

How to prepare your curriculum vitae

Wai-Ching Leung explains the finer points of how to compose a CV that matches different requirements

A good curriculum vitae (CV) is essential for your successful progression up the professional ladder. As a student, you may need a CV to arrange a student elective or to find a house job. A good CV is also important for those who have completed an intercalated degree and would like to join a clinical course at another medical school, apply for a PhD course, or obtain a research scholarship. Its importance increases after you qualify. You will need to submit your CV for different purposes: your annual assessment; your application for a new job or a research grant; or joining a learned society. Your CV should be prepared to put you in the best possible light.

There are abundant books on the contents and presentation of a general CV. A *BMJ* article published in 1978, offering doctors guidance on how to prepare a CV, has been reprinted in the widely read *How to do it* series.¹² A survey among post-graduate deans and training advisers at regional colleges found that the contents and presentation of a model CV for doctors in training has been published.³ It is perhaps surprising to note that these models differ significantly from one another. Although they may be useful as starting points, their differences tend to create confusion and anxiety among students. I would argue that these differences exist because the content and presentation of the "ideal" CV vary considerably among individual applicants, the stage of their careers, and the purposes for which the CV is used. It is impossible to create a generic CV. I have therefore not attempted to draw up another model CV. Rather, the purpose of this article is to outline the general principles and important practical points in preparing a good CV.

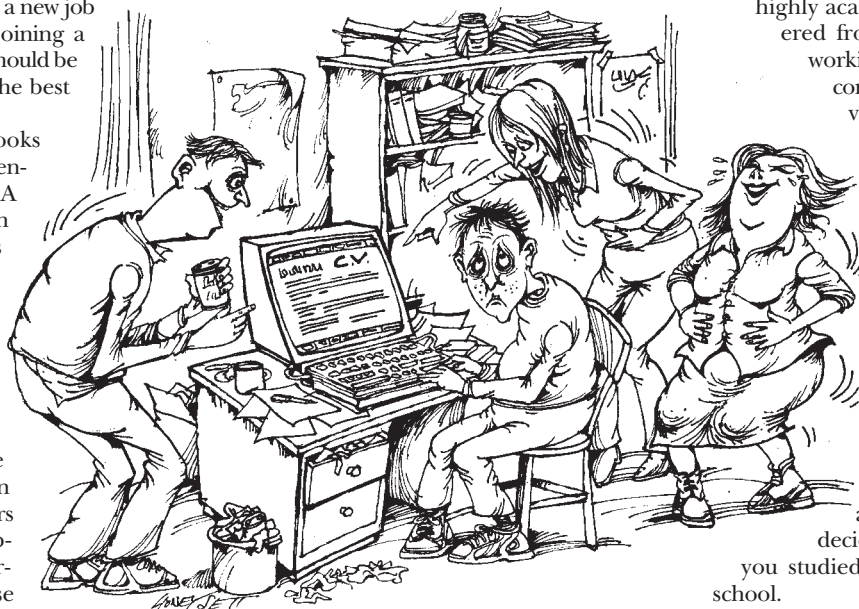
General principles on contents

Before finalising your CV for a particular purpose you must be sure of your objectives, whether it is used as an initial screening or the only selection instrument, and the criteria

against which it is judged. What details, and how many of them, to include in your CV depends on these factors. I shall illustrate with examples relevant to medical students.

(1) Job application

Your objective is to get the job. In a job application, the CV is used for two purposes: as an initial screening instrument for shortlisting candidates and as a framework for discussion during the interview.



The explicit criteria used for shortlisting are usually given in the job advertisement. For some organisations, separate lists of essential and desirable criteria are given. Alternatively, you can get a good idea of the basic requirements from the job description. Your CV must clearly highlight these criteria, preferably on the first page. These usually include: formal qualifications; registration with the General Medical Council; and the prescribed experience. It is sometimes easy to forget to mention items specifically asked for in the job description (for example, a valid driving licence).

The implicit criteria are less easy to pinpoint. For example, how much detail on your BSc dissertation and publications should you include? Should you make a long list of extracurricular activities, interests outside medicine, and positions of responsibility? If you admit to a wide range of extracurricular activities and interests, would you be considered as a candidate with a well balanced

mature personality or will it be interpreted to mean that you will have little time or interest to do your job? There are no easy answers. Common sense might tell you that BSc dissertation and publications are more important in application for teaching hospital or research posts, but less important for district hospital posts. Conversely, you might think that interests outside medicine are more important for posts in district hospitals or in general practice. This is, however, not always true. A few consultants at district hospital are highly academic. Information gathered from students and doctors working under the professor or consultant concerned may be vital. Alternatively, it is worth while doing your homework by looking up your prospective consultant in the medical directory. This may occasionally prompt you to include information that you might otherwise have left out. For example, you may find that the consultant qualified in Scotland and has previously worked in Scotland for a considerable time, and you may decide to add in your CV that you studied in a Scottish secondary school.

Since the CV is only used as for initial screening, you need not go into your previous experience or extracurricular activities in too much detail. Highlight only the most significant points, and leave the details for the interview.

If you are applying for a clinical post, one of your referees should be a consultant for whom you have worked as a student. You should ask for permission to use his/her name before submitting your application.

(2) Application for research scholarship or PhD studentship

The CV and application form are sometimes used as the sole selection instrument, and you must make enquiries before you submit your application. Clearly, academic ability is the main criterion for selection, and you should include as much information relevant to your academic ability and interests as you can. Examples are your A levels, your BSc

dissertation, any publications (even in the form of a letter in newspaper), any experience as an editor (for example, for your school magazine). Your extracurricular activities are less important, and you can simply give a short list.

At least one of the referees should be an academic—for example, your previous supervisor in your BSc degree.

(3) Application to join a clinical course in another medical school

Preclinical students who have completed an intercalated degree often have the option of applying to join a clinical course in another medical school, although it may become more difficult to do so with the introduction of the new GMC curriculum. Your CV is usually used for shortlisting candidates for interview. The criteria differ slightly among medical schools, but both academic ability and contribution to university life are important. Hence, not only should you highlight your academic achievements but you must also highlight your participation in the university (for example, in sports or music).

(4) For the information of your tutor or counsellor

For most medical schools, you are allocated a tutor who provides both academic and non-academic support and monitors your progress throughout your study on a confidential basis. Students are sometimes asked to submit their up to date CV to their tutors for information. Assuming that the tutors are helpful there is little to gain from over emphasising your strengths or hiding your weaknesses.

Once you become a doctor in training after you qualify you will need to undergo an annual assessment of your progress. It serves to certify that you have reached a satisfactory standard, but it is also used as an aid to identify and help with your weaknesses. You may find it difficult to balance these two purposes in presenting your CV.

General principles on presentation

Now that all students are computer literate, there should be few problems in preparing a well presented CV. The following list serves as a reminder on how to present your CV effectively:

- *Spelling or grammar mistakes*—do not rely purely on the spell check on your computer. Ask friends to proofread your CV for you.
- *Consistency*—The use of punctuation to open and close sentences, justification, and fonts should be consistent.
- *Readability*—The headings should be

clear. The font size should be no less than 12 point.

- *Basic criteria*—The basic criteria should be easily located, preferably on the first page.

- *Length*—The length of your CV increases as you progress up the professional ladder. For students, it should generally be no more than three pages.

- *Quality of print*—The CV should be printed on good quality paper, preferably using a laser printer.

Practical points

In this article, I argue that different versions of a CV may be required for different purposes. Even applications for different posts in the same specialty may require slightly different versions. Also, CVs need to be updated regularly.

This would have been time consuming to achieve in the past, but it is now quite simple, with the aid of a basic word processing package. A master CV containing all relevant information should be prepared and saved as a computer file. This should be continuously kept up to date. When the need for a CV arises, it can be tailor-made by editing the master document. It is important to save each of these edited versions separately, with the file names indicating the date when it was created and the purpose. It is also important to prepare a cover letter to go with the CV.

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1. O'Brien E. Prepare a curriculum vitae. *BMJ* 1978;25(2):1478-9.
2. O'Brien E. Prepare a curriculum vitae. In: Reece D, ed. *How to do it*. Vol 1. London: BMJ Publishing Group, 1995.
3. Chamblor AF, Chapman-Sheath PJ, Pearse MF. A model curriculum vitae: what are the trainers looking for? *Hosp Med* 1998;59(4):324-6.

Key messages

- A good CV is essential for successful progression up the medical professional ladder
- The contents of the CV should be tailor-made for the purpose it is used for and the criteria against which it is judged. It is important to gather information about these criteria first
- The CV must be technically well presented, with the basic criteria easily located
- Information technology has made it simple to regularly update our CVs and allows preparation of different versions of a CV for different purposes with relative ease

Guide to Medical Etiquette: the operating theatre

Not many jobs entail putting on a pair of pyjamas, a paper hat, and a mask. The benevolent connotations of this silly costume, a clown, magician, or some other such children's entertainer, belie the harsh reality. In



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truth, the operating theatre abounds with delicate egos and complicated power structures. To survive in this arena the wise student develops an intimate knowledge of his antagonist, and his own role. Until you develop this awareness these notes may be useful. Simply cut them out, stick them to card, and laminate for your wipe clean quick reference guide.

Consultant surgeon—She is the one holding the knife. The wise student keeps this fact in mind at all times. As a student, you will encounter the surgeon mainly while scrubbing up. To make a good impression you should scrub for longer than her. Unfortunately, surgeons are well aware of this student dictum and may amuse themselves by keeping you scrubbing for hours on end. Similarly, it is possible for you to overdo it. Generally, your pants and socks should remain on at all times.

Anaesthetist—He is the one doing the crossword. When an alarm goes off he may look up and tut. Occasionally he can be seen putting a towel or pillow over the patient's head. Do not be alarmed by this, he is merely attempting to avert hypothermia. On the other hand, if you notice similar behaviour in the outpatient clinic you should intervene or alert the police immediately, or both. Generally, the anaesthetist is pleasant to talk to, or have a relaxed game of chess with, but on no account wake him up if he is having nap.

Theatre sister—If you defecated in your sister's bed (while she was still in it), she would continue to hold you in higher regard than the sisters in theatre do. To remain safe from harm, do not sneeze, spit, or exhale in her presence. Do not address her unless spoken to, and always try to keep an item of furniture or member of staff between you and her.

Dirty nurse—The dirty nurse opens packages and such like. It would be wise to get any double entendres out of your system now, thus leaving you free to appear mature when confronted with the title in theatre.

With your new found insights, no doubt you'll be invited round the golf course in no time. Of course, golfing etiquette is another matter entirely.

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