How to write a successful CV

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Probably the first CV was written by Leonardo Da Vinci 500 years ago. You can view it here. Since then things have moved slightly on, and now it's essential to have a well presented professional CV, but still many graduates get this wrong. The following page will give you all the tips to make an impressive CV

What is a CV?

Curriculum Vitae: an outline of a person's educational and professional history, usually prepared for job applications *(L, lit.: the course of one's life).* **Another name for a CV is a *résumé*.**

A CV is the most flexible and convenient way to make applications. It conveys your personal details in the way that presents you in the best possible light. **A CV is a marketing document** in which you are marketing something: yourself! You need to "sell" your skills, abilities, qualifications and experience to employers. It can be used to make multiple applications to employers in a specific

career area. For this reason, **many large graduate recruiters will not accept CVs** and instead use their own application form.

An **application form** is designed to bring out the essential information and personal qualities that the employer requires and does not allow you to gloss over your weaker points as a CV does. In addition, the time needed to fill out these forms is seen as a reflection of your commitment to the career.

There is no "one best way" to construct a CV; it is your document and can be structured as you wish within the basic framework below. It can be on paper or on-line or even on a T-shirt (a gimmicky approach that might work for "creative" jobs but not generally advised!).

Often selectors read CVs outside working hours. They may have a pile of 50 CVs from which to select five interviewees. It's evening and they would rather be in the pub with friends. If your CV is hard work to read: unclear, badly laid out and containing irrelevant information, they will just move on to the next CV.

Treat the selector like a child eating a meal. **Chop your CV up into easily digestible morsels** (bullets, short paragraphs and note form) and give it a clear logical layout, with just the relevant information to make it easy for the selector to read. If you do this, you will have a much greater chance of interview.

When should a CV be used?

- When an employer asks for applications to be received in this format.
- When an employer simply states "apply to ..." without specifying the format.
- When making **speculative applications** (when writing to an employer who has not advertised a vacancy but who you hope may have one).

What information should a CV include?

What are the most important aspects of CV that you look for?

One survey of employers found that the following aspects were most looked for

(From the brilliant 2010 Orange County Resume Survey by Eric Hilden**)**

45%	**Previous related work experience**
35%	**Qualifications & skills**
25%	**Easy to read**
16%	**Accomplishments**
14%	**Spelling & grammar**
9%	**Education** (these were not just graduate recruiters or this score would be much higher!)
9%	**Intangibles**: individuality/desire to succeed
3%	**Clear objective**
2%	**Keywords added**
1%	**Contact information**
1%	**Personal experiences**
1%	**Computer skills**

Personal details

Normally these would be your **name, address, date of birth** (although with age discrimination laws now in force this isn't essential), **telephone number and email.**

British CVs **don't usually include a photograph** unless you are an actor. In European countries such as France, Belgium and Germany it's common for CVs to

include a passport-sized **photograph** in the top right-hand corner whereas in the UK and the USA photographs are frowned upon as this may contravene equal opportunity legislation - a photograph makes it easier to reject a candidate on grounds of ethnicity, sex or age. If you do include a photograph it should be a head and shoulders shot, you should be dressed suitably and smiling: it's not for a passport! See our **Work Abroad page for more about international CVs**

Education and qualifications

Your degree subject and university, plus A levels and GCSEs or equivalents. Mention grades unless poor!

Some employers may spend as little as 45 seconds skimming a résumé before branding it "not of interest", "maybe" or "of interest.

Work experience

- Use **action words** such as developed, planned and organised.
- Even **work in a shop, bar or restaurant** will involve working in a team, providing a quality service to customers, and dealing tactfully with complaints. **Don't mention the routine, non-people tasks** (cleaning the tables) unless you are applying for a casual summer job in a restaurant or similar.
- **Try to relate the skills to the job.** A finance job will involve numeracy, analytical and problem solving skills so focus on these whereas for a marketing role you would place a bit more emphasis on persuading and negotiating skills.
- *All of my work experiences have involved working within a team-based culture. This involved planning, organisation, coordination and commitment e.g., in retail, this ensured daily sales targets were met, a fair distribution of tasks and effective communication amongst all staff members.*

Writing about your interests

Reading, cinema, stamp-collecting, playing computer games
Suggests a solitary individual who doesn't get on with other people. This may not be true, but selectors will interpret the evidence they see before them.

Cinema: member of the University Film-Making Society
Travel: travelled through Europe by train this summer in a group of four people, visiting historic sites and practising my French and Italian
Reading: helped younger pupils with reading difficulties at school.
This could be the same individual as in the first example, but the impression is completely the opposite: an outgoing proactive individual who helps others.

Interests and achievements

- Keep this section **short and to the point.** As you grow older, your employment record will take precedence and interests will typically diminish greatly in length and importance.
- **Bullets** can be used to separate interests into different types: sporting, creative etc.
- **Don't use the old boring cliches** here: "socialising with friends".
- **Don't put many passive, solitary hobbies** (reading, watching TV, stamp collecting) or you may be perceived as lacking people skills. If you do put these, then say what you read or watch: *"I particularly enjoy Dickens, for the vivid insights you get into life in Victorian times"*.
- Show a **range of interests** to avoid coming across as narrow: if everything centres around sport they may wonder if you could hold a conversation with a client who wasn't interested in sport.
- **Hobbies that are a little out of the ordinary** can help you to stand out from the crowd: skydiving or mountaineering can show a sense of wanting to stretch yourself and an ability to rely on yourself in demanding situations
- Any **interests relevant to the job** are worth mentioning: current affairs if you wish to be a journalist; a fantasy share portfolio such as [Bullbearings](#) if you want to work in finance.

- Any **evidence of leadership** is important to mention: captain or coach of a sports team, course representative, chair of a student society, scout leader: *"As captain of the school cricket team, I had to set a positive example, motivate and coach players and think on my feet when making bowling and field position changes, often in tense situations"*
- Anything showing evidence of **employability skills** such as team working, organising, planning, persuading, negotiating etc.

Skills

- The usual ones to mention are **languages** (good conversational French, basic Spanish), **computing** (e.g. "good working knowledge of MS Access and Excel, plus basic web page design skills" and **driving** ("full current clean driving licence").
- If you are a **mature** candidate or have lots of relevant skills to offer, a **skills-based CV** may work for you

References

- Many employers don't check references at the application stage so unless the vacancy specifically requests referees it's fine to omit this section completely if you are running short of space or to say "References are available on request."
- Normally two referees are sufficient: one academic (perhaps your tutor or a project supervisor) and one from an employer (perhaps your last part-time or summer job). See our page on **Choosing and Using Referees** for more help with this.
  The **order** and the **emphasis** will depend on what you are applying for and what you have to offer. For example, the **example media CV** lists the candidate's relevant work experience first.

If you are applying for more than one type of work, you should have a **different CV tailored to each career area**, highlighting different aspects of your skills and experience.

A **personal profile** at the start of the CV can work for jobs in competitive industries such as the media or advertising, to help you to stand out from the crowd. If used, it needs to be original and well written. Don't just use the usual hackneyed expressions: "*I am an excellent communicator who works well in a team……* "

You will also need a **Covering Letter** to accompany your CV.

- When asked what would make them automatically reject a candidate, employers said:
- CVs with spelling mistakes or typos 61%
- CVs that copied large amounts of wording from the job posting 41%
- CVs with an inappropriate email address 35%
- CVs that don't include a list of skills 30%
- CVs that are more than two pages long 22%
- CVs printed on decorative paper 20%
- CVs that detail more tasks than results for previous positions 16%

- CVs that include a photo 13%
- CVs that have large blocks of text with little white space 13%

What makes a good CV?

There is no single "correct" way to write and present a CV but the following general rules apply:

- It is **targeted on the specific job** or career area for which you are applying and brings out the relevant skills you have to offer
- It is carefully and **clearly laid out**: logically ordered, easy to read and not cramped
- It is **informative but concise**
- It is **accurate in content, spelling and grammar**. If you mention attention to detail as a skill, make sure your spelling and grammar is perfect!

If your CV is written backwards on pink polka dot paper and it gets you regular interviews, it's a good CV! The bottom line is that if it's producing results don't change it too much but if it's not, keep changing it until it does.

If it's not working, ask people to look at it and suggest changes. Having said this, if you use the example CVs in these pages as a starting point, you are unlikely to go far wrong.
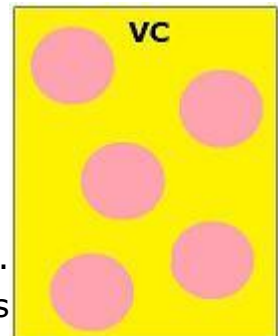
What mistakes do candidates make on their CV?
One survey of employers found the following mistakes were most common

- Spelling and grammar 56% of employers found this
- Not tailored to the job 21%
- Length not right & poor work history 16%
- Poor format and no use of bullets 11%
- No accomplishments 9%
- Contact & email problems 8%
- Objective/profile was too vague 5%
- Lying 2%
- Having a photo 1%