

# Writing a CV and Covering Letter

Building student futures



The University of  
**Nottingham**  
Centre for Career  
Development

*This leaflet is a comprehensive guide on how to write CVs and covering letters in a professional manner; essential for when you begin applying to employers.*

Today's graduate job market is very competitive and your CV is your prime marketing tool. It must highlight your skills and achievements in a clear and positive light which will persuade the employer to call you for an interview. Many applicants fail to make it to interview because of ineffective evidence of their skills and experience, poor presentation and careless spelling and grammar. Taking time and some simple advice can really make all the difference. Here we will show you how to write an impressive CV and how to avoid the pitfalls.

## Before you start

- Check that a CV is the correct method of applying to the organisation. Many employers now expect you to apply online via their website.
- Research what the employer is looking for. Look at the advert or information on the employer's website. What does it say about the job requirements? Are they looking for specific skills or competencies?
- Investigate the employer and the

business sector. Read our leaflet, Finding out about employers.

- Target your skills and experience around what you have found out about the role. What do you want the employer to know about you?
- Write down some key experiences where you can demonstrate the skills required and think about how you might show evidence of your suitability.

By giving thought to these points you are thinking strategically about why the recruiter should give your application serious consideration.

## Standard contents

All CVs need to contain some standard information, which normally includes:

- Personal details – name, address, telephone number and e-mail address
- Education and qualifications
- Employment history
- Interests, activities and achievements
- References

## Presentation

- Usually two sides of A4 or the equivalent in electronic format.
- Avoid coloured or textured paper.
- Be clear and concise.
- Be consistent with font type and size. Line up text.
- Make sure key information is not hidden by too much text; try breaking up with bullet points.
- Use headings or format text in bold to draw attention to important points.
- Spelling and grammar must be accurate.

## Things to remember

*Target your skills and experience around what you have found out about the role.  
What do you want the employer to know about you?*

# Writing a CV and Covering Letter

## Style and format

There is not one correct style of CV to use. All CVs should be targeted to meet the requirements of an advertised vacancy or a particular employer.

The two most commonly used CV formats are:

- **Chronological:** the most common format outlining your experiences in reverse date order.
- **Skills based:** this highlights and gives evidence of your relevant skills. It is particularly appropriate if you wish to demonstrate transferable skills.

**Examples are given towards the end of this leaflet.**

## The covering letter

Your CV should always be accompanied by a covering letter. You should use your covering letter to tailor your experience to the position or organisation to which you are applying. Never underestimate its importance and as with your CV pay attention to style, layout, grammar and spelling. If possible, you should send it to a named person. A covering letter should:

- Highlight particular points in your CV that give evidence of your suitability for the position.
- Demonstrate your interest in and knowledge of the company.
- Be no longer than one side of A4 or electronic equivalent.

**Examples are given towards the end of this leaflet.**

## The language of CVs

At university you learn how to write essays or reports for your tutors which

are entirely different in style to the short, brief statements which will sell you to the employer. Most CVs can be improved by a greater attention to the language and grammar you use. CV and application form writing is an art. It is one you can learn with a bit of perseverance and a good dictionary and thesaurus! Here are some golden rules.

### Make verbs work for you

Your best friends are active verbs and your worst enemies are passive verbs.

#### Example:

**Do not say:** I was responsible for organising a programme of speakers.

**Do say:** I organised a programme of speakers.

When you use the verb “negotiated,” in your CV, you are describing what you did but you also show you have negotiating skills as well as demonstrating that you use them. Use active verbs linked to skills the employer is looking for. See our list of “Action Words” and try to weave as many into your application as are relevant.

#### Examples:

**Do not say:** Resolution of customer queries to tight deadlines was required.

**Do say:** Resolved customer queries within tight deadlines.

**Do not say:** Simplification of the logging procedure resulted in speedier progress chasing of faults.

**Do say:** I simplified the logging procedure which resulted in speedier progress chasing of faults.

Avoid weak verbs like endeavoured, tried, hoped and attempted. “I feel that I am” is often used, which again should be avoided as it too can sound weak.

## Things to remember

*Your CV should always be accompanied by a covering letter. You should use your covering letter to tailor your experience to the position or organisation to which you are applying*

### Explain what you did

You may find when writing your CV or in answering questions on application forms that you are too concise or too wordy. Asking yourself the following questions is a useful strategy for making descriptions more detailed as well as pertinent.

- **Who?** With whom did you work?
- **What?** What duties/activities did you perform?
- **Where?** Where did your job fit into the organisation?
- **Why?** What were your goals?
- **When?** What timelines were you working under?
- **How?** What procedures did you follow?

Use them to help you convey to the reader what you did. Remember that no-one reading your CV will have a lot of time to think about what you mean. Making it easy for the reader to understand gives you a better chance of making an impact.

#### Examples:

**Do not say:**

Planned activities for the children

**Do say:**

Planned arts, crafts, activities and exercises weekly for children with learning disabilities.



### Do not say:

I worked as a counter assistant in a building society.

### Do say:

- Gained valuable experience working to targets within a fast moving financial sector.
- Worked quickly and accurately on a number of complex computer programmes.
- Dealt effectively and professionally with the public in a busy branch.

### Do not say:

This job involved dealing with the public and using the till.

### Do say:

- Worked as part of a team of six in this busy city centre store.
- Developed my communication skills through interacting with customers.
- Used tact and diplomacy to deal with customer complaints.

### Or

I worked on the tills, in the warehouse, stacking shelves and pricing items. Teamwork and working directly with customers was an important element of my job. I often worked at the busiest times and I loved the buzz of working under pressure to get a job done on time.

### Cut the padding

When writing essays we tend to use longer sentences. The best sentences in applications are short ones. You want variety in the structure. Do not start them all with "I". However it is likely that the number of "I" sentences will be greater than you are used to. Just remember you are writing about yourself so the frequent use of "I" and "me" is okay.

In a CV or a word limited application form the long phrase takes up space.

Do not be tempted to overuse phrases like "As a result of this..", "In response to this..", "before doing this..", "even if..", "even though..", "in order to..", or words like consequently, furthermore, however, moreover, nevertheless, and therefore.

### Examples:

Is of the opinion that *REPLACE WITH*

Thinks

During the course of *REPLACE WITH*

During

### Action phrases for applications

If you use these phrases they must be qualified by evidence of your experience.

### Examples of action phrases used in a CV:

- Demonstrated excellent interpersonal and people management skills through my retail experience, working on Nightline and as captain of the University's netball team.
- Achieved all of my data inputting targets to a high standard, demonstrating that I am able to work accurately under pressure.
- Proficiency in the use of statistical computer packages gained through my final year project.

### Examples of action phrases:

*Effective*

*Sole/lone/only/single*

*Proficiency in, skilled in/at, experienced*

*in/with, practised in/with/at*

*Analysed problems and developed solutions*

*Excellent interpersonal and people management skills*

*Able to analyse and interpret data*

*Able to exercise good judgement and sound reasoning*

*Good interpersonal skills*

*Able to concentrate and pay attention to detail*

*Can work well on own initiative*

*A good communicator*

*Ability to organise and motivate staff*

*A good planner*

*Careful and methodical approach*

*Able to work accurately under pressure*

*A good organiser with an eye for detail*

*A good team worker*

*Patient, tolerant and able to communicate*

*A good listener with a common sense approach*

*Persuasive but tactful*

*A flexible approach to changing situations*

*Determination and drive to see projects*

*to successful completion*

*An active decision-maker*

*An effective time manager*

*Highly numerate and computer literate*

*Adaptable to team or individual roles*

*Produces to deadlines*

*Extensive visual memory*

## Things to remember

*Make sure it is clear and easy to read. Most employers will spend less than 30 seconds scanning your CV.*

Action verbs for CVs

Accelerated	Achieved	Administered	Advised	Allocated	Analysed
Appraised	Arranged	Assessed	Assisted	Attained	
Broadened	Budgeted				
Checked	Coached	Communi- cated	Competent	Completed	Comprehen- sive
Conducted	Considerable	Consistently	Consolidated	Controlled	Converted
Co-ordinated	Created				
Delegated	Delivered	Demonstrated	Designed	Developed	Devised
Directed					
Ensured	Established	Evaluated	Expanded		
Facilitated					
Generated					
Helped					
Identified	Implemented	Improved	Increased	Influenced	Initiated
Innovated	Instructed	Interviewed	Introduced	Investigated	
Launched	Led	Liaised			
Maintained	Managed	Marketed	Minimised	Motivated	
Negotiated	Networked				
Operated	Organised				
Participated	Performed	Persuaded	Pertinent	Pinpointed	Planned
Prepared	Presented	Processed	Produced	Programmed	
Prompted	Proposed	Proved	Provided		Promoted
Qualified					
Recommend- ed	Recruited	Reduced	Reorganised	Represented	Researched
Resolved	Resourceful	Responded	Responsible	Reviewed	
Selected to	Simplified	Spearheaded	Strengthened	Supervised	
Taught	Tested	Trained	Transformed	Translated	
Undertook					
Volunteered					
Won					



## Further tips

- A personal profile is not essential but if included must be targeted for each application and must show evidence of your relevant skills.
- In terms of qualifications do not give a disproportionate amount of space to say GCSEs. Focus on the most relevant qualifications which are probably those you are currently or have recently studied.
- Don't be modest about your work experience. It's easy to undervalue your vacation/casual jobs. You may not have held impressive positions but what interests an employer is what you gained from the experience in terms of skills and personal development. Also, don't forget to include voluntary experience.

## Finally

- Check and double check your spelling and grammar.
- Make sure it is clear and easy to read. Most employers will spend less than 30 seconds scanning your CV.

## Further information

We can give you feedback on your CV or covering letter but we expect you to have followed the advice in this leaflet and the other resources below.

To book an appointment log on to our website at [www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students)

## Websites

### Centre for Career Development website

There are a range of resources on our website that you can use to develop your CV and covering letter [www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students)

### Prospects website

This site covers what to include in your CV and covering letters and examples [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

### Grammar websites

BBC [www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/grammar](http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/grammar)

The Owl at Purdue <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl>

### Leaflet - free to take away

Finding and applying for part-time jobs - covers developing a targeted CV and covering letter for these types of jobs with examples.

### Books - for overnight loan

- How to Write a Great CV
- Brilliant CV
- Killer CVs and Hidden Approaches
- The Global Resume and CV Guide
- Your Hired - How to Write a Brilliant CV
- Preparing the Perfect CV
- Readymade Job Search Letters
- Ultimate Cover Letters

## Events

We offer a number of workshops in the autumn and spring terms on developing a CV and covering letter - book a place through our website at [www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/events](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/events)

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An example of a chronological CV

Do not copy these examples word for word – YOUR CV has to reflect YOUR skills and how they relate to the job or role you are applying for

A personal profile is optional. If included, it must be targeted at the position applied for and include relevant strengths and skills. This would sit below your address.

**Steven Brown**  
12 Green Drive  
Lenton  
Nottingham  
NG7 2XX  
Tel: 076.....  
Email: [s.b.brown@gmail.com](mailto:s.b.brown@gmail.com)

Date of birth - No longer necessary.

## Education

2008-2011

**The University of Nottingham**  
**BSc Hons. Geography - 2:1**

Modules included: Interpreting Geographical Data, Economic and Urban Geography, Geography of Money and Finance, Environmental Change, Effects of Atmospheric Pollution. The course involved practical field trips in Wales and Majorca.

Final year dissertation analysed environmental issues in the development of a local business park.

2006-2008

**Joseph Wright School, Liverpool**

A-levels: Geography (A) English (A) Biology (B)  
AS Level Business Studies (B)  
GCSEs: 10 A\*- B

Try and put your most relevant experience on the front page.

## Relevant Experience

Spring 2010

**Wildlife Trust, Nottingham – Volunteer**

- Delivered fun educational activities in a local primary school
- Compiled and produced a marketing leaflet to promote future events

Summer 2009

**Newtown City Council Environmental Department - Administration Assistant**

- Worked in a team of six to provide administrative support to environmental consultants
- Compiled impact assessment documents using Microsoft Word
- Analysed environmental data using the internal database
- Responded to customer enquiries both on the telephone and in person

Summer 2008

**Corfu Dolphin Research Programme – Volunteer**

- Assessed and monitored the dolphin population in Corfu, Greece

Try and start each bullet point with a strong verb.


## Other Experience

2007-2008      **Right Look Clothing, Nottingham – Sales Consultant**

- Displayed clothing to encourage sales
- Achieved sales targets
- Served customers and supervised the changing rooms

2005-2007      Various casual jobs including catering assistant,  
warehouse work and builder's labourer

Group together  
temporary  
positions to save  
space.



## Positions of Responsibility

- Final year course representative. This entailed liaison between staff and students.
- Treasurer of Geography Society during second year

## Achievements

- Right Look Clothing's Employee of the Month – for exceeding my individual sales target by 25%
- Duke of Edinburgh Silver Award. This included community service at a local hospice and a three day expedition in the Peak District

## Additional Skills

- Driving: full, clean licence
- IT: competent user of Microsoft Word, Outlook and Excel
- Languages: conversational French and Italian

## Interests


- Sport: play football in a local league
- Environment: subscriber to the Environment Post and a member of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers
- Music: bass guitar in a local band

## References

Dr T Khan  
School of Geography  
University of Nottingham  
University Park  
Nottingham  
NG7 2RD  
Tel: 0115 .....  
Email: t.khan@ .....

Mrs Bird  
Right Look Clothing  
Robin Hood Centre  
Nottingham  
NG92 1PZ  
Tel: 0115 951 ....  
m.bird@.....

One of your references should  
be from an academic.



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An example of a skills-based CV

**JENNY LI**  
**31 Robin Hood Rise**  
**Sherwood**  
**Nottingham**  
**NG7 T66**  
**Tel: 07.....**  
**E-mail....**

**EDUCATION**

**2008-2011**

**The University of Nottingham**  
**BA Finance Accounting and Management**

Year 2 grade 69%

Modules have included: Computers in Business, Entrepreneurship in Business, Financial Accounting, People and Organisations, Microeconomics for Business, Introductory Econometrics.

Only list modules which might be of relevance to the position you are applying for.

**2001-2008**

**West Park School, Birmingham**

A-Level Business Studies (A) Mathematics (A) French (B)

AS Level Psychology (B)

GCSEs: 10 A\* - B

Consider which skills the employer is seeking and give evidence of these on your CV. Which other skills can you offer?

**SKILLS PROFILE**

**Effective Communication**

- Strong customer service skills developed in sales and waitressing roles
- Presentation skills and confidence gained through production of school play in the sixth form

**Team Working and Leadership**

- Duke of Edinburgh (silver) – Leader for team expedition. Motivated team members during difficult weather conditions
- Captain of school netball team

**Time Management**

- Involvement in drama, netball, part-time work and my study has taught me the importance of organisation and prioritising commitments

**IT**

- IT: Competent in the use all Microsoft packages

Other skills you could include in this section include: problem solving, innovation, influencing, creativity...

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## WORK EXPERIENCE

Aug 2008-present

### **Notts County Football Club - Waitress**

- Customer service skills gained from serving refreshments in the hospitality boxes on match days

July-December 2006

### **Sainsbury's – Check-out Operator**

- Operated the tills and dealt with customer enquiries
- Handled cash and card transactions



Use any casual jobs or voluntary experience you have had to give evidence of skills the employer might seek.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

- Captain of school netball club during sixth form. Team won local league in 2006
- Duke of Edinburgh Silver Award. This involved planning and leading a three day expedition in the Peak District with a group of ten students and weekly voluntary work with an after school club running drama activities for 4-11 year olds
- Member of school drama club. Producer of 'Annie' 2006. This involved organising the rehearsal schedule, negotiating employer sponsorship for the programme, co-ordinating ticket sales and overseeing the budget of £1250

## INTERESTS

- Sport: play netball in a local league in Nottingham
- Music: attend live concerts. Learning to play the keyboard
- Theatre: regularly see performances at the Nottingham Playhouse

## REFERENCES

Dr. J. Sutton  
South Building  
Jubilee Campus  
University of Nottingham Business School  
Nottingham  
NG10 1 YY  
Tel : 0115....  
j.sutton@nottingham....

Mrs Thompson  
Notts County Football Club  
Trent Avenue  
Nottingham  
NG1 IAA  
Tel : 0115.....  
e.thompson@ ...

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Example Covering Letter 1 – Reply to an advertised vacancy

4 Green Drive  
Lenton  
Nottingham  
NG7 2EE  
[S.brown@hotmail.com](mailto:S.brown@hotmail.com)

6<sup>th</sup> September 2010


Mr P Cottingham  
Pockitt & Jingle  
Main Street  
Fossington, Hants

Dear Mr Cottingham



State why you are writing

I am writing in response to your advertisement for a marketing assistant listed on the Centre for Career Development website.



State what you can offer the employer

As you will see from my CV, I am in the final year of a biological science degree. I have developed excellent oral and written communication skills through my coursework and work experience in catering and retailing. In addition, I am able to work well with other people. My role as captain of the University badminton team required me to motivate and encourage other team members and, as part of the first year Buddy Scheme, I was able to build rapport with my group very quickly. The range of my extra curricular activities and my academic performance show I have good time management skills. These also demonstrate my ability to work under pressure. My academic work requires a high degree of numerical ability and attention to detail. I enjoy research and have always found analytical work very satisfying. My ICT skills are well developed as a result of this. I see all these qualities as relevant to the role of marketing assistant.



State what the employer can offer you

Pockitt and Jingle offers me the opportunity to work in industrial rather than consumer product marketing where I can make use of my scientific knowledge in a commercial setting. From your website I see I would be involved in marketing projects at an early stage which is very appealing. In addition I am attracted by the opportunity to deal with a wide variety of customers. I notice that you place great emphasis on training in the job description and this is important to me. For all these reasons, an industrial marketing career appears to suit my personality and skills and I am fully committed to it.




Close positively

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss my experience with you at interview. My final exams fall in the two weeks of 9<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> June.

Yours sincerely

**Steven Brown**



End 'Yours sincerely' because there is a named contact. End 'Yours faithfully' if addressing the letter to 'Dear Sir/Madam'

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## Example Covering Letter 2 – Speculative Submission

4 Green Drive  
Lenton  
Nottingham  
NG7 2EE  
[S.brown@hotmail.com](mailto:S.brown@hotmail.com)

6<sup>th</sup> September 2010


Ms Eleanor Dashwood  
Farrar PR Ltd  
22 Regents Crescent  
London SW1B 2TP

Dear Ms Dashwood



State why you are writing

I would be pleased if you could consider this speculative application for an account handling role at Farrar PR. I note from your website that you welcome applications before Christmas for the September 2011 intake.



State what you can offer the employer

I am a confident and highly motivated final year history undergraduate at the University of Nottingham. I have gained editorial experience through Impact Magazine whilst at University. Having researched various media occupations, and undertaken work placements, I am now fully committed to pursuing a career in PR and have a particular interest in consumer PR.

My verbal communication skills are equally good. Extensive customer service jobs helped develop these skills coupled with my drama performance interests. Socially confident, I am capable of addressing a range of audiences. I have excellent negotiation and persuasion skills which I have had to apply recently when persuading store managers to lend me props for 26 photo shoots. As can be seen in my role profile, I possess a combination of creative ability with a very can-do approach. My peers regard me as a good team player who, being well-organised, is comfortable with both event management and communication roles.



State what the employer can offer you

I note from your website that you are a full service agency who specialise in PR for the retail industry. I am impressed by your extensive range of clients including the top names such as Tesco, and have followed their recent campaigns in the media. Communication skills are my strength. My editorial experience has really developed my writing skills, and taught me the need to produce copy to tight deadlines. At Crispin Publishing I learnt how to compile and research information. The strong emphasis on written coursework throughout my studies has been important in developing my written communication skills. My secretarial course and employment also taught me how to use business English and my IT skills are well developed.



Close positively

I hope that my enthusiasm for PR is conveyed in this application. I consider that I have the necessary drive and personal qualities required to contribute to your success as an established PR agency.

I look forward to hearing from you shortly regarding an interview.

Yours sincerely

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Centre for Career  
Development

Centre for Career Development  
The University of Nottingham  
Portland Building  
Level D West  
University Park  
Nottingham NG7 2RD  
United Kingdom

**WE'RE HERE TO HELP, GET IN TOUCH:**

Tel: 0115 951 3680

[ccd-enquiries@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:ccd-enquiries@nottingham.ac.uk)

[www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers)