HOW TO WRITE A GREAT CV

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CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Like them or loathe them, CVs are the way many employers select candidates that they wish to interview. A high percentage of applicants are rejected at this stage in the selection process (as high as 80% on average), making it vital that you convince them that you have the right blend of skills, motivation and experience for the role. That's a tough ask in only two pages!

This short guide was written to help you get your CV in good shape as quickly as possible, so you can communicate your skills and abilities in the right way to an employer. As it's only a few pages long it won't answer every question you might have about CVs, but it will help you focus on getting some of the most important things right.

In the first part, we'll cover the purpose of your CV as well as some CV basics. We'll also look at how you research the employer you're applying to, a vital (but often rushed) step.

Then we'll consider formatting and how you should present your CV for maximum readability and effect. Next, we'll look at two of the main CV styles to help you decide what works best for you.

Last, we'll look at creating content that will create a positive impact on the employer. This is the most important section, so if you read the rest of this guide and think "I know this already" please <u>don't skip this section</u> - it's the hardest to get right and needs the most work.

About the author

I'm Scott Foley, a Career Transition Coach, and I help professionals who feel stuck in their career to find work they love. I've been helping people create CVs with impact for over 15 years, and I wrote this free guide to help you create the best CV you can. I hope you find it useful.

RESEARCH

You might wonder why we're starting with research?

Before you start crafting your CV for a job application (or feel tempted to re-use your standard CV), you need to think about who it's aimed at, and what they want to see. Your CV is not:

- A life history
- A list of everything you've ever done
- A chance to win the employer over with your creativity or design choices

Your CV is... **a tool to get you to an interview**. So you need to write it **with the employer's needs in mind**. An employer won't know (and won't care) if you don't list every hobby you ever had, that you studied piano to grade 5 but stopped playing a few years ago, or that you completed some training in things entirely unrelated to the job you're applying for.

The only thing the employer wants to know (initially, at least) is that you have what they're looking for, and why you want the job! Which means your CV is not something you should write in isolation. You need to look carefully at what the employer wants to see, and use that as your guide.

Where to start your research

When researching an employer, the first (and sometimes only) thing most applicants look at when considering how to write a CV is the job advert. While that's a start, many job adverts are pretty brief, so there's a lot more you could do to research the employer.

Here are a few other places you could look:

- Check the employer's website. Look at the recruitment pages, but also the main site. What do they say about themselves? What's their mission? How do they talk about their people, the service they provide, their products and services, their culture? These all give clues to the qualities they may be looking for. It also helps you work out if this job really is for you.
- Use search engines and social media to find out what's being said about that organisation. Look for recent news, press releases, articles mentioning them. What's happening there, have they won a new contract? Emerged from a restructure or merger, relocated, or won an award? The more knowledgeable you are about that employer, the more credible you appear when you apply, especially if you get through to interview.
- Check them out on LinkedIn, Twitter and Youtube. Many companies have profiles on a range of social media sites, what do they say about themselves, what it's like working there and their market/industry?
- Analyse some of the competition. How does this organisation differ to its competitors?
- Ask someone who works there. If you're in any networks, professional or social, with someone who works for that employer, ask them what their job is like, what they enjoy, what the challenges are, what the culture is like. They may wonder at your curiosity so it's worth mentioning confidentially that you're considering a role there.
- Is there a named contact for informal enquiries listed in the advert? Most won't have one, but in some areas like the public sector it's fairly common. That person is someone you could contact if you have some questions about the role. It's also a great way to make yourself memorable. The best way to do this is explore your other sources first before making a call, so you already know a fair bit about the organisation and can drop this into the conversation as appropriate.

RESEARCH

Once you have completed your research, ask yourself what this means to YOU?

From taking the steps above, you'll not only find some useful information for your application, but it should help you decide this is definitely a job you want to go for.

- Do their values align with your own?
- Does it sound like a great place to work? If so, can you articulate why you want to work there? You will need this for your covering letter and for the interview.
- What are they looking for, and do you have those things? What gaps have you identified between what they want and what you can offer? Are they essential, or desirable? By this point you should have a much clearer idea of your motivations for the role, what you can offer, and what gaps you need to work on in your application.

STRUCTURE

In this section we're to going to cover CV formatting, the different sections that can make up your CV, and overall structure, to help you create impact.

CV length

The recommended maximum length for your CV is 2 pages in the UK. There are exceptions, for example in investment banking a 1 page CV is very popular, but unless otherwise advised, sticking to two pages is the best way to go. This allows you space to elaborate on your education, skills and experience, and importantly creates room for you to back your points up with evidence (which we'll come on to shortly).

The reason for this recommendation is that recruiters don't have a long time to read your CV, so it's a balance between making sure you don't undersell yourself and putting so much in they miss the key points.

STRUCTURE

Font size, colour and other formatting questions

Font style: Pick something fairly clean, good fonts are: Arial, Calibri, Verdana, Tahoma and similar. Times New Roman and other serif fonts are good if you want a more traditional or formal look to your CV.

Font size: Generally with most fonts between 10-11.5 pt font is fine, 10 may be readable on larger fonts like Arial, but Times New Roman 10 will look quite small and some may find it difficult to read. Avoid going below this in size, I've seen CVs with tiny font where I had to squint to read them! It's better to edit your content down to fit on 2 pages than reduce font size to fit it all in. The recruiter may miss important points if they struggled to read your CV.

Margins: I would start with the standard margins provided in MS Word or whichever program you're using. You can always adjust them if you find yourself running out of space, and if you're using 11.5 or 12pt font you can always go smaller which can help too. Don't forget you can make the top and bottom margins smaller too.

Decorative elements e.g. boxes, flourishes, shading: Boxes might look ok if done with a thin border and only to emphasise important elements, however I would suggest avoiding any decorative elements as they serve only to distract the reader. They may also make it harder for applicant tracking systems (CV screening software) to read your CV, if this is being used. Shading should be avoided, if your CV is photocopied (yes that still happens!) shading doesn't come out very well.

Bold, underlining and Italics: Bold should be used to give emphasis to your headers, e.g. your name, section headers and subsection headers. Underlining can be used, though I suggest sparingly and only for main headers. Italic is a weaker style of font and is a little too subtle for CVs if you want to draw attention.

STRUCTURE

Should I use a CV template?

I'm asked this question a lot. It can be a quick way to make your CV look nice. If it looks neat, tidy and clear, sure, go ahead. Some templates can however be a triumph of style over substance, and actually get in your way when you try to do something they're not designed for. So if you find yourself struggling, try a different one - remember that it's your content the employer is most interested in. And honestly, if you're reasonably. confident with a word processor you don't need a template at all, just make sure when writing a CV that you keep it consistently formatted (e.g. same font size throughout, except for headers).

Important CV headers

The exact headers you use should be decided based on what you want to draw the employer's attention to, as well as the overall style you are using. Remember the CV is there to sell you to the employer, so don't feel bound by the style, make sure it helps you sell what you're good at and what you have that's relevant to the role.

Name
This should be at the top, the largest header in your CV. Don't write 'Curriculum Vitae' – the style of the document and the context in which it is sent will mean it's obvious enough what it is.

Contact information
Always include your address, phone number, email, and LinkedIn profile if you have one.

Education
List your education from secondary/high school onwards, with most recent at the top and working backwards. Include your qualifications, listing grades attained. If you hold relevant professional qualifications, a relevant degree or other qualifications (a Masters, Diplomas etc) make sure to give emphasis and more space to these. School and college qualifications should be summarised to avoid taking up too much space.

8

STRUCTURE

Where relevant, your education can sit directly under your contact details and above your experience. However, if you have some relevant experience and your education is not relevant, it's perfectly fine to swap the two and lead with your experience. It's your CV so lead with whatever will grab the employer's attention most.

Experience
A summary of your work experience and any other relevant experience for the position. How exactly you present this will depend to some extent on the style of your CV, how relevant your experience is to the role you are applying for, and how consistent your career history has been (i.e. have you moved sectors or types of role a lot). We will come onto this below.

Important note on job titles
If your job title is well understood across your industry and you're applying for similar roles, then great. If you're moving outside your existing industry or type of work, consider whether it will be understood by people unfamiliar with your role. Does it reflect the work you do, the level of responsibility? If not, consider whether you need to explain it to make it easier to understand.

Additional CV headers

The following headers are optional, and you should use those which are most relevant to your application.

Personal profile
A personal profile can be used to briefly summarise what you have to offer, and your motivation to apply for this role. Don't feel obliged to have a personal profile, some recruiters like them, others don't. They also repeat some of what should really be in your covering letter. If you use one you should tailor the profile to be as relevant as possible to the job/employer, and use evidence to back up any claims you make, by quantifying and referring to specific experience you have had. E.g. "HR Manager with over 10 years experience in leading a team and delivering support to internal clients…"

STRUCTURE

Additional skills
If you want to highlight accreditations, training courses or relevant skills (e.g. IT), or holding a driving licence, this is a great place to list them.

Professional memberships
In this section, list relevant professional bodies and the level of membership you hold.

Positions of responsibility
Have you held any notable positions of responsibility? This tends to be more useful in graduate CVs where responsibility may have been held at university (e.g. in student societies). However for those with more professional experience chances are your responsibilities have been tied up with your employment. Consider using this section header if there are responsibilities you held which don't fit elsewhere – the key thing to remember is relevant to the employer you are writing to. What skill or quality does it emphasise which is relevant to the job?

Achievements (or Awards)
Any notable achievements or awards you have attained. As above, consider their relevance to the job you are applying for. Many achievements made in employment can be included under that section in your work experience section, as it will have more context.

Personal interests/hobbies
Do you have any interesting or memorable hobbies? Reading, cooking and walking are all very normal hobbies, but they don't stand out on a CV, so keep this section brief unless there's something more that you can say. So for example, if you enjoy cooking and have taken on catering for big parties or the pressure of making wedding cakes for family or friends, that gives you a way to quantify this in terms of skills – providing quality, working under pressure.

References
This header is usually placed at the end of your CV, with 'available on request' being the most common content to include underneath. However, if you are happy for the employer to contact your referees before an interview should they wish, and have space to do so, include them here.

STYLE

An important decision when writing your CV is the style of CV to use. There are a number of distinct CV styles out there, but the main two are:

- Chronological CV
- Skills based CV

Choose the style that you feel will present your experience and skills best. To help you choose, here are some of the main advantages and disadvantages of each.

Chronological CV style

A chronological CV lists your education and work experience in reverse chronological order, so an employer can clearly see a sequence. Skills are usually described within those sections rather than being listed separately. See the preceding section for suggestions on headers you could use.

A chronological CV can be most effective where your experience is broadly related to the role you are applying for, and where you have a fairly linear career history. However if you have had some gaps, have changed career direction a few times or your experience is a little 'bitty', a skills based CV may allow you more scope to focus the employers attention on what you're good at, rather than lots of different roles.

Skills based CV

This style of CV focuses less on the sequence of your career history and more on what they have taught you, i.e. your skills. This enables you to bring together your experiences, however diverse, into relevant themes. The main section of your CV should therefore be titled 'Skills', 'Relevant Skills' or similar.

STYLE

In your skills section, have several sub-sections which list the main skills required for the role and how you meet these, e.g:

- Leadership experience
- Strategy
- Relationship development
- … and so on.

List evidence against these from whichever parts of your experience are most relevant. Other sections of your CV could follow a similar format to the chronological style CV. You will still need to include your career history and dates lower down your CV, however these can be covered much more briefly than in the chronological style, as the interesting bits are covered in your skills sections.

CONTENT

Creating content that makes an impact

You can create the most beautiful CV in the world, but without content that adds impact, it won't have the effect you're looking for. So we'll cover a few tips on how to give your CV content a makeover, focus attention on the right points and convince a recruiter that they really have to interview you.

Why is this important?

This is the question you have to ask of everything you put in your CV.

It's the question a recruiter may well think when they read it, so you may as well deal with it right at the start. Pretty much everything which goes in your CV should be relevant to the role you are applying for, or shaped/reworded to make it as relevant as possible.

CONTENT

A recruiter will review your CV with their job and person specification to hand, looking for evidence against the requirements of the role. The harder you make it for them to spot those, and the more they need to interpret your experience and skills, the less chance you have of grabbing their attention. So make it easy for them.

Don't be afraid to echo the terms the employer uses occasionally (where appropriate), and make it clear that, for example, the high level project you delivered involved you leading a team of six managers from across the business, taking full budgetary responsibility and presenting the outcomes to three members of the board.

Where to put the good stuff

Your greatest assets should be toward the top of the CV, and certainly on the first page. This grabs their attention more quickly. Hiding your best stuff at the bottom of page 2 runs the risk of them missing it, or having reached a negative conclusion before they get there.

Task vs. skill

It's very tempting to focus on your responsibilities and tasks when listing points on your CV. When you are applying for a similar role within the same industry this may be fine, as it might be implicit what certain tasks have equipped you with in terms of skills and experience.

However, don't neglect balancing this with your 'soft skills' which are relevant to the role, e.g. leadership, problem solving, client facing skills, influencing, negotiation, and so on. This is especially important where your previous experience isn't related to the role you are applying for – in these cases your soft skills (also known as 'transferrable skills') can serve as a bridge, showing the employer you have the ability to do the job even if you don't have direct experience.

14

CONTENT

Quantify outcomes

Can the results of your efforts be measured in numbers, percentages, targets met or exceeded? If so, use the data – it's powerful. If the outcome was more qualitative, describe the improvement or impact made. Recruiters are looking for people who can make an impact on their organisation, they want to know what's the likely ROI for giving you this role? Show them what you've done for others.

Short and punchy

- Use bullet points, and get used to shorter, punchier sentences
- Recruiters scan read CVs, make yours easy to read. Simple, not long winded
- Don't bury the good bits at the end of a long paragraph
- Direct their attention, with strong verbs/action words at the start of sentences, e.g. managed, designed, increased, delivered... Not: arranged, tried to, was asked to...

Avoid use of jargon
(unless you spell out what it means)

Use of jargon or industry acronyms is tempting, but try to avoid using these terms unless you are applying within your industry and are absolutely certain they are commonly understood by everyone. Some acronyms may be used in some departments or divisions but less in others, even within the same organisation, so play it safe and spell out what you mean.

If you're making a career change and stepping outside your industry, avoid using jargon or acronyms at all if possible, because what you're trying to convey is a transferability of your knowledge and skills to something new, not that you're an expert in something irrelevant to the job you're applying for.

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15

SUMMARY

I hope you find these suggestions helpful when crafting your CV. There's a lot more which could be said about the detail, or when looking at an individual CV, but if you put these tips into practice on your CV, this will go a long way to creating more impact on the recruiters you apply to.

PLEASE SHARE!

If you know someone who might find this guide helpful, please pass it on! If a friend, relative or colleague is job hunting or changing career, I'm very happy for you to send them a copy - it's free and I believe in 'paying it forward'. Just make sure to keep it intact and not alter or reattribute the content.

DO YOU NEED MORE SUPPORT?

I work with clients who are changing career direction, and often their CV is an aspect they struggle with as they try to relate their experience to the requirements of a new job or industry.

As well as supporting people with career change I provide advice and consultancy on their CV. In a 1:1 session we review your CV together to help you identify:

- The strengths and weaknesses of YOUR CV
- How to effectively communicate your skills and experience
- Ways in which you can tailor your CV toward the specific jobs and employers you are applying for

If you would like to find out more, visit my website or email me at scott@scottfoleycoaching.com

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