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# How to write the perfect CV

A job applicant walks into a bar



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May 30th 2024

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**I**MAGINE MEETING a stranger at a party. What makes for a successful encounter? Lesson one is to heed the wisdom of a shampoo commercial from the 1980s: you never get a second chance to make a first impression. Lesson two is to remember that you do not need to wear a beret or a fur stole in order to stand out. Lesson three is not to forget that what you leave out matters as much as what you say.

These same principles, it turns out, apply to writing a CV. A résumé is not a list of every job you ever had. It is not your autobiography. It is, like that hair-care advert, a marketing tool. Your audience is made up of recruiters and hiring managers. Like cocktail-party guests, they do not take a long time to decide if they want to keep talking. According to one study, such professionals spend an average of 7.4 seconds skimming a job application. Your guest Bartleby has a few tips on how best to ensure that these seconds count.

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The CV's number-one task is not to put the reader off. If you are thinking of adding a watermark with your initials, think again; you are trying too hard. Use a clean, simple format and avoid fancy fonts (Arial or Helvetica are fine; Century Gothic is not).

Adding colour does not mean using a teal background. Nor does it mean using purple prose. Clichés can be a reason you are passed over for an interview. So can typos; spell-check and proofread over and over. You would be surprised how often someone forgets to include their name and contact details. Dispense with hackneyed descriptors (“cultivated and passionate professional”, “a keen eye for detail”)—facts should speak for themselves. But not all facts. You may think including your ranking on “Overwatch” is a quirky way to illustrate how quick you are on your feet. A recruiter may conclude that it shows you spend hours on the sofa tethered to a gaming console.

Do not hammer your CV out in an hour—take your time to polish it. Condense, filter and distil until what you are left with captures the essence of you. Anyone's CV can fit on a page, even if you have held residencies in the world's eight top hospitals or are Christine Lagarde. Forget the personal statement—no one has time for

that. If you spent three weeks in the summer when you were 17 keeping the books in your uncle's hardware store, no one needs to know that if you are now over the age of 25. The older you get, the more you should prioritise work experience over education.

Tailor your résumé for every application by making the relevant tweaks and highlighting different areas. Otherwise you are like the bore who tells the same story to every person he meets. Not everyone—and not every recruiter—is interested in the same things. If you can quantify an accomplishment, do. A second-year law student who just completed his summer internship having worked on six M&A deals? Put that in.

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Reasonable gaps in a résumé are not cause for concern. Life happens and sometimes people take time off; you do not have to explain that you spent three months between jobs hiking around Machu Picchu to clear your head and recharge your batteries. A ten-year gap from the workforce may be another matter. So might constant job-switching, which is as much of a red flag to recruiters as admitting to never having had a long-term relationship might be to a stranger at a party. But if this describes your work history then you probably have bigger problems that a CV alone, no matter how masterful, will not fix.

Once you have sent your application, refrain from emailing prospective employers to see if they received it. You risk coming across as that annoying person who texts to see if their previous texts have got through.

In his commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005, David Foster Wallace, an American novelist, used the metaphor of fish oblivious to the element surrounding them in order to point to the dangers of the “natural, hard-wired, default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centred”. Your life, he implied, should illustrate an acute awareness of the outside world. So should your CV. Drafting a presentation of your skills and achievements will inevitably reflect the sovereignty and self-absorption of your “skull-sized kingdom”, as Wallace described it. So as you launch yourself into the job market, follow his counsel to young graduates to try always to be aware of their place in the greater scheme of things: “This is water...this is water.” ■

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This article appeared in the Business section of the print edition under the headline “A job applicant walks into a bar”

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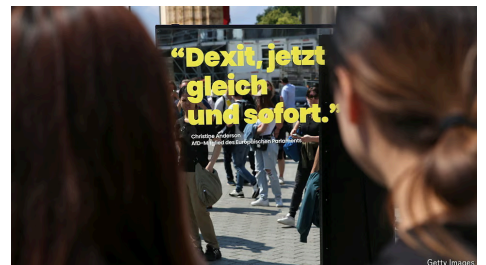
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