

Writing CVs and covering letters

When applying for a job, the CV is your opportunity to attract the recruiter's attention and present your skills and abilities in the best possible light. For a typical job that may have attracted 50+ applicants, the initial sift through CVs is a process of de-selection, i.e. the recruiter is looking for reasons to discard applications. Your CV should be clear, informative, simple to read and accompanied by a good covering letter that outlines the reasons for your application and highlights what you can offer your prospective employer. You should tailor your CV and letter for each application: with a good skeleton of basic information, it should not take too long to fill in the other details that focus on the requirements of a particular recruiter. An unfocused CV stands out from the others for all the wrong reasons. Make sure also that your CV and letter do not contradict each other (it does happen!). The best applications come from those people who have read the job description before writing their CVs, so if time allows try to get hold of one.

The following advice is based on information from several types of recruiter: academic, industrial, administrative, and is intended as a rough guide.

What to include in a CV

Your CV includes 'static information' (such as personal details, exam results) and 'dynamic information' (work experience, project details). The latter can be tailored to emphasise the points you wish to make.

Personal details - full name, address, telephone number (if you have a different term time address give that too with dates you are available at each address). It is optional to include date of birth, marital status and nationality, but these details do give a clearer picture of the applicant.

Education - focus on most recent qualifications with research project titles and brief summaries. You do not need to include a degree course synopsis, but do include useful laboratory techniques and areas of knowledge if this is relevant to your application. A-levels (or equivalents) and GCSEs require the briefest mention (e.g. 8 GCSEs, 3 As, 5 Bs).

Work experience - include work placements, voluntary work, summer jobs (if you have had a series of temporary jobs, e.g. bar work, you need not include every one). Describe your duties in two or three lines and highlight what skills you developed in the job.

Other skills - include languages, typing skills, driving licence, transferable skills gained from hobbies or a role in a society/club.

Computer skills - these could be included in 'other skills' or highlighted in their own section.

Other relevant information/interests & hobbies - do not devote too much space to this section, but if there is something you particularly want to mention then include it here (particularly if it highlights more transferable skills).

Style

The style of your CV is quite a personal choice. There is no absolutely correct design, but the following list of handy hints should help you choose a suitable style:

- ▶ Make good use of the space on your page - you do not need huge margins, but a reasonable amount of space between sections makes your CV much easier on the eye. Boxed sections can look very cluttered.
- ▶ Avoid a fussy look - make careful use of the bold and underline keys. Keep to one clear font, 11 or 12 point is usually a good size.
- ▶ Try using bullet points for a punchy style.

General information

- ▶ Your CV should be about two pages long (up to three if you are a post-doc with a publications list). Any longer than 2 - 3 pages and the recruiter's attention may start to wander.
- ▶ Do not go over the top in describing your skills and experience. Complicated language does not come over well.
- ▶ Use positive language about yourself - choose words that are active and strong (e.g. accomplished, advised, maintained, organised, persuaded, produced, set up, taught, worked).
- ▶ Transferable skills you should be emphasising include: team-work, communication, organisational, adaptability, interpersonal/social and technical. Obviously, different recruiters will require emphasis on a different range of skills.
- ▶ It is essential that you use correct spelling and good English. Check your CV and letter very carefully - you do not want to be de-selected because of simple typographical errors.

Different job sectors

As previously mentioned, a CV targeted at one particular job sector will not be suitable for others. Employers place different emphasis on skills according to their needs. The following advice is offered in addition to the more general points made above.

Academic research

Recruiters in universities (and to some extent research institutes) will be looking for an excellent academic record and your potential as a good researcher.

- ▶ Potential PhD students and research assistants should have some idea about the project they are applying for (although it is not necessary to have all the techniques that will be used). You will be working as part of a team so you should have good communication and interpersonal skills. Checking websites is often a good way to get some useful information about the research group. Familiarity with recent publications can also be a help.
- ▶ If you are applying for a post-doctoral position, the recruiter is looking for a motivated researcher who has the potential to publish as many papers as possible during the contract. You should therefore mention any publications from your PhD research. Post-docs tend to do much of the day-to-day supervision in a laboratory and offer guidance to PhD, MSc and undergraduate students who may be in the laboratory. If you can show that you are a self-starter, this may give you a competitive edge.
- ▶ Technicians should have good interpersonal and organisational skills and pay great attention to detail (a simple mistake in the prep-room can have the potential to ruin a class practical). Recruiters will probably be looking for candidates who have knowledge of the type of equipment or techniques used in the research or teaching laboratory.

Industry

Advertisements by industrial recruiters often contain very specific information about the skills they are looking for in candidates. You do not have to have all these skills, but it is a good idea to have at least two-thirds if you are going to apply. You will probably see terms such as 'multi-disciplinary team', 'implementation of innovative ideas' and 'ability to communicate'. Recruiters want to see that you are a good scientist and also that you will work well within a team and the company setting. Therefore it is essential that you illustrate your suitability for the job, with reference to the skills and terms mentioned.

Administration and editing

Science administration and editing usually requires a depth of knowledge gained from a BSc or PhD. Recruiters in these sectors look for good scientists who show a genuine desire to move away from the laboratory into their chosen field. CVs aimed at these jobs should be very carefully targeted.

- ▶ Science administrators need to be good organisers and should ideally have some office skills. Good communication and interpersonal skills are essential. The ability to write good, clear English should be obvious from your letter and CV. Often there is an element of budget management in this type of work so you should have evidence of numeracy (and preferably budget management).
- ▶ Scientific editing requires an eye for detail, specialist knowledge and good communication skills. Again, you must ensure that your application contains no typos, they will be noticed, and that you use clear, concise language.

Your covering letter

Many people assume that a covering letter has little importance in an application - they could not be more wrong. A good covering letter shows that the applicant is genuinely interested in the job and has thought carefully about the application. The following advice should help you design a high-impact letter.

- ▶ Should take up no more than one side of A4. Use space carefully so that it is easy on the eye.
- ▶ The letter is a good indicator of an applicant's written communication skills. Avoid using mangled English and misspellings, they will be noticed.
- ▶ Ensure that your letter contains information that does not contradict your CV.
- ▶ Explain why you want the job.
- ▶ Highlight your skills that are particularly relevant to the job advertisement; emphasise how you can make a positive contribution to the activities of the recruiter.

Application forms

If an employer sends you an application form do not send a CV in its place. Application forms are often designed to make the recruitment process easier and the questions are aimed at discovering applicants' skills and competencies in a consistent format. However, many of the points made above are equally relevant to application forms (especially the sections where you are expected to showcase your abilities).

**A TARGETED AND FOCUSED CV & LETTER SHOULD IMPROVE YOUR CHANCES OF
GETTING AN INTERVIEW**

GOOD LUCK!