

Preparing a winning CV



1. CVs: The basics

Whether a potential employer asks to see your curriculum vitae, CV or resume, they're looking for one thing...

... a document that proves why you're the ideal candidate to invest their time and money in. Essentially it's a sales brochure, pinpointing the interesting USPs (unique selling points) that make you stand out from the crowd. There's no universally accepted format, but your CV should cover these elements:

• Your details

Include your name, address, phone numbers and email address so any interested employers can contact you easily. Information such as nationality, age and driving licence status are optional.

• **Personal statement** - One paragraph that immediately captures the attention of your reader and entices them to find out more about you. Be careful not to cram too much in. Instead take your main skill and relate it to the job you're after to show employers why you meet their needs.

• **Work experience** - List your most recent position first, continuing in reverse chronological order including the name, location, website and dates of your employment for each company you have worked for. Aim to use bullet points wherever possible to highlight your responsibilities and achievements in each role so the person scanning your CV can quickly match up your experience with their job description.

• **Education** - Again, in reverse chronological order, give brief details of your academic and professional qualifications along with the grades you achieved. If you're looking for your first job since leaving education, include this information above any work experience.

• **Skills** - Whether you realise it or not you will have picked up many skills over the years, some tangible, some less so. Include every IT package or programme you have used as well as any foreign language skills you have gained, and state whether you're at a basic, intermediate or advanced level. Skills such as communication and project management are harder to substantiate and should be backed up with examples.

• **Hobbies & Interests** - Including these is optional and often used to fill up space at the end of the document. The idea is to give the interviewer a more rounded picture and, perhaps, something more personal to discuss at an interview.

• **References** - It's not necessary to list referees on your CV, but you should state that details are available on request. If this is your first job, it's a good idea to nominate tutors or mentors. You'll obviously need to choose references that you're confident will give positive remarks, but you should also make sure they would be easily contactable by potential employers when the time comes.

• **A clear and simple** layout - Always keep your CV to two pages of A4. It should be clear to anyone reading your CV where to find the information they're looking for, with enough 'white space' to ensure they're not overawed at first glance. The purpose of this document is not to get you the job, but to get you an interview. Always remember you're not writing a CV for yourself, you are writing it for your reader. As you write your CV, put yourself in their shoes. Keep it short, to the point and, above all else, interesting. Due to the high volume of applications they receive, a recruiter will generally spend at most 20 seconds initially reviewing each CV, so it's important to get it right. If you follow the structure outlined above, you're on the right track to presenting the information in a clear, concise and persuasive way. Things to watch out for Time spent making sure your CV is crisp and relevant is always time well spent. There are plenty of simple mistakes that are often overlooked that will turn your readers off before they've gone much further than your name and address.

What should you leave out of your CV?

- ❖ Photos - the only people who need to include these are models, actors, actresses and possibly air cabin crew.
- ❖ Any sort of failure - exams, marriages, businesses, etc.
- ❖ Reasons for leaving each job.
- ❖ Salary information - this can only be used to reject your application. If an advertisement specifically requests this information you can always include the information in your cover letter.
- ❖ Fancy patterns/borders - these detract from your presentation
- ❖ Leave out age (put in date of birth instead - but, even date of birth may not be required), weight, height, health, or any other personal information that is irrelevant to your application.

And finally...

- Resist the urge to jazz up your CV with images or colour
- Steer clear of long paragraphs
- Careful use of bold type can be effective, but don't overdo it
- Underlining should be reserved for website links only
- Use typefaces like 'Times New Roman' or 'Arial' - they're easier to read
- Avoid using font sizes smaller than 11pt, employers won't strain their eyes to read
- Don't use txt speak and only use abbreviations if they're universally known

Check for spelling or typographical errors. Any errors are your responsibility and are one of the first things employers use to weed out the weaker candidates. Even if the role you're after doesn't require a high level of literacy, spelling errors scream lack of care, which is an undesirable quality for any recruiter. Don't put all your faith in a spell checker as many are set to American settings as a default. If you're not sure about a word, look it up in a dictionary. Before you distribute your finished document or upload it to the Internet, get someone to look over it. Professional CV checkers see hundreds of CVs every day and can immediately spot things that may put off a potential employer.

2. CVs: An advanced guide

You've got the basic elements of your skills and experience down, now you need to fine-tune your CV to ensure it's got the 'X-Factor' that will have employers queuing up for your services.

Understanding your audience

As your personal marketing campaign, your CV must make the reader believe you're a worthwhile product. Business people generally have the same objectives; profit, bigger market share, developing their business and creating new products for their customers. They will look for candidates who will help them to achieve these objectives.

Whether you have two months or 20 years worth of experience, the rules are the same – show what you've done or have the potential to bring to their business.

How can you identify an achievement?

They come in all shapes and sizes and are different for every job. For some you will be able to show concrete evidence such as percentage increases in sales or money saved by streamlining. For others you will need to work harder to show that the influence you had on a project or task made a major impact. A statement such as, "Used new sales channels to increase market share beyond the UK, resulting in a 25% increase in turnover." suggests you used creativity, initiative and drive to reach a certain goal..

Try to pick at least one specific example per job you've held and explain briefly how it improved the business. It can't be stressed often enough that your CV is designed to get you the interview, not the job so remember not to delve into too much detail. Provide enough information to entice your potential employers to call you in so you can explain face-to-face the exact details of the tasks you've undertaken and the skills you have learnt.

Many jobseekers underestimate the achievements they have made and undervalue their impact on the business as a whole. Don't just say you were "ordering stationary", you were "responsible for ensuring the company had the necessary resources to operate efficiently". Always keep examples relevant to the role you are applying for.

Personal achievements are also valuable pieces to include as they often show focus and commitment that will impress recruiters. But be careful not to give valuable space to insignificant achievements. As you refine your CV, discard any content that is not selling you in the right way.

Avoiding alienation

From management speak to obscure abbreviations, the world of business is packed full of clichés, and most of us hate them. Do your reader the courtesy of avoiding clangers like 'team player', 'results orientated' and 'good communicator'. Be very careful of using abbreviations, especially if you're changing industry. The first person who evaluates your CV is usually somebody in the HR team who may not be an expert in your field. They will be given a rundown of requirements to mark CVs against so statements like 'extensive experience in working with QCIs' may mean nothing to them, even if it's an impressive skill that means you could do the job with your hands tied behind your back.

Skills for all occasions

There are countless transferable skills that can be used for many jobs in many companies. If you're looking to change industry, remember that although an employer may not need your skills on a certain IT package, they may be impressed that you have the ability to pick up new software quickly.

Explaining gaps in your CV

There are many reasons why your CV may have gaps and recruiters don't look down on candidates with them. They are suspicious however when these gaps are not clarified, so make sure they are explained in a positive manner.

Here are a few common gaps and how to give them a positive spin:

- Extended holidays - Communication and organisational skills are always important, so say how your break helped you develop these areas. Any languages you may have picked up will also be a major bonus.
- Family issues - There's no need to go into detail on personal reasons for taking time away from work, as essentially it's nobody else's business. A three or four word description is enough.
- Nothing in the market - It happens, so don't hide it. Try suggesting you were waiting for the right opportunity to come along.

3. Classic CV mistakes

It's deceptively easy to make mistakes on your CV and exceptionally difficult to repair the damage once an employer gets it. Prevention is critical, so here are the most common pitfalls, and how you can avoid them.

- **Spelling and grammar** - Even in roles where writing is not necessarily a key skill, poor writing shows a lack of care which no Manager will want in their team. Never trust a computer's spell checker and always get someone else to read through your CV to spot any errors that you may have overlooked. Grammar can be tweaked by reading a piece out loud – if it doesn't sound correct, then it probably won't read very well.

- **Writing lots, but saying nothing** - Why use 20 words when 5 would do? Employers aren't looking for you to explain everything you've ever done, just a few of the key elements that will persuade them you can do the job. Grab their attention with bullet points rather than long sprawling sentences.

- **No tailoring** - Whenever you try to develop a one-size-fits-all CV to apply for lots of vacancies, you almost always end up with something employers will ignore. Each employer is looking for a CV and cover letter that applies to their role and as all roles are different, you should make small adaptations so that it matches their specific requirements. Show that you understand what it is they want you to do.

- **Highlighting duties Instead of achievements** - Rather than copying the responsibilities from your old job descriptions, try and find ways to show what you actually achieved whilst you were there. Not all roles have KPIs that are quantifiable, but no company would have employed you to just sit there – you must have had some impact in the business. Think of time-saving activities, new procedures, successful campaigns and increased sales, giving percentage increases wherever possible.

- **Breaking the two-page rule** - 2 pages of A4 is more than enough room to persuade your potential employer that you're worth contacting for an interview. They're busy people and don't have time to read five or six pages of your career history.

Use lots of white space to make it easy to read, make all your sections stand out clearly and only include information that will get you the job. Less is often more.

- **Leaving out information** - Whether it's by choice or just forgetfulness, some people leave previous jobs off their CV meaning a gap in employment. It's better to not let your employer guess what you were up to as they will always think the worst. Even if you weren't working, there may have been transferable skills you picked up that will help your chances.

- **Using clichés** - "Good communicator", "Works well in a team", "Committed" – without any hard evidence of these you might as well write "Blah, blah, blah". If you've worded the achievements in the rest of your CV well, the fact that you have these skills will already be evident. If you feel you must use these phrases, at least try to link it to something you've done such as "Used my communication skills to build and retain a substantial client base."

- **Being vague** - Using fluffy lines like "Seeking a challenging position that offers professional growth." doesn't really give your reader anything to go on. Give them something specific that focuses on their company's needs as well as your own. "I'm looking for a challenging entry-level Marketing position that allows me to contribute my skills and experience to fundraising for a Charity."

- **Poor design** - Unless you're going for a design role, layout should always be second stage to the content of your CV. If your CV is wall-to-wall text featuring five different fonts styles and sizes you'll give the reader a headache. Black and white text on a clean design is all you need, so don't overdo it. Show your CV to several other people before sending it out to check they don't turn their heads in disgust.

- **Incorrect personal details** - Not getting any calls despite your perfect CV? There may be a very simple reason for that – you've written down the wrong phone number! This is less of a problem now email is the common form of communication, but check your .com isn't a .co.uk and your address isn't the flat you used to live in. On the subject of emails, if you have a 'jokey' address such as 'eatingpies@myhouse.co.uk', be sure to use a more professional one on your CV.

4. Selecting your CV format

To get yourself noticed it is important to use a CV format which will best represent you in the jobs market. There are many ways of laying out a CV, but these can in fact be reduced to 4 basic examples:

- 1. Chronological CV**
- 2. Targeted CV**
- 3. Inventory CV**
- 4. Functional CV**

Chronological CV:

The most popular type of CV, the chronological CV details your career history most commonly in reverse chronological order with the most recent employment detailed first and working backwards. A complete record of career history is detailed along with a complete education record. It is the most frequently used CV and is usually 2 sides of A4 in length.

Job Titles and company names are emphasised with skills, duties and achievements detailed under each job title. A chronological CV is most useful if you are staying within the same industry and wish to show career progression.

Additionally, if your employer was a familiar household name, it may be wise to highlight that as often they set a precedent for the type of people they employ so the mere mention of their company name may be enough to demonstrate that you are a high calibre candidate.

Most employers prefer the chronological CV formats, as it is easy to see who you have worked for and what you did in each particular job. If you do not have many achievements you can take the emphasis off this fact when using a Chronological CV.

What is the layout of the chronological CV:

- 1. Personal Details**
- 2. Personal Profile or Job Objective**
- 3. Career & Related Accomplishments**
- 4. Work Experience**
- 5. Education**
- 6. Professional Affiliations & Interest**
- 7. References (Optional)**

Targeted CV:

This kind of CV is a way to focus your career towards a particular objective, within a specific industry or a specific company.

A targeted CV is written in a way that highlights skills, qualifications and experience that match the requirements of the advertised position. Writing a targeted CV is effective when:

- ❖ You know the requirements of a particular position
- ❖ You know which company you will be sending your CV to
- ❖ You are sending your CV in reply to a specific job advert

NB – the nature of a targeted CV means that you will need to compose different CVs each corresponding to a different career objective or job role that you are applying for.

What is the layout of the targeted CV:

- 1. Personal details** – can also be listed at the end of the CV
- 2. Two sentence description of specific goals and objectives**
- 3. Skills and Accomplishments**
- 4. Education or Training**
- 5. Job History**

Only list your previous employers, position held and main responsibilities. Include start and end dates.

- 6. Interests**

Inventory CV:

This kind of CV is a more general overview of your skills, achievements and qualifications. A general objective or career strategy behind an inventory CV helps in being slightly more specific towards your career goals.

The Inventory CV is used when sending your CV to:

- ❖ Various recruiters (such as recruitment agencies)
- ❖ When you do not have a specific job objective

Having a general career objective in mind can help you focus on those particular skills, abilities and experience required for the job. Your CV should show that you are competent by demonstrating your relevant previous experience and qualifications. If you are unemployed or desperate to switch jobs, the inventory CV is a good time saver. You can write a custom cover letter for each job you apply for and you can send the same CV to all recruiters. If you are interested in several careers write several inventory CVs each for a particular career goal.

General career goals can be:

- "a secretary working with a local company"
- "a computer programmer"
- "a sales person"

Functional CV:

The Functional CV is usually two pages in length and covers your entire career history. Unlike the most common chronological CV it focuses not on your career history but on your skills, abilities and expertise. It may not even refer to a specific industry, as the skills as detailed are deemed transferable.

It is important that the skills you detail are relevant to the position you are applying for. It is no use highlighting your great accounts experience if the position is in sales. You should highlight your achievements in a sales environment and focus on relevant aspects of that field of work.

A Functional CV format is useful if:

- ❖ You lack experience or have gaps in your work history; these can be de-emphasized in a functional CV while your skills and potential are highlighted.
- ❖ You have changed jobs frequently and have had a variety of unrelated work experiences.
- ❖ You want to promote skills and experience obtained through college or volunteer experience.
- ❖ You are changing careers or re-entering the job market, perhaps after taking a career break to be a full time parent.
- ❖ Your most recent work experience is not relevant to the job, but past experience is.
- ❖ You have been working freelance or in temporary employment.

- ❖ You do not want to advertise your age.

What is the layout of a Functional CV?

- ❖ The Functional CV starts with a Profile that highlights specific skills, achievements and relevant personal qualities.
- ❖ Grouped beneath subheadings, you should then present your range of skills and abilities beginning with the most important. Present the functions as bullet points. Rather than focusing on experience in a particular job, detail your abilities as demonstrated in that job in such a way as to show that they are transferable to the job applied for. As previous employers are not mentioned by name you can include voluntary and unpaid work.
- ❖ Following this section is a list of employers and employment dates.
- ❖ Qualifications are covered next including professional and academic qualifications.
- ❖ The Functional CV may conclude with a brief outline of your personal details, hobbies and interests.

5. Keeping your CV up-to-date

How often have you tried to put together a CV and had difficulty remembering the details of previous jobs? It's not just the dates of employment that you'll forget – tasks, projects and courses you were involved with are easily overlooked.

You obviously don't want to be redesigning your CV to incorporate every minor thing you do, but adding a quick bullet point when you think you've done something impressive or developed a new skill will allow you to retain the important information easily. As you develop in your career, it's too easy to fall into the trap of simply adding your most recent job to your CV without considering how your experiences in past jobs may attract potential employers. You will have a much better idea now than when you originally wrote your CV of the sort of things employers are looking for, so tweak it accordingly to create a better first impression.

Always be aware of what employers are looking for, and translate your experiences and achievements into a language that will have an impact. For example, if you previously worked as an office junior, you weren't just "doing the filing"; you were "contributing to the day-to-day efficiency of the company".

You might have added significantly to your people skills, where previously your CV was more angled towards your qualifications. As your experience develops, it's important to ensure that the balance of your CV presents the best reflection of the person you are now, the skills you have acquired or enhanced, and your potential value to a new employer.

Be willing to get harsh with the information already on your CV, and hack away the deadwood. As a general rule, if something is not actively adding value to your CV, it's almost certainly diminishing its impact. Be ruthless to make sure you are selling yourself as well as you possibly can.

If you're quite far into your career and think it's too late to get back the memories of things you did, try to get in touch with old managers to see if their recollection is any better than yours. Getting back in touch with them may also uncover an unexpected job opportunity.

6. How to get on the radar of potential employers

Just because you're comfortable where you are, it doesn't mean you shouldn't be ready to start job seeking at a moment notice. It's unfortunate, but sometimes things happen that are out of our control. Once you're happy with how your CV looks and how relevant it is to your current situation, post it on job websites and send it to companies or organisations you'd like to work for on a speculative basis. This should be done at least every couple of months, or every time you've done something of major significance.

You never know when it's going to hit the desk at just the right time, and it never hurts to show a company you are interested in them. The more creative and proactive you are in getting your CV out there, the better your chance of catching your next employer's eye. They may add you to a talent pool of candidates if they don't currently have a position available.

CV tips for career changers

Career change CVs are completely different animals. Your current CV played an effective part in getting you the job you have now, but it might not work again in another industry. For this reason, you will almost certainly have to work through it and tailor it to the needs of the sector you're hoping to break into.

As ever, communication is vital. Get out there and network with people in your target industry. Check job sites for the kind of roles that are available, and see what skills, qualifications or other attributes are being asked for. Work through all your experience and transferable skills, and begin to create a portrait of yourself that potential employers will be able to relate to.

Ask yourself "Why would someone take a chance on me?" and use your answer as the main structure to build your CV around.

Making things clear

Based on your research into your prospective employer's industry, write down a list of the qualifications and skills you have that are most likely to appeal to your potential employer.

Because your previous jobs may not have any direct relevance to your new career, it's worth switching your CV around so the skills section is the first thing a reader sees. Make it clear that you're aware of the differences between your old industry and your target one, and these skills are the reason why your switch will be a success.

You don't need to give an in depth reason for why you're looking to change career – this is a discussion that should be saved for the interview.

Use your imagination and common sense and exploit every positive you can find to build up a picture that will appeal to your future employer. Your lack of experience in their industry will be irrelevant if the rest of the CV proves your value.

Be aware that the person reading your CV may not understand technical jargon from your past roles, so be prepared to dumb-down some areas so it has a broader appeal.

The job of a career change CV is to make your switch seem like the logical next step, enabling future employers to see why they should give you a shot at succeeding in a new field.

Getting your name out there

Networking is of great value here, so see if you can get into a relevant business group or club. It also pays to ask around amongst friends and colleagues to see whether they have any contacts that may be of help.

As every industry has its own way of doing things, these contacts will be invaluable when it comes to giving you pointers on perfecting your document. They will quickly notice anything missing that is vital in their sector.

Making prospective applications and posting your CV on jobs-boards such as Monster will put it in front of employers who are on the look out for new talent. Making the switch to a new company is always easier if they come to you rather than you chasing after them!

7. How to write a cover letter

In the days when all applications were sent by post, the cover letter was the first chance you had to 'wow' a prospective employer. Now the process is largely electronic based, nothing has really changed.

In the beginning...

Address your reader – if you know their name always put "Dear Mr Bloggs" rather than "Dear Joe" as over-familiarity at this early stage might suggest an unprofessional attitude.

The first sentence should then clearly state your intention to apply for the job. Recruiters are often covering many vacancies at one time and can get easily confused as to which applicant is applying for which job.

Include any reference numbers provided to make it easy for them. You want to reference your aptitude to do the job successfully, but your cover letter is not your autobiography – the main bulk of your experience and abilities should be included in your CV. The focus should be on how you meet an employer's needs so avoid the perception of being self-important.

Pick the main responsibility they're looking for you to undertake in the role and give an example of why you're the person they're looking for. "My experience of managing Network Support Engineers will help to ensure the smooth running of your computer systems to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your business." is an example of a need that can be met.

Watch the length

Two short paragraphs is plenty of room to sell yourself. You want to be as punchy as possible as your reader will probably be a very busy person with limited time to trawl through a long letter. Concise and compelling is the way to go. You may want to include a 'next step' for your reader, such as "To see how I could take your marketing to the next level, take a look at my CV to see the achievements I've had during my time with ABC Widgets."

This clearly points the employer to the part of your CV you think will persuade them to give you the job.

If you're applying to a number of similar positions, chances are you're tweaking one letter and using it for multiple openings. That's fine, as long as you are customising each one. Don't forget to update the company, job and contact information - if Mr. Jones is addressed as Mrs. Smith, your application will go straight into the bin.

Be sure to include your contact details so they can get hold of you when they need to. This information should also be on your CV, but there's no harm doubling up.

8. Guide to application forms

Application forms help employers to compare candidates on a more even keel and allow the employer to extract more specific information than is often included in a CV. You will generally come across them in public sector or management trainee roles where the number of applicants is extremely high as it allows employers to spot if a certain box has not been ticked and quickly discard the unfortunate applicants

How to get it right

There are a number of things you should do to give your completed form maximum impact and ensure you're not left on the scrapheap:

- Print out two copies or make a photocopy to allow for a practice run
- Just like in exams, always read the whole document before you begin
- Always use blue or black pen, and make sure your handwriting legible
- Concentrate on listing achievements that will be most relevant to the job in question
- Always get a second opinion from a trusted friend
- Read your completed form before sending it off, carefully checking for grammar and spelling errors
- Keep a copy of your completed form so you can refer to what you've written in an interview

There are a few things you should avoid at all costs:

- Don't miss out any questions. Some may not be relevant, but you should at least add 'not applicable'
- Don't include your CV unless you're specifically asked to, it's just doubling up on information
- Don't include anything you can't back up at an interview

Most application forms will use the same basic format as your CV, so a certain amount of copying can be done. There are however, certain areas that will require a little more thought.

Open and closed questions

Closed questions demand a 'yes' or 'no' answer, or a factual answer to something such as "How long have you lived at your current address". These should be pretty easy to answer but watch out for the wording of each question, especially in a long list. A 'yes' answer to "Do you have a clean driving licence?" is completely different to a 'yes' to "Do you have any points on your driving licence?"

Open questions, like "How would you describe your ability to work under pressure?" give you the chance to shine. Be very careful in answering open questions, and make sure you don't miss the opportunity to make a positive impression. Strengthen your application by providing a clear reason why you should be considered, backing it up with examples wherever possible. Use terms from the job advert and any supporting information you have been given to make your application very persuasive as it immediately relates your skills to their company's needs.

It is vital to understand fully what each question is looking for, so note all the word restrictions and instructions. The temptation to cut and paste answers from previous forms can backfire if a question is slightly different or your career focus is no longer relevant.

Employers often notice when generic terms are used not specific to their questions and are rarely impressed. If you can't take the time to fill in a simple form, how much effort would you put into the job?

General hints

Wherever possible, highlight your responsibilities, strengths, skills and achievements. General sections on the form, such as 'other Information' will offer an extra opportunity to sell yourself. Anything you have gained over your career such as awards and accreditations will all be useful factors to get you invited for an interview.

If you're asked to post the form back to the employer, it's wise to include a cover letter within the envelope to introduce yourself and give a quick overview of why you're the best candidate for the job.

Always aim to follow up your application with a phone call a few days after it has been sent or submitted online. Be careful not to be too hasty or pushy though, employers may be impressed with your enthusiasm, but you could potentially come across as desperate.