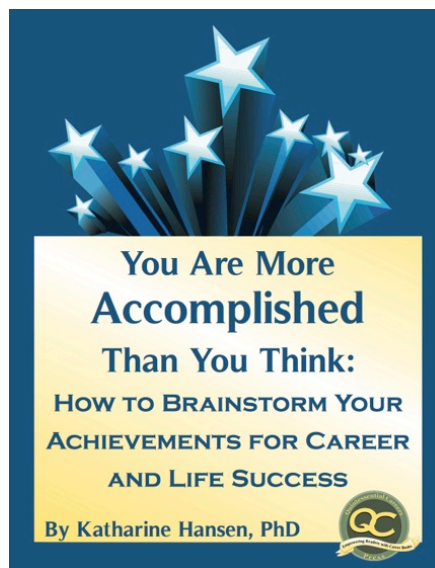


# Articulating and Communicating Your Accomplishments



**A QUINTESSENTIAL CAREERS WHITE PAPER EXCERPTED FROM  
YOU ARE MORE ACCOMPLISHED THAN YOU THINK:  
HOW TO BRAINSTORM YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS FOR CAREER AND LIFE SUCCESS  
BY KATHARINE HANSEN, PH.D.**



## Articulating and communicating your accomplishments

Once you've identified your raw achievements, what's the most effective way to express them? This white paper explores techniques and gives samples.

"You're naturally good at what you do," assures resume writer Laura Smith-Proulx, "but telling your accomplishment requires a higher level of analysis."

This ability to articulate your accomplishments is more important than you might think because expressing your achievements well is an accomplishment in itself. Take your resume, for example. As recruiting expert Dr. John Sullivan writes, "even though a particular job may not require much or any writing, the writing skills of the applicant will dramatically affect the content and the impact of their resume. Even if you were a top performer, you likely won't get full credit for it unless your writing skills are powerful."

That's a dramatic statement. It's shocking to think a strong candidate would be overlooked if he or she failed to describe his or her accomplishments effectively in writing. The scenario is a worthwhile argument for hiring a professional resume writer if you know that writing is not your strong point – or at least have your resume reviewed by someone with a command of language.

Once you have brainstormed and identified a significant inventory of raw accomplishments using the resources here: <http://www.quintcareers.com/accomplishments/>,

you'll want to refine and polish them by giving them an effective structure, ensuring you've given yourself sufficient credit, adding an element of vulnerability or success-out-of-failure as appropriate, adding detail, removing braggadocio, and relating your accomplishments to your future capabilities. This polishing will result in AccomplishNuggets, shiny and valuable chunks of golden verbiage that you can tailor to many uses.



### Choosing storied frameworks and structures for communicating accomplishments

When we describe accomplishments, we are essentially telling stories. They have a beginning, middle, and end. Sharon Graham's take on the beginning, middle, and end structure shows how it applies to accomplishment stories:

- *Beginning*: The challenge or event that started the story. Your role/how you got involved in the story. Surrounding details, such as tight deadlines, budgets. Outside perceptions of the extent of the challenge.
- *Middle*: Your role and key actions. Turning point.
- *End*: Results and impact. Effect on stakeholders. Metrics.

Thinking of accomplishments as stories helps to frame them. Communicating accomplishments as stories makes them more memorable, creates a connection and help you establish trust with your audience, distinguishes you, illustrates what you have to offer, and paints vivid pictures. In her book *Brag! The Art of Tooting Your Horn Without*

*Blowing It*, Peggy Klaus notes a real difference in audience response when she started selling herself “using [a] subtle and story-like approach.” Stories make your accomplishment message more authentic and illustrate the connections you seek to make between what you’ve achieved and what your audience needs.

In the job-search world, experts have developed a variety of formulas, abbreviated by acronyms, that embody structures for accomplishment stories. All are similar beginning-middle-end structures; some are embellished with additional elements. The top three on this list, CAR, PAR, and SAR, are the most commonly cited:

*CAR*: Challenge, Action, Result

*PAR*: Problem, Action Result

*SAR*: Situation, Action, Result

Example of CAR/PAR/SAR accomplishment:

*Challenge/Problem/Situation*: Company’s order-routing system resulted in unacceptable number of errors, costing repeat business.

*Action*: Created new order-routing system to enable sales and customer service to understand required information and to reduce errors and cost.

*Result*: Reduced errors by 50 percent and increased customer retention. New system facilitates communication with the customer about choices of standard processing methods and provides a vehicle to communicate special customer needs.

*CCAR*: Context, Challenge, Action, Result

Example of CCAR accomplishment:

*Context*: \$1-billion company was failing.

*Challenge*: Respond to financial crisis.

*Action*: Planned and implemented policies, procedures, and operating performance standards for claims, reinsurance, and recovery functions. Deployed effective interventions, crisis-management strategies, and stabilization protocols.

*Result*: Turned company around.

*PARLA*: Problem, Action, Result, Learning, Application

Example of PARLA accomplishment:

*Problem*: The norm for my work team was to communicate via email, but one member tended to misinterpret emails and take a lot of the team’s time trying to get clarity on issues.

*Action*: Talked to the member face-to-face about the issue.

*Result*: We came to a decision that the team would still conduct most of its communications via email, but whenever this team member did not understand something, instead of sending a confusing series of emails, she would either pick up the phone or walk to the other person’s office and resolve the miscommunication quickly and efficiently.

*Learning*: I learned that if a particular means of communication is causing problems, a different channel of communication should be employed to address the problem.

*Application*: I now evaluate the communication channels for each project and ensure they work for everyone.

*SCARQ*: Situation, Challenge, Action, Results-Quantified

Example of SCARQ accomplishment:

*Situation:* Company was losing money by processing claims in-house.

*Challenge:* Negotiate \$60 million claim-handling contract with vendor.

*Action:* Convinced vendor to take over handling of all existing and new claims, as well as all employees at their existing salaries, benefits, and service time.

*Results-Quantified:* Delivered unprecedented results that saved company more than \$40 million.

*SHARE:* Situation, Hindrance, Action, Results, Evaluation

Example of SHARE accomplishment:

*Situation:* Company culture was toxic, and morale was low, resulting in poor financial results and high turnover.

*Hindrance:* Management team had weak members.

*Action:* Conducted regular training sessions to obtain team-member feedback and improve skills; implemented morale-boosters, offsite manager meetings, contests, and consistent communication.

*Results:* Achieved phenomenal turnaround within six months.

*Evaluation:* Improved employee morale; reduced turnover; increased promotions; enhanced employee satisfaction; boosted results, client satisfaction/client-turnover, and ability to increase pricing

*SIA:* Situation, Impact, Analysis

Example of SIA accomplishment:

*Situation:* Company had high turnover, often losing promising new employees before they could reach their potential.

*Impact:* Increased new-employee retention rate by 30 percent and improved morale by

developing cross-training orientation programs that attracted high achieving employees.

*Analysis:* Having tackled the retention and morale issues, I could focus on optimizing benefits packages for employees.

*SMART:* Situation with Metrics (or Situation and More), Actions, Results, Tie-in

Example of SMART accomplishment:

*Situation with Metrics:* Company had revenues of \$500,000 but the potential to earn much more.

*Actions:* Spearheaded development of cutting-edge products.

*Results:* Escalated revenue to \$15M and boosted company's recognition as an industry leader

*Tie-in* (which SMART originator Susan Britton Whitcomb describes as a theme or pattern that can link to key components the employer seeks, as well as communicate enthusiasm or job knowledge): Set the pattern of creative innovation and offering product-development solutions that have resulted in profitability and US Patents. Pursuit of continuous improvements yields high quality in all aspects of work.



*SOAR:* Situation, Obstacle, Action, Result

Example of SOAR accomplishment:

*Situation:* Two banks were merging.

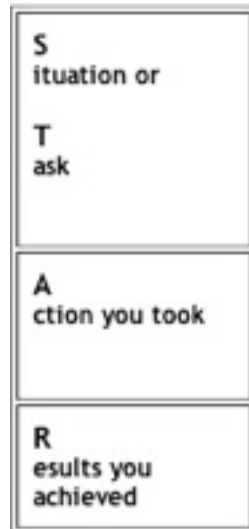
*Obstacle:* Banks had vastly different cultures and management styles.

**Action:** Advised/trained expatriate management staff in EEO law, coaching and counseling, and performance management.  
**Result:** Re-established balance in the workforce and addressed staff relations issues that arose post merger.

**STAR:** Situation, Task, Action, Result

Example of STAR accomplishment:

**Situation:** Hospital authority owed contractors hundreds of thousands in sales taxes on hospital construction.  
**Task:** Find a way to raise sufficient funds to pay taxes.  
**Action:** Conducted extensive research of sales-tax laws and regulations; compiled brief supporting position that authority could avoid the taxes and presented case to state senator and Department of Revenue representatives; won the argument.  
**Result:** Saved \$1 million in taxes and played role in revised statutes the next year to eliminate problem my research discovered in the law.



A few more formulas also offer similar beginning-middle-end structures, as well as extra nuances:

The Hero's Journey is a classic story structure featured in literature and popular culture from the Odyssey of ancient times to the modern Luke Skywalker. The structure, broken down extremely simplistically, is:

- **Departure:** The hero realizes his or her life (or situation) is about to change.
- **Initiation:** The hero faces obstacles in confronting the change experience.
- **Return:** The hero undergoes transformation and learning.

(The Internet is packed with information about the Hero's Journey; you can google it for more elaboration on the structure.)

In his classic and perennial bestseller, *What Color is Your Parachute*, Richard Bolles recommends writing about seven experiences. Here's a paraphrased version of his recommended structure:

- Goal you wanted to accomplish
- Obstacle(s)
- Action steps
- Outcome/Result
- Metrics of Outcome

Story practitioner Gerry Lantz recommends giving structural weight to accomplishment stories by emphasizing what was at stake if you had not accomplished what you did. As you are describing a problem you solved, tell what was at stake – what would have happened if you hadn't solved the problem. Would the company have lost money? Would a customer be disappointed? Would a sale have been lost?

Finally, a structure for proposal-writing from Mary Morel, this structure is as follows:

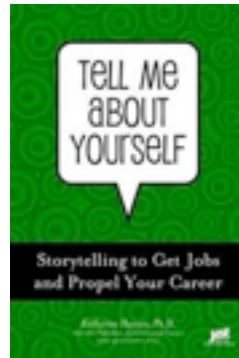
- **Position:** In what position or role did you find yourself in a past or current job?
- **Problem:** What issue or problem did you encounter?
- **Possibilities:** What options did you have for solving the problems? What avenues did you consider?

- *Proposal*: Which option did you choose to solve the problem?
- *Product*: What was the outcome or result?

I've written an entire book on storytelling in job search and career that provides comprehensive elaboration on the story framework for accomplishments and more. You can read this book in several ways:

*Tell Me About Yourself: Storytelling to Get Jobs and Propel Your Career*

- Paperback via Amazon: <http://tinyurl.com/arn22tg>
- Kindle via Amazon: <http://tinyurl.com/aaip8hk>
- Earlier edition on the Web (free): <http://tinyurl.com/5ff8t2>
- Earlier edition serialized on a blog (free): <http://tinyurl.com/alvy9gl>



I also offer a companion workbook, *Tell Me More About Yourself: A Workbook to Develop Better Job-Search Communication through Storytelling*.

- Ebook: <http://tinyurl.com/avgaxge>
- Kindle version: <http://tinyurl.com/c9wza7l>

### *Enhancing accomplishment stories by providing just enough detail*

The amount of detail you provide about your accomplishments will depend on the context and communication vehicle you're using. Typically, job-seekers, for example, provide the greatest amount of detail in interview responses, less detail in cover letters, and the least amount of detail in resumes.

Still, resumes shouldn't be overlooked as purveyors of accomplishments detail. "A resume should be a statement of the skills a job-seeker would bring to a new job, as well as an outline of accomplishments in past positions," says human resources manager John Logan. Because the resume is often the only data an employer receives from a candidate, the bullet points must provide context for past work; providing details like number of people supervised, size of project budget, estimated cost savings in dollars (or other appropriate specifics) helps an employer place each candidate in the context of the organization. "I find that most resumes do not provide enough details for me to understand the scope of the candidate's experience, but are merely a restatement of a job description, which is not helpful to me as an employer," Logan says.

Placing yourself in the context of each organization you've working for, as Logan says, is the key to providing sufficient detail about your accomplishments in each workplace (or other setting in which you've delivered results and successes). You must communicate enough detail and context for the audience to understand how you boosted the organization.

Context and detail also are important when describing project accomplishments, notes a

press release from executive-search firm Harris Allied: “When discussing your involvement in a project include the original problem, solution and results.” The firm suggests offering specifics about your project involvements and your role as a team member, giving a brief description of the project, including name/location/scale, and the phases in which you contributed and deliverables you produced or to which you contributed. “Remember to put your accomplishments in a broader context and speak to how they apply to the organization or department as a whole,” the firm advises.

Details make stories more memorable, especially sensory details. Business-storytelling guru and author Annette Simmons recommends bringing your stories to life through sensory details, enabling whenever possible, your audience to see, feel, hear, smell, and taste elements of your story.

### ***Use keywords to describe your accomplishments***

If you’re using accomplishment stories for purposes other than job-hunting, keywords aren’t too important. For job search, however, they are critical. Keywords are exceedingly important for today’s resumes because they are what employers’ Applicant Tracking Systems look for when resumes are placed in keyword-searchable databases after you submit them electronically. Keywords should be industry-specific and job-specific and taken right from the job posting. When you’re including accomplishments in job-search communications, such as resumes, and cover letter, try to incorporate keywords relating to the targeted job whenever possible.

### ***Giving yourself sufficient credit for team accomplishments***

When I conducted mock interviews with my college students, I frequently found them describing accomplishments using the pronoun “we.” The business school in which I taught required many group projects, which logically ended up being touted as accomplishments in interviews. All well and good, but in job-search and workplace situations, you need to describe your role on the team and give yourself enough credit. Credit the team, too, of course, but express your team-project in “I” terms, rather than “we” terms. Example:



I played a key role on a team conducting marketing research for a local business. I had the strongest analytical abilities on the team, so I led team members in analyzing the data. Through my analytical skills, we discovered that the business had been targeting the wrong market all along; we were able to show the owner the market segment that the business should be targeting.

Because of the limited space available on resumes, explaining your role in a team project can be difficult. “Even though the individual may have been part of the team,” writes Sullivan, “it’s impossible using the resume alone to accurately ascertain the actual role that this individual played in the task or accomplishment.” Thus, you may want to use your cover letter to elucidate your role in the team’s success, or even include in your resume submission a

supplemental accomplishments sheet that draws out how you contributed to team wins.

Even if your role in a team success was small, give yourself credit for the parts of a project where you made the greatest contribution. As Allan Hay writes in *Memory Mining*, “Remember that your results are what is important here, especially if you were pleased that you completed your part of the project well.”

**Describing accomplishments that include obstacles, vulnerability, or spring from negative situations or failure**

Several experts who write about accomplishments have noticed that their accomplishments connect better when they include vulnerability, the overcoming of obstacles, or rising from failure. “Whether you are being vulnerable with a conference room full of colleagues or a prospective client,” writes speaker, coach, and trainer Alexia Vernon, “the more you can employ your storytelling skills to show how you have turned your garbage into gems, the more you will engender true, sustainable credibility, and buy-in.” Adds Peggy Klaus: “People like to learn from others how they have overcome obstacles. It’s one of the best bragging tools in your arsenal.”

Want a good way to identify your vulnerabilities to help you construct accomplishments of conquering obstacles or emerging from failure? Write a “failure resume.” Tina Seelig, a Stanford PhD in neuroscience and the director of the Stanford Technology Ventures Program, suggests the failure resume in her book, *What I Wish I Knew When I Was 20*: “A failure resume is a quick way to demonstrate

that failure is an important part of our learning process, especially when you’re stretching your abilities, doing things the first time, or taking risks. We hire people who have experience not just because of their successes but also because of their failures.” Accomplishment statements and accomplishments that lack vulnerability and a bit of humility can lack credibility. It’s hard to swallow a collection of completely glowing statements that portray the person as nothing short of perfect.

This human tendency to want to see ourselves and others triumph over obstacles, vulnerabilities, and foibles manifests itself in a type of job interviewing called “motivation-based interviewing,” in which high performers are seen as achieving better results despite obstacles, while low performers think the obstacles are responsible for their not achieving the high performance. Thus, a new variation on the types of standard acronyms/formulas for accomplishment stories we saw earlier is Situation → Action → Positive Overcoming of Obstacles → Result, or SAPOOOR. Because studies have shown that consumers, for example, are far more likely to choose an underdog brand, we can extend that finding to the job search and speculate that employers are more likely to choose the underdog candidate – the one who has overcome obstacles in a positive way.

Even as you expose vulnerabilities, you want your accomplishments to end on a positive note. In a resume, for example, resume





writer Barb Safani noted in a blog post, job-seekers don't need to gloss over negative situations; instead they "can show their ability to influence positive outcomes, even when the deck is stacked against them and business conditions are exceptionally challenging." Safani suggests accomplishments of selling in a challenging market, providing leadership in environments plagued with infighting, salvaging a damaged client relationship, preparing for a failed company's closing, and managing poor performers.

### ***Substantiating subjective claims about yourself with accomplishments-driven facts and metrics***

Particularly in job-search communications, especially resumes, we all have a tendency to make subjective claims about ourselves. I have long advocated for a section atop the resume – called "Professional Profile" or "Qualifications Summary" – that lists top selling points. Today, I advise concrete qualifications in this space – qualifications that are substantiated with facts or accomplishment bullet points. However, I once used unsubstantiated claims, such as "exceptionally organized manager," "proactive team builder," and "strong communicator." Numerous job-seekers – and even resume writers – still use unsubstantiated value judgments like those. Many hiring decision-makers have told me that they pay no attention to claims like these unless they are backed up with real accomplishments, ideally with metrics.

Example:

Highly analytical decision-maker who has demonstrated ability to turn around troubled companies five times in 10 years.

"If [candidates] say 'oversaw development of strategic solutions,'" says Meg Steele, director of recruitment and employment mobility at Swedish Medical Center in the Seattle area, "they should have some more specific examples of said 'strategic solutions' and what the impact was to the business [and] the employees."

### ***Don't leave out the results***

I've mentioned results numerous times up to this point, but it's time to underscore how important they are to the



accomplishments equation. In a 2010 report, "The Current State of Performance Management and Career Development," from Hewitt Associates, most respondents said their organization measures both "what" someone accomplishes and "how" they do it; however, they tend to weigh results much more heavily, with 62 percent of respondents stating that executives are either measured solely on results (30 percent) or more on results than competencies/behaviors (32 percent). As blogger Scot Herrick writes, companies care only about your work that helps the company achieve results.

### ***Relating past accomplishments to future opportunities***

Providing context about your past accomplishments is important, but when you seek to take the next step, you also need to show how those past accomplishments relate to the next organization you wish to join – how they, as Deborah Walker writes,

“connect to corporate bottom-line objectives.”

In your resume, for example, it’s about showing “a clear connection between your past achievements and your future direction,” writes Safani. “If your resume merely represents your chronology it may be difficult for a hiring manager to understand how your past experience relates to their current position. This is especially true if you are trying to transition to a new job function or industry. Your resume needs to be idiot proof. Be sure to connect the dots between past performance and future value to the organization (I recommend a profile at the top of the resume to accomplish this). No one will connect the dots for you. Take the time to create a clear roadmap from past accomplishments to future value,” Safani says.

Similarly, in a report by ExecuNet, “Overcoming Today’s Toughest Resume Challenges,” author Marji McClure suggests that preparing a strong resume requires candidates to take a closer look at the past (and what they have accomplished in their career for previous employers) as well as the future (how they can bring the knowledge gained from those accomplishments and achieve similar successes for a new employer.)

One way to do that, says resume writer Jessica Hernandez, is to incorporate language into your accomplishments statements that shows your commitment to the previous organization as the driving force behind your accomplishments; for example, stating that you “organized and conducted organizational-development research to further the company’s mission of enhancing its work environment and employee morale.”

Hernandez explains that “by showing that you were invested in your previous company’s mission, the prospective employer can assume you’ll feel the same way about it.”

### *Rehearsing communicating about accomplishments*

Ideally at this point, you’ve identified raw accomplishments using the prompts found at <http://www.quintcareers.com/accomplishments/> and are refining them using the guidelines in this white paper. While many of your uses for your inventory of accomplishments will be in writing, many others – such as networking and job interviewing – will require oral delivery. You’ll want to rehearse speaking them as part of your refinement process to see how they sound.

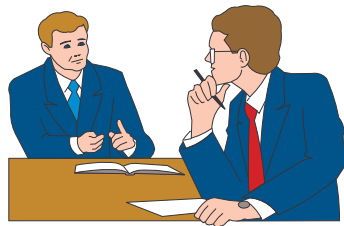
But rehearsal offers other benefits. Even mental rehearsal helps you to learn what your accomplishments are and boosts your confidence. “Rehearse your accomplishments,” advises career trainer Bob McIntosh. “Recite them to friends, family, networking partners, to anyone who will listen. Relating your accomplishments to others will give you a sense of pride and increase your self-esteem. This is a key component in understanding who you are.”

Experts frequently cite rehearsal’s positive effect on a job interviewee’s self-assurance. In an academic article, Victoria Seitz and William Cohen write that “through mental rehearsal, job-seekers can practice interviews with a successful outcome until the unconscious mind believes it has already happened.”

Mental rehearsal, for many years espoused by sports psychologists and practiced by athletes to relieve anxiety, contains the important element of visualizing success. Peak-performance expert Peter Murphy, who notes that rehearsal's success is based on neuro-linguistic programming, recommends that you mentally rehearse both from the interviewer's perspective and your own. "In your imagination," Murphy writes, "visualize yourself at the interview comfortable and at ease meeting people, feeling relaxed and confident." Positive self-talk will help ward off any self-doubt that may creep in during the rehearsal.

One technique is to rehearse accomplishments aloud by yourself, enabling you to hear how they sound and adjust your verbiage as needed.

Recording these rehearsals and then listening to the



recordings from the audience's perspective can help you refine and polish substandard accomplishment stories. You can also try rehearsing in front of a mirror to check out your nonverbal mannerisms.

Written rehearsal is another effective technique. Composing and refining your accomplishment stories will help cement them in your mind and help you refine them.

Rehearsal as a technique for successful job-interview preparation is the entire premise behind *The Interview Rehearsal Book* by Deb Gottesman and Buzz Mauro. They advise practice in telling accomplishments stories but caution against memorization, which will

result in the candidate's sounding "stilted and mechanical" in interviews. "Instead, ad-lib from your memory of what you've written," the authors recommend. Research on memory has stressed the role of rehearsal and repetition.

### *Titling your accomplishments*

Once you have a refined inventory of accomplishments, given each one a title. Doing so will help you better remember them when called upon, say in an interview.

### *Checklist for refining your accomplishments*

- Is the accomplishment recent? For job-seeking, ideally accomplishments should focus on the last two years and/or your two most recent jobs. Not every accomplishment needs to be recent; sometimes accomplishments about early interest in your field can be effective. But the majority of accomplishments should be fairly recent.
- Is the theme of the accomplishment clear? Can the audience easily identify the accomplishment, skill, trait, passion, value, etc., that the accomplishment intends to convey?
- Is the accomplishment compelling? Will it draw in the audience? Is it interesting? Will the audience want to learn how it turns out? Suspense isn't required, but it doesn't hurt.
- Does the accomplishment have an overall positive tone and end on a positive note? It's vital and expected

to have many accomplishments that start with a problem or negative situation. Still, the overall tone of the



accomplishment should remain positive. You should not cast blame or negativity on past employers or team members. Most importantly, your accomplishment should end on a positive note. A few accomplishments in your inventory may simply not have a positive outcome, but end on an optimistic note by talking about lessons learned and how you will improve in the future.

- Have you given yourself enough credit? Especially when talking about team projects, be sure you make your role clear and give yourself sufficient credit. Praise the team, but emphasize your own contribution to the team's success over the team's success itself.
- Have you asked yourself, "So what?" Put yourself in the mindset of an employer asking "so what?" about each of your accomplishments. Does the accomplishment address something that's important to an employer? If your accomplishment can't answer the "so what" question for a specific employer or type of employer, you may want to consider a different one.
- Have you included a variety of accomplishments? Your inventory should feature accomplishments that cover a variety of skills, values, traits, interests, strengths. While most should come from recent jobs, it's fine to include a few from school,

hobbies, sports, organizations, and your personal life. If you're a job-seeker, try to find outside-of-work accomplishments that pertain to skills needed on the job.

- Have you added metrics where appropriate?

Now that you've polished your raw accomplishments into dazzling AccomplishNuggets, you're ready to apply them.

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To see a growing collection of content about accomplishments, see this section of Quintessential Careers:

<http://www.quintcareers.com/accomplishments/>

### About the author

Katharine (Kathy) Hansen, Ph.D., creative director and associate publisher of Quintessential Careers, is an educator, author, and blogger who provides content for Quintessential Careers, edits its newsletter QuintZine, and blogs about storytelling at A Storied Career. Kathy, who earned her PhD from Union Institute & University authored *Tell Me About Yourself*, *Dynamic Cover Letters for New Graduates*, *A Foot in the Door*, *Top Notch Executive Interviews*, *Top Notch Executive Resumes*; and with Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D., *Dynamic Cover Letters*, *Write Your Way to a Higher GPA*, and *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Study Skills*.

