

The 12-Point ATS Resume Check

Run your resume through these twelve checks before you apply. Each one targets a specific way an applicant-tracking system mangles or rejects a file, and each tells you exactly how to fix it. Print this page, tick every box, and correct anything you cannot honestly check off. No sign-up, no payment, no watermark.

1. The layout is a single column with no text boxes

Many parsers read straight across the page, so columns and text boxes scramble the reading order or get skipped. Fix: delete text boxes and reflow everything into one top-to-bottom column.

2. Section titles use real heading styles, not just bold large text

True Word heading styles (Heading 1 and Heading 2) tell the parser where Experience, Education, and Skills begin. Fix: apply the built-in heading styles instead of hand-sizing bold text.

3. The font is a standard family such as Calibri, Arial, or Georgia

Decorative or uncommon fonts can fail to embed and render as missing glyphs, leaving the parser with garbled text. Fix: switch the whole document to one common system font.

4. Your contact details sit in the body, not in the header or footer

Some systems strip headers and footers before parsing, so a phone or email placed there disappears from your record. Fix: move your name, phone, and email into the first lines of the body.

5. There are no images, icons, logos, or photos

Parsers cannot read text inside an image, so skills or contact info shown only as graphics are invisible. Fix: delete every icon and photo and write the information as plain text.

6. Bullet points use standard round or square bullets

Exotic symbols and emoji bullets often import as question marks or boxes and break an experience entry. Fix: reset your lists to the default round or square bullet character.

7. The file is saved as .docx or a text-extractable PDF

Image-only or scanned PDFs contain no selectable text, so the parser sees a blank page and may auto-reject you. Fix: export from a word processor, then confirm you can highlight and copy the text.

8. Dates follow a consistent, recognizable format

Mixed formats like bare years next to 'Jan 2022 – Present' make it harder for the system to calculate tenure. Fix: pick one month-and-year format and use it for every entry.

9. Job titles and employers are spelled out, not abbreviated only

Parsers match on full terms, so an undefined acronym can stop a role from matching a recruiter's search. Fix: write the full title or company name once, with the acronym in parentheses.

10. Keywords from the job posting appear naturally in your text

Ranking systems score resumes on overlap with the posting, so the exact tools and skills named in the ad should appear where true. Fix: mirror the posting's wording in your summary and bullets.

11. Tables are not used to position columns of content

Layout tables read unpredictably across parsers and can merge a two-column skills grid into one unreadable run. Fix: replace any layout table with plain paragraphs or a simple bulleted list.

12. The page is US Letter with margins between half an inch and one inch

Off-standard page sizes and razor-thin margins can clip content and signal a hastily formatted file. Fix: set the page to US Letter and the margins to between 0.5 and 1 inch.