

## Some Advice on CVs and Cover Letters

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### **The Curriculum Vitae**

In Latin, the phrase *curriculum vitae* loosely translates as “[the] course of [my] life.” It is longer and more comprehensive than a resume and is the format used for physicians and other academic professionals. While a resume is brief one- or two-page summary of your skills, experience, and education relevant to the for which you are applying, a CV contains of a much more detailed synopsis of your educational background, teaching positions, publications, awards, honors, affiliations, memberships, and other academic and clinical experiences.

A CV is a living document. You should continue updating and reorganizing your CV as your career progresses. You will also most likely have to write and re-write your CV depending on the purpose and the audience. For better or for worse, the need for it will never go away. Therefore, the ability to write an effective CV will remain an important skill throughout the duration of your career.

#### *Content*

Content refers to the included experiences and actual text descriptions within a CV. There is more than one way to peel a potato and you can choose to alter your content in whatever fashion best suits your purposes. However, perhaps the two most important things to keep in mind when deciding on the content of your CV are (1) to remember to highlight the most significant and relevant experiences and (2) to maintain ethical principles.

In almost every circumstance, your educational background will be the most important category of experience and accordingly should be listed first [1]. The remaining categories of experience should be arranged in the order of relevance to the position for which you are applying [2]. For example, if you applying for an academic appointment focusing on research, you will want to list your grants, publications, and ongoing research projects near the top. If you are applying for a primarily clinical position, then you will want to emphasize your professional work experience and special skills training. Highlighting relevant experience also implies that not every experience needs to be included on your CV. References to high school and high school activities are generally avoided as they are often too far removed in both time and focus from your current career [3]. College experiences may be included if directly relevant to the position for which you are applying.

Considerable flexibility exists with regards to the actual experiences that can be listed within a given category [2,4,5]. For example, a category header entitled “Academic Activities” might include publications, invited lectures, research experience, and mentoring. However, you could also choose to place your invited lectures and mentoring experience under a category header entitled “Teaching Experience.” In remembering to highlight the most relevant experiences, the titles for your category headers should be chosen with an eye

to your CV as part of an application for an educational, research, clinical, or other position. Within each category, your most recent experience should be placed first and the remainder listed in reverse chronological order. Try also to balance the number of experiences. It is better to have four categories with four experiences each rather than two categories with one containing four experience and the other with eight.

Where appropriate, your experiences should note your title or role, location, and inclusive dates. Most of your experiences will also require a short description of your specific responsibilities and accomplishments [2]. If you dedicated a significant amount of time for a particular experience, note your specific time commitments. The descriptions should be brief and to the point, using action verbs as much as possible. For your reference, a comprehensive list of action verbs is included at the end of this document in Appendix B. Let's look at these two examples to see the difference that using action verbs can make:

### **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

#### **LifePACT (Critical Care Transport), Providence, RI**

*Rhode Island Hospital*

2012 – 2014

- Was the physician for both adults and children requiring critical care ground transport throughout Rhode Island and the surrounding areas

Compare this description with one using action verbs:

### **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

#### **Critical Care Transport Physician, LifePACT, Providence, RI**

*Rhode Island Hospital*

2012 – 2014

- Provided critical care ground transport for both adults and children throughout Rhode Island and the surrounding areas

Here are listed some of the more common category headers and some specific suggestions for experiences and descriptions to include within each one. For a more extensive list of category headers, see Appendix A at the end of this document.

#### *Educational Background*

- College, medical school, graduate school, other professional school, and residency.
- May include patient volume and acuity numbers for your residency program.
- May include academic awards such as AOA nominations and honor societies
- Does not include GPAs, board scores, USMLE scores, SAT scores, or other similar numbers.

### *Publications*

- Documented in the format used for reference citations, with your name emphasized in some way

### *Lectures*

- May include morning report, morbidity and mortality conferences, and other presentations given within your residency or home institution
- Includes regional or national presentations, such as lightning rounds, panels, or poster presentations.

### *Research Experience*

- An opportunity to discuss ongoing research activities that have not been published yet.
- Any research experience for which you were not included on the final list of authors
- Work experience as a research assistant
- May include grants or other funding awarded for projects

### *Professional Experience*

- May include any experiences in which you acted primarily as a physician
- Moonlighting, volunteer work, community service
- Special skills training, such as TeamSTEPPS, ultrasound experience, or procedure labs

### *Teaching Experience*

- Most academic, non-clinical, activities in residency can fit under this category
- Lectures, workshops, simulation sessions, direct observation, mentoring
- Teaching at the level of residents, medical student, college pre-meds, or even high-school students— as long as the experience for you did not occur in high school, as noted above

### *Awards/Honors*

- Can be an impressive category, but only if there are enough awards or honors to warrant a separate header. If only one or two less impressive awards, then consider incorporating them into your educational background section

### *Committees*

- Includes residence-based committees, hospital committees, and national committees

### *Professional Memberships*

- Most residency programs provide memberships to the major organizations within your field
- Any additional specialty memberships that may be pertinent particularly for prospective fellows

### *Certifications*

- Includes ACLS, PALS, ATLS, etc. as appropriate

### *Personal Interests*

- There are conflicting opinions on whether or not to include this category at the end of your CV. In the best-case scenario, it may help to build connections with a future employer that would otherwise not have existed. Most often it will have a neutral effect. However, in the worst case, they may look at your interest, say in taxidermy, and decide that you're not a good fit for the position after all.

Lastly, regarding the content of your CV, it is important that all of the information included is both correct and ethical in nature [3,6]. Double-check your dates for graduations and certifications in particular to make sure they are up-to-date and correct. As far as ethical standards go, the number of resident CVs that contain blatantly fabricated experiences is likely quite small (although probably not zero). The more difficult issue arises when attempting to describe a role or experience in a more flattering light. It is desirable to portray yourself in the best possible manner, but overly exaggerating a title, ownership, or responsibility is not only unethical and unprofessional, it can get you into trouble if the truth becomes known. Better to be a more modest but reliable candidate than one who looks great on paper but turns out to be a liar. One question you can ask yourself when debating a description is, “Would I be okay defending this experience if it was suddenly plastered on the front page of the New York Times as an example of fraud?”

### *Formatting and Organization*

Your CV should look like a CV, whether you’re holding it two feet away or ten feet away. If it starts looking like a page ripped out of Stephen King’s latest novel, it’s time to think about re-formatting. Your future employer should be able to quickly skim your CV in less than 10 seconds in order to glean the most important information [2]. Nine times out of 10, this will be happening in the last five minutes before your interview. The most impressive thing that you can do is to help your reader along. Furthermore, a well-presented CV speaks to a degree of conscientiousness and professionalism desirable in an employee. With this in mind, major principles with regard to formatting include (1) appropriate balance of white space and text (2) consistency in font size, emphasis, spacing, and phrasing details (3) readability, specifically font choice. Please note that some of the more specific advice that follows applies to versions of Microsoft Word from 2011 or later. Other word processing applications should have comparable functions as well.

White space and text balance essentially goes back to the point that your CV should look like a CV. Too much text and it starts looking like prose. Too little text and it looks like you’re padding your experiences. Margins should be one-inch all the way around. Spacing between lines should be consistent. One specific issue that often comes up while writing a CV is the problem of what I call the “hangover”—that is, an experience header or description ends with one lonely word perched on the last line by itself. Here is an example:

The itsy bitsy spider crawled up the water spout. Down came the rain and washed the spider out.

Go to the Format tab and select “Font.” Under advanced functions, the scale for character spacing is typically set to 100% by default. Simply decrease the percentage to the necessary size (here, I decreased to 95%):

The itsy bitsy spider crawled up the water spout. Down came the rain and washed the spider out.

Along the same lines as character spacing for the one-word hangover, try to avoid the one-sentence hangover—i.e. if your CV finishes on the fourth page, but the last page only has a single line, decrease the font size or character spacing slightly over the span of the entire document to get three full pages instead.

One of the easiest ways to achieve white space and text balance is by using tables. Here is a step-by-step guide to creating a CV in this fashion:

Start with a 2x2 table:


Merge the cells in the top line:


Adjust the columns so that you have space for text on the left and dates on the right:


Now you have your basic section formatted. Insert text and add rows as needed:

<b>SECTION HEADER (e.g. PUBLICATIONS)</b>	
Publication #1	Date #1
Publication #2	Date #2

Create a separate table for each section:

<b>SECTION HEADER (e.g. PUBLICATIONS)</b>	
Publication #1	Date #1
Publication #2	Date #2

<b>SECTION HEADER (e.g. INVITED LECTURES)</b>	
Lecture #1	Date #1
Lecture #2	Date #2
Lecture #3	Date #3

Then once you're done, get rid all of the borders for the table. In order to continue to see what you're doing while working on your CV, you can select the "View Gridlines" option, which will show the lines on the computer but not in the printed document or when the document is saved to a PDF format:

**SECTION HEADER (e.g. PUBLICATIONS)**

Publication #1 Date #2  
 Publication #2 Date #2

**SECTION HEADER (e.g. INVITED LECTURES)**

Lecture #1 Date #2  
 Lecture #2 Date #2  
 Lecture #3 Date #3

Be consistent. For everything. If you choose to bold category headers and italicize dates, then make sure that all of the category headers are bolded and all of the dates are italicized. The same goes for keeping consistent formatting for the dates (e.g. 9/2014, Sep 2014, or September 2014), font choice, line spacing, placement of the date, location, role/title, and other elements. Aside from the large header on the first page of your CV that should contain your name and contact information, the remainder of the document should contain the same size font throughout as well.

Choose a readable font [2,6]. My favorite is Cambria, although Times New Roman and Helvetica are also good choices. Historically, san serif fonts were preferred as they were simpler for older computers and printers to process. However technology has advanced such that today it does not make a substantial difference whether you choose a san serif or serif font. The size of the font should be no larger than 12 and no smaller than 10 for most font types. Similar to the discussion on spacing above, too large a font looks like padding and too small becomes difficult to read quickly.

<b>Serif</b> <i>Detailing on the letters</i>	<b>San serif</b> <i>No detailing on the letters</i>
Times New Roman	Arial
Cambria	Helvetica
Georgia	Calibri
Garamond	Verdana

I highly recommend using page numbers in either the footer or the header and including your last name as well, starting on the second page. There are no guarantees that your CV will be stapled together once printed. There may be a chance that your CV could become accidentally shuffled with another candidate CV or that a page becomes lost. Labeling the pages will help to prevent some of these problems on the receiving end.

Lastly, I will share the best piece of advice that I've ever received on CV and cover letter writing. Once you're done proofreading, spellchecking, and obsessing, make one last save as a Word document [3,6]. Then take your Word document and Save As a PDF. When you email copies of your CV, always send the PDF version. This will guarantee that the document that you see on your computer will be the exact same document that is printed out in the office of your future department chair. No formatting issues. No font issues. No spacing issues. It also prevents inadvertent (or intentional) manipulation of your document on the receiving end.

### *Punctuation, Grammar, and Spelling*

This is otherwise known as proofreading. Read and re-read your document to check for correct verb conjugations, spelling errors, capitalization, and proper punctuation [6]. Regard to punctuation, again, consistency is key—if you use a period at the end of one description, you should use periods at the end of all of them. Numbers less than ten should be spelled out, as should any number that begins a sentence. Make sure that your verb conjugations are in the present tense for ongoing activities and in the past tense for completed ones. Note that the spellcheck function does not work on capitalized words. Paying attention to these tiny details, although tedious, can significantly add to a good impression—or a bad one.

## **The Cover Letter**

Why do we write cover letters? Most of us know that a cover letter should accompany a CV and job application, but writing one without a clear sense of purpose is unlikely to be effective. Your cover letter is one of the first interactions that you will have with an employer and it may determine whether or not an interview is forthcoming [7]. It is your chance to distinguish yourself from the other candidates with similarly competitive CVs [8]. Keep the tone positive and professional. Erring on the side of formality is probably safer, but ideally you want to let some of your personality shine through [8].

Your cover letter should accomplish three things, (1) state the specific position for which you are applying, (2) convey a geographical connection to the location or practice, (3) describe your skills and qualities that make you a desirable candidate. Given these requirements of a cover letter, it should be clear that you will need to write a different cover letter for every application.

### *Content*

To begin, your cover letter should contain your legal name and contact information, as well as the name and contact information of the person to whom you address your letter [2,8]. No one wants to read a generic letter addressed to “whom it may concern.” Find out whether your cover letter will be read by a recruiter, fellowship director, or department chair and address it specifically to that person. If you don't know

or suspect that your letter and CV will be distributed to multiple people, it is generally safe to address your cover letter to the department chair.

You should state the position for which you are applying [8]. A given practice or group may have multiple positions for which they are hiring and it is important that you are clear on the job that you want. However, this is not the place for you to state specific hiring parameters [8]. Making demands as far as the number of night shifts or call days you are willing to work will not grant you many interviews. Similarly, be careful about describing any particular job search goals or career aspirations, as you may end up ruling yourself out for a position if your employer does not feel that you would be an appropriate fit for what they are offering.

The primary reason the same cover letter cannot be used for more than one position is because you want to convey a connection to the practice, geographic location, or patient population [7,8]. Your future employer prefers to hire people who want to be there. Motivated physicians inevitably perform better. Whether it's family and friends, previous experiences, or a unique practice environment, you should devote at least one or two sentences for this purpose. If you have trouble describing your connection, perhaps you should question your motives for applying for the position in the first place.

In a similar manner as your CV, your cover letter should highlight your most relevant skills and experience [2]. This is your opportunity to emphasize the most important parts of your CV. The best cover letters will also relate how your experiences will serve you in good stead if you are hired. This adds another dimension to your geographical connection. So do your homework. If it is a busy urban hospital and you trained at a busy urban hospital, mention that. If the practice is invested in serving the broader community, emphasize your volunteer work. In the pursuit of portraying your skills in the best light, be careful not to try to "sell" yourself too hard and certainly don't beg for the position.

Lastly, your letter should conclude with a thank you, mention of your enclosed CV and references, and a call to action [2,7,8]. This could be as simple as stating that you are looking forward to hearing from your reader soon and that your preferred mode of contact.

### *Formatting and Organization*

Your cover letter needs to be long enough to convey all the content described above, yet short enough to sustain the interest of your reader. One page is usually sufficient [7]. Many of the same principles regarding formatting described in the cover letter writing section apply here, such as using a readable font and font size, consistent margins, and a nice balance of white space and text.

### *Punctuation, Grammar, and Spelling*

Correct spelling and grammar are perhaps even more important in your cover letter than in your CV. Take the time to proofread carefully and have your letter reviewed by at least one other person prior to saving as a PDF and sending it out.



## References

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## Appendix A: Category Headings

*Adapted from: Coghill-Behrends W and Anthony R. CV Handbook: A Curriculum Vitae Owner's Manual. United States: PhD Books; 2011.*

Abstracts	Distinctions	Manuscripts and	Recognitions
Academic	Education	Research	Research Areas
Accomplishments	Educational Background	Memberships	Research Awards
Academic Awards	Educational Highlights	Mentoring	Research Experience
Academic Background	Educational Overview	Overview of Experience	Research Interests
Academic Interests	Exhibits/Exhibitions	Papers in Preparation	Research Overview
Academic Overview	Experience	Papers Presented	Selected Presentations
Administrative	Experience Highlights	Presentations	Selected Publications
Experience	Experience Summary	Positions Held	Scholarly Presentations
Advisory Committees	Formal Education	Professional	Scholarly Publications
Affiliations	Field Research	Achievements	Scholarly Work
Areas of Concentration	Funded Projects	Professional Activities	Scholarly Works
Areas of Expertise	Grants	Professional Background	Scholarship
Areas of Special Interest	Grants and Contracts	Professional Certification	Scholarships
Articles	Grants Held	Professional	Societies
Background	Honorary Societies	Development	Special Awards
Book Chapters	Honors	Professional Experience	Special Training
Certifications	Honors and Awards	Professional Interests	Specialized Training
Clinical Experience	Institutional Services	Professional	Sponsored Research
Clinical Training	International Projects	Memberships	Teaching
Committee Leadership	International Experience	Professional	Teaching Experience
Committees	Invited Addresses	Organizations	Teaching Interests
Credentials	Invited Lectures	Professional Overview	Teaching Overview
Current Projects	Language Competencies	Professional Service	Working Papers
Degrees	Languages	Proficiencies	Works in Press
Departmental	Lectures	Publications	Works in Progress
Leadership	Licensure	Publications in Progress	Works Submitted

## Appendix B: Action Verbs

*Adapted from: Coghill-Behrends W and Anthony R. CV Handbook: A Curriculum Vitae Owner's Manual. United States: PhD Books; 2011.*

Accommodated	Contributed	Established	Highlighted
Accomplished	Controlled	Estimated	Increased
Achieved	Coordinated	Evaluated	Inferred
Acquired	Corrected	Examined	Informed
Acted	Correlated	Exceeded	Introduced
Activated	Corresponded	Excelled	Invented
Adapted	Counseled	Expanded	Investigated
Added	Created	Expedited	Involved
Addressed	Critiqued	Explained	Launched
Adjudicated	Customized	Explored	Lectured
Administered	Delegated	Extended	Led
Advanced	Delivered	Extracted	Identified
Allocated	Designated	Facilitated	Illustrated
Allowed	Designed	Familiarized	Implemented
Analyzed	Developed	Fashioned	Improved
Appraised	Devised	Figured	Incorporated
Argued	Directed	Finalized	Initiated
Arranged	Discovered	Focused	Inspected
Assessed	Dispatched	Formulated	Instructed
Augmented	Displayed	Fostered	Integrated
Authored	Disproved	Found	Interpreted
Balanced	Distributed	Founded	Interviewed
Bolstered	Earned	Fulfilled	Issued
Boosted	Eased	Functioned	Joined
Built	Edited	Gained	Juggled
Caused	Educated	Generated	Labored
Certified	Elected	Graded	Linked
Chaired	Elevated	Greeted	Logged
Changed	Elicited	Grew	Maintained
Collaborated	Empowered	Guaranteed	Managed
Collected	Enabled	Guided	Maximized
Commissioned	Encouraged	Handled	Minimized
Communicated	Ensured	Heightened	Mobilized

Continued	Envisioned	Helped	Modeled
Moderated	Presented	Saved	Targeted
Modified	Probed	Selected	Taught
Monitored	Produced	Served	Tested
Motivated	Programmed	Settled	Theorized
Multiplied	Projected	Shaped	Tightened
Negotiated	Quantified	Simplified	Totaled
Observed	Rated	Simulated	Traced
Obtained	Reassessed	Solicited	Tracked
Operated	Recommended	Solved	Trained
Optimized	Reconciled	Stimulated	Transformed
Organized	Recorded	Streamlined	Translated
Overhauled	Reduced	Strengthened	Transmitted
Oversaw	Refined	Structured	Turned
Participated	Rehabilitated	Substantiated	Tutored
Performed	Relieved	Summarized	Uncovered
Persuaded	Reorganized	Supervised	Updated
Pioneered	Reported	Surveyed	Validated
Planned	Restructured	Sustained	Verified
Polished	Returned	Synthesized	Visualized
Posted	Revamped	Systematized	Volunteered
Prepared	Reviewed	Tabulated	Widened
Prescribed	Revised	Tailored	Wrote