

Writing a CV

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Know what's required from the outset

Before dedicating a large period of time to your CV, you should make sure that the recruiting organisation actually accepts CVs; while this may seem obvious, many people fall at the first hurdle as some organisations only accept completed application forms to facilitate their selection processes; thereby facilitating more direct comparisons between candidates.

Where CVs and covering letters are required, make sure you abide by any stipulated restrictions on length or content. Try to think of the time spent on the covering letter and CV as an investment to help you to get an interview and for your future career; this investment in time can also help you to build the foundations of your interview strategy. There are no black and white rules when it comes to CV construction as it remains an essentially subjective process. There are however a range of useful hints and tips that you can consider:

How should my CV be structured?

Think of your CV as a template document where some of the key information will remain constant for different applications, but there should also be an element of customisation for different types of position and recruiting organisation.

Begin by considering the best structure; this can be achieved by identifying the key things that the organisation is looking for. If past professional experiences are at the forefront they should be outlined on page one, or does the organisation appear to have a different priority such as academic achievements? By placing the principal information and your key strengths on page one you will be able to grab the attention of the reader(s). Where HR professionals and senior managers have to work through a mountain of CVs you need to make their job as easy as possible to flag up that you meet their requirements.

Be concise but informative

Many parts of the CV require the job hunter to seek the right balance, making sure that you provide the selectors with a strong field of supporting information without being too wordy. Try to remove some of the superfluous details, such as the months of the year when providing the year would be sufficient and anything else that you don't feel adds value to your document. The optimum length of CVs is a contentious issue and it's difficult to define exact parameters; the most important objective is to provide sufficient information to enable them to make an informed judgment while whetting their appetite to discover more

of the details at the interview stage.

Where a large number of CVs need to be analysed by the selectors you also need to help them to fill in the blanks; as with a large field of candidates you may otherwise not get the chance to explain it at the next stage of the process. If you fill in the potential gaps in a concise manner it also leaves less to their imaginations. Also, consider the importance of professional bodies or affiliations within the type of role or industry that you are applying to and whether or not this should feature prominently within your application.

Consider use of language & formatting style

One interesting way of demonstrating the research that you've done on the organisation is to reflect this within your use of wording in your documents. Through the review of the recruitment literature and information available online, you will get a feel for both the organisation's priorities and use of language. Mirroring their language in key areas will help them to see how you can address their needs.

When focusing on the way that you use words, it's advisable to avoid clichés and concentrate on highlighting your strengths and key messages so that there are consistent and positive vibes throughout. The use of excessive jargon should be avoided, but you will need to make a judgement call on the extent to which technical language may be needed for the type of job you are applying for.

The use of Microsoft Word (or equivalent) is now a given, but it's important that you demonstrate some ability to tailor your document; selectors will be well aware of the standard templates and won't be impressed by their use. Don't forget the basics of effective presentation and ensure that your CV has been laid out in a user-friendly manner and is not too cluttered.

After deciding on your priorities and structuring your CV, ensure that the subsequent information and details are in a logical order. Checking for errors is an obvious point to make but it is amazing how many CVs are submitted with typographical or grammatical errors; some organisations may draw inferences from this lack of attention to detail.

Ask for feedback from friends/colleagues

After you've compiled your CV, go back and read it carefully - what message does it send out about you? Do your key strengths and achievements stand out? If not, you can go back and refine it before reviewing it again. At this stage, you might also ask a trusted colleague to provide some feedback for you about the tone and content of your document. Where it's not appropriate or possible to consult with colleagues, you could consider the use of a professional CV writing service, though you would need to consider the advantages and disadvantages of doing this as losing the hint of your personality encapsulated in your own drafts may not always strengthen your submission.

Traditionally, CVs usually begin with your personal contact details; my preference is for these to be featured at the end of your document. The rationale for this is that you want to capture their attention from page one where they can read about your achievements so this is the first thing they are reading about you. Hopefully by the time they reach the end of your document they will have become engaged with your story and will seek to put the contact details to good use.

How should I position my cover letter?

Covering letters are an important opportunity to sell yourself to potential employers, and it's imperative that you use a positive and professional tone to sell your achievements. There are essentially two different types of letter; one to support an application for an advertised post or as a speculative approach to an organisation. Speculative letters will require clarity in the type of position you are seeking and an alignment of your key strengths to the known priorities of the organisation which can often be accessed via their websites. The remainder of this article focuses on the first type of letter; to accompany an application for an advertised vacancy.

Don't underestimate the importance of your covering letter when they're requested by organisations, in some cases the power of your covering letter will influence how much time the selectors will put aside to read your CV. This is an important document and as such does need to be clearly personalised for each vacancy so that your distinctiveness can be highlighted as well as your match for their organisation.

Use the cover letter to provide more detailed info

Use the covering letter to explore in more detail some of your primary achievements that you have detailed in your CV and link their relevance to the requirements of the position you're applying for. You may also want to provide some supplementary information on the types of organisation you have previously worked for with a more detailed indication of your role and responsibilities. For vacancies in clearly forward-thinking roles, you may even want to use this opportunity to provide an initial snippet of your ideas for how the role could be developed under your leadership.

If your CV doesn't align entirely to a specific area outlined within the job description, I'd suggest that you use this opportunity to outline your related experiences which provide similar and appropriate evidence of your abilities and track record. One example of this might be around working internationally for an organisation and where a candidate has not personally worked overseas but has managed a very diverse workforce within one country (or liaises extensively with global colleagues) it might be possible to draw parallels in areas such as managing diversity and adopting global perspectives.

Ensure your personality & attitude shine through

Candidates are sometimes put off from applying for jobs from a different sector from which their career history has been situated. Rather than being a definite disadvantage, this can be turned around as an opportunity to identify equivalents and discuss how drawing good practice from one sector can be used for the benefit of the organisation. If exploring the differences between working cross-sectors, it's important not to reinforce stereotypes or overstate the case for generalisability. Demonstrating your awareness of some of the Challenges in moving between different areas could provide a useful illustration of both your personality and approach to the work environment.

Remember to proof read your letter and don't send it until you're satisfied that it provides a good insight into your suitability for the post and your potential in undertaking the role successfully.