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Effective CVs for research students

Version 9.15

IMAGINE YOUR FUTURE

STARTING POINT SERIES

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You've done your research, tested out your theories, got a load of results and maybe even a marketable product. Now's the time to publish, hopefully to critical acclaim – only this time, the product is you, and the publication won't be sent to Nature, but will land on the desk of a potential employer in the form of a CV.

You can stretch an analogy too far, but there are some similarities between publishing your research, and publishing your CV.

Your research so far ...

- what have you discovered or developed ?
- what will your peer reviewers or readers want to know ?
- what results do you have to back up any claims ?
- what are the conventions in style and presentation for publications ?

Your life so far ...

- what skills, knowledge and experience do you have to offer ?
- what will a potential employer want to know ?
- what have you done in your life to back up your claims ?
- what is considered professional in style and presentation of a CV ?

This is a short guide to developing your CV, focusing on applying for jobs using your specialist knowledge, academic jobs, and jobs unrelated to your subject area, in the UK. For information on non-UK CV formats (each country differs), we have a range of reference books at the Careers Service which may help. However, many of the basic principles are common to most types of CV.

You will find more example CVs on our website www.manchester.ac.uk/careers

For individual help use our Applications Advice Service. www.manchester.ac.uk/applicationsadvice
Find a job to apply to, tailor your CV using this guide and we can work with you to improve its effectiveness in the appointment.

1. Primary Research: Yourself

Before putting pen to paper to write a CV you need to do some serious research – on yourself. You didn't plunge straight into your PhD without researching, interpreting and summarising previous research. Think of your CV as a kind of thesis on your life – and the first part of your literature review is researching, interpreting and summarising yourself. This means: 1. knowing what skills you possess; 2. Understanding what those skills mean; 3. Providing specific evidence of those skills in action from your experience

1a. What skills do you have?

Skill /skil/ noun the ability to do something well; expertise

Right now, use the box below to jot down as many skills as you can think of in **1 minute**. We've given you a couple of common ones to get you started.

Don't ignore skills gained outside your research or your department. Working in a bar gives you scope for demonstrating tact, diplomacy, persuasion and assertiveness. Teamwork or leadership can be shown whilst rock climbing, playing in an orchestra or organising fundraising events for your daughter's playgroup.

Communication
Organisational
Analytical

Your minute is up! You can come back to this exercise later and add more. The important thing right now is getting to grips with the process.

What does that skill *mean*?

Most people wouldn't write "I'm clever" on a CV but would point out their qualifications and some of the things that enabled them to earn those qualifications. However, many are tempted to claim that they have "excellent communication skills" and leave it at that – don't fall into this trap! Your blog or website might demonstrate an excellent ability to engage diverse audiences with your research; volunteering with the Samaritans could illustrate expertise in listening – but you must present this evidence in a way that is meaningful to the employer.

'Communication' represents a whole package of skills –and you may have more or less expertise with different aspects of communication such as (but not limited to):

Presenting	Negotiating	Writing (different audiences?)
Teaching	Listening	Communicating using various technologies (which ones?)
Advising	Motivating	
Persuading	Providing feedback	

Have a go now – what does having 'communication skills' mean for you? Don't worry about the evidence – we'll cover that next. Can you add anything to the list above?

My **communication** skills:

What evidence do you have to persuade people that you're not 'making things up' or 'boasting'?

Assertions without evidence are as frowned upon in CVs as they are in academic writing. All your claims must be backed up with evidence. Many research students confess feeling awkward or uncomfortable about "blowing their own trumpet":

1. Employers need employees who can perform certain tasks to a standard that justifies the salary they are being paid. They need evidence from your past performance that you have the requisite skills.
2. It's not bragging if you make a claim and back it up with evidence.

3. Thoughtful use of language is the key to avoiding arrogance. You wouldn't write "I'm clever" but you might talk about your high standard of academic achievement demonstrated by awards, publications, marks, feedback, *etc.*, all of which illustrates that you are, indeed, "clever".
4. If you don't make the claim, someone else will and they will get invited to interview instead of you. Employers can't read between the lines and somehow 'see' that you are the right person for the job – you need to demonstrate that through your evidence.

Giving Evidence for Skills – some approaches are more effective than others

Skill	Evidence, Example A	Evidence, Example B
Persuading	Experience of successfully persuading people is demonstrated by, for example, successfully encouraging a sustained 50% increase in students participating Postgraduate Geog Soc events.	I am highly skilled at persuading people in a variety of situations.

If you were an employer, which statement would persuade you most effectively about the candidate's skills of persuasion? Why?

Many, if not most, people would say Example A – it is specific. Details such as '50% increase' communicate impact. The argument against Example B is that it is too general. Anyone could say that – how could an employer infer anything or make any meaningful assessment of the candidate's claims of persuading skills from Example B?

Now it's your turn. Choose 2 of the skills you brainstormed for communication and give a statement of evidence.

After you've done that, get some feedback – from a friend, a careers consultant, a family member, an academic – someone you trust to give you reliable, impartial advice. What was the feedback? If you received some suggestions for feedback, have another go and write an improved version based on the feedback.

Skill	First Try	Improved version

Skills – what to do next?

Build a portfolio of evidence. Ideally you should have multiple examples to draw on for every skill – from academia, work experience, extra-curricular activities and other areas of your life.

One approach is to create a table laid out like this one:

Skill	Situation	Task	Action	Result
E.g., motivating others	Could be a situation from any part of your experience – academic, work, volunteering, interests.	What was the task you needed accomplish?	What actions did YOU* take? Be specific and personal Explain how and why you took the course of action that you did	What was the outcome of your actions?

1b. What do you know?

Knowledge

Your deep subject knowledge may be of prime importance for an academic research post. But then again –it might not. The employer (PI) may be interested in knowing how well you comprehend the project for which you are applying. It's important to get the balance right, so be alert to clues in the advert, and seek advice if you aren't sure.

For jobs outside your subject area, it may be effective to highlight how certain techniques or subject knowledge are transferable and how they relate to the job in question – you can't assume the employer will automatically make the connection.

For jobs unrelated to your specialism, try to explain your research briefly in plain English.

- **Tip:** Get a non-specialist friend to read it and tell you if they understand.

Don't feel you have to hide your research degree, but your research area is unlikely to be the focus of your CV if you're applying for a non-specialist job. Don't devote lots of space to it or make it the first thing the employer sees on your application.

1c. What is your experience?

Experience includes being a research student, but also previous work or professional experience (casual student jobs can count – see Skills), other activities in your social life, or activities which help with the smooth running of your department. **Volunteering counts, too.**

The key to using these successfully in a CV lies in focusing on achievements rather than lists of duties or long descriptions of the context of the experience.

2. Who Are You Writing This For?

When choosing evidence and language use, think carefully about your audience. Read your CV and covering letter from the employer's point of view. The job description and person specification will help you do this. Your examples should make it easy for them to see the connection between what you have to offer and what they are looking for.

Most people write a first CV as a history of their life. This is fine as a starting point, but the trick is to set this to one side, and then focus on what the employer wants to know – what will convince them that they would like you to work with them?

2a. The person specification and job advert

Use your enhanced analytical skills to pull these apart and really get to grips with what the employer means. A useful exercise can be to imagine yourself in the role, carrying out the task or responsibility.

Example-Curriculum development

A job advert for a lecturing post demands that candidates undertake “curriculum development in relation to the <subject area>”. What does that mean? If this is the first lecturing job you are going for, you may have little experience of curriculum development, therefore it will be doubly important that you demonstrate that you know what this is and make appropriate links with your transferable skills. Curriculum development encompasses a variety of activities, and it is likely that you will have some experience in a selection of these.

It can include:

- **Identifying the learning that needs to take place** – How do you select what students need to learn?
- **Planning the learning** – How do you develop your seminars, tutorials or lectures? How do you prepare for lab demonstrating?
- **Delivering** – What teaching methods do you use? How do you select them? How do you support student learning as a lab demonstrator?
- **Evaluating** – How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your teaching strategies?

As a new academic, you may have not had the experience of developing a new degree programme, but any teaching experience can give you insight to diverse aspects of the curriculum development process. By teaching yourself what curriculum development means as a full time lecturer, you can make the appropriate links between what the job demands and what you have to offer.

2b. Understand the organisation

This includes academic as well non-academic employers. Read as much as you can about the organisation – their mission, values, strategies.

For academic institutions, read the **institutional strategy**. How could you contribute to that? Have you specialist skills that could contribute to **other strategies** at institutional or departmental level, e.g., elearning, widening participation, teaching and learning, public engagement? For the foreseeable future, publications and ability to secure funding will remain of paramount importance in keeping you

competitive, however, showing an awareness of the wider institutional environment could help your application stand out that little bit more.

For any job, try to find out what the employer is looking for – if they won't tell you directly, the clues are in adverts, recruitment and organisation literature (even if designed for other jobs it may tell you about the culture of the organisation).

2c. In summary...

A CV is like an advert – it will work best when it focuses on how the finished product will satisfy the needs of the customer (the employer), and not on the effort which went into developing aspects which the customer doesn't need. This means different CVs for different types of jobs, even for different employers if you want to be really smart. Here are some broad suggestions:

Jobs using your specialist subject – focus on your subject specific achievements, ability to deliver end results, your education, any projects and resources managed, relevant techniques and knowledge, and skills such as team work, problem solving and creativity.

Academic jobs – focus on your subject specific achievements and education, your past, current and future research interests, any teaching, demonstrating or departmental admin activities, anything to demonstrate your research skills and professional standing.

Unrelated jobs – focus on your key transferable skills which are appropriate to the job, particularly highlighting achievements which have been gained outside an academic research context, avoid over-technical descriptions, a personal profile highlighting your interest and suitability for this type of work can be helpful.

3. Making the Right Impression

Employers reading CVs in answer to an advert can spend as little as 90 seconds scanning a CV before consigning it to the “read later” or “bin it now” piles. If you've sent a speculative CV – well, think how much attention you pay to unsolicited mail at home or work ... It will only pass the first cut if it looks professional, and something of interest to the employer stands out immediately.

Tips for Professional Presentation

- For non-academic CVs, 2 sides of A4 maximum, new sheet for each side, laser printed. For academic CVs, use as much paper as you want (weight matters!) but get most of your good stuff on the first two pages.
- If you are sending a hard copy, use new, good quality paper; white or “professional” in colour (e.g. cream, parchment). Avoid folders or fancy slippery covers – often hated by recruiters.
- Graphics – use only if relevant and only if they actually add something.
- If emailing, avoid colours – your CV will probably be printed in black and white anyway.
- Use **bold**, *italics* or underlining but not all at once or you will lose **impact**.
- Avoid background shading – when photocopied it can be blotchy or obscure text
- USE DISTINCTIVE HEADINGS and clearly separate the different areas of your experience. Keep sections together - avoid them running over two pages.
- Indenting sections and using ● bullet points add visual interest and signposts key information.
- Send as PDF – you want what you see to be what the recruiter sees, not MS Office 2000's version opened on a Mac.

Beef Up Your Written Style

- Rambling prose and endless lists are boring to read – the recruiter may not bother. **Make it punchy and to the point.**
- If a sentence starts to run over three lines, it is probably too long - split it up into shorter sentences.
- Use strong active words such as initiated, reorganised, co-ordinated, liaised, managed, etc. A full list of words can be found on page 10.
- **Avoiding the passive voice** will help you achieve the above.
- Be specific and quantify achievements for credibility and impact – eg. “negotiated £100 sponsorship from local companies to promote department charity fun run, raising £760”

Active Language List

10 words to show... Your personal qualities

Enterprising	Adaptable	Resourceful	Proactive	Experienced
Practical	Versatile	Driven	Hard-working	Dependable

How you work with others

Volunteered	Collaborated	Supported	Facilitated	Participated
Assisted	Mentored	Motivated	Encouraged	Facilitated

You taking charge of others

Administered	Delegated	Supervised	Directed	Co-ordinated
Motivated	Led	Managed	Presided	Represented

How you made something better (don't forget to quantify!)

Improved	Increased	Generated	Saved	Delivered
Resolved	Transformed	Doubled	Edited	Refined

Your information/data handling skills

Analysed	Assessed	Evaluated	Reviewed	Researched
Interpreted	Discovered	Identified	Interviewed	Investigated

How you share information with others

Advised	Coached	Guided	Mentored	Organised
Demonstrated	Trained	Presented	Instructed	Recommended

How you take the initiative

Established	Initiated	Created	Designed	Developed
Devised	Introduced	Volunteered	Launched	Suggested

Your organisation and planning skills

Arranged	Co-ordinated	Organised	Planned	Maintained
Prepared	Scheduled	Revised	Processed	Produced

Your effectiveness in persuading others

Negotiated	Mediated	Persuaded	Presented	Liaised
Encouraged	Promoted	Guided	Influenced	Interviewed

Your achievements and going the extra mile

Volunteered	Suggested	Recommended	Mastered	Nominated
Achieved	Awarded	Selected	Won	Attained

4. Getting the Format Right

There is no one right way to present a CV, and you can move sections around or omit them, depending on their relevance to the recruiter - read it from their point of view. However, as starting points, here are some of the more common styles.

Conventional Chronological CV

This is a safe option for many jobs, and often ideal for jobs based around your specialism outside academia.

- Education and work experience should be shown in reverse chronological order, as the most recent is generally most relevant. However if, for example, your most relevant work experience was 2 or 3 student jobs ago, you can separate them into two sections – Relevant Work Experience, Other Work Experience. Also, other experience gained within academia could be included, e.g., as Relevant Professional (or Technical) Experience
- Don't leave unexplained gaps, but you don't have to list all jobs or qualifications, if they are numerous, not relevant or a long time ago eg. "1994-96 Various temporary summer jobs including sales, construction and warehousing"

Academic CV

Whilst some academics have strong views on the correct format for academic CVs, we've found that these can differ. However, virtually all academic CVs are built around the three pillars of research, teaching and administration.

- The right research focus is important – focus on your own research ideas if applying for a job where you'll be writing your own bids; show how your research ideas fit with the recruiter's if they hold the purse strings.
- Highlight any help you've given your department (paid or unpaid) – demonstrating, open days, schools events, organising study groups or seminars

Our website contains further information on putting together your academic CV

Skills Based CV

This format comes into its own when applying for jobs where you are trying to change field. By highlighting the transferable skills, and de-emphasising the technical content of your education, you can help the recruiter see how you might fit into their non-research job.

- A Personal Profile or Career Aim can be very effective in setting the scene for the reader – just make sure it says something concrete, and avoids vague waffle
 - ✗ "Highly motivated postgraduate with good team skills looking for a job with excellent training where I can develop to my full management potential"
 - ✓ "Nurate graduate with up-to-date IT knowledge, proven leadership skills and practical customer service experience seeking a move into Sales in the IT sector"
- Skills can come before your qualifications, but if your education is relegated to the second page, make sure the first page refers at least to you being a graduate.
- Your enthusiasm must shine through, as your qualifications and knowledge can't speak for themselves – use expressive language to give a feel for who you are.

5. Finally...

Did you sit down, write your thesis in one sitting and then submit it? Of course not, you did research, you wrote drafts, you got feedback, you made changes. It's the same process for writing your CV. Your CV is a living document – there is no one CV for every job. Each CV must be tailored to each position you are applying for.

6. CV Examples

18 examples of chronological, skills and academic CVs for science/engineering and arts/humanities PhDs are available on the Vitae website. You must register but there is no charge.

www.vitae.ac.uk/researcher-careers/researcher-cv-examples

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MEET THE TEAM

We're based in The Atrium on the 1st Floor of University Place. We are open all year round to give you advice and guidance and help you explore your future.

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