

Writing a Successful CV

When applying for a new position, your CV will convey an important first impression to your potential employer. They may be faced with hundreds of applications for one position, and you want yours to go straight into the pile destined for interview, not the one bound for waste paper.

CV stands for ‘Curriculum Vitae’, which is Latin for ‘life story’. We review how best to convey yours.

Here are 10 initial rules to follow:

1. **Simplicity:** don't overcomplicate a CV with too many categories or too much information.
2. **Highlights:** make sure that your CV highlights all of your achievements in your career and personal life to date. Think of your CV as an opportunity to market yourself.
3. **Truthful:** you want to highlight your achievements, but you do not want to sound overly boastful, and you certainly should not fabricate information as this will become obvious to your employer at some point.
4. **Unique:** use a style and tone which are personal to ‘you’, but do so subtly. Be positive, direct, and personal. Use ‘I’ statements.
5. **Tailor:** the content of your standard CV should be customised according to each individual job application in line with the job description.
6. **Word Processed:** complete your CV on a word processor and ensure that as well as using a spell check, you have checked the document over for any typing mistakes or formatting errors. Avoid poor English or slang.
7. **Succinct:** be concise. Employers will not be impressed by several pages of useless information. Keep it short (ideally two, but a maximum of three pages) but do not squash information in – keep it well spaced so that it is easier to read. You should leave employers wanting to find out more.
8. **Chronological:** put the information in reverse chronological order with the most recent events first under each heading.
9. **Review:** ask the opinion of a respected colleague or manager. Get a second pair of eyes to critically review what you have written.
10. **Quality:** use good quality (not coloured), A4 paper and always choose an appropriate type font, to ensure that your CV looks as neat and professional as possible. It should not be packed with text, but have some white space. Bullet points are a good way of displaying text.

As well as following the above golden rules, adhere to the following format:

Personal details

This section should include your name and contact information only. Do not offer details of your date of birth, place of birth, children, health or marital status, which could lead to discrimination.

Personal profile

It is up to you whether or not you want to include this section. It is usually one sentence which provides a concise insight into who you are and your strengths/achievements to date.

Carefully consider this section. Many end up in clichés, such as ‘I work well both individually and in a team’, which become statements that employers just ignore. Instead, site tangible competency-based examples of things you have done and achieved. This will show and prove that you have the skills they are looking for rather than just saying it.

Work history

Work experience starting with the most recent or most relevant. Try not to leave any gaps; although you may not have been in paid employment, it is likely that you were doing something at the time which you learned new skills from. For each previous position, include the job title, organisation worked for, dates employed, projects involved in, responsibilities, achievements and experience gained.

Education

Again, start with the most recent (or most relevant) e.g. university and then work back from there. Don't outline in detail your GCSEs/O levels/Highers (or equivalent exams). You can group these together, for example, 9 GCSEs. You may wish to include membership of any professional bodies here or in a separate section.

Skills

This section may come before the work history on your CV, if you believe this is appropriate. Include languages and computing skills, noting level of fluency and evidence of using them.

Hobbies/interests

Ensure that this section is kept up-to-date.

References

Some people wish to include two references here. Try to pick two reliable contacts from two different sources. Include their contact details, job title and link to you. Alternatively, many applicants omit this information, or state that references are available on request. Make sure you ask permission from your referees to use them as a contact.

Tips

You need to grab the attention of the reader quickly. You might like to do this by putting your personal details to the end of your CV (but keep your name at the beginning).

The most prestigious point on your CV is on the first page, just above half way down. Make sure you put important information here, such as your personal

profile, or your skills description. Another good place is at the top of the second page. These are the places that will attract employers' attention when scanning CVs.

Remember, don't just state what you have done, but include the skills you have used along the way.

There are computer packages that can help you write your CV, or commercial companies that will charge you to produce a CV. However, be aware that these are very impersonal ways of producing your CV. You need your personality to show through, and to develop a unique style. Some employers say they can spot CVs produced by these means.

A CV should always be sent with a tailored covering letter.

Covering letters

Covering letters are a vital part of your CV. It is the first thing potential employees will see, so if it is of poor quality, they can dismiss your application before they even get to your CV.

Your covering letter is where you should make your sales pitch. It should encourage employees to read on and persuade them that you are worth pursuing.

- Make sure you address the letter to the right person. This will either be given on the job advertisement, or you will have to do some research (e.g. looking at their website or telephoning the organisation).
- It should be no longer than one side of A4 and three to four paragraphs long. It should be written in the style of a business letter with your address and the address of the employee at the top.
- Don't just repeat what is in your CV. You should aim to give employees a flavour of what is on your CV, by highlighting more your skills than your background.
- Ask someone to proofread the letter for you.
- Format:

a) Introduce yourself.

b) State the job you are applying for and where you saw it advertised.

c) Explain why you are interested in the job and their organisation. Do some research around the organisation so you can include some specific information.

d) Outline what makes you perfect for the job. What is it about your unique blend of knowledge, skills and experience that that makes you ideal? e)

Conclude the letter positively.

Speculative applications

Speculative applications are a highly successful method of gaining access to the hidden job market. Jobs that are not advertised account for about 80% of the available vacancies.[1] If you can show employees that you are motivated and enthused enough by their organisation to contact them directly, you are in with a good chance of gaining a response.

You are also likely to stay on their books, so will be considered first when positions become available.

Your covering letter is vital to a good speculative application, and it will need a slightly different tone, i.e. persuasive. You should state why you are interested in their organisation, and what line of work you are interested in. You should show that you know about the organisation and highlight why your skills and abilities suit the line of work.

Research who you should contact, you will probably have to telephone the organisation to ask for the appropriate name. Conclude the letter by saying you will follow up this contact with a telephone call within a certain period.

Include your CV into the speculative application, and make sure you tailor it to the type of job you are looking for.

[1] Brain Sutton, *Career Networking: The Insider Guide* (The Industrial Society, 2000).