



CVs and Covering Letters

What is a CV?

The term is an abbreviation for Curriculum Vitae, which means 'the course of life'. Employers are not interested in whole chunks of your life, they are interested in those aspects that demonstrate your skills, qualifications, attitudes, ability and personality in relation to the vacant post.

There is no single 'correct' way of writing a CV. There are two circumstances where you may need to use a CV. The first is in response to a job application that requests a CV. The second is writing a CV to send speculatively.

A winning CV will make a positive first impression and should get you through to the interview stage.



CVs and Covering Letters

Think like a shortlister

When you are completing your application form or writing your CV for a job that has been advertised, it is really helpful to know how managers shortlist. By doing this, you can anticipate what they are looking for and make sure you provide it.

When managers are shortlisting, they base their choice on how your information matches the items in the job description and the person specification for that job. Some organisations call the person specifications 'competencies'. They are looking for someone who has the skills, personality and abilities identified to do the job well. To make sure you get shortlisted it is important to look both documents if they are provided. As they read through your information, they simply tick one of the boxes. This means that you should always present the information about yourself in the same order as is shown in the job description and person specification. Make it easy for the shortlister to choose you.



Presentation

To make a good first impression your CV needs to be neat, easy to read and free of mistakes.

- Your CV should be word-processed if possible using a clear font such as Arial, which looks professional and easy to read.
- Check for spelling errors – read through carefully, and don't just rely on automatic spell checkers.
- Try to use a standard word processor file format to save your CV (for example, word or RTF format). You may want to email it to an employer and a standard file format will make sure they can open a file you send them.
- Keep it short with no more than two sides of A4 paper as an employer may not have the time to read through a long CV.
- Keep it simple – you may be tempted to add photographs, clip art or different colours but most employers say they prefer a clean, text only design.
- Choose a good quality paper to print on, such as a pale cream or off-white as this can help a CV to stand out.
- A CV should be accompanied by a covering letter.



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What should it contain?

There are lots of different ways of presenting a CV but there are some basic things that they should all contain:

Personal details

- Head the CV with your name in bold or a larger font.
- Follow with your contact details – your address, telephone numbers and email (make sure this is suitable: for example myname@.... is probably better than smellysocks@... !)
- Date of birth, nationality, gender or marital status are not necessarily required.

Personal profile/career objective

- Most modern CVs contain a personal profile, which is a summary of your skills and achievements and your future career goals.

Education and qualifications

- Start with your most recent school/college/university.
- Include details of all secondary schools or colleges or university attended and list any qualifications you have, or ones you have taken recently. Include the subject, title of qualification (e.g. GCSE, NVQ, BTEC) and grade.
- You do not need to add the address of the place you studied.

Employment experience

- List your most recent job first – include the name of your employer, your job title and the start and end dates/months.
- Mention all the jobs you have had – you may want to head another section for voluntary work.
- Write a brief description of your duties in your job or placement – be positive about your achievements and skills gained.

Skills and achievements

- You can use this section to list any relevant skills you have gained, such as working with computers.
- You must illustrate each skill with a relevant example - remember skills are transferable so think about extra-curricular experience as well as education and employment.

Interests

- Give brief details of any interests or hobbies, especially ones which develop your skills in working with other people and as part of a team.
- If you belong to any clubs, societies or organisations, mention them here.

References

- You should give details of two people who are prepared to write a reference for you.
- To save space you could write 'references available on request.'

Remember: If you are writing a CV in response to an advertised job you MUST match your skills and experience to the person specification and job description.



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Writing a CV to send out speculatively

It is estimated that about 70% of jobs are not advertised. In addition to sending a CV in response to an advertised job you can send out your CV to several organisations 'on spec.' This means that you do not know whether there is a job available. Many people hesitate to do this but what have you got to lose? Remember, many organisations are delighted to be able to fill posts without the expense and trouble of advertising.

There are three approaches to sending out CVs speculatively:

1. You send your CV to every organisation that may have a vacancy. This would work, for example, for a typist job – almost every organisation has some office staff.
2. You send your CV to the types of organisations that may possibly have specific types of work. For example, all florists in your area if you're looking for a florist job.
3. You send out your CV to organisations that have been in the news and that you think may therefore have an opening in future. This would be the case, for example, if you read that a company had won a big contract, is expanding, has received an award. Anything positive, in fact, might be worth following with a CV and covering letter.

Next steps:

Think about the sort of work you want to apply for

Work out what the job entails and try to write your own job description and person specification

Write your CV as if you were writing to that organisation for that job

Write a suitable covering letter, indicating exactly the type of work that you seek, or saying that you are open to suggestions.

Find out the name of the personnel or relevant manager and send your letter and CV direct to that person (this shows initiative and only costs a phone call)

Consider following up with a phone call a few days later. If you do this prepare beforehand for the call: what are you going to say?

What is a covering letter?

This is the introduction to your CV, and you should use it to explain why you are applying for a particular job. You should use this to:

- Explain why you are applying for the role
- Demonstrate your knowledge of the organisation
- Highlight any particular selling points within your CV
- Explain any additional factors that do not fit easily into your CV
- Mention any specific personal circumstances contained within your CV
- Do not exceed one side of A4
- Avoid using the same words or phrases as your CV

Your covering letter can really make a difference when you are applying for a job, whether you are responding to an advertisement, but especially if you are applying speculatively.

Remember to have your CV and covering letter checked by a Careers Adviser before you send them. You may also want to seek the opinions of friends and family, **but don't leave it until the last minute!**