Academic CVs: 10 Irritating Mistakes

Applications to academic jobs are notoriously convoluted, says **Steve Joy** – to make life easier, here's what not to do in your CV

Some mistakes are irritating because they can so easily be fixed, so here's a tip: never use Curriculum Vitae as a heading.

Applications to academic jobs are notoriously convoluted, particularly to posts which combine teaching and research. Typically the CV will be one document among a groaning dossier that might well comprise a cover letter, a research statement, a teaching statement, sample courses or syllabi, and even (on occasion) a diversity statement. Where do you start? And with so many elements to worry about, how important is the CV?

The answer is that it is very important. Many selection committee members say that the first document they look at is the CV. It shows that you're fundamentally eligible to do the advertised job, and it offers a run-down of your career to date. It's the scaffolding on to which the selectors can hang all of the other information contained elsewhere in your application. Yet, for a host of varied reasons, many people persist in writing truly awful CVs.

What follows is my list of the top 10 most irritating mistakes – irritating because they can so easily be fixed. They are the fruit of more than 10 years' combined experience as a researcher, teacher, and academic careers adviser at the University of Cambridge. I have seen literally hundreds of academic applications and, hence, the myriad ways to shoot yourself in the foot with a poor CV. But if I had to sum up my advice in just one line, it would be this: don't go on about the achievements you're most proud of; prioritize the ones that are most relevant to your intended employer.

1) Not scannable

Be realistic: your CV will almost certainly not be read in detail, line by line, word by word, until you have made it at least on to a long list and very probably not until you have made it all the way to the shortlist. Before that point, the person reviewing your application may spend no more than 90 seconds scanning through the CV, skimming for key highlights – such as your list of publications, places you've worked, grants won, and so on. You have to make sure that the important stuff, which will not necessarily be the same from one application to the next, leaps off the page.

There's no singular 'correct' way to format a CV so that it can be scanned effectively, but here are two tips. First, you have to keep seeing it on the page, so don't spend too long editing your CV on the screen before you print it out to take a look. Secondly, the best test of whether it's scannable is – drum roll, please – whether someone can scan it.

So, give a hard copy of your CV to a willing friend, ideally someone who owes you a favor but doesn't know your career history inside out. Put a stopwatch on them for 90 seconds and ask them to read through the CV. What did they pick up in that time? What didn't stand out? Did they identify the achievements you most want the selection committee to notice?

2) Sections split across pages

This is part of the logic of scanning. Someone reading fast will turn the page and jump straight to the next heading, which means that whatever content has been 'held over' from the previous page could well go entirely unread. Break up sections by using subheadings, e.g. divide your teaching into undergraduate and postgraduate, or separate it according to the elements of the teaching process such as lecturing, examining, curriculum design, and so on.

3) Structured in chronological order

I never thought to have to negotiate this, but, recently, a surprising number of early career academics have tried to argue this point with me. Let me therefore say very clearly: reverse chronological order is the norm; it is reasonable; it is absolutely de rigueur. CV writing is not about what's logical or preferable to you; it's about anticipating your selectors' needs and trying to make their lives as easy as possible.

If that argument doesn't convince you, here's another angle. Remember that I'm going to be skimming your CV, not reading it in detail. If I cast a quick glance over your publications and see at the top of the list a paper dated 2007, then I may well conclude that you haven't published anything since and decide not to waste more time on reading this section of your CV.

4) Content not tailored to the specific application

In many cases, this is simply a question of structure. If you're applying for a teaching role at a less research-intensive university, then do I really want to wade through seven or eight pages of information about your research experience before I get to a meagre section on your teaching? Bring the teaching section forward and expand it. If you've taught modules or topics relevant to the new post, then say so. If they want somebody with experience of supervising research students, then be sure that I can read about your experience of supervising research students without the need to pause, ponder, or decrypt.

5) Using language that's unclear to the reader

Avoid like the plague all institution-specific arcana. My own university has more than its fair share of authentic and faux medieval terminology that is utterly opaque to outsiders (and too many insiders), e.g. Tripos, Part II, prelims, JRF, DoS. This is by no means an exclusively Cambridge phenomenon. You must be ruthless in purging your CV of language that doesn't make sense to readers outside your current institution because you run the genuine risk of offending. You will look like a snob who can't be bothered to translate his or her experience into generally comprehensible language. Think undergraduate exams, third year, postdoctoral fellowship, and so on.

And here's a related tip: know the differences in preferred language between your current and future institutions. Paper, module, unit, or course? Tutorials, supervisions, office hours, or something else? Show that you have done your homework, because it says something about how seriously you want the job.

6) Including course codes for everything you've taught

To my mind, it's baffling to want to list all course codes and other administrative technicalities on your CV, but I see this done alarmingly often. Yes, I do want to know what you have taught, in what format, and to what learners. I'm also happy, in most cases, to know the exact titles of those courses or lectures. However, I don't want to know whether your university also labelled that teaching as 'Paper Ge21', 'Module AS100305', or 'Unit H3946'. This is administrative

information – for internal use only. Unless you are an internal applicant, how does this kind of pedantry help the selectors decide to put you on their shortlist? Extraneous information on a CV may not be as heinous a mistake as incomprehensible information (see number 5), but it clutters up the skim-reading process, potentially confuses the reader, and does you no discernible favors.

7) Inconsistent style of referencing

Why it is that professional scholars who have to prepare references and bibliographies for publication can't put a list together for their CVs, using a consistent style and with proper attention to detail, is a perennial mystery to me. And, yes, it does matter. Is slapdash what you want me to think of you before I've even met you?

8) Using 'Curriculum Vitae' as a heading

I can recognize a CV when I see one, and I trust that others can, too. Your heading should be your name. And don't be pretentious: no titles or post nominal letters. Just your name.

9) No page numbers

Put your name as a header on every page after the first. Put page numbers on every single page. This might seem a little too 'belt and braces' for some, but the rationale is sound. First, it looks professional. (Need I say more?) Secondly, it serves a practical purpose. What happens if I accidentally drop the twelve pages of your CV on the floor? What happens if, in reading your 15-page magnum opus, I inadvertently mix up the sequence of pages? What happens if your CV gets unintentionally jumbled up with the CVs of 11 other applicants? These things can, and do, happen.

10) Overusing bold and italics

Overuse bold or italics on your CV and nothing stands out; avoid the use of bold or italics and, likewise, nothing stands out. The former often smacks of desperation ('Look! Look at all these important things! Look at them all!'), whereas the latter has a terrible whiff of disinclination ('Yeah, whatever. Read it, don't read it. I don't mind'). But the best way to mitigate over or under-formatting your document is simply to print it out and show it to people.

When push comes to shove, the best approach to CV writing is the simplest: seek multiple opinions at every stage. And in so doing, dare to be honest. What impression do you really have of me on paper?

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