

CV dos and don'ts

Your curriculum vitae gives potential employers a first look at you. How you cast it determines whether they give you a second one.

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What type of curriculum vitae (CV) is most likely to impress potential employers? One that is simple, straightforward, organized and tailored to fit a job ad, experts say.

"Right now it's a very competitive job market, and a CV is your ticket to an interview," says Tara Kuther, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at Western Connecticut State University who has given seminars on writing CVs. "A vitae that is formatted nicely, attractive, looks professional and presents your strengths really stands out to employers."

As such, putting together your CV takes much care and forethought. First off, be sure the job asks for a vitae and not a résumé. A vitae is a detailed record that showcases your career and education accomplishments and can be unlimited in length, whereas a résumé is generally a one-page overview of your career. When applying for most jobs in psychology, employers will request that you send a vitae, not a résumé.

Also, depending on the type of job you are applying for—a practice or academic one—you might need to tailor your vitae. When applying for a practice job, highlight your internship and practicum experience, experts recommend. On the other hand, when applying for an academic or research job, highlight your publications, teaching and research experiences, they say.

Here are the essentials of a vitae that impresses:

COMPARTMENTALIZE

Organize your vitae with sections such as "education," "professional experience" and "publications," and list each accomplishment in chronological order with beginning and end dates. Also, if applicable, include sections such as "practica/psychotherapy experience," "volunteer/service work," "awards and scholarships" and "professional affiliations."

When applying for a practitioner job, include a section on assessment measures you have mastered during training, advises Shawn Roberson, PhD, a forensic psychologist at the Oklahoma Forensic Center, part of the Northeastern Psychology Internship Program. Roberson helps to screen internship applicants at the center.

WEIGHT IF IT'S WORTH INCLUDING

What to include depends on what the position entails, experts say. For instance, should you include coursework? Most advisers say no, but some recommend listing any specialized training—you might include coursework in forensic psychology, for example, when applying for a forensic job. However, experts generally say that coursework, methodological skills and software proficiencies should be omitted from a vitae that's geared for full-time jobs, since it's assumed that psychologists have mastered these skills. Still, you might include such skills on applications for internship and postdoctoral positions, they note.

In particular, any undergraduate experiences you include should be highly relevant to your psychology career and the job at hand, says Mary Kite, PhD, associate dean of the Graduate School at Ball State University and a professor of psychological science there. While social fraternities and sororities don't belong on a vitae, students might note membership in Psi Chi or Phi Beta Kappa and high academic honors, such as magna cum laude, Kite says.

Be creative in relating your experiences to the job, Roberson adds. If the position requires public speaking or organizational involvement, you might, for example, highlight your work with organizational boards. Experts also say you should not include your age, relationship status or hobbies on your CV.

KEEP IT SIMPLE AND STRAIGHTFORWARD

Too often students try to cram too much information on a page, Kite says. Keep job descriptions clear and concise, and follow a standard format. Bold the headers of the different sections—such as education and professional experience—and use a simple font such as Times New Roman, experts recommend. Also, use quality white or ivory paper, Kite advises. These steps will help employers easily absorb the information on your CV.

HONESTLY REPRESENT YOUR WORK

Don't pad your vitae to make it appear more impressive, experts advise. For example, Kuther says, many students lump publications and presentations together to make the section look longer. But search committees usually prefer to see them separate, she says. "Everyone understands you're a student," Kuther explains. "If you only have one [published] article listed, that is still a fantastic thing."

TAILOR YOUR VITAE TO THE JOB

Match your background, skills and training to the job you're applying for, Roberson says. For example, clinical psychologists need to emphasize internship and supervision experience, while academic applicants need to highlight research and teaching experience, Kite adds. "If a student is looking for both, then they should have two different vitae rather than a one-size-fits-all vitae," Kite says.

MAXIMIZE YOUR CV WITH THE COVER LETTER

Use the cover letter to highlight accomplishments on your CV, such as clinical, research or education experiences that match the job, Roberson notes. You can also call attention to work that doesn't belong in the CV: If you have any research in progress, for instance, use the cover letter to mention it, Kite says. The CV should only contain research that has been published or is in press, she explains. And, just like the CV, the cover letter also needs to be customized for every employer.

FIND AN EDITOR

Ask colleagues or faculty members to check your vitae for awkward phrasing, formatting problems and spelling errors, and to give you feedback on content and organization, advise Kite and others.

Ultimately, the vitae should serve as a summary of your education and career experiences, Kite notes, and should be continually updated throughout your career.

The Vitae Checklist

Name and contact information, including work and home phone numbers, address and e-mail

Education, including college degrees, places and dates

Dissertation topic

Licenses/certification, including state and certificate number, if applicable

Internships

Professional experience

Publications

Speech/Transcript/Script (8)
Summary (8)
Directory (7)
Guidelines (7)
Letter (7)
Bylaws (6)
Chart/Table/Figure (6)
Database/Electronic Product (6)
Opinion/Editorial (4)
Call for Comment (3)
Form/Application (3)
News Responses (3)
Event Calendar (2)
Minutes (2)
Presentation (2)
Survey/Survey Results (2)
Obituary (1)
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