Public relations is a growing field, ripe with opportunities for employment and advancement. Labor analysts predict that the demand for public relations practitioners will grow at least as fast as the general employment scene, and faster than many jobs. That’s good news for the public relations student. The job search may take a while, but it should ultimately be successful.

Public relations has a promising future. Most corporations and nonprofit organizations have public relations departments. In smaller organizations, public relations projects may be handled by employees who have additional jobs, often involving marketing, human resources, fundraising, recruitment, and other areas of contact with the public.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Labor, predicts that jobs in public relations are growing faster than average, with an expected increase by 25 percent through 2018. At the same time, the bureau expects competition to be keen for entry-level jobs.

The bureau reported in 2010 that public relations managers have an average salary of $89,430; public relations specialists earn $52,340 on average. Income varies both by geographic region of the country and the type of organization. Salary.com says the average annual salaries for public relations directors is $136,142 and $44,994 for entry-level public relations specialists. Other industry analysts report starting salaries at $28,000, with more than 50,000 job openings each year in public relations.

A 2010 study by Spring Associates, a public relations executive recruiting agency, that the economy had taken a toll on the profession, with public relations practitioners working longer hours for the same or less pay than the previous year.
The study, associated with the Public Relations Society of America, reported a nationwide average salary of $45,000 for an account executive in a public relations agency and $66,000 for a communications specialist. The study also reported that the growth areas for jobs in public relations were in health care, pharmaceutical, consumer, and high tech/social media fields.

Employment analysts cite increasing opportunities for women and minorities. Estimates are that women comprise 65–80 percent of public relations practitioners, though men fill the top management ranks. That is changing as women build their credentials and advance through management to executive levels.

A survey by PR Week reported low proportions for minorities (91 percent white, 3.3 percent black and 2.4 percent Hispanic). However, a PRSA salary study showed African American practitioners earning above the average, probably because they tended to be employed at supervisory positions in corporations.

**Entry-level Job**

The PRSA Foundation, the organization’s research and education arm, looks at five levels of job categories in public relations: technician, supervisor, manager, director, and executive.

Students can expect entry-level positions that emphasize technical competence in writing and related areas. Skills typically required for such positions include proficiency in preparing brochures, memos and letters, newsletter articles, news releases, materials for online newsrooms, proposals, reports, scripts and speeches. Related skills include conducting research, editing and interviewing, as well as web design and proficiency with social media. Virtually all entry-level job announcements call for applicants to be familiar with social media.
Look for openings with job titles such as public relations writer, public affairs or public relations specialist, media relations assistant, account assistant, or publications or web editor. Also look for generic job titles such as staff associate and associate director.

A career-minded novice in public relations should use an entry-level position as an opportunity to move toward the next level of positions. Cultivate interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Develop an expertise in a particular specialty such as public affairs, social media, research, investor relations, or employee relations.

An excellent source of information for anyone seeking a job in public relations is the Public Relations Body of Knowledge, a compendium of articles, books and other published materials that deal with the profession. In its book, *Public Relations Professional Career Guide*, the PRSA Foundation identifies many sources of information related to the skills and knowledge expected of entry-level technicians in public relations writing and related areas. It also identifies articles associated with advanced career levels.

PRSA also published a Pack of Career Tactics, with 40 must-read articles for public relations graduates and job seekers. Information is available at prsa.org > “Career,” “Job Seekers.”

**Education**

The most useful advice for obtaining a job in public relations is to get the best education possible. The following categories of courses and knowledge/skill areas may help you plan your academic career.
**PUBLIC RELATIONS.** A report by the Commission on Public Relations Education has recommended minimally five specific and separate courses for undergraduates in a public relations major, minor or sequence:

- Introduction to public relations, including theory, origin and principles
- Public relations research, measurement and evaluation
- Public relations writing and production
- Supervised work experience in public relations, such as through an internship
- An additional public relations course in campaigns, case studies, law and ethics, or planning and management

The report cites an expectation that issues of diversity, communication technology and global implications be imbedded in public relations courses. It also recommends electives in advertising, broadcasting, photography, graphic design, persuasion, and advanced media writing.

**WRITING.** Employers consistently seek effective writers. Courses in public relations writing are especially useful, but don’t stop there. Look to journalism and broadcast reporting courses. Look to courses in poetry, play writing, and other types of creative writing. Investigate courses in professional and technical writing.

**ETHICS.** The Commission on Public Relations Education cites professional ethics as an area central to academic preparation for entry into the profession. The recommendation is that ethics should pervade all content of public relations education.
**Organizational and Business Studies.** Increasingly, public relations is seen as a profession rooted not only in the communication arts but also in management science. Business courses enhance your value to an organization, particularly courses focused on marketing, research, and management.

**Problem-Solving and Critical-Thinking Skills.** Traditional areas such as philosophy and literature and newer areas such as creative studies offer opportunities to develop your competence in analytical skills sought by employers.

**Liberal Arts.** The Commission on Public Relations Education recommends that 60 to 75 percent of undergraduate coursework be in liberal arts, social sciences, business and language study. The Accreditation Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications echoes this expectation for professional programs that include undergraduate public relations degrees. Employers prefer candidates who are well rounded. Expand your value to an employer by taking courses in the arts and humanities, natural and social sciences, and applied studies.

**Diversity and Global Perspectives.** Likewise, an understanding of and appreciation for issues of diversity and inclusiveness is considered to be an essential part of public relations education. Similarly, public relations education should include exposure to global or international themes.

© Routledge/Taylor & Francis 2012
FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE. Increasingly, organizations are finding themselves involved in an environment that is more global and more diverse. Public relations often is expected to lead this change. Job applicants familiar with another culture, conversant in another language, or knowledgeable about social or ethnic pluralism often catch the eye of employers. International study programs are particularly good ways to develop such cultural proficiency.

STATISTICS. Painful as it may be to some creative and literary types, skill in mathematics and statistics is a vital element of the education of a public relations professional. Practitioners often deal with budgets, surveys, evaluation reports, and other topics that require proficiency in mathematics.

TECHNOLOGY. Employers often count on the fact that college graduates may have greater computer skills than practitioners already working in the field. Expose yourself as much as possible to computer applications for word processing, research, presentation, graphic design and Internet technology. Familiarity with social media and emerging communication technology is most important.

GRAPHIC ARTS. Because image counts, public relations practitioners need to have a strong artistic appreciation. Preferably, they also should have practical graphic skills in print, video and online formats.
**PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE.** In addition to relevant courses, employers are looking for people with work experience. How do you get that before you have a job? Internships. Part-time jobs. Volunteer work. Student organizations.

Internships often are available through colleges and universities, and many larger employers offer internships to college graduates. Part-time jobs and volunteer service are other ways to gain work experience; try to use these opportunities to show what you can do in public relations projects.

Student organizations, especially those related to public relations, provide opportunities for professional training. The Public Relations Student Society of America, which is affiliated with PRSA, has chapters on more than 300 campuses. IABC also has established student chapters, and many colleges and universities have independent student public relations groups not formally related to either of the two professional organizations.

**GRADUATE SCHOOL.** The minimum academic qualification for a job in public relations is a bachelor’s degree. Increasingly, competition for jobs includes people with master’s degrees. Many universities throughout North America offer advanced studies in public relations, organizational communication and related areas.

The Commission on Graduate Study in Public Relations recommends that graduate programs in public relations should include courses beyond the undergraduate level focusing on two kinds of skills: basic skills in management, decision-making, goal-setting, budgeting, planning and organization, and advanced skills in design, media selection, scheduling, and writing/speaking for media dissemination. Specifically the commission outlines a curriculum with multiple courses in the following areas:
- Strategic public relations management, including organization, relationship management, public relations best practices in a digital environment, crisis and risk communication and ethical and legal issues.

- Basic business practices and processes, including management, marketing, economics, finance and strategic business outcomes.

- Communication/public relations theory and research methods, with a particular focus on applied research techniques.

- Global and international influences on public relations, including regional differences in the practices of public relations, issues of geopolitics, advanced global public relations theories, cross-cultural and intercultural communication influences.

- Courses in an area of specialization such as healthcare, social services, sports, entertainment, politics and so on.

- An internship or co-op experience.

Job Search

There is no easy formula for landing your first job or getting a foothold in the profession of your choice. However, some techniques have been used by many job seekers and found to be effective. Following are several suggestions for breaking into jobs in public relations.

**PERSONAL ASSESSMENT.** You’ve heard it before: Life is too short to work at a job you hate, even a well-paying job. Before you plunge into the job search, give some time for a bit of soul
searching. Do you like continual change or a routine and stable environment? Do you thrive on pressure, or does it grind you down? Are you willing to relocate for a job with potential? These are questions you should answer before preparing any applications.

Many types of personal inventories are available at career development offices in colleges and universities. These can help you assess your personal interests, aspirations and work styles, using the information to direct your career path.

**Employment Assessment.** Research the field. Learn who is hiring and where the jobs are. Investigate opportunities in other parts of the country, and look into job possibilities in related fields such as marketing, research, advertising and technical writing. Explore possibilities in both corporate and nonprofit organizations, as well as agencies. Don’t be afraid to ask for an information interview with a senior person in the public relations profession.

**Networking.** Let everyone know that you are looking for a job. Ask friends to pass along your name to their friends and colleagues who may know someone looking for an eager public relations employee. Join the student chapter of a professional organization such as PRSA or IABC, and transfer your membership to a professional chapter when you graduate. Try to participate in both local chapter meetings and national conferences.

Build an expanding network of professional contacts through your internships, through shadowing and mentoring programs with practitioners, through visitors to your campus, and through contacts with alumni of your school who work in your areas of interest.
**COVER LETTER.** A cover letter is your first introduction to a prospective employer. Make a strong first impression.

- **Ensure accuracy and professionalism.** Send an original letter, never a photocopy. Send e-mail only if the hiring protocol calls for online applications. Make sure there are no misspellings, smudges or other imperfections. Present a professional tone that reflects you without being humorous, overly confidant, cute, or avant-garde.

- **Address the cover letter to a real person.** This is more effective than sending it to a nameless office holder such as Personnel Director or Public Affairs Manager. A search of the organization’s website or a telephone call to the receptionist should yield the name you need.

- **Indicate your interest in the position.** State where you heard about the opening. Indicate why you are interested in this job, and express confidence that you can do it effectively. Keep the focus on what you can do for the organization rather than on your need for a job.

- **Briefly describe your philosophical approach.** Indicate what you think about this type of work, its importance and your commitment to it.

- **Summarize your qualifications.** Tell how they relate to the particular job for which you are applying. Pull out the two or three items from your résumé that highlight your competence for this particular position.

- **Ask for an interview.** End the cover letter with a specific request to obtain a response or to meet with the employer. If it is appropriate, offer to telephone for an appointment, or ask for a formal application.
**Portfolio.** Every applicant for a public relations job should have a comprehensive portfolio of writing samples, graphic designs and other relevant materials. Preferably, the portfolio should be available both in hard copy and online.

At a minimum, the portfolio should include several news releases of various types (both traditional releases for print and broadcast media, as well as releases for online and digital media). Ideally, it also will include a brochure, direct-mail package, feature article, blog posting, opinion piece, pitch letter, and public relations advertisement. Include a planning sheet for each piece of writing to give some context. If possible, also include clippings related to news releases and fact sheets.

Display the portfolio in a professional-looking binder. Make sure that the digital or online version of your portfolio can be accessed from your online résumé.

**Résumé.** Every job seeker needs a quality résumé, which is a listing of professional credentials and experience. This should be tightly written to highlight your strengths.

- *Keep the résumé to a single page.* This is sufficient for new graduates and other entry-level job seekers. One way of accomplishing this is to use résumé language that features action statements such as “edited newsletter” or “conducted research” rather than complete sentences.

- *Use a summary rather than an objective.* Traditional résumé objectives focus on what you want, such as “position in public relations” or “challenging writing position with opportunity for advancement.” Instead, consider using a personal summary highlighting what you have to offer. For example: “Recent graduate and agency intern familiar with research techniques. Diverse writing skills. Able to clearly
present technical material. Experience with PRSSA accounts. Degree in public relations.” Try writing this in

- **Design the résumé for eye appeal.** Especially in the field of public relations, where appearance is important and where design ability is expected, would-be employers expect résumés that look professional. Use quality paper. Bold or underlined section heads with bullet items can be useful. People read from the left, so use the left side of the sheet for the most important information; save details such as inclusive dates for less-prominent positions.

- **Avoid gimmicks.** Neon-colored paper, personal brochures, techno typeface, and bizarre graphics may be attention getters, but they often fail to generate a positive response. Stick with conventional and professional styles.

- **Avoid hype words.** Control the urge to call yourself “a dynamic, self-motivated go-getter” and avoid other such hyperbolic statements. Arrogance, self-praise and inflated ego have no place in a résumé. Instead use objective words, numbers and strong verbs. Give examples of past success.

- **Use buzzwords.** Showing that you know that language can attract the attention of the person initially screening applications. Consider what is expected for the job you are applying for, and then use words to address those expectations. High on the list of most public relations employers are the following words: analyze, design, edit, evaluate, plan, research and write.

- **List professional experience.** Include paid employment, internships, volunteer work, and military service. Indicate the company or organizational name, job title and dates (years only, or months and years) of employment. If you have many part-time or
summer jobs unrelated to public relations, summarize these under one heading. List your professional experience concisely, using bullets and brief action statements. Don’t exaggerate or use minute detail. Focus on tangible tasks rather than broad job categories, and use strong action verbs. Indicate not only your work projects but also their results. For example: “Increased student agency accounts by 35 percent.” Many résumés present experience in reverse chronological order focused on jobs. An alternative is to focus on areas of skill or achievement, such as separate sections on writing, editing and research, followed by a brief work history.

- **List educational achievements.** Include the name of your school, major, degree, awards and special concentrations of study. Indicate your grade average if it is noteworthy (3.0 or better on a 4.0 scale). List your most recent education first. Do not list high school unless it adds a particular credential, such as Academy for Visual Arts if you are citing experience in design. If you do not have much work experience, list relevant courses, using generic course titles, and don’t overlook nonmajor courses in business, language and other disciplines.

- **List professional affiliations and memberships.** Even in an entry-level job search, you can show involvement with job-relevant organizations.

- **Provide an e-mail contact.** You may have to establish a new e-mail, if you have been relying on one provided by your college or university. It’s probably a good idea to create an e-mail account just for the job search and professional uses. Remember to check it often. Also, be careful about the name you choose. SuperKrak, Btchsfbk, LilMama and StudMonkey may be okay for e-mails to friends, but they don’t create the professional impression you need for business purposes.
• **Identify special skills.** Language fluency, computer skills and other personal capabilities relevant to employment should be listed. List organizational and volunteer activities if they are relevant to public relations or if they show leadership experience.

• **Be selective with personal information.** Hobbies, political involvement and religious affiliation generally have no place on a résumé, unless your hobby relates to the potential job or if the position deals with political or religious matters. Marital status and other such personal information are out of bounds in a job search.

• **Do not list personal references.** Save these for a separate sheet including names, postal addresses, e-mail contacts and telephone numbers for people who have indicated their willingness to give you a good recommendation. Always ask permission to list a reference, and don’t be shy about asking if that person feels comfortable about giving you a positive recommendation. Don’t waste space on the résumé with the obvious note that references are available on request.

**INTERVIEW PREPARATION.** Employers tell of hundreds of applications submitted for a single job opening. Obviously, the cover letter and résumé are the initial screening devices. The competition is tough, but a few of the standouts make it through. If you are lucky enough to get an interview, make the most of it.

• **Research your interviewer.** Find out all you can about the organization: its mission, reputation, activities, and successes. Investigate its standing within the community, perhaps with a call to the Chamber of Commerce or the Better Business Bureau. Do an online search to see if the organization has been in the news lately. Look into the
organization’s Facebook account if one exists. Check into biographical materials for information on its leaders.

- **Arrive early.** If anyone is waiting for the interview to begin, it should be you. Learn ahead of time how to get to the interview site and how long the trip will take.

- **Dress professionally.** This should go without saying, but too many employers complain that job applicants dress in a way that suggests they aren’t taking the interview seriously. Dress as if you already have the job, and then err on the side of being more formal than may be necessary. This doesn’t mean to wear your best party dress, nor does it require purchasing an expensive business suit. But for most jobs and in most parts of the country, conservative professional attire means jacket and tie for men and parallel clothing for women.

- **Be an active listener.** During the interview, maintain eye contact, look for nonverbal cues, concentrate on the discussion, and evaluate the significance of questions before your respond.

- **Ask you own questions.** Prepare a list of questions relevant to the prospective position, questions that show you to be a person eager to make a contribution. Indicate that you will work hard, learn fast, and quickly become a contributing member of the organization. Hold questions of salary, benefits, vacations, and other personal concerns until you have a job offer.

- **Show your portfolio.** Bring your portfolio to the job interview so you can show your work rather than merely talking about it. Offer it early in the meeting so the interviewer can glance at it during the discussion.
• **Have some leave-behinds.** Bring photocopies of the most appropriate portfolio items to leave with the organization. Prepare these are leave-behinds, and do not ask that they be returned. Also, provide a sheet with a link to your online résumé and portfolio.

• **Expect a writing test.** As part of the interview process, many employers hiring writers want to see how candidates perform under pressure. You may be given a set of facts and asked to prepare a news release. If so, do a brief planning sheet to make sure you are focusing on the appropriate publics and addressing their interests.

• **Expect a current affairs test.** Many graduates tell, often with regret, of feeling that they did poorly on a current affairs test that was administered as part of a job interview. Public relations professionals are expected to know what’s happening in their community and beyond. You should develop a habit of following the news everyday. Make sure you are aware of current happenings when you go for a job interview.

• **Have an air of confidence and professionalism.** Maintain eye contact with your interviewer, and control any anxiety you may have. Remind yourself that this organization thinks you are good enough to consider hiring you. Dressing professionally can be an ego boost, and knowing that you are prepared can go a long way to calm your nervousness.

• **Follow up with a thank-you letter.** Immediately following the interview, mail a note or card that expresses appreciation for the opportunity to be considered for the position. Send a real care, not an e-mail note. Use this as another opportunity to restate your interest in the job and to reiterate your main qualifications.