Resume writing guide

CVs/Resumes are an essential tool in your belt during the job search and application process – regardless of whether you are a school-leaver looking for your first job, or a seasoned professional looking for the next step in your career development, everyone should understand what makes a good resume.

Your CV is usually the first point of contact that a potential employer will have with you, and so it is imperative that when writing your CV, it reflects your skills, experience and accomplishments in an easy-to-read and engaging format.

It is surprising to note just how many job seekers don't recognise the difference between a good resume and a great resume – and this could be the deciding factor for you in securing an interview for your dream job.

Tips on the format of writing a great resume (CV)

The length of your CV should be no more than 3-4 pages

It is designed to provide an overview of your skills, experience and achievements.

Always prioritise the points which most accurately match the requirements of the role you are applying for at the beginning/top of your resume, even if they are less important in terms of your current role. This way the hiring manager will be able to see what makes you a great candidate straight away without having to dig for the information.

An effective CV should begin with a short summary of who you are. Make sure the CV is straight-forward and avoid all the subjective clichés such as 'excellent self-starter', 'good team player', 'natural leader’ and ‘good communicator'. These qualities can be demonstrated through your tangible achievements which follow in the CV.

Remember that your CV will form part of the script for the interviewer's questions.

Address time-gaps in your work history, and include clear and concise explanations for these.

Your CV should also give some idea of your future potential. If you are presently studying for an additional qualification, say so.

Illustrate your greatest career achievements to date

When writing their resume, many job seekers make the mistake of simply listing the day to day responsibilities they have held in each role. It is vital to illustrate how well you have carried out this work through your list of achievements and select material to reflect the requirements of the specific post. Instead, it is vital that you can demonstrate to a prospective employer your accomplishments outside of these standard tasks.

How does an achievement differ from responsibility? An achievement is a statement of how you have added value to an organisation.

For example: instead of listing ‘researching and resolving accounts payable issues’, go one step further by explaining that as a direct result of your research, you were able to reduce the amount of un-paid invoices for the business by 50% and thus increase operating revenue.

Sell yourself: What makes you unique from other candidates?

Always express your skills and qualities in the present tense – even if you have an accounting qualification that you are not using at the moment, this is still a relevant certification to list.

Reinforce positive skills and qualities to make sure they jump off the page. Example: If one of your strong points is that you are a skilled communicator, enhance this point by giving an example of when you have demonstrated this ability.

Make sure your content is clear and simple to read.

Effective CV’s are chronological

Pay attention to how your resume is ordered – your most recent experience should always be at the top of your resume so that hiring managers and recruitment consultants can easily gauge what you have been working on most recently.

In general, the best rules to follow are:

Chronologically list experience in reverse date order, with your most recent role first

Present your career history as a series of appointments with the day to day responsibilities listed, as well as achievement against each bullet point

Allocate more space for your more recent positions, since these are where your most current experience and achievements is usually found

The do’s and don’ts of writing a good CV:

DO:

List your professional and higher education qualifications

Show recent vocational training

Include genuine foreign language skills

Add a note of any publications you have been featured in and/or external positions you hold

Ask someone independent to look at your resume when you have completed it - not a friend or family member – so that you can get an unbiased opinion on its efficacy.

Be prepared to refine your resume a number of times until it is right

Where possible, update your CV for each new job application to match the specific requirements of each role you are applying for.

DON'T:

List every training course you have ever attended

Indicate race, nationality, marital status, children, religion or political preferences

Indicate your computer skills

Include your present salary details

Give references

Tailor your resume

A resume is not a static document that you write once and continue sending out in the hope that at some point it will stick.

It should always be tailored to the role that you are applying for with a focus on bringing to the forefront you're most relevant skills and experience.

For example, if the role requires SAP put that at the top of the list of your computer skills. Don’t leave it buried in your resume.

Clearly list your responsibilities

Use bullet points and not big slabs of text. One to two sentences per responsibility is normally sufficient.

Detail your achievements

Outline each role including special projects, implementation of systems and procedures and any initiatives that you worked on and the company adopted.

Provide details on Companies if it’s not clear

If it is not clear from the company name what they do as a business then include a sentence that provides detail on the industry, company size and turnover.

Make it easy to read

Use an easy to read font with lots of white space to keep the document looking clean and simple to read.

No photos

Do not include a photograph of yourself or pictures/graphics of any kind.

Don’t include unnecessary information

It is not necessary to include information on your age, marital status, number and ages of children or religion.

Make no mistakes

Spell check. And then spell check again.

Make sure contact details are correct & clear

Ensure that your contact details, email address, phone numbers are correct and up to date. If you have a flamboyant or inappropriate email address, set up a basic hotmail account for your job search.

Get a fresh eye to review

Get somebody whose opinion you value to read over your resume and ensure that it reads well, flows easily and avoids any mistakes.

Latest Jobs

How to write an effective resume

There’s an art and a fair degree of science to writing an effective resume or CV. Here are our need-to-know hints and tips on how to write your resume to maximise your chances of success.

What is the employer looking for?

Your resume is how you market yourself to employers. It should convey that you are employable and suitably qualified, but also that you are a good fit for the company. The more relevant and professional your resume, the more relevant and professional you look to prospective employers.

Things to avoid, include and impress

It goes without saying, your resume should be professionally worded and free from errors. We also suggest that you avoid:

Overly personal information

Images or graphics

Fancy formatting – keep the layout clean and simple

Embellishing or exaggerating

Waffling – keep it one to two pages

Your resume should include:

Your contact details – name, email, contact phone number

A list of your skills and strengths – try to match them with the ‘essential’ and ‘desirable’ skills required for the job

Your educational history

Your employment history

Your key personality traits – cite things like trustworthiness and integrity, and back them up with activities or experience that demonstrate these traits

Try to impress prospective employers with:

Your technical/software skills

Your impact in previous jobs, rather than your responsibilities

Your success – facts, figures or statistics that demonstrate your effectiveness in a previous role are good

Remember, wording is everything

Consider powerful ‘action’ or ‘impact’ words, such as:

Achieved

Improved

Managed

Created

Volunteered

Influenced

Contributed

Valued

Invested

Trained

Try to avoid vague, bland or ‘empty’ words, phrases and clichés, like:

Responsible for

Go-getter

Results-driven

Detail-oriented

Team player

Hard worker

Experienced

Self-motivated

Highly qualified

Effective

As a rule of thumb, don’t write anything that you wouldn’t be comfortable saying in person – keep it real and factual. For example, instead of writing, “I am an effective manager,” you could say, “I reduced production costs by 20% over four months.”

How to explain gaps in employment

It’s best to address gaps in employment directly. Often, gaps can be quickly explained and brushed aside, other times they can even be advantageous.

For instance, if you were taking care of family, explain how that intermission is over now and you are eager to re-enter the workforce.

If you lost your job due to cut backs, provide evidence of strong performances at previous jobs. If you were ‘let go’ due to your performance, explain how your skills better suit the role you are applying for, and avoid writing anything negative about your previous employer.

If you had a travel hiatus, present it in a positive light – encourage your employer to view it as proof of independence and cultural awareness.

Providing references

You should not include references on your resume, unless you’re asked to do so, but you should be ready to provide them on request.

When choosing someone to provide a reference, pick a contact who is familiar with your skills and ability – a mentor would work better than a friend here. Provide your prospective employer with your referees’ contact details, and let your contacts know when they are likely to receive a call from your potential employer.

Electronic resumes

Your electronic resume can be searched (via computer), so using keywords that people are likely to use to search for good candidates will mean your resume is more likely to be found. As such, when you submit a resume electronically, make sure you include some keywords – these can usually be found in the job description.

Also, save your resume as a Word file (DOC), text-only file (TXT) or Adobe Acrobat (PDF), with a simple and professional file name.

Want more career advice and tips? Read about cultivating your career and making positive career moves.