

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Beat the 2026 ATS (and Get Found by AI Search)

Two filters stand between you and your next role: the applicant tracking system, and the AI your future employer now asks first.

INTRODUCTION

Two Filters You Can't See

You used to compete against other candidates. Now you compete against software before a human ever opens your resume, and increasingly, against whatever answer an AI tool gives when someone asks it who's good at what you do. Both filters run on rules you were never shown, and both can be worked with once you know what they're actually checking for.

The first filter is the applicant tracking system (ATS): the software that parses, scores, and often silently discards resumes before a recruiter sees them. Most mid-size and large employers use one. The second filter is newer and less visible: AI search and assistant tools that recruiters, hiring managers, and even clients now query directly, "who's a strong candidate for X," "find me a freelancer who does Y." Getting past the first filter gets you into a pipeline. Getting picked up by the second gets you found before you even apply.

This guide covers both: the concrete formatting and keyword fixes that get a resume through an ATS intact, and the underused practice of Generative Engine Optimization (GEO), structuring your online presence so AI tools can actually find, trust, and recommend you.

SECTION 1

Beat the ATS

Most ATS rejections have nothing to do with whether you're qualified. They happen because the software couldn't parse your resume correctly, or because it never found the keywords it was scored against. Fix the mechanics first, they cost you nothing and they're the reason strong candidates disappear before a human ever weighs in.

FORMATTING THAT SURVIVES PARSING

Skip tables, text boxes, and columns. Many ATS parsers read left to right, top to bottom, in a single stream. A two-column layout or a table can scramble your work history into nonsense on the system's end, even though it looks clean to you.

Use standard section headers. "Work Experience," "Education," "Skills," not creative relabels like "My Journey" or "Where I've Been." The parser is often matching against a fixed list of expected headers.

Save as .docx unless the posting says otherwise. Most ATS platforms parse Word files more reliably than PDFs, especially older systems. If the application explicitly requests PDF, use PDF, otherwise .docx is the safer default.

No headers, footers, or images for contact info. Content placed in a document header or footer is skipped by many parsers entirely, including your name and phone number.

Standard fonts only. Arial, Calibri, Georgia, Times New Roman. Decorative or condensed fonts can be misread character by character.

Formatting gets you parsed. Keywords get you scored. Most ATS platforms rank resumes by how closely their language mirrors the job description, not by how impressive your history reads to a human. That means tailoring per application isn't optional anymore, it's the single highest-leverage thing you can do per job post.

PROMPT • KEYWORD MATCH CHECK

Compare this job description and my resume. List the exact skills, tools, and phrases the posting uses that my resume doesn't currently include, but that I genuinely have experience with. Don't suggest anything I'd have to fabricate.

Paste both in full. The goal isn't to stuff keywords, it's to close honest gaps between how you describe your work and how the employer described the role. If a skill isn't genuinely yours, leave it out, an ATS pass that leads to an interview you can't back up isn't a win.

PROMPT • BULLET REWRITE

Rewrite this bullet point to lead with a measurable result, use language closer to this job posting, and stay under 2 lines: [paste bullet + job posting excerpt]

A bullet that says "responsible for social media" scores lower, and reads weaker, than one that says "grew organic reach 40% across 3 channels in 6 months." Numbers aren't decoration, they're what both the ATS and the human reading it are actually scanning for.

SECTION 2

Get Found by AI Search (GEO)

Generative Engine Optimization is the practice formerly known, loosely, as "the SEO of the AI era": structuring what's publicly true about you online so that when someone asks ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google's AI Overviews, or Claude a question you're a good answer to, you're the one that comes back. It's not a trick. These tools retrieve and summarize real, crawlable, consistent information, which means the fix is mostly about removing the reasons an AI tool would skip you.

MAKE SURE YOU CAN BE CRAWLED

If you run a personal site or portfolio, check its robots.txt file. Confirm it doesn't block GPTBot, PerplexityBot, ClaudeBot, or Google-Extended, the crawlers behind the major AI answer engines. Many site builders block these by default to prevent AI training on content, which also quietly makes you invisible to AI search.

STAY CONSISTENT EVERYWHERE

Your name, role, and location should read the same way on LinkedIn, your personal site, and your portfolio, the same pattern search engines have used for local business listings for years (often called NAP consistency: name, area, profession). Mismatches make AI tools less confident you're one person worth citing, not three unrelated ones.

SIGNAL YOU'RE ACTIVE

AI answer engines weight freshness. A LinkedIn profile last touched two years ago, or a portfolio with a 2023 case study as its newest entry, reads as dormant. Update your "About" section, add a recent project, or publish something short but dated every few weeks, small, regular signals beat one big overhaul.

TEST YOUR OWN VISIBILITY

Ask ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google's AI Overview a version of the question a client or recruiter would actually type: "who's a good [your role] in [your city/niche]" or "freelance [your specialty] with experience in [your industry]." If you don't appear, that's your baseline, not a failure, and a reason to recheck the two boxes above.

PROMPT · GEO CONSISTENCY CHECK

Here's my LinkedIn About section, my portfolio bio, and my personal site bio: [paste all 3]. Flag any inconsistencies in how I describe my role, location, or specialty across them, and suggest one unified version I can adapt to each platform's tone.

Do this once, then re-check every time you materially update one of the three. Drift happens quietly, a title update on LinkedIn that never makes it to your site is exactly the kind of mismatch that costs you a citation.

*The ATS decides whether your application survives.
GEO decides whether you're even found before you apply.
Neither replaces being good at the work. Both decide whether anyone finds out you are.*

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