

## TIPS ON WRITING A CURRICULUM VITAE

Perhaps no other document is as important to those seeking an academic position as the curriculum vitae (CV). Do it by the book and a candidate could be in the running for a coveted faculty position. Do it poorly and the application may land in the trash can with a thud.

Trouble is, little agreement exists among experts about what are the principal ingredients of an effective CV. Ask any group about the Do's and Don't's of writing a high quality CV and you will get a range of answers.

While there is general agreement that an academic application should include a strong cover letter, a CV, a research proposal and a teaching philosophy, there is little consensus over which of these elements is the most important.

Some say the cover letter is all-important. Others point to the research proposal and the teaching statement, depending on whether the applicant is seeking a position at a research or teaching institution. Still others insist that a CV can make or break a job candidacy.

"The CV is part of a package," says Jerry A. Bell, ACS senior scientist and a former chemistry professor for 30 years. "A good CV won't get you a job. But if it's not good, it can cost you a job."

In their authoritative book, *How to Prepare Your Curriculum Vitae, Revised Edition*, authors Acy L. Jackson and C. Kathleen Geckeis say the CV is often called the "academic resume." They note that the CV is no longer just being used by hopeful college professors. Increasingly, undergraduates are being asked to submit a CV as part of their application for graduate or professional school, they say.

The book provides step-by-step instructions for condensing your career into a concise biographical sketch that highlights your assets. It includes many sample CVs and guidance for five categories of applicants: soon-to-be college graduates, continuing graduates, professionals who need to prepare a CV, professionals who need to update a CV, and professionals planning a career transition.

Other helpful features of this publication include tips on how to get started on your CV by taking inventory of your competencies and skills and how to prepare an electronic CV for scanning by a computer. The book also includes a lengthy list of "action verbs" to help candidates punch up their CV and create a strong impression.

According to Nancy E. Levinger, associate professor of chemistry at Colorado State University, the primary concern should be ensuring that the CV includes all the information and background that reviewers will want at their fingertips. She has reviewed thousands of CVs in her position and believes that the standard CV begins with a simple, straightforward format: contact information followed by educational background and a list of awards.

"I want to know where you got your degree and what's special about you," she says. Next should follow an employment history and professional accomplishments. Candidates are free to include their personal hobbies, age, marital status, and their children's names and ages. But Levinger considers these irrelevant and suggests they be left out.

Lisa M. Balbes, a veteran Department of Career Services career consultant, agrees. She says including family information on the CV would be a mistake because “you don’t want to give them a reason to discount you right off the bat.”

However, Bell maintains this is a matter of personal choice. He says the goal should be determining if there is a match between the job candidate and the institution. It’s important that both sides are open about their expectations and desires, he says.

Experts note that the CV is a “living” document that is constantly updated as a faculty member’s career proceeds. They say it’s very important that the document be an exhaustive list of publications and presentations, research grants, a description of courses taught, and lists of references and of students mentored and where they are currently located. CVs are routinely longer than resumes. Length should not be a concern, they say.

“My impression is that a CV is kind of an encyclopedic inventory of a person’s work,” notes Brian Coppola, professor of chemistry at the University of Michigan. “Coupled with a philosophy of instruction and a set of research proposals, I think it should build a complete picture.”

Bell notes that different institutions – large research universities vs. four-year colleges – place different weight on the candidate’s CV, the research proposal, or the teaching philosophy. But he urges jobseekers to do their best on each of them.

In larger research universities, both the teaching philosophy and research plan (which includes a detailed description of the candidate's research goals) are standard parts of the application package, and are carefully considered by professors reviewing CVs for the department.

The research plan would include not only the general research area and specific problems to be addressed, but potential funding sources, start-up requirements, how the proposed research will fit with current departmental resources, and the broader impacts of the proposed research, says Balbes, principal scientist with Balbes Consultants, which provides scientific writing and consulting services.

Resources available at a large university are considerably different from those available at a small liberal arts college or a community college. Jobseekers are well advised to know their audience and be explicit in their applications about what types of instruments they would need to conduct their research, experts say.

“Bear in mind that there are over 1,000 colleges offering the bachelor's degree in chemistry, about 290 offering the M.S. and about 190 offering the Ph.D.,” says Ray O’Donnell, coordinator of graduate studies in the chemistry department at State University of N.Y. at Oswego and a veteran ACS career consultant.

“Your research `goals’ should be appropriate for the `type’ of chemistry department where you hope to have a career. Start-up money can vary from a few thousand to several hundred thousand dollars,” he adds. “In the same spirit, most departments are interested in your ability to sustain your research program, whether that is by attracting undergraduates or graduate students to work with you or by attracting funds to sustain your work.”

Jobseekers are urged to brief themselves on the chemistry departments to which they are applying in other ways, also. Make it sound that you know about the college or university and what their needs are. For example, do some research so that you don’t stumble into addressing the female head of a chemistry department as, “Dear Mr. Chairman.”

CVs are routinely discarded for other reasons. The most common pitfall in writing CVs is sloppy grammar or mangling an English word, several professors say. “That’s a certain knockout factor – it will get thrown out,” says O’Donnell. The best defense against an unpleasant surprise is asking several people to read your CV before it is submitted, experts say.

Another common mistake, notes O’Donnell, is a candidate using a narrative under the section on experience and accomplishments. “Your experience and accomplishments can be formatted with bullets, much in the same way you would for a well-prepared industrial resume,” he says.

Balbes urges job candidates to always list their experience in reverse chronological order. This way, the current and most prestigious position is the first bulleted item and the career path leading to it follows in an organized progression.

She cites an important difference between writing a CV and a resume. The CV provides a complete picture of your entire professional history while a resume is a list of transferable skills and accomplishments showing what you can do for the company.

“The CV focuses on you as a professional while a resume focuses on the company to which you are applying and what you can do for them,” Balbes says.

O’Donnell sees another reason for making sure that job seeker and an academic institution strike a match: there will be less room for error when being considered for a tenure-track appointment. It is a very painful experience for all involved when a faculty member fails to be granted tenure. Industrial appointments generally allow for more flexibility in creating a “fit” for an employee, he says.

But the most common mistake candidates make in their CVs is not what they include but what they leave out, says Levinger. “The most important thing about a CV is that it be complete and include all the information that someone would need to evaluate you,” she says.

In her view, the CV is an integral part of an application that could generate an interview. Completeness is important because “you want people to look at it and say, ‘Wow, this person does a lot.’”

Candidates should present a comprehensive picture of their academic activities since they were an undergraduate. This could include volunteering for American Chemical Society local section activities, judging science fairs, and giving formal presentations.

Experts say foreign-born students should take extra steps to ensure that their academic background can be clearly understood by American academicians. Their CV should demonstrate how well the candidate knows the American university system and provide evidence that they can give a presentation in English, Levinger says.

Despite the importance of making a CV as complete as possible, some experts question whether it matters as much as the cover letter. Others say search committees don’t care how a CV looks stylistically unless there are glaring errors.

“It doesn’t have to be beautiful in the sense of all sorts of lovely things you can do with computers,” says Bell. “But it really has to tell the story of you.”

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## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

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