

Step-By-Step: How to Write Your CV and Cover Letter for a Postdoc Position

*Meet Miguel. Miguel
needs to write his CV*



TL;DR?

Sample CV:
Slide 12

Sample Cover
Letter/Email
Slide 17

Be the career counselor: 3 steps to write your CV

1. **Pick Your Headings**

Use section headings that quickly explain your range of skills and experience.

2. **Write Useful Descriptive Text**

Get the language from the position or opportunity description.

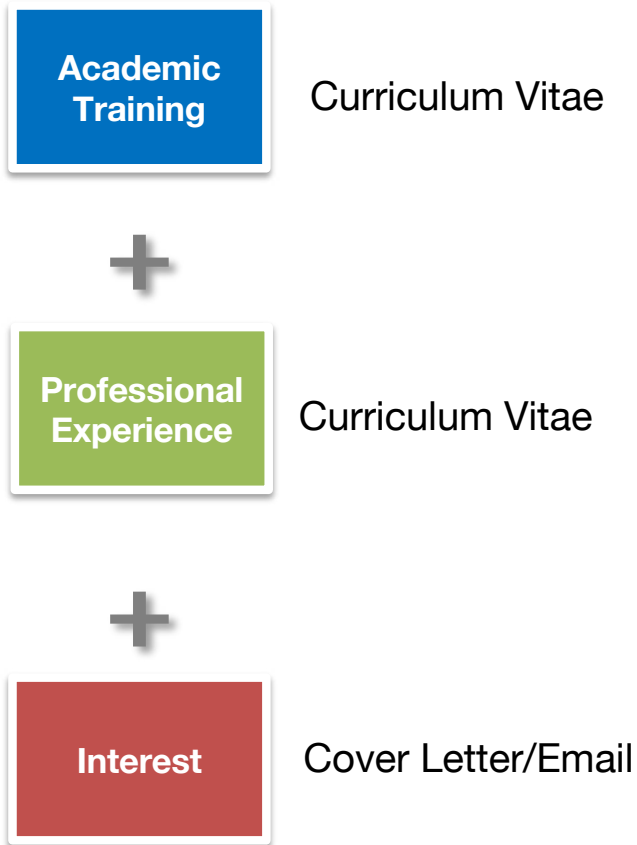
3. **Final Formatting**

Polish your format so your information is easy to read.



Why are CVs formatted the way they are?

To tell a story of your development as a scientist



Every candidate has 3 things: certain academic training, a particular set of professional skills, and their own personal reason for pursuing science/opportunity.

No one quality/skill distinguishes you from other candidates, but no other candidate will have your unique combination of academic training, professional skills, and your interest. (Think of it like your own special combination of superpowers. Your PI doesn't need three supermen, but one Superman next to a Wonder Woman and a Flash would make a great team!)

Application materials were designed to mine for this data: CVs summarize your academic training and professional skills. Cover letters summarize your interest.

And now you know!



Why are CVs formatted the way they are? To tell a story of your development as a scientist

Academic
Training

Curriculum Vitae



Professional
Experience

Curriculum Vitae



Outcomes/
Productivity

What's a CV?

A CV (*'curriculum vitae'* in Latin, meaning *'list of life'*) is a single or multipage document that documents your activity and productivity.

CVs start with your academic background (your education/ theoretical knowledge)....

continue with your professional experience (how you've applied your knowledge as a researcher, educator/mentor, leader, etc)...

and end with a list of your outcomes (your various forms of recognition and productivity)



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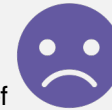


Outcomes/
Productivity

How to approach a CV

Some students

write/revise their CV by starting at the top of the page of their document and try to write their document in one sitting.



We recommend

that you lay out the 'backbone' of your CV first, by picking 3-8 section headings that reflect the scope of your work.



Then, begin writing/cutting and pasting your information into those sections. Then keep trying to fill out each section by fleshing out the descriptive text of each of your experiences. Write in 20-60 minute bursts. Then take a break. Keep at it; you'll get it done!

Which section headings should you chose?

Go to the next slide!



First: Choose Your Headings

Who Are You & Which Headings Best “Bucket” Your Experience?

Academic Training

- Education
- Relevant Training
- Project Management Training
- Scientific Leadership or Management Training



Professional Experience

You're a...

Researcher

- Research Experience
- Basic Science Research Experience
- Clinical Research Experience
- Oncology Research Experience
- Bioinformatics Experience
- Industry Experience

Educator

- Teaching Experience
- Teaching and Curriculum Development Experience
- K-12 Science Education
- Science Education & Advocacy
- Informal Teaching/Training Experience
- Mentorship Experience
- Science Communication Experience

Leader & Advocate

- Professional Leadership
- University Leadership & Service
- Community Service
- Committees
- Public Health Service
- Student Health Advocacy
- DEI Leadership & Service



Outcomes/ Productivity

Because of your training & experience, you have....

- Techniques
- Honors and Awards
- Grants
- Fellowships and Travel Awards

- Mentoring and Teaching Awards
- Professional Organizations
- Memberships
- Invited Talks/Presentations

- Relevant Presentations
- Selected Presentations
- Publications
- Patents

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1. **Pick Your Headings**

Use section headings that quickly explain your range of skills and experience.

Final points

Q. Which headings should I use?

A. To present like an ‘insider’, check which headings your current and/or future colleagues are using!

1. Ask to see your PI or lab mates’ CVs. What headings are they using to ‘bucket’ their experiences?
2. Look at the website of PI whose lab you want to work at – do any of the lab members link to their CVs? Their CV format got them their postdoc in that lab!



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What content is key with descriptive text?

Breadth, depth and impact

1. **Projects**
2. **Range of responsibilities**
3. **Outcomes/Achievements**

This is some sample text.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

QB3, University of California, San Francisco
Supervisor: *Kami Khan*

Graduate Student Researcher
(0000-0000)



- **Dissertation Title:** "Revealing of XXXXXXXX. Studies of XXXXX Enzyme and Engineered XXXXXXXX Mutants"
 - Revealing of XXXXXXXX and its engineered XXXXXXXX mutants were analyzed using various spectroscopic and other methods. Aggregation of folding intermediates was extensively investigated. Very stable XXXXXXXX mutants were obtained. Initiated a new area of research in a lab, which is primarily a peptide synthesis/structure lab.
- **Peptide Antibiotics**
 - Purified individual components from complex, microheterogenous mixtures of fungal peptides using normal phase and reverse phase HPLC and crystallized the purified peptide. The high- resolution structure of XXXXXXXX, a channel forming peptide, was solved in collaboration with Prof. M. Curie, Naval Research Laboratory, Washington D.C., which provided insights into the gating mechanism of protein/peptide channels.



What content is key with descriptive text? Breadth, depth and impact

1. **Projects**
2. **Range of responsibilities** (*Analyzed, synthesized, compared, designed, trained/mentored, etc.*)
3. **Outcomes/Achievements** (*Achieved, solved, discovered, initiated, built, published, etc.*)

This is some sample text,
color coded.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

QB3, University of California, San Francisco
Supervisor: *Kami Khan*

Graduate Student Researcher
(0000-0000)



- **Dissertation Title:** "*Revealing of XXXXXXXX. Studies of XXXXXX Enzyme and Engineered XXXXXXXX Mutants*"
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Q. Want to find more examples of scientific action verbs to write your descriptive text?

A. <https://www.biospace.com/article/the-top-action-verbs-for-life-science-resumes/>



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Miguel Morales

University of California San Francisco, 12 Spider Street, Santa Cruz, 0000. Phone: 123.456.7890. Email: mm@email.edu

EDUCATION

University of California, Santa Cruz 0000-0000
• Ph.D., Biomedical Science Graduate Program

University of Texas San Antonio 0000-0000
• B.S., Microbiology and Immunology

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

University of California, Santa Cruz, 0000-0000 **PhD Research**
Peter Parker's Lab

- Project: Examining the mechanisms of localization of a-synuclein at the synapse.
- Results: Able to show using biochemical fractionation and quantitative confocal microscopy that a-synuclein interacts with lipid rafts and that this association underlies its localization at the synapse.
- Article has been accepted by *Name of Journal Here*.

University of Texas San Antonio, 0000-0000 **Research Assistant**

- Diana Prince's Lab
- Collected data on X to assess Y.
 - Developed skills in A, B and C techniques

TEACHING & MENTORSHIP EXPERIENCE

- Teaching Assistant, Biology 101. University of California, Santa Cruz, 0000
- Chemistry Tutor. University of Texas San Antonio, 0000-0000
- Science High Science Day Mentor. Designed a science module for ~ 100 diverse high school students interested in pursuing an advanced degree in the sciences degree. 0000, 0000, 0000, 0000

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS

- UTSA Research Symposium. Write the name of your poster here. TX, 0000
- ABRCMS. Write the name of your poster here. CA, 0000

PUBLICATIONS

Gibran, K., LastName, R., Last, J., Name, A., and NameLast, H. 0000. Name of Publication here. *Name of Journal Here*. In press.

NameLast, R., Last, N., Gibran, K., and Name, K., 00000. Name of Publication here. *Name of Journal Here*. In press

NameLast, Name, P., Gibran, K., and N, LastName S. 0000. Name of Publication here. *Name of Journal Here*. 00:000-000.

AWARDS AND HONOURS

- Graduate Fellowship, Bloom Foundation for the Study of the Biology of Aging, UCSC ,0000-0000
- Chancellor's Award for the Advancement of Women, Student Recipient, UCSC, 0000
- Regent Science Scholarship, UTSA, 0000
- CURIE Award for Most Promising Researcher, UTSA, 0000
- Dean's List, UTSA, 0000-0000

Is it easy to read? Ask a friend.

- 1. Length:** 1-3 pages
- 2. Margins:** Top/Bottom .5 and Right/left .75 inch
- 3. Fonts:** Times New Roman, Calibri, Cambria, Garamond, Helvetica, Arial Narrow, Optima, Palatino, etc.
- 4. Font Size:** 10-12 font. With smaller fonts (e.g. Times) don't go below 11
- 5. Headings:** Bold and capitalize. Heading font size 0-1 size larger than text.
- 6. Highlight:** Indent, bold, capitalize, bullet to highlight.
- 7. Numbering:** Put your name and page number on 2nd & 3rd pages in corner
- 8. Exclude:** Do not include birth date, birth city, personal status, photos

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...and now, let's talk about the cover letter/email



Be the career counselor: 3 steps to write your CV

Final points

Q. How long should this take to write a CV?

A. A CV, from beginning to end, usually takes between 4-10 hours, in 20-60 minute sittings. Is it taking you longer? You might be stuck. Stop, and ask a colleague, career counselor, mentor or friend for a review and some advice. An extra opinion can help you get back on track.

3. Final Formatting

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Are Cover Letters Worth the Trouble of Writing Them?

The question isn't:

- ❖ “Do PIs read cover letters?”

The question is:

- ❖ “When do PIs read cover letters, and what are they looking for when they do?”

- ❖ In our experience, almost every PI sets aside the cover letter to skim the CV first. (just like you might skim a paper before reading it closely.)
- ❖ While some PIs said they read the cover letter as a writing sample, several PIs we spoke with say that they read cover letters in 3 instances:
 1. If they had several interesting candidates the used the cover letter as a ‘tie breaker’ to limit the number of interviews.
 2. If they were really interested in the candidate and they wanted to find out more about them.
 3. There was something unusual in the candidate’s path (for example, it wasn’t obvious why the candidate was pivoting from their PhD work to the potential postdoc PIs lab, and they wanted to know more about the argument.

Pro-tip : don't attach your cover letter as a separate document. Just make it the text of your email, and attach a CV.



How are effective cover letters structured?

If a contact recommended you meet someone– copy them on the email & mention them in the subject line

To: BradWayne@email.com
CC: KalltKhan@email.com; ClarksonKent@email.com
Subject Line: Dr. Kent recommended I reach out to you.

Dear Dr. Wayne,

I am contacting you on the recommendation of Dr. Clarkson Kent. I am a 5th year Ph.D. student in the Biomedical Science program at UCSC and completed my thesis work in Dr. Kelli Khan's laboratory. I am writing to inquire about the possibility of obtaining a postdoctoral position in your laboratory.

(#1) My thesis work focused on understanding the mechanisms of..... [*one sentence overview of your research*]. **(#2)** Specifically, I was able to show using biochemical fractionation... **(#3)** My approach involved.... **(#4)** The key impact was.... And this work is currently *in press* in... **(#5)** Additionally, I also had the opportunity mentor 5 students and take on a leadership role as vice president of the Graduate Student Association.

Over the course of my graduate studies, I have become interested in using imaging techniques to understand X and Y. I read your papers on A and B, and was particularly interested in C because of D. I wish to pivot my work to E, and would greatly appreciate the opportunity to talk to you further about the possibility of completing a postdoc in your lab. I have attached my CV to this email for your review, and thank you for your consideration..

Regards,

Miguel Morales

Academic
Training

Professional
Skills

Interest

5 points to cover when summarizing your research:

- #1 One sentence summary of your research
- #2 One sentence what your research demonstrated – and remember - adjust specificity for how knowledgeable your reader is)
- #3 One sentence how you designed your research project/obtained the evidence – which techniques/ analyses you used to answer your research question
- #4 One sentence of significance (papers, conference talks, funding, new projects, patents, impact on your/ other fields, etc.)
- #5 One sentence about additional outcomes/achievements



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...you can also write a shorter version.
Just attach the CV to the email!

Academic
Training

Professional
Skills

Interest



You wrote your CV/cover letter; now what?

Finally – you should know every career counselor will always tell you to have a colleague, mentor or friend review your application materials before sending to potential PIs.

One way you can involve professional acquaintances/mentors/people who you hope to keep in touch with, is to make a 'contained ask'. Send everyone in your professional community a quick email that says...

Dear Dr. X,

I hope you're well. Since we last spoke (a year ago at the ABC conference), I've completed my dissertation on X in Dr. Ys lab at University Z. I defend in March.

I'm now applying to postdocs and have been reaching out to individuals I respect in my professional community to ask if they had some time over next two weeks to review my CV/correspondence to potential PIs. To limit the time commitment of my ask, I'm requesting that people take no more than 20 minutes to review my materials and focus on no more than 3 comments/pieces of advice on my documents.

Thank you for considering my request; please know I entirely understand if you don't have the time right now.

Warmly, Miguel Morales



Thank you!

Want more help?

Come talk with us!

career.ucsf.edu/appointments

