



## **Top tips on how to write a compelling CV**

(for school leavers)

Does writing your CV fill you with enthusiasm, mild trepidation or even sheer terror?

If you are about to leave school and are thinking about applying for an apprenticeship, or a job, the writing of a CV can be extremely daunting. I'm going to take you through the CV writing process one step at a time, giving you examples to help you get started. Approach the task like making a cake; you need to get all the ingredients prepared and add them in the right order, with a pinch of your own special uniqueness to help you stand out from the crowd.

The purpose of a CV is to provide sufficient information to the prospective employer, for them to decide whether or not to interview you. The CV is, in effect, the first impression that prospective employers will have of you so it's important that you pitch clearly and concisely. Having been employed myself at senior level and lead numerous recruitment campaigns for over 25 years, I thought I would share with you my ideas on composing a CV that will get you noticed for all the right reasons!

If you're applying for a job or an apprenticeship, you will at this point have a job or career path in mind. I strongly recommend that you be familiar with the job requirements, the job description and person specification or personal qualities that are essential or desirable for the post. This goes beyond the job advert and accompanying documents. I would encourage you to check out their website, their vision, values and facts about the company, if you haven't done so already and get a feel for the company culture and ethos. By doing this, you will gain useful insights that will reinforce your desire to get that job because your values match. You may even learn that your values are mismatched which will help you to decide whether or not to proceed with an application.

When carrying out your research, note down key words and terminology that stand out to you as you may be able to incorporate them in your CV and this will resonate with the prospective employer. For example, if you are seeking a sales post and the job description says they are looking for someone who can "maintain excellent relationships with clients" or "will go the extra mile to achieve targets", you may find it useful to repeat some of this



wording in your CV as the prospective employer will be seeking someone who has these attributes. You will need to be able to back up your statements with evidence which I will come on to later.

Usually a CV contains five main sections; personal details, personal statement, experience, qualifications and extra-curricular activities.

### **Personal Details**

Personal details include name, location, email address, phone number. In terms of Equality there is no requirement to provide your date of birth or address but historically it has been common practice to do so. You may also choose to include an appropriate picture of yourself. The benefits are that should you be called to interview the employer will already be familiar with your image and it will help the employer to remember you after the interview, particularly if they are interviewing many people over a number of days.

### **Personal Statement**

The benefit of a personal statement is that it provides a punchy summary of your main core strengths and often includes a career goal so the employer can see at a glance your main attributes and can also gain a feel for your personality. After all, not only does the employer want to fill a post with someone who can perform the job role, they want the successful candidate to fit in with the rest of the team. The personal statement says something about you, your drive, motivation, aspirations and ambition.

Employers are very busy people so they may decide whether or not to read all of your CV depending on the information you provide in your personal statement. Many people struggle with the wording for their personal statement so the key is to keep it brief, specific and relevant.

I see many CVs where the applicant has made some unsubstantiated self-flattering claims about their performance or personality such as "highly motivated, ambitious with excellent communication skills". There is no evidence here to corroborate these attributes and will therefore be viewed unfavourably by the employer. My top tip is that you need to identify



the attributes, personal qualities and role that the employer is seeking and tailor your statement to incorporate this with a specific example.

Example:

Charlie left school at eighteen having secured 3 A Levels with grades A - C. He didn't know what he wanted to do for his career so he decided that he would get a job locally to gain some work experience with potential for career development. He saw that a local insurance company were advertising full time and permanent administrative posts and decided to investigate further.

From the age of 16 Charlie had been working part time in a restaurant kitchen with a small team of people, preparing ingredients for the chefs, taking orders from customers and pot washing. This experience had given him the opportunity to work in a team, develop his customer service skills, adhere to hygiene regulations, prioritise his work to complete the jobs on time. He took pride in meeting the standards of cleanliness required and had been able to take a Food and Hygiene level 1 certificate, which he successfully passed.

Charlie read through the job requirements and looked at the company profile, vision and values. He established that the company employed over 4000 employees worldwide and were proud of their career development opportunities. They were looking for applicants who were good communicators with the ability to follow policies and pay attention to detail. There were qualification requirements of GCSE English and Maths and 3 A Levels, which he met. Charlie felt that he met the job requirements and decided to make an application. He wanted to ensure that his personal statement highlighted his skills and personal qualities to the best possible advantage.

“I am motivated and driven to deliver exceptional customer service, priding myself on accuracy and compliance with policies and procedures as demonstrated in my current employment in the restaurant and hospitality industry. I succeeded in my job responsibilities at my annual performance review and also gained a recognised qualification”.

“In my current role I have had the opportunity to develop my communication skills, as part of a team and on my own, contributing to team performance through meeting laid down productivity measures and hygiene requirements. I have demonstrated my success through positive customer feedback and appraisals as well as passing a Food and Hygiene Certificate



that demonstrates my ability to comply with strict policies and regulations. I am seeking an entry level career within the insurance sector that suit my skills and attributes.”.

Charlie went on to describe his key skills, directly relating examples to the role he was seeking.

## **Experience**

Employers will be impressed if you are able to demonstrate that you have recent, relevant experience for the position being advertised. You will therefore need to have suitable relevant examples that you can draw upon. I advise you to use your strongest examples as these will provide the greatest impact. If you are or have been in work while still in education, usually your experience is detailed by setting out previous jobs with corresponding start and finish dates. You would also include main responsibilities of each job so this is an opportunity to echo some of the responsibilities set out in the job description for the advertised post, if appropriate. For example, if the employer is looking for someone who works well as part of a team and this is something that you have successfully done in a previous job or setting, include it in this section and accompany it with a brief example of how you have demonstrated good teamwork. If you are able to also demonstrate leadership skills within the team or that you have taken responsibility for a task within the team, this will further strengthen your CV. Make sure that you are succinct and avoid rambling, consider the use of bullet points.

As a student you may not have been employed so you need to think more laterally. Think about what experience you have accumulated that demonstrate that your skills are transferrable. For example, if you have volunteered as a helper for Brownies, Cubs or Beavers, you will have gained some experience at organising, communicating, dealing with problems, complying with rules. These skills can be referred to as specific examples in a CV if they are relevant to the job requirements being advertised. Have a think about any clubs, groups or activities that you belong to, outside of school, that could demonstrate criteria that employers are looking for. Here are a few to get you thinking; Sea/Army/Air cadets, Amateur dramatic society, choir, Young Farmers, sports activities.

At school think about projects that you have worked upon with your peers, such as Young Enterprise, Peer Mentoring, fundraising activities, charity work or projects that you may have undertaken as part of your GCSEs/A levels. What responsibility did you have in the group that could be used as evidence in a CV? Did your school offer work experience? If

they did, think about how you benefitted and what you learned about yourself, your strengths and about the work experience placement itself.

Make a list of all the tasks you have undertaken as part of the experience you have accumulated when considering all of the above and write down what skills you have shown in carrying out the tasks. For example:

| Task carried out                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Skill shown                                                                                                                                           |
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| As part of an ICT project, I have populated fields in Excel and created formulas                                                                                                                                                                                     | IT competency<br>Attention to detail<br>Accuracy<br>Logical                                                                                           |
| As part of a school project I helped to organise a careers event and was responsible for booking in companies, meeting and greeting and taking them to their allotted area                                                                                           | Organisational skills<br>Customer Service<br>Communication skills<br>Teamwork<br>Problem solving skills                                               |
| With Duke of Edinburgh I worked in a small team to navigate from one point to another cross country. I was responsible for map reading.                                                                                                                              | Ability to concentrate<br>Ability to be precise<br>Attention to detail<br>Communication with team members<br>Motivation<br>Determination              |
| I organised my work placement in a solicitors' Office for my work experience. I arrived early each day and was able to complete all the jobs given to me such as photocopying, booking in clients, answering the phone, transferring calls, preparing files, filing. | Reliable<br>Punctual<br>Flexible<br>Enthusiastic to learn new skills<br>Customer service<br>Communication skills<br>Organisational skills<br>Accuracy |
| I volunteered to escort prospective parents around the school on a visit, showing them the subject areas and explaining what happens in each of the subjects, answering questions that they asked me.                                                                | Communication skills<br>Initiative<br>Positive attitude<br>Customer Service                                                                           |

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|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I captained a football team and succeeded in leading my team to victory, winning the County cup for 2 years in succession | Leadership<br>Communication<br>Positive attitude<br>Encouraging others<br>Analytical<br>Able to give constructive criticism<br>Determined |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

A top tip when setting out your experience is to include your main responsibilities, matching them to the job requirements if possible and concluding by making an accomplishment statement such as “Organising a careers event with 70 stall holders in attendance. 100% positive feedback from attendees.” or “Completing income and expenditure spreadsheets for Young Enterprise project. 98% accuracy achieved over last 12 months”

### Qualifications

If you have impressive qualifications and grades or you meet/exceed the qualification criteria set out in the job specification you may well want to include all the details. If they fall short of what is required yet you still feel that you have all the relevant experience required to fulfil the post advertised, it would be prudent to provide a summary rather than include specific grades. Some employers will differentiate between essential and desirable qualification criteria while others will not stipulate qualification requirements.

If you have gained additional qualifications since leaving or while in full time education, I recommend that you include the details particularly if the qualification is relevant to the post advertised. If you have a driver’s Licence, include it here and any other memberships where a qualification has been achieved. Generally, employers view continuous professional development positively.

Usually you would cite the most recent qualifications first followed by the remaining in descending chronological order.

### Extra - curricular activities

Including extra – curricular activities does provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate your personal qualities further. For example, if you have captained a winning team it



suggests that you are motivated, driven and possess effective leadership and communication skills. Be cautious about what information you include here. Make sure that the examples you provide are relevant to the job responsibilities and avoid statements such as "I enjoy socialising with friends" as it does not add value and may be detrimental. My top tip is to include examples of being a member of a club, group or society and highlight special talents that you have developed as a result. If you subscribe to relevant industry magazines include the details in this section.

For those with little or no work experience, you will need to draw upon all of your life resources such as any activities where you held a position of responsibility or took part in a successful event. You may be a member of a club outside of school such as sea/air/army cadets, scouts, guides, rangers, a sports team or an amateur dramatics group, music group or band. Remember to relate your experience to the role requirements if you can.

### **Format**

Research has shown that most employers prefer a clear and professional looking CV rather than a creatively designed one. My top tip here would be to use a clear font such as Arial or Calibri and font size 11 or 12 on a white background. Contain your CV within 2 pages. Usually at the foot of the second page, you would include details of 2 referees. If you are short on space leave out referee details but include a statement "references available upon request".

Personal details appear at the top of the page. Usually your name would appear in a larger font than 11 or 12. I suggest 14 or 16 in bold. Personal details are placed in the centre of the page at the top. If you wish to insert a line underneath your personal details to separate them from the body of the CV you can do so but this is personal preference. Try it with and without to see which format you prefer.

Following on from your personal details will come your personal statement as described above.

We then have qualifications, experience and extra-curricular activities. Usually the extra-curricular activities are placed at the end so you need to decide whether to go with experience or qualifications after your personal statement. My top tip would be that you are guided by the job requirements so if the employer is looking for a graduate or entry level employee where the qualifications may be more of a focus than experience, then include qualifications before experience. If, however, the employer is emphasising



experience required and does not seem to focus on qualifications as a priority, or if your qualifications fall short or are average rather than impressive, then place experience before qualifications.

Finally, you include extra-curricular activities and remember to include activities that are relevant to the post and will portray you favourably.

Once you have completed your CV, read it back to yourself as if you are the employer. Does it sound impressive? How could you improve it? Is it appropriate and relevant? Do you come across as sounding enthusiastic and competent? Would you select yourself for interview?

Ask a trusted friend, teacher or family members to review your CV and come up with suggestions as to how it could be even better.

Remember that a CV is work in progress. It can be amended and improved at any time so keep it up to date and tailor it to each job for which you apply.