Build a better CV

Simple steps to help graduate students improve their CVs.

By Brendan L. Smith

Curriculum vitae (CV) is Latin for "course of life," and the preparation of this academic and professional summary is crucial for life after graduate school.

"A CV should be a thorough, exhaustive account of professional experiences, honors and activities," says Mitchell Prinstein, PhD, director of clinical psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Anything that speaks to one's professional experiences or character would be relevant to include."

While a resume is a one- or two-page summary of work experience, a CV doesn't have a page limit. It is a much more detailed account of an applicant's accomplishments, including education, teaching and clinical experience, research, publications, presentations, grants, volunteer positions and membership in professional organizations, such as APAGS.

"In academia, we're really using CVs almost to the exclusion of resumes because they provide more detail about an applicant's background," says Prinstein, who has written about CV preparation and professional development.

That's why it is crucial to get them right. Here's advice from the experts on how to make your CV stand out:

Tailor it for every position. Adapt your CV to each position you apply for, says R. Eric Landrum, PhD, a psychology professor at Boise State University who has written about

See a sample psychology graduate student CV from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln: http://psychology.unl.edu/psichi/Psi_Chi_Sample_CV.pdf

academic and professional development. "You don't do one version and just copy and paste," he says. "You absolutely want to tweak a CV for the environment you want to work in." So, if you are applying for a clinical position, list your clinical and internship experience high on your CV, while research and teaching experience should be listed more prominently for research or faculty positions.

Be clear. Explain your accomplishments simply, Prinstein says. For example, describe any awards that you include and their significance, don't just list the award name. Likewise, briefly describe your responsibilities for each research, teaching or clinical position. "Someone might list that he was a teaching assistant for Psych 265, but no one knows what Psych 265 is," Prinstein says. "You need to make sure you are writing your CV for a broad audience."

Don't pad it. Your CV needs to show clearly how you stand out from other applicants, so don't list your coursework, for example. Do list any specialized training, certifications or relevant skills you have, such as fluency in languages besides English or knowledge of statistical software programs, says Landrum, the 2014 president of Div. 2 (Society for the Teaching of Psychology). "The goal of the CV is to be as long as possible because you want to demonstrate a long academic life, but you should not pad it," he says. So, don't include attendance at conferences unless you delivered a presentation or had a leadership role. Don't include undergraduate accomplishments, except for prestigious awards, publications or other high-profile achievements. Also, to avoid any misrepresentations, your CV should clearly state if manuscripts are under review, accepted or published in peer-reviewed journals.

Include your volunteer service. Too often, graduate students forget the importance of including volunteer service on their CVs, says Elizabeth Morgan, PhD, an assistant professor of psychology at Springfield College who has written about CV preparation. Mentoring new graduate students or working at a local soup kitchen, for example, speaks to your commitment to the field or the community.

Don't get too personal. It's a bad idea to include hobbies or irrelevant personal information, such as marital status or number of children. You can include part-time jobs unrelated to psychology if those jobs demonstrated your work ethic and initiative, Landrum says. But don't list your salary or reasons for leaving a job on your CV.

Proof it. Once you are done tweaking your CV for a position, ask your mentor, advisor or others to review it, Landrum says. "Spelling and grammatical mistakes are fatal flaws in a CV. It has to be absolutely perfect," he says. Also, send your CV to any references you provide so they can highlight your achievements if they are asked to write a recommendation letter.

Make it easy to read. A CV should use APA style with clear headings, no flashy graphics or unusual formatting, and a simple business font, such as Times New Roman or Arial, Landrum says. Keep it simple and readable. Precise technical language is fine, but avoid jargon. Use action verbs and active voice instead of passive voice.

Craft a strong cover letter. No CV is ready to send until it has a cover letter that provides more personal information about why a candidate is applying for a position, such as a love for teaching or a particular connection to that college or university. "A cover letter really helps people connect which parts of your CV that are most relevant for the job you are applying for," Prinstein says.

Start early and keep updating it. A CV is a working document, so try to update your CV every semester to make sure you don't forget any accomplishments. "In the first or second year of graduate school, a CV will probably be somewhat depressing because it is so bare," says Morgan, "but it can help you identify opportunities and experiences that you need to include to be a competitive candidate." ■

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The vitae checklist
- **Name and contact information,** including work and home phone numbers, address and email
- **Education,** including college degrees, places and dates
- **Dissertation topic**
- **Licenses/certifications,** including state and certificate number, if applicable
- **Internships**
- **Professional experience**
- **Publications**
- **Professional or academic presentations**
- **Honors, scholarships, fellowships or awards**
- **Professional organization memberships**
- **Volunteer or service work**
- **Teaching, research or clinical experience**