

Chronological CVs

This tip-sheet offers some hints and tips for tailoring your CV to positions outside academia. It focuses on the standard chronological format, suitable for the UK.

If you are considering a significant career change, you might want to use a skills-based CV, for which the PFDC have a separate tip-sheet.

1. Essentials

Your CV:

- is a factual **marketing** document outlining your career history, education, and skills. An effective CV will contain accurate and honest information which shows that you meet the requirements of the role you are applying for.
- will need to be **adapted each time** you apply, deciding what is relevant and irrelevant by looking closely at the information that is available to you.
- should focus on the last **five years**. Skills and experience acquired before this time can be added but only if directly relevant to the role you are applying for.
- must mirror what the prospective employer has said they are looking for. Keep the job advert, job description, and person specification close to hand. Aim to use the same vocabulary.

2. Style & format

Looks matter

Your CV should be both professional to look at and easy to read. Through a quick scan of your CV (maximum 30 seconds), your potential employers must be able to extract your key achievements.

Length

Your CV should be a **maximum of two pages** – no debates, no exceptions.

Only include publications or conference papers for research positions, e.g. R&D roles in industry, and only then if you can find evidence that your prospective employer is actively publishing their work.

Bullets and notes

To enable your CV to be easily scanned, use concise, punchy bullet points. Don't bother to say 'I' – put the verb first instead.

Never use full sentences anywhere on your CV.

Fonts

Be consistent with your formatting throughout your CV.

To aid easy reading, use a sans serif font such as Arial, keep it to pt 11 or above, stick to standard margins (1 inch/2.54 cm all around), use proper line breaks, and align all text to the left (never use centre or justified).

Bold fonts work well for headings and emphasising job titles, but capitals, italics, and underlining can clutter the page and are often best avoided.

3. Content

Personal details

Put your name in a large font and, underneath, your email address and a phone number (one of each).

There is no need to start with a heading of 'CV' or 'Curriculum Vitae'.

You can (but you don't have to) add your title at the top of your CV – either 'Dr' before or 'PhD' after your name is acceptable, but not both.

There is no need to add any other personal details, e.g. photo, date of birth, or marital status. If you are applying to other countries, please check local conventions.

You might choose to describe your right to work:

Nationality: Canadian (work visa required)

Nationality: Icelandic (EEA national)

Nationality: Malaysian (work visa not required – UK permanent resident)

Personal statement

You could include two or three lines to explain why you are a good candidate, e.g. by highlighting key skills and experiences. These statements were very trendy for a while, but a lot of employers dislike them and simply don't read them.

A statement of key skills or achievements can, however, be useful if your most relevant experiences are spread throughout different sections of the CV.

Similarly, you might set out your 'career goals' if you are making a significant career change.

Don't use adjectives to describe yourself in glowing terms. Support what you want to say with robust numerical evidence:

Bad: 'highly experienced plant biologist'

Better: 'plant biologist with 8 years' experience'.

Employment

You might choose to call this section 'Experience' and include voluntary or unpaid roles as well.

Alternatively, you might find grouping under themed headings helpful, e.g. 'Commercial Experience', 'Management', 'Leadership', 'Administration'. Choose these headings based on the job description and mirror the language the employer is using.

Whichever heading(s) you use, list your experiences in reverse chronological order, i.e. most recent first.

Highlight **key achievements** – i.e. for each position, add two or three bullet points to describe your successes. Don't simply refer to 'duties' or 'responsibilities' – it doesn't show that you were actually successful.

Begin each bullet point with an active verb, e.g. led, coordinated, established, delivered. Include **quantifiable data** where possible to support your evidence:

"Led a team of 4 for a six-month project costing £40,000. Delivered the key project milestones 2 weeks ahead of schedule and 10% under budget."

"Established an industrial collaboration resulting in a £400,000 grant and a successful patent application."

Be sure to include relevant **transferable skills** gained from your research experience, e.g. networking, communicating with collaborators, supporting and mentoring students, presenting and public speaking, writing, and producing material for publication...

Ensure that all information is about you. Don't say 'we' or talk about your team in general terms.

Qualifications

List your qualifications in reverse chronological order, and be sure to specify the years (start and finish).

It is rarely necessary to include school qualifications.

Include your thesis title within this section if it's directly relevant. There is no need to give supervisors' names.

4. Optional headings

These optional headings can be included on the second page of your CV if they are relevant to the position you are applying for:

- **Professional development** – include any relevant courses, workshops, or development activity.
- **Awards and achievements** – list awards and accolades received in the last 5 years (and older awards if they are relevant to the post).
- **Languages** – list languages and your level (native, fluent, intermediate, basic).
- **Interests** – don't just list some hobbies. This is another chance to show success, e.g. prizes, tournaments won, positions of responsibility...

5. Referees

If there is another space where referees' details are asked for, e.g. on an application form, you can omit this section entirely or write 'References available on request'.

Don't give the details of more referees than the employer has asked for. It doesn't show how esteemed you are; it just shows that you don't follow instructions.

6. Breaks and disclosures

Minimise small breaks in your employment history by using whole years rather than months and years, e.g. 2009 – 2011.

If you have taken a career break or had time off lasting more than a few months, you can choose to:

1. Provide a brief, factual description:
 - Parental leave (6 months)
 - Sickness absence (1 year, now fully recovered)
 - Career break (12 months) – travelling in East Africa
2. Leave the break out. You do not have to volunteer this information, though you might get asked about any gaps later, e.g. at interview.

7. Checklist

- Does your CV correspond closely with the person specification and show evidence that you meet the essential criteria?
- Is your CV the right length for the kind of application you're making?
- Is your CV formatted consistently, with no spelling or grammar errors?
- Is the content recent and relevant?
- Have you included all appropriate sections?

Ask a friend to scan your CV in 30 seconds, then take it away from them. What stood out? What did they miss that you really want the employer to see?

If you have any further questions regarding your CV or any other aspects of your professional development, please contact the Postdoc and Fellows Development Centre for a one-to-one meeting.

Contact us: pfdc-support@imperial.ac.uk

