

# CV writing and interview skills

Guidance notes for secondary students  
applying for a first job

# Section 1 – CV writing

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## Purpose

To help secondary school/college students present themselves in the best possible way when applying for that all-important first step into the world of work.

Remember that even though your dream job or career may not be available straight away, it's important to get a foot on the ladder. Once you have an offer, although it may not be perfect, YOU can make a decision whether the experience and training you would get on the job will help you on your way.

The process that employers go through to select people to fill job vacancies usually has 2 stages:

### Stage 1 – CVs and/or application forms

These are used to identify the people who will be invited for interview so it's vital that what you write shows the employer you could be the kind of worker they are looking for.

### Stage 2 – Interviews

The employer will make a shortlist of the people whose applications have impressed them the most and invite them to come for a face-to-face interview. All of the candidates are likely to have similar qualifications to have got this far, so you need to be able to make yourself stand out from the crowd.

These notes will show you how to put together job applications geared to what an employer is likely to be looking for, and having hopefully got yourself shortlisted, how to make the most of your interview.

## Your priorities

When you've decided on the type of work you want to do, think about the things that would be **MOST** important to you in an organisation you'd like to work for.

Even though many organisations may be working in the same business or service sector, like fashion retailers or building contractors for example, they are each of them likely to have differences in their culture and the way they think about and do things.

Understanding what motivates you will help you to decide whether a potential employer is likely to provide the kind of working environment where you will thrive and succeed.

You may not find everything you are looking for so you need to prioritise the things you feel you must have vs. those that would be nice to have.

### Factors to consider

- Would you be happier in a small or large organisation?
- Do you enjoy a culture that focuses on individuals or teamwork?
- Is it important that your employer makes a contribution to society?
- Do you want a long-term future with one employer or just a stepping-stone?
- What sort of reward (payment) system are you looking for?
  - Salary vs. other benefits, e.g. insurance, discounts, pension etc.
  - Performance based rewards
  - Regular reviews
- How do you see the balance between your working and personal life?
- Are you looking for career development opportunities?
- Do you expect your employer to be investing in the future?
- Does it matter if people get promoted on merit or length of service?
- What kind of training are you hoping for?
  - Technical
  - Professional
  - Leadership



## Writing your CV

Your CV, or Curriculum Vitae (Latin for 'course of life') is a snapshot of who you are and what you have done in your life so far.

Not every employer will ask you to send one when they advertise job vacancies, but it's a good idea to have one prepared before you start looking.

Having an up-to-date CV also gives you the chance to approach potential employers you are interested in even if they aren't advertising locally at the time. Most employers value initiative and if they like the look of your CV, they may well keep it on file and contact you if a suitable vacancy does come up.

### Career focus

Although your CV isn't written for a specific vacancy, you need to think about the type of job you are looking for when you write it.

The skills and achievements you will highlight need to be relevant to a potential employer in your chosen area of work. For example, the skills and qualities you need to demonstrate if you want to work in Carpentry are different to those needed for Retail Sales.

### CV basics

Here are some points to bear in mind when you start preparing your CV.

- The sole purpose of a CV is to get you on an interview short list so think about what you have to offer that is likely to do that – and no more
- Your CV will also form the basis of the interview and you may well be asked to give more detail about the things you said – make sure you are ready to do that
- Most recruiters don't have the time to read poorly laid out CVs – if it isn't clear and easy to follow it may well go straight in the bin!
- Use a font size of 11 or 12 point and avoid strange fonts – Arial is easy to read
- Leave empty spaces between sections of the CV so that each part is clearly defined
- The ideal length is 2 pages (plus a covering letter) – any less is unlikely to tell the reader enough about you to make a decision and any more may irritate a busy reader

We've given an example of what a good CV for a school or college leaver should include and how you might set it out on the next page.

# Suggested CV structure

Name  
Address  
Telephone  
Email

**Career goal** Describe the type of post you are looking for.

## Summary of skills

Skill 1

List 3 or 4 separate skills which are relevant

Examples might include

Organisational,  
Communication,  
Computer Literacy,  
Leadership,  
Numeracy,  
Persuasion,  
Design,  
Problem solving etc.

- Use 2/3 short and concise statements to describe how you have used each of the skills listed in real life situations, ideally based on something you have done in school/college, a part time job or work placement, or in your own time.

Skill 2

- 

Skill 3

- 

- 

- 

## Education

Dates from to

Name of school/college attended

- List key subjects and grades obtained

- 

- 

- 

**Awards** (only include if applicable)

Describe any awards received from your school/college or education related competitions in which you received a placing.

**Positions held** (only

Any special responsibilities you have had e.g. member of



if applicable) Student Council, prefect etc.

### Work experience

List any experience you have had, including any part time or holiday jobs and your work experience assignment through your school or college. Try to describe what you were responsible for rather than just what you did. The example below shows how you might do this.

Dates from to	Description of job Name and location of employer Duties included:
2006 to present	Example: Part-time Supermarket Assistant Sainsbury Supermarket, Anytown Duties include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensuring customer satisfaction when selecting goods (<b>rather than</b> Showing customers where they can find items)</li><li>• Handling money accurately (<b>rather than</b> Working on the tills on busy Saturdays)</li><li>• Achieving a good presentation of goods (<b>rather than</b> Setting up new displays)</li><li>• Supervising new members of Saturday staff (<b>rather than</b> Showing new Saturday staff what to do)</li></ul>

### Personal activities and interests

List membership of any clubs or associations, or sports teams you belong to and note any position of responsibility you hold or have held in them.  
Describe any hobbies or personal interests you have.

Once you have finished a draft of your CV, it's a good idea to ask others to read it and give you feedback.

## Covering letter – advertised jobs

If a job advertisement asks interested parties to send in their CV as part of the application process, you will need to prepare a covering letter. Since that will also be part of the first impression the prospective employer has of you, it's important to write it carefully.

The example shows the kind of things you need to include.

1. Date the letter
2. Put YOUR complete address
3. Show the name, title, position and full organisation name and address as in the advert

**4a & b** Refer to the job you are applying for and say where you saw the advert

5. Say why you are applying for the job and why you would make a good candidate. Refer to any relevant experience and skills.

6. State how you can be contacted.

7. Sign off with 'Yours sincerely'

8. Print or type your name after your signature

Read the letter through carefully to check

content, spelling and grammar and get someone else to proof read it for you. Save the file or make a copy before you send it off.

<p><b>1. Date</b></p>	
	<p><b>2. Ms Harriet Irving</b> 12 Bluebell Meadow Hadley Winchester Hampshire SO23 8AZ</p>
<p><b>3. Mr John Fletcher</b> Shop Manager Trendline 44 Wellington Street Winchester Hampshire SO27 8DQ</p>	
<p>Dear Mr Fletcher</p>	
<p><b>4a. Job vacancy for Trainee in Fashion Sales</b></p>	
<p><b>4b.</b> I was very interested to read your advertisement in today's copy of the "Winchester Echo" for the position of Trainee in Fashion Sales and I have pleasure in enclosing my CV as requested.</p>	
<p><b>5.</b> I will be leaving school in 2 weeks' time and would like a job in which I can meet the general public and use my strong interpersonal skills. I very much enjoyed my week's work experience at Sainsbury's Supermarkets when I helped customers, displayed the stock and handled money but would prefer to work in fashion sales for my career.</p>	
<p><b>6.</b> I would welcome the opportunity of discussing my application further at an interview. I can be contacted on 01926 111111 or 07786 234567 or at anyone@isp.com (<i>if you are on email</i>).</p>	
<p><b>7. Yours sincerely</b></p>	

## Approaching employers yourself

Once you have decided on the type of work you want to look for and have a CV prepared, you could start approaching those local employers who are most likely to have a need for that type of worker.

This is particularly important if you are looking for a fairly specialised type of post where there are only a limited number of potential employers in the area, or where you want to work in a specific type of industry or service sector, like Insurance for example.

### Finding the contacts

Use sources like Yell.co.uk to make a list of all the organisations which might fit your job needs within whatever distance from your home that you are prepared to travel, including their address, telephone number and website (if one is shown).

Visit any websites you have found because they may well give you valuable information about the organisation – how big it is, the work it does, number of staff, training and recruitment policies etc.

Once your list is complete, telephone the organisation and ask for the name of their Human Resources (HR) Manager, or if they don't have a dedicated person, whoever is responsible for recruitment.

### Send your CV

We've given you an example on the next page of how you should write a covering letter to send a copy of your CV to all the organisations on your list.

Don't be too disappointed if you don't get a pile of excited invitations to an interview in the next post – there may not be any planned vacancies to fill right now.

Remember that if you don't ask, you don't get. Even if your letter doesn't arrive at just the right moment, most employers value initiative and if your CV looks good, they will keep it on file and get back to you if things change.

Checking out a good potential candidate first is a lot cheaper and less time consuming for an employer than running a recruitment advert.

## Covering letter – speculative

Here's an example of how you should put together a letter to potential employers that you are approaching yourself.

1. Date the letter
2. Put YOUR complete address
3. Show the name, title, and position of the contact you have found and full organisation name and address
- 4 Say why you are writing and state the kind of job you are looking for
5. Give the reasons why you want this kind of job and why you would make a good candidate. Refer to any relevant experience and skills.
6. State that you have enclosed your CV and ask for an interview – even if it isn't immediate
7. State how you can be contacted
8. Sign off with 'Yours sincerely'
9. Print or type your name after your signature

1. Date
  2. Ms Harriet Irving  
12 Bluebell Meadow  
Hadley  
Winchester  
Hampshire SO23 8AZ
  3. Mr John Fletcher  
HR Manager  
Trendline Ltd  
44 Wellington Street  
Winchester  
Hampshire SO27 8DQ
- Dear Mr Fletcher
4. I am writing to you because I will be leaving school in 2 weeks' time and would be very interested in working for your company if you have a suitable vacancy for a retail sales trainee.
  5. I would like a job in which I can meet the general public and use my strong interpersonal skills. I very much enjoyed my week's work experience at Sainsbury's Supermarkets when I helped customers, displayed the stock and handled money but would prefer to work in fashion sales for my career.
  6. I have enclosed my CV, which I hope you will find of interest. I realise that you may not have an immediate opening but I would welcome the opportunity of discussing my application further at an interview either now or in the future.
  7. I can be contacted on 01926 111111 or 07786 234567 or at anyone@isp.com (*if you are on email*).
  8. Yours sincerely
  9. Harriet Irving

Read the letter through carefully to check content, spelling and grammar and get someone else to proof read it. Save the file or make a copy before you send it off.

# Application Forms

Whether or not you are required to submit a CV when applying for a job, there will almost always be an application form to complete.

Most application forms will ask for similar information and here's a guide to completing them well.

- 1. Get it photocopied** Put the original somewhere safe and do all the preliminary work on the photocopy until you're happy with what you've written. Then complete the real form.
- 2. Read the form carefully** Are you given any instructions? E.g., black ink. Print carefully using a black pen or type in 12 point.
- 3. Never leave blank spaces** Put N/A for "not applicable" If you leave a section blank, the reader might assume that you had forgotten or missed it altogether. They may think you lack attention to detail.
- 4. Do the easy bits first** A lot of the information will be factual e.g., Full Name, Address, Date of Birth etc.
- 5. Details of work experience** Include any holiday or part time jobs you have done plus your work experience assignment. Space is usually tight in a form so plan this carefully and describe the things you did as well as saying what the job was.
- 6. Reason for leaving** Not a problem when you are listing holiday work. End of holiday is fine. For Saturday work put a positive reason such as "to gain a different experience" or "concentrate on studying for exams"
- 7. The important part** This section will state "Give your reasons for applying for this position" or "Give any other information in support of your application" **Do not leave this blank.** Look at the employer's needs. Read the job advertisement and job specification carefully. What do they want you to do? Think about what skills you have that mean you could do it well.
- 8. Write a short letter** If the form has been sent to you in the post always send it back with a short letter.
- 9. Enclose your CV** Do not make it part of your application i.e. do not write on the form "see attached CV", but enclose it with your letter and completed form.
- 10. Take a photocopy** Your interview may not be for a few weeks and you need to remember what information you have given.

## Section 2 – Interview skills

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## Interview preparation

Your application has been accepted and you've been invited to attend an interview.

To give yourself the best possible chance, you now need to do some preparation for the big day.

### Research the organisation

Unless the organisation is very small, you should be able to find out quite a lot about it from the internet and your local library. You may not be able to find everything on the examples below, but the more the better. Make a note of what you find out and take it with you to the interview.

- What EXACTLY it does – you may think you know but you might be surprised to find out it's more than you thought.
- If it's a business, how long has it been established?
- Is it part of a larger group? If it is try to find out a bit about them as well.
- Roughly how many people does it employ and what does it have to say about training?
- If it's a larger company it may well have a copy of its latest annual report for download from its website. That will give you a lot of the information you are looking for plus things like how much it earns from customers each year and the amount of its profits.

Apart from the fact that the interviewer is very likely to ask you what you know about the organisation and answering "nothing" will not impress, you can probably use some of what you have found out to think about some sensible questions when you are asked if there's anything more you would like to know.

### Review your CV and/or Application Form

Remember that the interviewer will want to explore some of the information you have provided. Make sure you are comfortable with how you might develop any of the points you have written about, particularly with additional examples of things that you have done which demonstrate why you are a good candidate for this job.



## Interview preparation (cont'd)

### Prepare for typical interview questions

Although every interview will be different, there are some questions which every interviewer is likely to ask. By thinking about how you would answer them, you can give yourself an edge when and if they come up.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Q</b> <i>Tell me about yourself (Give me a brief overview of your background)</i> | <b>A</b> Prepare a brief outline focusing on your accomplishments. Limit your response to about two minutes. Be logical and organised; start from the early years and move forward in time. Emphasise those items in your background that "match" the job for which you are interviewing.   |
| <b>Q</b> <i>Why are you interested in this position?</i>                             | <b>A</b> Your interest might be as a result of work you have done in a similar position or as a result of something else in your background (a set of skills) that "matches" this position. This question is worth some careful preparation to make sure your answer is crisp and well thought out.   |
| <b>Q</b> <i>Tell me about your technical skills.</i>                                 | <b>A</b> Whether this comes up depends on the type of job you are applying for. It is most likely to be asked if the job involves working with technology or in a skilled trade   |
| <b>Q</b> <i>What do you consider your biggest accomplishments?</i>                   | <b>A</b> These may be something you have achieved in education or in extracurricular activities. Anything related to what you would be doing in the position is particularly valuable, but even if you can't make that connection, always have something of which you are proud to talk about.  |
| <b>Q</b> <i>What do you know about this organisation?</i>                            | <b>A</b> This is where you will use what you have found out in your research. If you're worried about remembering details, tell the interviewer that you've done some research and ask if it's OK to refer to your notes. That shouldn't be a problem.  |
| <b>Q</b> <i>What are your strengths? (You may be asked to rank them)</i>             | <b>A</b> This is an important question. It will give you the opportunity to show your thoughtful side as you sell your background as a fit for the job. Think about your strong personal qualities which best match the job/organisation needs.<br>Examples might include things like self-motivation, creativity, ability to work under pressure, perseverance, ability to use initiative, attention to detail, team working, conscientious, caring, innovative, logical, sense of humour, loyalty etc. Be prepared to give examples of how you have used those strengths in a positive way. |

- Q** *What are your weaknesses?  
(Again, you may be asked to rank them)*
- A** This is always difficult because most people don't like acknowledging their weaknesses. However, the question is almost bound to be asked so think about how you will answer. Everyone has weaknesses and the interviewer knows that. The important thing is to show that you are aware of them and are willing to work on them. Don't quote more than 3!
- Q** *What are your goals? (Where do you want to be in X years?)*
- A** Ideally, choose goals that are related to the position and what you know of the organisation. If you're uncertain about your future career path, there's nothing wrong with saying that, as this would be your first job, you want to be the best you can at it before deciding what your next step might be.
- Q** *Do you have any questions for me?*
- A** Most interviews will end with the interviewer asking the candidates this question. If you say you don't have any questions, the interviewer may assume you are not interested in the job.  
Plan to ask a few—two to four—questions which show your interest. A couple of good examples might be:
- *"What do you think it takes to be successful in this position?"*
  - *"What are the biggest challenges facing the department/branch/company in the next 12 months?"*
- Other topics (if they haven't already been covered) might be:
- *"Could you tell me a little more about the opportunities for training/personal development?"*
  - *"What is the next step from here? When is a decision likely to be made?"*

## In the interview

### Make a positive impression

Views are formed instantly and are likely to stay for 90% of the interview so make sure the interviewer's first impression of you is positive.

- ✓ Dress simply and smartly, avoiding loud colours – don't use strongly scented perfume, after shave or cologne
- ✓ Arrive on time
- ✓ Treat everyone you meet with respect – word of a bad attitude will get back
- ✓ Greet the interviewer with confidence – a firm handshake and a smile
- ✓ Sit up straight when you are seated – don't slouch or lean forward

### Show positive behaviour

- ✓ Keep good eye contact with the interviewer at all times
- ✓ Listen carefully to questions. Don't answer until they have finished speaking
- ✓ Don't be afraid to ask for clarification if you haven't fully understood the question
- ✓ Stick to what you have been asked – don't go off at a tangent or ramble
- ✓ If you'd like to know more about something the interviewer has told you, speak up – you might have forgotten by the time they ask if you have any questions
- ✓ Take your time to collect your thoughts before answering in-depth questions – that won't count against you
- ✓ Always be positive and honest when giving examples of achievements
- ✓ Have some questions ready when the interviewer asks for them

### Leave on a high note

- ✓ If by the end of the interview you know the job isn't what you are looking for then say so politely, explain why and thank the interviewer for their time. Don't leave on a bad note – you might apply again for a different job in a few years!
- ✓ Otherwise, thank the interviewer and say you are looking forward to hearing from them.
- ✓ If you don't get the position, contact the interviewer and ask if they would give some feedback – there may be something you can improve next time



## Summary of key points

Here's a brief summary to serve as an aide memoir and help you on the road to getting that all-important first job.



- Prepare a CV before you start looking and get other people to read it
- Focus on writing about skills and achievements that are relevant to the type of work you want
- Make sure your CV is well laid out and easy to read – clear print and 2 pages
- Always write a covering letter when sending your CV
- Get application forms photocopied and complete a draft on the COPY – don't complete the original until you are happy with the draft
- Keep a photocopy of the application forms you are sending in
- When you are offered an interview, do some research on the organisation
- Think about how you will answer the most common interview questions
- Plan examples you can give of how you have used skills which are relevant to the job
- Present yourself positively on the day through dress, punctuality, attitude and confidence
- Show positive behaviour through eye contact, listening skills and well thought out answers to questions
- Make sure you have 2 to 4 good questions ready when the interviewer asks if there's anything you'd like to ask