the job must not be for me.
I have actually done this on either Monster or careerbuilder. I did it because I don't have any work experience in Geography or GIS, so I had to put in the key words so that maybe someone will find my résumé and say maybe I should give her her first job in GIS. It hasn't worked yet, but what else can I do when all of my work experience is as a paramedic and not as a cartographer or geographer.	I understand that the end justifies the means when it comes to finding a job, but I would find it dishonest to gain an upper hand by "putting one over" on a computer system. At the same time, if there is a way to get ahead, people will exploit that. So, I guess it depends on the correlation with how many jobs I had applied for, and how many interviews I had been called for.

Of the 357 students surveyed, 211 (59%) responded. All 211 students gave a *yes* or *no* response to each question plus qualification statements. More than 50% (*n* = 107) of the respondents stated that they would use keywords in their résumés to hit the robot's eye, even if those keywords did not necessarily reflect their actual job skills and experience. Students were asked why they would or would not use keywords that didn't match; a list of representative comments from the pool of 211 comments is offered in Table 1.

The survey findings indicate that there is widespread acceptance of an ethically questionable use of keywording, although how many students actually commit résumé fraud in any form is debatable. Although our small study revealed that roughly half of former professional writing students would be willing to commit some kind of fraud, most research estimates these numbers as much higher. Wexler (2006) cites several studies of résumé fraud occurrences, with the highest number coming from McShulskis (1996): "95 per cent of college students flooding the entry-level job market in the mid-1990s were willing to engage in at least one factually false statement in order to get a job, and 41 per cent had already done so" (quoted in Wexler, 2006, p. 13).

HOW THE RÉSUMÉ GENRE HAS DEVELOPED

Quible's (1995) advice about filling online résumés with keywords and minimizing graphic display (p. 5) is similar to more recent advice about how to construct successful online résumés for searchbots: "Keep this in mind: someone else may have a jazzy, graphics-enhanced résumé, but you will be the one to get the interview since your keywords were picked up by the scanner" (Oxford University Press, 2008). Burnett (2001) warns that

> employers will search their résumé database for specific skills and abilities like "AutoCAD" or "Design Engineer." While you don't want your résumé to be just a list of key terms, you should try to include as many such keywords as possible to increase the likelihood that yours will be selected by a search. (p. 711)

Doyle and Berry (1990) offer advice about the importance of maintaining accuracy at all costs but encourage résumé authors to emphasize graphic display:

Accuracy is essential. Nothing can be claimed without proof provided or at least made available. Don't oversell.

Brevity is next to Godliness.

Clarity is critical. Overusing pet words, abbreviations, and phrase-of-the-day jargon (e.g., "systems engineering designer") is more likely to buy snorts or snores than success.

Display is as important as **A, B,** and **C** combined. In our visually oriented world, we are all conditioned to expect the attractive display, not the ugly. (Doyle & Berry, 1990, p. 82)

This earlier pattern of advice was of course aimed at print résumé writers and not online résumé posters. Although résumé rhetoric has changed since 1990 to adapt to online media, it is crucial to keep in mind that résumé rhetoric has been evolving for roughly a century. Popken (1999) contends that business communication textbook authors in the early 1900s contributed heavily to this résumé genre, which through all of its transformations can be generally understood as the persuasive documentation of a candidate's professional history and qualifications. According to Popken, the résumé developed from a list of credentials in a job application letter (what Popken calls the "résumé-in-letter") to a separate "data sheet" by 1920:

The business communication textbook authors of the [1920s and 1930s] generally show résumé-data sheets depicting the self as an amalgam of facts. After the résumé secedes from the letter of application, these authors find separate functions for the two genres: the résumé-data sheet is a drab, self-effacing genre that plays the straightman to its more colorful, self-revealing counterpart, the application letter. (p. 104)

Popken laments the early solidification of the résumé genre as a formula where "the only self consisted of a set of facts" (p. 105) and champions more modern and rhetorical approaches to résumé writing where the writer is allowed more flexibility in the construction of self (p. 107). One study illustrating this kind of flexible self-construction in the résumé genre is Killoran's (2006, pp. 451-452) research on self-published Web résumés. Killoran describes résumés published on authors' own Web sites as an expansion of résumé functionality beyond the print résumé genre system. Killoran found that the Web

medium made the résumé even more of a marketing tool for self-published résumé posters because the résumés of self-employed posters were not necessarily used to seek jobs but rather to seek clients. In other words, we find in Killoran's study that résumé authors have reconstructed themselves as consultants rather than employees, a shift enabled by the change in medium, from print to the Web. This finding in turn lends support to claims by Bazerman (1994) and Miller (1984) that genre is not so much a discourse form merely imitated as it is a form constructed to suit specific social purposes and therefore subject to evolution as social context changes.

Killoran's study focused on 100 résumés posted to self-published Web sites and how the Web affected the genre system of the stable print genre of the résumé. If the Web medium, as Killoran asserts, is clearly influencing the genre and genre system of the résumé itself, then we might argue that this same medium strongly affects résumé rhetoric (as is seen in print vs. online résumé advice). The advantage of these changes in résumé rhetoric is that students are preparing to write well for the robot, to get their résumés to "hit" the searchbot, and, hopefully, to secure an interview. The disadvantage is that such advice may, albeit inadvertently, encourage students to deploy deceptive language and in effect to lie to potential employers about qualifications.

We contend that strategies of deception have developed and then shifted in the résumé genre, in a manner exactly parallel to the ways in which résumé rhetoric has changed during the past century. Just as advice about résumé construction and the style of résumé presentation have changed, so the most effective ways to deceive potential employers with a résumé have changed. Interestingly enough, each successive deception strategy has reflected a distinct but systematic violation of philosopher H. P. Grice's "Cooperative Principle."

Grice's (1975) essay "Logic and Conversation," which first describes the Cooperative Principle, is considered "one of the classic essays that would likely be required in any survey of philosophy of language" (Nuccetelli & Seay, 2008, p. vii). The Cooperative Principle is now a standard tool of discourse analysis among linguists and has been used elsewhere to analyze business communication ethics (e.g., Riley, 1993) and business communication instruction (e.g., White, 2001). Grice described the Cooperative Principle as follows:

> Our talk exchanges . . . are cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. . . . We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected [all things being equal] to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. One might label this the *Cooperative Principle*. (p. 45)

At each successive phase of résumé-genre development, a different systematic aspect, that is, a different "maxim" of the Cooperative Principle, as originally set out by Grice, has been violated by résumé writers seeking to mislead potential employers.

Early in résumé-genre development, factual accuracy was foremost. Therefore, "depicting the self as an amalgam of facts" (Popken, 1999, p. 104) assumed that the lines on the personal "data sheet" were a truthful telling of a job candidate's history and achievements. If a candidate were to provide factual inaccuracy—and if this direct kind of lie were discovered by the employer—then the candidate could fully expect to be dismissed or be deemed unhirable because of his or her questionable character. As important as factual accuracy is, it is only the first maxim of Grice's Cooperative Principle, which Grice referred to as the maxim of "quality," having two major subpoints:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (Grice, 1975, p. 46)

Another way to deceive, by means of distraction rather than inaccuracy, surfaced around 1980 with the introduction of mass computer use and desktop publishing programs. These technological changes enabled a marked shift in résumé rhetoric: The presentation of self had transformed from bare facts to the deployment of graphic "razzle-dazzle" in the form of unusual paper, eye-catching fonts, elaborate page layouts, and so on. Word processing and graphics software allowed for an emphasis on format over substance, much in the same way a stylish business suit or a certain kind of car might secure a weak candidate a job if he or she appeared, on the surface

at least, to have credibility and what the company wanted in terms of style and reputation. According to Grice, the "how" or "manner" of communication is, like factual accuracy, a key element of the Cooperative Principle. Under this maxim of "manner," Grice lists the following subpoints:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly. (Grice, 1975, p. 46)

To deliberately violate any of these subpoints, particularly to distract audience members from factual information that they are interested in having, equally constitutes a violation of the Cooperative Principle and may thus be misleading (pp. 49-50) and perhaps as ethically questionable as a direct lie.

Embellishing one's résumé with expensive or colored paper or with highly decorative fonts is not as overtly deviant as factual inaccuracy. One might argue that no violation of the maxim of Manner can be as ethically problematic as a violation of the maxim of Quality, but we would emphasize here that manner violations certainly could constitute an ethical breach if the candidate purposely used graphic aesthetics to distract the employer from the résumé's inferior content, namely a thin history of job experience and accomplishments (for further discussion of visual-rhetoric ethics and the use of distracting visual elements to obscure facts, see Elliot & Lester, 2002; Manning & Amare, 2006).

Before about 1995, the primary rhetorical devices of the résumé were the factual enumeration of job experiences, combined with attractive visual display. In parallel with these legitimate devices, two effective means of résumé fraud were well established: factual embellishment (i.e., deception) and (over)emphasis on graphic display (especially when used to detract from a résumé's weak content). A new rhetorical device surfaced in the mid-1990s, with a corresponding violation of a third and possibly a fourth Gricean maxim, when several companies began using online recruiter "robots" to scan thousands of résumés for keywords. On one hand, effective résumé rhetoric would require writers to accommodate the new audience by

composing keywords to match their qualifications and by placing them where the searchbots would flag them, subsequently passing the résumé to a potential employer. On the other hand, the new rhetoric would also make available a new strategy of deception: one that violates, depending on interpretation, either Grice's maxim of "quantity" or the maxim of "relation." We'll begin with a discussion of quantity, described by Grice as follows:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (Grice, 1975, p. 46)

Again, a deliberate violation of either of these subpoints equally violates the Cooperative Principle, equally can mislead an audience, and may have the same effect as a direct lie.

Violations of the maxim of quantity are often subtle, but they can be detected in this new mode of résumé deception—we'll call it *searchbot trickery*—which consists of inserting keywords into a résumé that may match the job ad but do not match the candidate's personal experience. Here, an illustrative analogy from Grice is helpful:

Quantity. If you are assisting me to mend a car, I expect your contribution to be neither more nor less than is required; if, for example, at a particular stage I need four screws, I expect you to hand me four, rather than two or six. (Grice, 1975, p. 46)

Like the mechanic in Grice's analogy, who is requesting the appropriate number (and type) of screws, the potential employer is requesting résumés from applicants with the appropriate number (and type) of qualifications. The qualifications are indicated by keywords in the résumés, but the potential employers are *not* asking for keywords alone. They are asking for qualified applicants to go with the keywords. This is the cooperative purpose of the job ad–résumé exchange, and it is a violation of the maxim of quantity for the résumé author to merely provide keywords to potential employers, when they are *also* asking for the employee qualifications that go with these keywords. The searchbot-tricking résumé author is providing two screws instead of four, as it were.

It is also possible to read searchbot trickery as a violation of Grice's maxim of "relation," for which Grice listed no corresponding subpoints but only a single adage, "be relevant," illustrated with the following scenario:

> *Relation*: I expect a partner's contribution to be appropriate to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction; if I am mixing ingredients for a cake, I do not expect to be handed a good book, or even an oven cloth (though this might be an appropriate contribution at a later stage). (Grice, 1975, p. 46)

Like the cook in Grice's analogy, who is requesting ingredients or tools relevant to the current task, the potential employer is requesting résumés from applicants with information relevant to the employment decision, that is, the qualifications of the applicant. This is the cooperative purpose of the job ad–résumé exchange, and it is a violation of the maxim of relation for the résumé author to merely "bounce" keywords back the employer that were listed in the job ad (something the employer already has) as opposed to keywords that correspond to actual applicant qualifications (what the employer is waiting for). The searchbot-tricking résumé author is handing prospective employers another mixing bowl when they already have a bowl and are looking for the right ingredients, as it were.

It is perhaps necessary to use both the concepts of quantity and relevance to make as clear as possible to résumé writers what is and isn't ethically acceptable. Thus, the advice given to students using the Oxford University Press's online "Student Center" is for candidates to include what are relevant keywords, but it's not clear in this passage whether or not the keywords have to reflect actual candidate experience:

> You will want to pack your résumé full of keywords that are targeted for your field. For example, technical writers who are interested in entering the realm of online document design might pack their résumés full of the buzzwords of the field. (Oxford University Press, 2008)

It's not hard to see how an unemployed, underqualified student could misinterpret this advice as license to overrun the résumé with keywords that match the field, that is, that are relevant in a general sense

but not necessarily relevant in the Gricean sense, where one's actual experience has to also quantitatively measure up to the keywords. The above advice is from a textbook, but even stronger language appears in industry articles, such as this recent one from *Business Week*:

> An online curriculum vitae is a different document than the paper version. "The purpose is not to look like an individual, it's to look like a match," says Pat Kendall, a career coach in Tigard, Ore., who optimizes clients' résumés for online submission.
>
> Looking like a match in the eyes of a filter, says Kendall, means speaking the language of job-specific keywords. Most electronic résumés are automatically dumped if they don't have a certain number of keywords that correspond with skills related to the position. The filter for a head sales position might require "cold calling" and "Microsoft Office."
>
> Finding the right keywords is as easy as flipping through help-wanted ads. When several employers use the same words to describe similar positions, you would be wise to incorporate them into your CV. (MacMillan, 2007, p. 86)

Such field-related but not candidate-related keywords merely add jargon rather than content to the résumé because students are writing for a machine that actually knows nothing of content (e.g., http://www.resumerobot.com/). The candidate then ceases to compose for the end user/employer and begins composing just for the search engine, with the very limited goal of getting the search engine to stop on the candidate's résumé so that he or she is then called for an interview. Barchilon (1998) was one of the first to note that

> the issue of adding jargon to produce the greatest number of "hits" also raises some fundamental questions about our purpose and audience. . . . Now we need to consider that our first-level audience is a computer program and our purpose is to "feed the system" its minimum daily jargon requirement. (p. 184)

Although Barchilon correctly notes the rhetorical shift in design and content issues (p. 185), she does not acknowledge the ethical implication of such a shift and how teachers might better adapt instruction concerning the résumé and the rhetoric surrounding discussions of job search tools to address résumé fraud. Problems arise,

Model Job Advertisement	Model Keyword-Deceptive Résumé
Chief Technology Officer: Build and supervise development team for email software; build and co-supervise support team. Software development using agile methods, C++, Perl, Java, on UNIX and Windows. Apply in-depth knowledge of TCP/IP technology and email protocols. Anticipate and evaluate technology changes. Oversee adherence to tech. standards. Five years experience required.	**Joseph B. Slick** You need a team builder with agile-methods software experience including C++, Perl, Java, UNIX and Windows. Your ideal candidate would have worked at such companies as Yahoo, Google, and America Online for five years or more. My experience: I am an avid user of email applications and I would like to supervise a team.

Figure 1.   Sample Résumé With Keywords Used for Searchbot Trickery

of course, when an actual employer (not the searchbot) reads the faulty keywords and realizes the résumé writer has merely tricked the searchbot and has few or no actual qualifications for a job.

WHAT CONSTITUTES RÉSUMÉ DECEPTION: EXPANDING THE DEFINITION OF "LIE"

An cautionary example of keyword résumé fraud is discussed in Needleman (2007), where one résumé poster lists job titles he has never held in a paragraph after the phrase "you need a . . ."; he also falsely lists working for companies such as Google under the header "ideally would like someone who worked with companies such as. . . ." This résumé poster claims he is not guilty of résumé fraud because he has inserted the section headers, which combine with the keywords to make factually accurate though highly irrelevant statements about what the company is looking for, as opposed to what the

candidate poster actually has done. He currently receives about 10 emails a week from job recruiters (Needleman, 2007).

In this type of résumé, modeled by us in Figure 1, the headers before the keyword lists do not stop or alert the robot eye that the listed keywords are unrelated to the poster's actual qualifications. In other words, the résumé author is not providing all that the job advertiser is asking for: a violation of the Quantity principle discussed earlier. It is this deliberate relevance-quantity failure that constitutes a deliberate deception by means of language, that is, a lie in an indirect sense, at least.

The writer deploying searchbot trickery may argue that he or she has not lied because none of the statements in the posted résumé are factually inaccurate. This argument merely "counts" as a lie only the use of factually inaccurate language, choosing to ignore the more general definition of a lie: any language deployed to defeat the purposes of the communication with deception (for a further discussion of language deception and business communication, see Riley, 1993). To say that only typical lies (i.e., factual inaccuracies) are really lies is logically equivalent to saying that only typical birds (e.g., robins) are really birds. However, we recognize with little effort that there are atypical birds—for example, penguins are flightless and fuzzy rather than flying and feathered, but birds nonetheless. It is likewise relatively easy to find examples of atypical lies, perpetrated by violation of Grice's maxim of quantity and/or relation: creating an incomplete statement, covertly irrelevant to audience need, as opposed to the typical lie that is a covert violation of the maxim of quality, that is, a factual inaccuracy:

> Boss to employee: Did you order the Widgets like I told you to?
> Employee (who hasn't done it yet): That hurricane in the Atlantic may delay delivery.
> Boss: OK. Let me know as soon as they come in.

In a similar way, a deception by means of language is constituted by placing keywords in a résumé that are insufficient to tell the end users/employers what they really want to know but that lead the end users/employers to think they have what they want to know. In marketing terms, this is essentially a bait-and-switch tactic, where what

is advertised in the résumé is not what the job applicant actually has available to "sell."

An even more subtle variety of searchbot trickery involves adding keywords not visible to the human eye but that still hit the robot eye. Such tactics may involve typing keywords in white-colored font in the white space, hiding keywords in a microscopic font so that they look like a line, or placing keywords inside .html code visible to the searchbot but not to human eyes. As with the more basic kind of searchbot trick discussed previously, the now-invisible keywords do not reflect actual job skills or experience. However, Needleman (2007) warns that such résumé writing trickery may no longer work because today's searching software is catching up with unethical résumé writing practices. Note how this form of fraud echoes strategies from the 1980s that were violations of the Gricean manner maxim (i.e., "Be clear"): The job candidate again may be tempted to use graphical design choices such as font size (microscopic) or font color (white font on white background) to "hide" deceptive keywords. Needleman advises against such résumé fraud and advocates copying keywords from the job ad into your résumé *only* if they accurately reflect real experience.

To summarize our analysis thus far, we find résumé rhetoric evolving in distinct stages, thereby shifting the more common types of résumé fraud from factual inaccuracy (Gricean quality violation) to graphic razzle dazzle (Gricean manner violation) to searchbot tricks (Gricean quantity and relevance violation). However, just as we can still often identify features from the older forms of the genre in current résumés, we can also find older deception strategies being employed along with the newer ones. In the minds of those résumé writers disposed to use these deception strategies, we suspect that their working definition of "lie" or "fraud" has come to focus too narrowly on factually inaccurate statements only.

Wexler (2006) refers to the kind of logic used to justify the more blatant forms of résumé fraud as *moral disengagement*. Wexler interviewed 11 professionals who had been fired for lying on their résumé but later hired by a different company for more money, at least Can$10,000 per year more: from Can$85,000 to more than Can$95,000. Wexler conducted three interviews of each "résumé

fraudster," for a total of 66 interview hours. Each new phase of interviews revealed increased *moral disengagement*, that is, an increasing level of self-rationalization that explains "why basically good people who know they are doing wrong persist in so doing and over time convince themselves that they are good, decent, or even exemplary citizens" (p. 144).

The interviewees justified their lies with framing logic such as "All or many are doing it" or "I lied. They lied. We're even" (Wexler, 2006, p. 143). They began with the assumption that padding a résumé is a harmless white lie and therefore not the same thing as lying: "They were not liars, fraud artists or conmen or -women. They were, each insisted, résumé padders. They embellished the truth; they did not misrepresent it" (Wexler, 2006, p. 142). By the third interview, the interviewees actually argued that their lies were *beneficial* to the organization because they had exercised "brave" behavior such as taking a risk or going out on a limb to get a job that requires "go-getter" behavior. Wexler referred to the third and final phase of interviews as "the heroic bend":

> The "winner as hero" reasoning in both the economic weighting and balancing the ledger tactics in phase three interviews speaks to the hero, not as the team captain, but assumes that the team captain is the high point getter or star. This is problematic. Many a team selects a captain whose proficiency rests less on the bottom line than upon the captain's ability to focus upon reality, warts and all. Résumé fraud is not a heroic act. It is fuelled by a desire to please or trick an authority figure in order to, in time, become one. (p. 149)

Wexler's study focuses on résumé fraudsters who used factual inaccuracy to deceive, but the same basic mind-set of moral disengagement apparently operates when résumé writers choose to violate other aspects of the Cooperative Principle as well. In all cases, the needs of the writer are placed ahead of the needs of the readers; cooperation between the two groups breaks down.

Wexler's findings also suggest that résumé deception on any level—no matter how small or "white lie" the deception seems to be—is harmful in terms of ultimate outcome: Small deceptions often lead to larger, more damaging ones. Wexler's interviews reveal what can

happen if the résumé fraudster is rewarded for his or her behavior (even after being fired) and how what may have started off as a seemingly small act escalates into an ethical web of pervasive deceit. Moreover, in interviews for jobs after they were fired, 10 out of 11 did not reveal to future employers (in a further withholding of relevant information) why they had been dismissed from their last jobs, and the same 10 out of 11 also continued to use résumé doctoring for their new jobs even though they had been fired from a previous job for doing so.

Indeed, it might be argued that business communication culture as a whole has come to accept lying as a valid strategy. Rose (2005) makes the argument that lying is actually good for you:

> Simply put, we lie because it works. When we do it well, we get what we want. We lie to avoid awkwardness or punishment. We lie to maintain relationships and please others. And, of course, most of all we lie to please ourselves. Whether we're embellishing our credentials or strengthening our stories, we often tell untruths to make ourselves appear and feel better. . . .
>
> And lying has proven psychological benefits. (Rose, 2005, pp. 2-3, 8)

Such arguments for the benefits of lying should be countered by recognition of its costs: No business can survive if its employees are not in fact qualified to produce goods and services but instead can only appear to do so. No business can survive in the long run without cooperation and trust. Therefore, it is not a useful long-term strategy to encourage deceptive practices.

Nevertheless, we have identified at least one area in which business communication instructors may inadvertently be encouraging résumé deception, or at least allowing it to pass without sufficient comment or ethical caution. Instructors advise students to pack their résumés full of keywords to match the job ad and warn students that their résumés won't "hit" unless they choose the right diction. Popular business articles occasionally excuse or endorse deception as a success strategy. Explicitly or implicitly, the message to students is that they must get a job to be considered successful, and our preliminary survey of students indicates that this message is stronger, for at least half the students surveyed, than any injunction to be ethical or honest.

CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Although the increase in searchbot use has created an avenue for new strategies of résumé deception, to lay all the blame on searchbots for students' résumé fraud would be as irrational as blaming the Internet for student plagiarism. It is ultimately the students' decision whether or not to commit résumé fraud. Business communication teachers can, however, ensure that their students are informed about all areas of business ethics, including résumé fraud, before these students engage in the genre system of online résumés (Killoran, 2006).

Although the sales-brochure theme is pervasive in résumé rhetoric, business communication textbook authors *do* try to reduce résumé fraud through résumé pedagogy. For example, Guffey's (2007, p. 401) *Essentials of Business Communication* includes a section that asks résumé writers to be "honest and ethical" and to avoid all résumé padding to stay "off the hot seat." In addition, Laker and Laker (2007, p. 131) provide a discussion of the 5-year résumé assignment, where college students create their résumés with a 5-year plan for the future. This proactive assignment helps students to tell the truth on their résumés because they avoid apathy:

> Lack of planning can lead to deception once students begin seeking career-related employment. Faced with a competitive job market, some students inflate and exaggerate their résumés. (p. 128)

We would further caution business communication teachers to reevaluate their résumé rhetoric as well as their approaches to teaching the résumé and to consider, for instance, incorporating exercises such as Laker and Laker's, exercises that take preventive measures against motivations to lie on résumés. Instructors might also bring to the forefront in their teaching some of the misconceptions that have accumulated in discussions about résumés. These misconceptions are discussed below.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS

1. Avoid or at least tone down the monolithic sales-brochure theme for the résumé. Discourage language construing our students as products

that can be packaged or repackaged easily and at will. Students are not products, and industries that use rhetoric to describe people as "for sale" (e.g., prostitution) effectively devalue them. Although the sales-brochure metaphor is a strong one in our field, we might note that even companies that do sell products and not people—for instance, food companies—are regulated by FDA guidelines and are punished when they lie about the contents of the food (e.g., food manufacturers are not allowed to state that a product has no fat when the product has no transaturated fat but does have untransaturated fat). Business communication teachers might shift résumé discussions to emphasize more the candidate's qualifications and emphasize less the students need to "match" themselves to a job ad, especially if this means matching themselves to the ad via résumé fraud.

The link between current résumé rhetoric and ethics needs to be more fully discussed with students. When scholars such as Ross and Young (2005) contend that "résumé content should be tailored to the preferences of the administrators reviewing the résumés and making the hiring decisions, regardless of the setting" (p. 153), instructors could clarify for students that rhetorical tailoring means highlighting skills that students already have, not denying one's own identity "regardless of the setting" to get a job, any job. Instructors could discuss with their students other deceptive methods in the job search and how they are analogous to résumé fraud, such as dressing for a job interview and wearing a Phi Beta Kappa pin on one's lapel even though the student has never been a Phi Beta Kappan. And just because the employer with whom the student is interviewing has been a Phi Beta Kappan does not justify the pin deception, any more than it is justifiable to insert visible (or invisible) résumé keywords that do not match a student's qualifications.

We commend Guffey (2007) and others for warning about the pitfalls and potential consequences of résumé padding. We would ask all business communication textbook writers to continue to emphasize résumé honesty but also to reconsider the strong rhetoric used with regarding to "selling oneself" at all costs, especially when this rhetoric seems to contradict the admonition to tell the truth at all costs. For example, Guffey's (2007) *Essentials of Business Communication* offers a thorough discussion of the types of résumé padding, and yet just two pages later offers this advice about cover letter writing:

> In many ways, your cover letter is a sales letter; it sells your talent
> and tries to beat the competition. It will, accordingly, include many
> of the techniques you learned in the sales letter in Chapter 7, especially
> if your letter is unsolicited. (p. 388)

Although business communication instructors may be clear about the
difference between trying to "beat the competition" to land an inter-
view and résumé fraud, we need to make it clearer to students that job
experiences must be obtained legitimately prior to writing the
résumé, not *created untruthfully* as the student scrambles to twist the
résumé to satisfy a job ad or a class grade.

  *2. Encourage a resurgence of discussion of the résumé as a truth-
ful autobiographical narrative.* Whether chronological or functional,
a résumé reflects true things about the individual who is composing
it. This works for print as well as online résumés. Truthful represen-
tation of self in all forms of communication and media is crucial to
successful interviewing and job placement. It also saves precious
time and money for industry. Yes, students can reorder their life
events and accomplishments on the résumé as long as they are still
telling a truthful story. It is not necessary or desirable to embellish for
purposes of deception. Likewise, it is not necessary or desirable to
"match" oneself to a job regardless of the costs or measures taken as
the résumé breaks down into a fictitious narrative, not a truthful one.
(Even personal "matching" services like eHarmony.com ask for a
truthful profile.) Offering assignments such as Laker and Laker's
(2007) encourages a self-representation over a sales-brochure approach,
as does the achievement résumé, which Bailie (2003) recommends as
a valuable alternative to the skills résumé:

> An achievement-based résumé is two pages long—one sheet, front
> and back—with the second page providing a brief chronological work
> history of relevant positions and supplemental information. This type
> of résumé uses the first page to demonstrate that what you've accom-
> plished in the past, you can accomplish for a future employer. . . .
>   Achievement-based résumés, a staple of the executive set where
> demonstrating one's potential is critical, have fast become the most
> effective marketing tool for job-seekers. The advantage of this
> résumé format is that listing achievements takes the focus off of the
> "circumstantial evidence" of your past, and turns attention to both
> what you have actually *accomplished*, and to what you can do for a

future employer. Coupled with an informational interview, this résumé format becomes a formidable tool for recent graduates, career-changers, generalists, and the promotion-bound. (p. 17)

3. Discuss openly with students those cases where individuals do deceive and why it is neither acceptable ethically nor appropriate rhetorically. The media is full of discussion of résumé fraudsters: George O'Leary, Notre Dame's head coach, who was fired after 1 week; Ronald Zarrella, the former CEO for Bausch & Lomb, who lied about graduating with a business degree; CFO for Vernita Software Kenneth Lonchar, who lied about his Stanford MBA (Levine, 2002). In addition to exercises such as Laker and Laker's 5-year résumé assignment, business communication teachers could ask students to share their résumés with classmates and practice how they might be truthful by avoiding deception in their writing. The instructor could demonstrate some bad examples or deceptive résumé rhetoric (as in our Figure 1) and then show some good examples or at least revision of the deceptive language. In small groups, students can work together and talk to one other about their qualifications. This oral vetting of one's autobiographical "data sheet" allows more narrative to be said than just what is on the résumé, allows a dialogue about truthful achievements, and helps students practice talking about themselves for the future interview process, which is really what secures the job.

4. Inform students about business communication studies that contradict common advice to organize résumés as one-page keyword lists. For instance, Blackburn-Brockman and Belanger (2001) found that CPA recruiters actually preferred longer résumés from qualified candidates because "the second pages provide relevant and persuasive information" (p. 35). Their study supports much earlier findings by Charney and Rayman (1989) and by Charney et al. (1992) that recruiters responded positively to "timely elaboration" of a candidate's qualifications despite our discipline's desire to overstress brevity (Charney et al., 1992, p. 69). Popken and Conklin (1993) also found that successful résumés didn't necessarily follow the advised one-page formula and other myths about résumé content:

We found a good many properties we had never seen promoted in any textbook or article. For instance, some [résumés] included tables and figures, some didn't use subjectless sentences, some had full prose

paragraphs, some went on for five or more pages, and a number had
sections in which the candidates indicated personal facts such as reli-
gion, family size, and marital status. (quoted in Popken, 1999, p. 107)

Popken and Conklin's study shows not only the misconceptions
about the résumé genre but also how, above all, the résumé is a
context-driven rhetorical task, not effectively reduced to a formula
from a textbook or a list of keywords for students to copy from a
job ad. Students also need to know that "the percentage of Internet-
recruited applicants actually hired varied widely and is still a small
percentage of the whole" (Pearce & Tuten, 2001, p. 9). Thus, cor-
rect keywords are hardly the be-all end-all, and personality, perse-
verance, and personal contact (e.g., networking and interviewing)
are job skills that still matter. Pearce and Tuten (2001) also found
that recruiters did use the mass-résumé services such as Monster
and CareerBuilder but preferred to solicit and examine résumés via
their own corporate Web sites. Citing Hays (1999), Pearce and
Tuten also assert that "who-you-know" still determines how most
jobs are obtained—such as candidates who secure interviews
because a current company employee recommends them—not via
what keywords are listed on the online or paper résumé.

   To date, the résumé still epitomizes a candidate's information and
authentic qualification for a current or future job, but students are mis-
led if instructors continue to stress the résumé above other job recruit-
ing skills mentioned above, such as interviewing, networking, and
researching. Moreover, résumés, although crucial, do not provide the
only window into the candidate's career "soul." Employers also rely
on personal references and credential checking, and, as Lucky (2007)
notes, a potential employee's blogging, emailing, posting, and surfing
on the Internet create "an electronic slime trail behind you as you
creep through cyberspace," a trail that ultimately creates "a résumé on
the Net—one that will stay with you a long time." Often, employers
need only use Google to learn about a candidate. This is all the more
reason to encourage students to be truthful in all electronic submis-
sions and to avoid deceptive language, keywords, razzle-dazzle, and
factual inaccuracies in their résumés.

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Nicole Amare is an assistant professor of technical writing at the University of South Alabama. She teaches technical writing, editing, stylistics, and grammar. She has written Real Life University, *a college success guide, and has edited* Global Student Entrepreneurs *and* Beyond the Lemonade Stand. *Address correspondence to Nicole Amare, 240 HumB, University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL 36688; email: namare@usouthal.edu.*

Alan Manning is a professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University. He teaches graduate courses in writing and research design and undergraduate courses in linguistics and editing. He is a coauthor of Revising Professional Writing Science and Technology, Business, and the Social Sciences *(with Riley, Campbell, and Parker). Address correspondence to Alan Manning, 4053 JFSB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; email: alan_manning@byu.edu.*