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## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

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### Tips for a Successful CV

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United States  
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Curriculum vitae (CVs) tell the stories of the professional lives of university scientists, documenting their careers and showcasing their accomplishments. A well-crafted CV can help a job applicant land an interview--instead of having her materials shredded or buried in a file. The CV is no less important for scientists with tenure and no intention of changing jobs, because it is an essential part of any application for grants, awards, and promotions. It should, therefore, be kept up-to-date at every academic career stage.

At any given career moment, your CV should provide a current, accurate list of all your professional accomplishments. CVs are far more expansive than the resumés used outside academia; the CVs of experienced scientists can be dozens of pages long. They have the flexibility and space to encompass a long list of publications while also describing research projects, or courses designed and taught, in at least minimal detail. But a good CV isn't just a boring, exhaustive encyclopedia of your career. Like a resumé, a CV should lend itself to

being skimmed by readers who don't care as much about the details. It should deliver an accurate (and strategic) impression of your work. Careful CV craftsmanship and maintenance is a crucial career skill, serving academic scientists well at every career stage.

#### Clear, clean, and pristine

The basis of any CV is a comprehensive, well-organized list of professional accomplishments. CVs generally have no restrictions on length and few on format. Your CV should include every professional accomplishment from college onward: education, professional positions, training experiences (including short courses), awards, publications, presentations (including--separately--invited presentations), grants, teaching experience, scientific techniques, professional affiliations, and service to the university or professional organizations.

A CV should showcase scholarship, says Robert Palazzo, professor of biology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, but it needs to be versatile. Many people have trouble being as complete as they should be, says Richard Bretz, a chemistry professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. "One of the biggest challenges when you're putting your CV together is that there are so many different eyes reading it that you need to have something in there for everybody," he says.

Correct spelling and grammar and clear organization are essential. Spelling and grammar mistakes are likely to leave those reading it with a poor impression of a scientist and her work. "If it's not pristine on your CV, when will it be?" notes Palazzo. "Thou shalt not have typos," adds Andrew Feig, a biochemistry professor at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. "It just looks bad and sends the wrong impression, and then they're just fighting an uphill battle to get me to pay attention to the application if

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"The content, of course, is crucial, but presentation is also crucial," says Julie Miller Vick, the associate director of career services at the University of Pennsylvania. "It has to be good, clear, and easy to read." She and her colleague Jennifer Furlong write a regular column, "The CV Doctor," for the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* career Web site, in which they critique submitted CVs from a variety of academic disciplines. They recommend clear organization of the sections and simple formatting. Tables and templates, like the resumé templates in Microsoft Word, and even the use of tabs can make a file too busy, they say. Complicated formatting also may not hold up as files are sent electronically. The main goal is to draw attention to important points, they say.

CVs should have the last name and a page number at the top of every page, and the style should be consistent throughout the document. Publications should be presented in the same format, including the title of the article and all co-authors, using a style consistent with that of the leading journal in your field. A CV should also include a list of current professional references--typically three and possibly more, with current contact information--at the end of the document.

### **Organizational strategies**

Every CV should present information in reverse chronological order to put recent publications and accomplishments closest to the beginning. "A surprising percentage of people have a long education section where their Ph.D. is last, or have their most recent publication at the end of their publication list, and that's really not effective at all," Furlong says.

The particular organizational strategy and individual sections will vary depending both on the strengths of the individual and the level of experience. A junior scientist, who might not have received much funding, might include financial awards--like fellowships--in an "honors and awards" section, whereas more experienced scientists, with many grants to their credit, should list those grants in a separate section on external research support. Similarly, a scientist with extensive teaching experience would want to showcase courses developed, including brief descriptions of those courses and the specific work involved. Senior academic scientists should include a separate section listing students and postdocs whom he or she has mentored. Someone who has had a previous career should consider mentioning that experience briefly in a separate section labeled "additional professional experience."

Vick and Furlong also recommend tweaking the CV for the particular application you're submitting. If you are applying to an institution that emphasizes teaching, the teaching section might come right after the education section and before research. For a job at a research institution, research experience and expertise, as well as grant funding, should come earlier in the document. Publications should come at the end of the document, which can also limit formatting problems as you update the CV.

In general, a CV should present important information so that a reader can find it quickly. When they receive a packet of application materials, both Feig and Palazzo say they usually look at the CV first--even before they read the cover letter. Reviewers look first at what a candidate has been doing recently, followed by the references and then publications, say Vick and Furlong.

So make it easy for them. "[The search committee] shouldn't have to dig around" for information, says Vick. Diana Phillips, a chemistry professor at Kettering University in Flint, Michigan, and an American Chemical Society career counselor, has seen documents her initial impression of which has been, "If you won the Nobel Prize last week and it was on here, I couldn't find it, because it's so wordy and it's buried."

## BASIC CV DO'S AND DON'TS (FOR U.S. AUDIENCES)\*

### Do:

- Include all relevant contact information: address, e-mail address, phone number, cell phone number.
- Include a comprehensive listing of professional experiences.
- Proofread for correct spelling and grammar.
- Use relatively simple and consistent formatting.
- Organize the document so that a reader can find important information quickly.
- Use reverse chronological order throughout the document.
- List all publications in the same reference style.
- Be sure references are up-to-date and that your references know about jobs you're applying for.
- Get feedback from colleagues, mentors, and career advisers.

### Don't:

- Use complicated formatting.
- Include certain personal information such as your Social Security number, date of birth, marital status, or number of children.
- Include information about unrelated hobbies or interests that doesn't show professional experience or qualifications.
- Pad your CV with extra words or spacing to make it appear longer.

\* *Standards vary elsewhere, so get local advice.*

### Maintaining a CV over the course of your career

Once the organization is in place, maintaining a CV is straightforward. Every new grant, invited seminar, publication, or technique should be added in the appropriate place. Most people suggest adding these to the document as they happen so as not to forget about important accomplishments. Feig updates his at least every 6 months using careful records that he's kept of publications and invited seminars. He also includes the date that his CV was last revised at the bottom of each page so that a reviewer looking at the document months later will have an idea of how current the information is. The main point, experts stress, is to make sure to update it regularly and review it before sending it out.

A CV should be an exhaustive record of scholarly accomplishment, but it would be foolish to pad it. Hiring and grant-review committees don't want to see large empty spaces, wide margins, or lists of irrelevant hobbies. Most people still print out a CV to review it, Vick says, and having to page through extra paper to find relevant qualifications really detracts from them. Extra information "is a real turnoff," says Palazzo. He also discourages researchers from including abstracts of papers. Although the language in a CV should emphasize accomplishments, the information must be accurate, Phillips adds. Job candidates should be careful to use correct job titles. They should not embellish information.

In addition, scientists should choose fonts and type sizes that are easy to read. Classic, standard fonts like Times New Roman, Helvetica, or Arial work best. And even if you're tempted to use smaller type to squeeze in more information, 10-point type is a minimum, say Vick and Furlong. Using 11- or 12-point size works well and is easier on the eyes.

Students and postdocs can get a variety of advice and help with their CVs from peers, mentors, and the career offices located on most campuses. Their principal investigator or committee members can provide model CVs to emulate and can offer useful suggestions. Those external sources will help catch any grammatical mistakes or typos, which may be particularly important for non-native English speakers.

Most of this advice is common sense, Furlong says. "And know that everybody will give you a little bit of different advice," Vick adds. "So take it, and then you make the decision."

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