

CVs and covering letters

CV content

What is a CV?

The term 'curriculum vitae' literally means 'course of life'. However, a CV should not be a list of all your experiences and achievements. It should be a document that demonstrates your suitability for a particular job and company. It should show, in an ordered and methodical way, how your profile matches the employer's needs.

When employers ask for a CV, they're setting you the task of inventing an 'original' application for the job. This is different from an application form, which asks all candidates to fill in the same boxes under the same headings. The CV really is a unique selling document. It's an opportunity to make yourself stand out. It will be different for every application you make.

The decisions about which CV style to use, what to include and omit, what to emphasise, and how to order the information, are all determined by what is the best way to sell yourself to an employer who has a specific vacancy. Your CV is never 'done'. It's constantly revised and rewritten for each new application.

In the US, the term 'résumé' is usually used to distinguish this more marketed document from an academically focused biography, although in the UK the terms are more interchangeable.

The way you present information on your CV is relatively flexible and will depend on what you have to offer. However, it's generally recognised that all CVs tend to include the following sections.

Personal details

Keep this section brief - no more than a quarter of a page. Ensure you're easily contactable at the address given and if necessary include term-time and home addresses with dates for availability at each.

Email addresses are useful. Choose one that reflects well upon you - not for example, as one graduate employer reported: iamamuppetandiknowit@hotmail.com.

In or out?

- *Date of birth* has been a usual but not mandatory feature on CVs. Age discrimination legislation made this a less legitimate CV requirement from October 2006.
- *Nationality* is not mandatory but can be useful, particularly to clarify your ability to work in a country. International students may wish to use this section to clarify their work permit status. Although some international students choose not to include nationality on a CV, some UK employers do not recruit non-EU nationals who need work permits, and may even screen out applicants at a later stage of selection if their nationality was not previously disclosed.

- *Marital status, gender and health status* are not included unless this information is specifically and legitimately requested for the post.

Personal profile/career objective

If you use a profile, keep it brief at three or four lines maximum. Use it to demonstrate your career focus and/or current aims and perhaps evidence of two or three main strengths and where they were developed. This is a part of your CV which is likely to change with every application see our [sample CVs](#). You may want to tailor the profile to reflect company ethos and values. Avoid generic skills statements such as 'good communicator, team worker with strong analytical skills'. Make the personal profile relevant to the vacancy and employer.

Profiles are optional and this information could alternatively be included in your covering letter.

Education

Details about your education are usually stated in reverse chronological order, with your most recent experiences first, back to your secondary level education. Include dates, the name of the institution, and town. Full addresses are not required. Integrate your education and qualifications into one section. Think about the relevance of the information.

Summarise GCSEs but market your later education more fully and use language that will be familiar to the employer. Suggestions include a list of relevant modules, information about projects and dissertations undertaken, average grades to date or predicted results, and/or skills developed. For example:

- data analysis, interpreting statistical information and experience with relevant computer packages;
- teamworking, communication and presentation skills developed during group projects;
- creativity, initiative and design ability for artistic studies.

It can be tempting to try to cover up a poor grade by not mentioning it at all, but there may be ways of limiting the damage on paper. If you're unsure about how to approach this, consult your careers adviser.

Experience

All work experience counts, whether paid, voluntary or shadowing. Aim for reverse chronological order with rough dates to illustrate how long you were there. Focus on your responsibilities, achievements in the role, and illustrations of where skills were used or developed. Try to give yourself a job title and use terminology relevant to the post you're applying for or that shows commercial awareness.

You may wish to create a separate section for experience particularly relevant to the post you're applying for. Typical headers might be: 'relevant experience', 'technical experience' or 'legal experience'. Similarly, as you gain more work experience, it may be appropriate to group some experiences together.

An *example* would be:

Summer 2004: A variety of customer service roles including bar work, waitressing and telesales. Developed an awareness of customer relationship management and improved my influencing skills when working with challenging clients under pressure.

Positions of responsibility, achievements, interests

These are all relevant sections to include and can be used to demonstrate that you're motivated to pursue other activities, have an interest in a relevant career, and take the initiative to develop your involvements and skills. Again, try to focus on recent achievements and what your contributions were, what skills you developed and what the outcomes were. Employers will not necessarily spend time trying to make sense of your experience.

Referees

- Two referees are the norm, one academic and one work-related, or a character referee if allowed.
- Give their phone number and email along with their title and full contact address.
- Always ask for their permission first and remember to keep them informed of your career aspirations and achievements to date.
- If a reference from your immediate manager is not possible, consider using someone else in the company.
- If using an international referee, it's a good idea to confirm with them that they can provide a fax or email in English.
- If you're running out of space, and referees' details are not explicitly requested, it's acceptable to state 'References available upon request'.

CV layout

Aim

Good and appropriate CV layout is critical to show effectively how your skills match the requirements for a particular post. In the first instance, the employer is looking at your ingenuity in addressing the challenge of making the connection between yourself and their job.

Focus

Your CV layout itself demonstrates motivation and respect for the employer. The person reading the CV will usually be the person who wrote the job specification or newspaper advertisement. If your layout is focused on the information they provided, they will be more likely to shortlist you. The care you take to target, interpret and prioritise your experiences also demonstrates effective written communication skills.

Accessibility

The employer will probably scan rather than read the CV, so it's essential that the layout makes it easy to navigate. This means a strong internal logic with headings and consistent use of effects. Make sure you're giving the reader strong visual signals about how the CV should be read.

To make it look good

- Ideally the font size of regular text should 11 or 12. Don't be tempted to cram in more text in a smaller font. You should be able to hold your CV at arm's length and still read it comfortably.
- Use headings likely to engage the employer such as 'Relevant Skills & Experience'.
- Better still, use headings taken from the employer's original advertisement or job specification.
- Avoid large blocks of text that won't be read.
- Split information into individual focused bullet points.
- Start sentences with competency-based words that emphasise the skill, quality or attribute you're presenting.
- CVs should be two pages maximum, unless you're applying for an academic research position.
- Use good quality paper.
- Always check spelling and grammar. Ask a careers adviser or third party to read through the final version.
- In the main, graphics and gimmicks are to be avoided.
- Using tables and charts can make a CV look cluttered and detract from the information given.
- Overall, try to use a consistent style and format and don't overdo underlining and capitals.
- Try a different or larger font for headings and use bold for emphasis.
- For some creative roles, an alternative approach may be appreciated but keep it original and professional.

Sample CVs

Particular CV styles can help to highlight your relevant strengths, depending on your experiences to date. Many people find a combination of styles effective. All CVs should be targeted either to meet the requirements of an advertised vacancy or, if you're making a speculative approach, to appeal to a particular employer.

The chronological CV

This is the most familiar format, outlining your experiences in reverse chronological order with sections for education, experience and achievements. It's easy to organise and demonstrates how you've progressed over time. However, it may not be as suitable if you've changed jobs frequently, have disparate experiences or are looking to change career direction. Have a look at the [sample Chronological CV](#) . This CV is targeted at the [sample job advertisement for the High Roller Group](#) and would be sent with the [Standard covering letter](#).

The skills-based CV

This CV focuses on demonstrating evidence of relevant skills. Use relevant skill headings to present your evidence - educational and work experience descriptions are kept brief. This style of CV is more difficult to organise but, if you focus on the right skills, it can show you've considered the needs of the employer. Have a look at the [Skills-based CV](#) . This CV is targeted at the [sample job advertisement for the High Roller Group](#) and would be sent with the [Standard covering letter](#).

The academic CV

This type of targeted CV differs mainly in the degree of emphasis given to knowledge and academic achievements. For an academic or research career, appropriate headings might include:

- dissertation and/or research abstracts;

- research interests and/or areas of expertise;
- teaching and/or administrative experience;
- publications;
- presentations or conferences attended;
- professional memberships;
- fellowships and awards.

(See [Academic CV](#) .)

Remember that your research interests should be comprehensible to people outside your field but scholarly enough to interest fellow researchers. Lastly, try not to neglect your transferable skills and use a professional layout. Academic employers want academic staff who are motivated team players, and can manage projects, bring in funding and communicate concisely and professionally.

For further information on marketing a PhD effectively, see [Your PhD ... What Next?](#) (<http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/YourPhD>) If you're a postgraduate but not looking for an academic career, your CV should follow an alternative layout.

Electronic CVs (ESCVs)

When submitting a CV online, be aware of who will see it.

- Is your formatting readable by all IT packages?
- Will an elaborate layout travel electronically?
- Will a generic CV template used by an online agency be sufficiently targeted to your preferred career?

Some recruiters use scanning equipment for CVs submitted online, so try to consider any key criteria or attributes they may be looking for. A company will usually warn you in advance if they're using this system.

- The system extracts key data such as name, address, phone number, skills and qualifications, previous employers and positions.
- Data relating to your qualification levels, competencies and specific and transferable skills are matched with requirements for the job on offer.
- Make sure that you're using key words and phrases that would be relevant to your chosen vocational area.
- See [power words](#) for advice on useful words and phrases to use.
- Use a normal typeface such as Times New Roman or Arial.
- Do not use underlining or italics.

Try to establish the policy regarding the privacy of your personal details.

Some people prefer just to submit an email address or a hyperlink to their own website.

Be aware that there are some bogus sites listing fictitious vacancies, which forward your CV to hundreds of employers. Look for established user protection with password controls.

Covering letters

Your CV should always be accompanied by a covering letter. This gives you an opportunity to give your CV some context.

The covering letter is the principal way in which you can demonstrate your understanding of the employing organisation and how you relate to its values, ethos and aspirations. While your CV sets out the skills you have for the post, your covering letter more explicitly

presents your motivation and adaptability. A covering letter should:

- demonstrate to the employer your interest in and knowledge of the company;
- highlight particular parts of your CV that are your unique selling points;
- draw attention to additional information that does not fit easily into a CV;
- explain any personal circumstances or anomalies in your application.

Well-written covering letters are also particularly effective for speculative applications outside a recruitment cycle.

Style

- Address your letter to a named person. Especially with speculative applications, you should phone the company and find out the name of the person who deals with recruitment. This will ensure that it reaches the right person. It also gives you a contact name for a follow-up call or email.
- Think from the employer's perspective rather than your own. Tell them what you can contribute to the organisation rather than how it can benefit you.
- Ideally your covering letter should be no more than one page long and with short and clearly themed paragraphs.

Content

The following format provides a useful overview for a letter:

- Briefly introduce yourself, state what position you're applying for and where you saw it advertised. For a speculative letter, specify the type of work you're looking for.
- Explain why you're interested in this type of work, demonstrating an understanding of what it's likely to involve.
- Explain why you're interested in working for this particular employer. Demonstrate enthusiasm and evidence of research into such aspects as their successes, involvements, values or clients.
- Highlight the ways in which you're suitable for this position. Provide evidence of your key strengths by referring to experience listed on your CV. Aim to show that your key strengths reflect the requirements of the employer and position.
- Take the opportunity, if necessary, to explain any anomalies in your background, such as any time gaps or any ways in which you don't match the selection criteria. Perhaps explain how any hurdles you've encountered have helped you develop in a positive way.
- Indicate availability for interview.

Disclosure of disability

You may feel that your health or disability doesn't affect your ability to do the job for which you're applying, and that the employer won't view you objectively if the disability is declared. This is your choice. At the same time, disclosure can be positive when it shows how you've developed skills in adverse circumstances or have overcome significant obstacles to reach your current level of achievement.

Disclosure also improves your access to equal opportunities and training schemes in place under current legislation. There may be a health and safety implication, e.g. a requirement for workplace adaptations, which the employer needs to know from the outset. Failure to disclose the truth on an application form when asked, or on a medical form, could give rise to dismissal later on.

Refer to the [sample CVs](#) for ideas about how to refer positively to relevant experience related to your disability.

A covering letter may refer to disability in terms such as:

'My enthusiasm and determination can be demonstrated by voluntary work. As a member of the National Diabetic Association, I help to raise funds to increase awareness. Having diabetes and achieving high academic grades, working part time throughout my studies and raising large amounts of money through organising sponsored events, has developed my flexibility and ability to meet targets and manage my work effectively'.

More information can be found in the [handling discrimination](#) section.

Example covering letters

- [Standard covering letter](#)
- [Covering letter from an international student](#)
- [Covering letter for a student with a disability](#)

Job applications: Contacts and resources

Most university careers services run sessions to provide feedback on your CV, covering letter or an application form. These are worth a visit and can generate new suggestions, strategies or a fresh pair of eyes. If you no longer have access to your service, the Prospects.ac.uk website has a section for graduates.

Looking Good on Paper

Job Seeking Strategies (<http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/JobHunt>)

Selection Success In One

Black and Asian Grad (<http://www.blackandasiangrad.ac.uk>)

Employers' Forum on Disability (<http://www.employers-forum.co.uk>)

SKILL (National Bureau for Students with Disabilities) (<http://www.skill.org.uk>)

The UK GRAD Programme (<http://www.grad.ac.uk>)

The Art of Building Windmills: Career Tactics for the 21st Century (<http://windmillsonline.co.uk/pdf/abw.pdf>)

Stonewall (<http://www.stonewall.org.uk>)

Monster (<http://www.monster.co.uk>)

Total Jobs (<http://www.totaljobs.com/>)

Killer CVs and Hidden Approaches

Great CVs.co.uk (<http://www.greatcv.co.uk>)

How to Write a Great CV

Preparing the Perfect CV

The Right Way to Write Your Own CV

Guardian Jobs (<http://jobs.guardian.co.uk/>)

Higher Education and Research Opportunities in the UK (HERO) (<http://www.hero.ac.uk>)

Contacts and resources

Publications

The following AGCAS publications should be available in your university careers service.

AGCAS publications

Looking Good on Paper, AGCAS Video, 1996

Selection Success In One, AGCAS DVD, 2004

Other publications

How to Write a Great CV, How To Books Ltd, 2006

Killer CVs and Hidden Approaches, [Pearson Education](#), 2007

Preparing the Perfect CV, [Kogan Page](#), 2006

The Right Way to Write Your Own CV, [Right Way Books](#), 2007

Websites

The Art of Building Windmills: Career Tactics for the 21st Century,
<http://windmillsonline.co.uk/pdf/abw.pdf>

Black and Asian Grad, <http://www.blackandasiangrad.ac.uk>

Employers' Forum on Disability, <http://www.employers-forum.co.uk>

Great CVs.co.uk, <http://www.greatcvs.co.uk>

Guardian Jobs, <http://jobs.guardian.co.uk/>

Higher Education and Research Opportunities in the UK (HERO), <http://www.hero.ac.uk>

Job Seeking Strategies, <http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/JobHunt>

Monster, <http://www.monster.co.uk>

SKILL (National Bureau for Students with Disabilities), <http://www.skill.org.uk>

Stonewall, <http://www.stonewall.org.uk>

Total Jobs, <http://www.totaljobs.com/>

The UK GRAD Programme, <http://www.grad.ac.uk>

Your PhD ... What Next?, <http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/YourPhD>



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