

8 Tips to Improve Your CV



Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By Leonard Cassuto | JULY 21, 2019

Your CV — as its full name, "curriculum vitae," suggests — is the record of your academic life. But it's also a passport through that life, and one you'll have to show to gatekeepers over and over. If you want to get past those gates, your CV had better do its job.

I talk a lot in The Graduate Adviser column about the career prospects of Ph.D.s outside of academe, but this month I turn to the central document of academic life: the CV. Of course a strong CV is built on strong achievements. But you also have to present your record in an interesting and impressive way. And that's where many aspiring academics fall short.

What follows are eight tips to improve your CV.

But first, understand the difference between a CV and a résumé. There's plenty of overlap between the two — it's fair to describe a CV as an academic résumé. But the differences are salient. A résumé tends to be directly purpose-driven. It might start out with an explicit career objective ("a public-relations position that combines analysis and customer relations"), while a CV rarely features that kind of rhetoric.

CVs have specific purposes, too — they're more implicit, that's all. You have to design a CV for the audience it will reach — and you have to attend to the particular readings habits of that audience.

Résumés are typically more compact than CVs. Just about everyone who's written a résumé has encountered the injunction to keep it short. But if a CV is usually more comprehensive, that doesn't mean it should be swollen with watery excess. Keep in mind that every unnecessary item on your vita threatens, by its very presence, to distract your reader from the necessary stuff.

What makes a CV entry necessary? That depends on who's reading, and why.

Always remember: Your CV combines autobiography and salesmanship. It needs to persuade readers to hire you for the job, give you the grant, or award you the fellowship. You have to select the aspects of yourself that will sell you to your specific audience.

Other people read your CV because they have something you want. When you prepare the document for their eyes, keep your specific goal in mind and customize accordingly. If you're sending your CV as part of an application for a grant, you probably don't need to include your campus service work — because unnecessary extras distract the reader. If you're applying for a teaching job at a research university, you'll present your teaching record differently than if you're applying for an opening at a private high school.

In other words, a CV is not just a written record of your credentials. It's an argument in favor of you. Write with that in mind.

Generally speaking, put your educational credentials first. As you make that argument for yourself, follow the prevailing rules. Education is the business most CV-readers are in. Readers of résumés might not care much about where you went to school and what degrees you got, but CV readers almost always look for that information right away. Don't annoy them by burying it.

When you lay out your CV, follow the conventions of your discipline. A CV is not the place to challenge your reader's assumptions. If scientists expect your publications to be presented in chronological order and in a specific bibliographic format, then meet their expectations. If you don't, you'll distract your readers from their most important task, which is to assess your credentials.

Draft your vita knowing it will be skimmed. I keep returning to distraction because it ought to be your greatest concern. Consider that most people going through a stack of applications will spend only a couple of minutes reading each CV — if that. You have to make the most of that brief time.

Worse, most readers don't read a CV carefully. They skim it. You can't change that fact, so accommodate to it instead: Write to be skimmed. Which brings me to my next two points.

Most important, write visually. That's an umbrella term. It means you should attend to the visual balance between text and white space on your CV, use formatting thoughtfully to create emphasis, and, above all, consider the movement of a skimming reader's fast-moving eye.

You may wonder how you can tell where readers are going to look. It takes some practice. You can get it by reading other people's CVs (which are abundant online), and watching where your own eyes travel. Where do you home in? What do you skip? Do your eyes move sequentially from section marker to section marker, or do they jump around?

A good CV uses formatting to catch and direct the reader's attention. Boldface, for example, will attract the reader — as it does you when you read this essay. Underlining does the same.

On the other hand, big bricks of text — i.e., chunky paragraphs — will repel readers. When the skimming reader's eye encounters a long paragraph, it usually just bounces off it and drops downward to the next resting point. Resting points are important because even skimming readers need a place to stop. Indentation and other formatting choices provide visual variety and contrasts, and they also provide section markers to give readers a momentary rest before you redirect them.

Use boldface, underlining, and other attention-getting hooks judiciously. Overuse renders them ineffective, or worse. If a CV assaults the eye with a blizzard of words and a farrago of underlining, bolding, italics, text boxes, and so on, you'll turn off many readers and get less of their precious time.

Front-load your most important entries. This, too, is about keeping in mind your readers' limited amount of time for looking at CVs. If your most impressive credential is the prize you won for your dissertation, then figure out a way to put it before your reader as soon as you can — and flag it so it won't be missed.

You have to do that because reading lengthy CVs gets tiring very fast. Make sure your readers see what you want them to see before they run out of attention, shift into "it's time to finish" mode, and start hitting "page down."

Avoid inside baseball. That's a journalistic term for insider talk. You'll conserve your reader's patience if you present the important stuff intelligibly. Unless you're applying for an opening in a department you're already teaching in, your reference to "Sociology 342" will be lost. Worse, it will be interpreted as a sign that you don't really understand who your audience is — and your readers will take note of that failure.

Use your CV to guide the interview you hope to land. Your CV should include only those things that you want to talk about in the job interview. Remember that an interview is a conversation about you — and your application provides the ingredients for that discussion. Imagine how you'd like the conversation to go, and organize your CV to make that outcome more, not less, likely.

The inverse also holds true: If you don't want to talk about a particular controversy in your field (say, a high-profile sexual-harassment case in your discipline), then avoid names and references on your CV that might lead a reader to ask you about it.

Of course your application comprises more than your CV. If you're applying for a job, your cover letter is at least as important. That'll be the subject of my next column.

Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, writes regularly about graduate education in this space.

His latest book is The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It, published by Harvard University Press. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories at lcassuto@erols.com. His Twitter handle is @LCassuto.

*This article is part of:
The Graduate Adviser*