NURTURING EXPECTATIONS

CAREER BY DESIGN

Early Career *Path Guide*

From your first application to your first offer.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

How to Use This Guide

This guide is for recent graduates, whether you're finishing a bachelor's degree, wrapping up a master's program, or somewhere in between. The job market is competitive, and most people entering it are working with a shorter professional history than they'd like.

The seven sections in this guide address the specific challenges early-career candidates face: building a compelling story from limited experience, constructing a resume that actually gets seen, and walking into interviews with the confidence of someone who has prepared, not just hoped.

> *Limited experience does not mean a weak candidacy. It means you need to be more intentional about how you present what you have. That's exactly what this guide is for.*

PART 1

Building Your Story With Limited Experience

You Have More Than You Think

Most early-career candidates make the same mistake: they look at their background and see gaps where an employer sees potential. Internships, campus leadership, research projects, part-time jobs, athletics, volunteer work: all of it is evidence of who you are and how you work. The question is whether you're presenting it that way.

What Counts as Experience

Employers hiring early-career candidates know you don't have 10 years of professional history. What they're evaluating is your trajectory, and trajectory is built from every serious thing you've done, not just paid employment.

- Internships and co-ops: even a single summer internship is significant professional evidence.
- Part-time and summer jobs: customer service, coaching, retail, food service all demonstrate work ethic, communication, and reliability.
- Campus leadership: managing a budget, leading a team, organizing an event are all transferable.
- Research, thesis, and capstone projects: especially valuable for master's graduates; demonstrate analytical rigor, independent judgment, and sustained effort.
- Graduate assistantships and TA roles: teaching and mentoring others is a management skill. Treat it as one.
- Volunteer work and community involvement: show values and initiative.
- Freelance projects and personal initiatives: demonstrate self-direction and real-world application.

A Note for Master's Graduates

If you completed a graduate degree, you likely have more substantive experience than you're giving yourself credit for. A master's thesis represents months of independent research, problem definition, analysis, and written communication. A graduate assistantship is a real job. Treat these with the same weight you'd give a professional role, because an employer evaluating a master's graduate will.

> *The framing shift: stop describing what you studied and start describing what you produced, led, and decided. Outcomes over activities, always.*

Experience Type	What you did / contributed	Skill it demonstrates	STAR-ready? *Y / N*
Internship or co-op *Professional*			
Part-time or summer job *Professional*			
Campus leadership / student org *Extracurricular*			
Research / thesis / capstone *Academic*			
Graduate assistantship / TA role *Academic*			
Volunteer work *Community*			
Freelance / personal project *Self-directed*			
Athletics / coaching / team *Extracurricular*			

PART 2

Resume Fundamentals

A Resume That Gets Read

Your resume has one job: get you the interview. It is not a comprehensive record of your life. It is a curated argument for why you are worth a conversation.

Length: The Honest Rule

Graduate type	Recommended length
B.A. / B.S. graduate	One page. No exceptions until you have 5+ years of professional experience.
Master's graduate (research / thesis)	One to two pages. A second page is earned, not defaulted to. Every line must justify its presence.
Master's graduate (professional / MBA)	One page. A professional master's is not an academic CV. Keep it tight.

Resume Structure

- Contact information: name, city/state, phone, professional email, LinkedIn URL.
- Summary statement (optional but recommended): 2–3 sentences that position you for the role. Forward-looking, not a list of adjectives.
- Education: degree, institution, graduation year, GPA if 3.5+, relevant coursework, honors, thesis title if applicable.
- Experience: reverse chronological. Each role gets 2–4 bullet points. Lead with action verbs. End with results.
- Skills: technical tools, software, languages. Only list what you can speak to in an interview.
- Activities / Leadership (if space): campus organizations, volunteer work, relevant extracurriculars.

Writing Strong Bullets

Every resume bullet should follow this structure: Action verb + what you did + how you did it + result or impact. The result is what most people leave out, and it's the most important part.

Weak (activity-focused)	Strong (outcome-focused)
Assisted with social media accounts	Managed Instagram and LinkedIn content for a 3-month campaign, growing follower engagement by 34%
Worked on a research project about consumer behavior	Conducted mixed-methods study on consumer decision-making; presented findings to faculty panel and received departmental award
Volunteered at a nonprofit	Coordinated volunteer scheduling for 40+ participants across 12 events; reduced scheduling conflicts by 60%
Led a team project in class	Led a 5-person capstone team; divided workload, managed deadlines, and delivered final presentation to client stakeholders

Experience *(Role / project...)*	**Action verb + what you did** *(Led, Developed, Analyzed...)*	**How / with what** *(Using X tool / approach...)*	**Result or impact** *(Resulting in / achieving...)*	**Final bullet (combine)** *(Write full bullet here...)*

Common Resume Mistakes to Avoid

- Using a functional resume (skills-based) instead of chronological: ATS systems don't read them well and recruiters distrust them.
- Including a photo, age, or marital status: not appropriate on a US resume and adds no value.
- Using the same resume for every application: even small customizations significantly improve results.
- Listing 'references available upon request': assumed and wastes space.
- Inconsistent formatting: fonts, spacing, and bullet styles should be identical throughout.

PART 3

Beating the ATS

Your Resume Needs to Reach a Human First

Most large employers use Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) to collect and organize applications. Recruiters often search and rank them by keywords from the job description. A beautifully written resume that doesn't use the posting's language can end up buried.

> *You may hear that ATS software automatically rejects most resumes before a human reads them. That is largely a myth. The real risk is quieter: with hundreds of applicants, a resume that doesn't match the posting's language ranks low and rarely gets seen.*

How ATS Works

- You submit a resume online through a company's application portal.
- The ATS scans your resume for keywords from the job description: exact matches and close variants.
- Resumes are ranked by how closely they match. Recruiters usually start with the top matches.
- Recruiters often review the top-ranked resumes first, so ranking matters.

How to Optimize for ATS

- Use a clean, simple resume format: no tables, columns, graphics, headers/footers, or text boxes. ATS systems often can't parse these correctly.
- Mirror the exact language from the job posting: if they say 'project management,' don't write 'managing projects.'
- Include a skills section with relevant tools, platforms, and technical competencies listed explicitly.
- Use standard section headings ('Experience,' 'Education,' 'Skills'), not creative alternatives.
- Submit as a .docx or .pdf: check the job posting for preferences. When in doubt, .docx parses more reliably.

Keyword Matching Worksheet

Keyword from job posting *(copy keyword exactly)*	**Where in your background this applies** *(internship / project / coursework)*	**How it appears on your resume** *(exact phrasing used)*

PART 4

Building and Telling Your Stories

The Framework Behind Every Strong Interview Answer

Behavioral interview questions ('Tell me about a time when...') are designed to assess how you've handled real situations. They're the most common type of question in professional interviews, and they reward candidates who can tell a clear, specific story.

The most effective way to answer these questions is a four-part structure called STAR. It gives your answer shape, makes it easy to follow, and ensures you always land on a result, which is what interviewers are actually listening for.

The STAR Framework

	Stands for	What to cover	The question it answers
S	Situation	Set the context: where were you, what was happening, what needed to be done?	What was going on?
T	Task	Clarify your specific responsibility: what were YOU accountable for?	What were you trying to do?
A	Action	Describe exactly what YOU did: not the team, not 'we.' Your specific steps.	What did you do about it?
R	Result	Share the outcome: what changed, improved, or was achieved because of your actions?	What happened because of you?

The Two Mistakes Early-Career Candidates Make

Most people learning STAR for the first time make the same two errors. Knowing them in advance puts you ahead of the room.

The mistake	What it sounds like	The fix
Saying 'we' instead of 'I'	'We decided to reorganize the project and our team delivered it on time.'	'I took ownership of the timeline, restructured our milestones, and kept the team on track. We delivered on time.'
Leaving out the result	'I managed the social media accounts for the org and created a lot of content.'	'I managed our Instagram and LinkedIn for six months, growing our follower count by 40% and doubling post engagement.'

> *Interviewers cannot give you credit for work they can't attribute to you. Own your contribution: say 'I,' quantify where possible, and always land on a result.*

Your Experiences Are Valid STAR Stories

Early-career candidates often panic at behavioral questions because they assume the interviewer wants a corporate story. They don't. They want evidence of a competency. Where that evidence comes from is secondary: internships, academic projects, campus leadership, volunteer work, athletics, and personal challenges all count.

Experience source	Competencies it can demonstrate
Internship or co-op	Technical skills, professional communication, working within a team, taking initiative, meeting deadlines
Thesis or research project	Analytical thinking, problem definition, self-direction, handling ambiguity, written and verbal communication
Graduate TA / assistantship	Teaching and explaining complex ideas, managing multiple responsibilities, giving feedback, leadership
Campus org / student government	Leadership, team management, conflict resolution, event planning, budget management
Team sport or competitive activity	Teamwork, resilience, performing under pressure, coachability, commitment
Volunteer / community work	Empathy, service orientation, adaptability, working with diverse populations
Part-time or service job	Work ethic, customer focus, reliability, communication, handling difficult situations
Personal initiative / project	Self-direction, creativity, entrepreneurial thinking, follow-through

STAR Story Bank

Build 4 strong stories before your first interview. Draw from any source: professional, academic, or extracurricular. A well-chosen story can flex across multiple question types. Aim for stories that highlight your individual contribution and end with a concrete result.

STORY 1 OF 4	*Give this story a memorable name, e.g., 'The Turnaround'*
Story Title	
Source	☐ Work ☐ Internship ☐ Academic ☐ Campus ☐ Volunteer ☐ Personal

S: Situation

T: Task

A: Action

R: Result

Question types this story can answer:

☐ Leadership	☐ Handling pressure
☐ Teamwork	☐ Initiative
☐ Problem solving	☐ Failure / learning
☐ Communication	☐ Conflict

STORY 2 OF 4	*Give this story a memorable name, e.g., 'The Turnaround'*
Story Title	
Source	☐ Work ☐ Internship ☐ Academic ☐ Campus ☐ Volunteer ☐ Personal

S: Situation

T: Task

A: Action

R: Result

Question types this story can answer:

☐ Leadership	☐ Handling pressure
☐ Teamwork	☐ Initiative
☐ Problem solving	☐ Failure / learning
☐ Communication	☐ Conflict

STORY 3 OF 4	*Give this story a memorable name, e.g., 'The Turnaround'*
Story Title	
Source	☐ Work ☐ Internship ☐ Academic ☐ Campus ☐ Volunteer ☐ Personal

S: Situation

T: Task

A: Action

R: Result

Question types this story can answer:

☐ Leadership	☐ Handling pressure
☐ Teamwork	☐ Initiative
☐ Problem solving	☐ Failure / learning
☐ Communication	☐ Conflict

STORY 4 OF 4	*Give this story a memorable name, e.g., 'The Turnaround'*
Story Title	
Source	☐ Work ☐ Internship ☐ Academic ☐ Campus ☐ Volunteer ☐ Personal

S: Situation

T: Task

A: Action

R: Result

Question types this story can answer:

☐ Leadership	☐ Handling pressure
☐ Teamwork	☐ Initiative
☐ Problem solving	☐ Failure / learning
☐ Communication	☐ Conflict

PART 5

The Entry-Level Interview

What Employers Are Actually Evaluating

When an employer interviews an early-career candidate, they know they're not hiring someone with a proven track record. What they're actually trying to determine is whether you have the foundation to grow into one. That means the evaluation is different, and so is the strategy.

The Four Things Employers Assess in Entry-Level Interviews

What they're assessing	What it looks like	How to demonstrate it
Coachability	Openness to feedback, willingness to learn, intellectual humility	Reference times you received feedback and changed course. Show you're not defensive.
Curiosity	Genuine interest in the role, the company, the industry	Ask substantive questions. Do research before every interview. Reference what you found.
Work ethic	Reliability, follow-through, willingness to do what the job requires	Use examples that show sustained effort, not a single heroic moment.
Culture fit	Values alignment, communication style, how you'd work with the team	Mirror the company's language. Research their values. Be yourself: fit is a two-way assessment.

Questions You Should Always Ask

- 'What does success look like in this role in the first 90 days?'
- 'What do people who thrive here tend to have in common?'
- 'What's the biggest challenge the team is facing right now?'
- 'How would you describe the feedback culture here?'
- 'What's a typical growth path from this role?'

What to Do Before Every Interview

- Research the company: read their website, recent news, annual report if available. Know what they do, who their customers are, and what challenges they face.
- Research the role: re-read the job description and identify the 3 most important requirements. Prepare a STAR story for each.
- Research your interviewer: look them up on LinkedIn. Know their background, their tenure, and any shared connections.
- Prepare your questions: have 4–5 substantive questions ready. You won't ask all of them, but you'll be ready.
- Practice out loud: not in your head. Say your stories aloud until they sound natural. Time yourself.

PART 6

Negotiating Your First Offer

You Are Expected to Negotiate: Even as a New Graduate

Most early-career candidates accept the first offer they receive without negotiating. This is understandable: you're grateful, you don't want to seem difficult, and you're not sure what you're worth. But it is almost always a mistake.

Employers routinely build negotiation room into initial offers. Negotiating professionally does not jeopardize your offer. It signals that you understand your value, which is exactly the kind of self-awareness good employers want to see.

> *A note for master's graduates: if you've been living on a stipend or graduate assistantship salary, resist the urge to anchor your expectations to that number. Research market rates for the role and level you're entering, not what you've been earning.*

Before You Negotiate: Do Your Research

- LinkedIn Salary: search by job title, location, and experience level.
- Glassdoor: salary ranges for specific companies and roles.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS): Occupational Outlook Handbook for broad field benchmarks.
- Peers and alumni: ask people in similar roles what they're earning. Most will tell you.
- Industry associations: many publish annual compensation surveys.

What to Negotiate

Salary is not the only lever. If the base salary is fixed, there is often flexibility in:

- Signing bonus: often easier to negotiate than base salary.
- Start date: more time before you start can be valuable.
- Remote / hybrid flexibility: can significantly impact quality of life and commuting costs.
- Professional development budget: training, certifications, conferences.
- Review timeline: ask for a 6-month review instead of annual if you're confident in your performance.

How to Ask

Keep it simple, professional, and anchored to research, not personal need.

> *'Thank you so much for the offer. I'm very excited about this opportunity. Based on my research into market rates for this role and my background, I was hoping we could discuss the compensation. I was targeting something closer to [X]. Is there flexibility there?' Then stop talking. Let them respond. Do not over-explain or apologize.*

Offer Evaluation Worksheet

Before accepting or negotiating any offer, map out every component. The full picture often looks different from the headline salary number.

Component	Offer details / Market benchmark
Base salary *Research via LinkedIn Salary, Glassdoor, BLS...*	
Signing bonus	
Annual bonus / performance bonus	
Benefits (health, dental, vision)	
Retirement / 401(k) match	
PTO / vacation days	
Remote / hybrid flexibility	
Professional development budget	
Start date flexibility	
Title / level	

If They Say No

- Ask what the timeline looks like for a performance review and salary adjustment.
- Ask if there's flexibility in the signing bonus or start date instead.
- Thank them and ask for 24–48 hours to consider. This is always appropriate.
- If the offer doesn't meet your minimum threshold, it is okay to decline. That's what the research was for.

PART 7

Informational Interviews: Getting Into the Room

The Most Underused Tool in the Early-Career Job Search

An informational interview is a conversation you initiate with someone working in a field, company, or role you want to learn more about. You are not asking for a job. You are asking for insight, and in doing so, you are building the exact kind of relationship that leads to opportunities most candidates never see.

For early-career candidates, informational interviews serve a specific strategic purpose: they give you access to people, knowledge, and referrals that your resume alone cannot get you. Many jobs are filled through relationships, not just job postings. Informational interviews are how you build those relationships before you need them.

> *Many jobs are filled through referrals and relationships, and referred candidates are far more likely to be hired than people who apply cold. Informational interviews are your way into that network.*

Why This Works for Early-Career Candidates Specifically

- You have less competition in informational settings: most candidates only apply to posted jobs. Conversations set you apart.
- You can get candid intelligence: what the role is really like, what the hiring process looks like, what they look for in candidates.
- A referral from an internal contact dramatically increases your chances: hiring managers trust recommendations from their own network.
- It demonstrates initiative: showing up before there's an open role signals exactly the kind of drive employers want to hire.

Who to Target

- Alumni from your college or graduate program: the shared connection significantly increases response rates.
- People in roles you're targeting: search LinkedIn for people with your target job title at companies you're interested in.
- People who made a similar transition: if you studied one thing and want to work in another field, find people who made that same move.
- Second-degree connections: ask professors, advisors, or family contacts if they know anyone in your target field.

How to Reach Out

Keep your outreach message short, specific, and focused on learning, not asking for a job.

- Personalize every message: reference something specific about their background. Generic messages have very low response rates.
- Send on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday: these days consistently get higher response rates than Monday or Friday.

- Follow up once if you don't hear back within one week: keep it brief and gracious.
- If they say no or don't respond, move on. It's not personal.

> *'Hi [Name], I came across your profile while researching [field/company]. I'm a recent [degree] graduate from [School] and I'm building my career in [field]. Your path from [X to Y] caught my attention and I'd love to learn from your experience. Would you be open to a 20-minute conversation? No agenda. I'm just trying to learn.'*

What to Ask

Prepare 6–8 questions, knowing you'll use 4–5. Let the conversation flow naturally. Don't just read from a list.

- How did you get into this field? Was it a straight path or did you figure it out along the way?
- What does a typical week look like in your role?
- What skills do you find most valuable in your day-to-day work?
- What do you look for when you review applications or interview candidates for entry-level roles?
- What would you do differently if you were starting your career today?
- What's the biggest misconception people have about this field or role?
- Are there resources (people, communities, publications) you'd recommend for someone trying to break in?
- Is there anyone else you think I should connect with?

How to Convert a Conversation Into a Connection

- Send a thank-you email within 24 hours: specific, genuine, brief.
- Connect on LinkedIn with a personalized note referencing your conversation.
- Follow up if they offered to introduce you to someone: do it within the week.
- Share relevant updates: if you get an interview at a company they mentioned or land a job, tell them. People remember candidates who close the loop.
- Stay in touch periodically: a brief message every few months keeps the relationship warm without being transactional.

Informational Interview Tracker

Name & role	Company / field	How connected *(alumni / LinkedIn / referral)*	Date	Key takeaways / next steps

Final Reminders

- Your background is not a liability. It's a starting point. Present it with confidence.
- Customize every application. Generic resumes and cover letters are easy to spot and easy to pass over.
- Follow up after every interview with a thank-you email within 24 hours. Very few candidates do this. It matters.
- Rejection is data, not a verdict. Ask for feedback when you can, adjust, and keep going.
- The first job is not the last job. Get in the door, deliver, and build from there.