

taylorrollinson
scientific recruitment

CV writing Guide

for PhD Life Scientists



How to write a CV

It's easy to worry too much about your CV, but you shouldn't. It's a documentation of your career, and you're the expert on it. Most CVs we see are good, and the most important thing when applying to a new job is where you apply, not what your CV looks like.

With that said, we can turn a good CV into a great CV with some guidance

What are companies looking for?

The first thing someone reading your CV should see is your speciality and level of seniority. They are often looking for a specific profile for instance:

- Science Graduate with PCR and mammalian cell culture experience.
- PhD Graduate with experience using CRISPR to edit cells
- Senior Scientist who's managed experimental design and an Associate Scientist in a time pressurised environment.

A good CV quickly shows your seniority and speciality, we set off looking for this, and if we don't find it quickly, your CV is likely to end up in the 'no' pile. If you have the right seniority level, we're looking to understand:

- **The timeline** – What you've been doing, work or otherwise, in the last few years.
- **Technical Strengths** – What have you been doing alongside this speciality, how lab based, how independent and publication strengths
- **Your personality** – Sporty, Traveller, Additional Study

If you're in doubt about what to write, think about what we're looking for, and make a CV to match. Here's our guidance on how to do your CV best.

What is a CV?

It's Factual

We want:

"Independently optimised and developed 8 colour FACS Assay"

Not:

"I did lots of FACS and like using it"

It's a Summary

We're looking to understand what you did, and what you're best at. It should be easy for someone to read, and very quickly understand your background. Few Science CVs should be over 4 pages, and we would encourage aiming for 2 pages.

It's Formal

This is a professional document, and should be professionally formatted. Use formal language, and if you're in doubt if something is not professionally relevant, omit it. Don't include:

- A photo
- Date of Birth
- Marital Status
- Names of Children/Father
- Details of Pets
- Crazy graphics

It's Promotional

It's not the time to be modest, and we're impressed by people who put impressive things on their CV. If you've got good results, been given an award, stuck at something that was hard, put it in.

It's Targeted

You should review your CV for each job and each company. Make sure you provide clear detail on your experience for each point on a job advert, and research the companies' other research teams, and put relevant techniques where possible.

It's only the first stage

The CVs only function is to get you an interview. It needs to convey what you're good at, but it won't alone get you hired, and it's your performance at interview which will make the difference.

It's Accurate

If 80% of people make up things for their CV, they don't do it in science. It's really easy to be caught out on anything you make up, and it's really not worth it. Put the effort in making sure you're applying to the right company.

CV Body

Format

There isn't one perfect CV, and the best one for you is subjective, and depends on what on the experience you have. There are two types suitable for Science CVs

- **Chronological** – The standard form, roles in order, and fully described in the text of the Role
- **Skills** – A more modern form, similar to the Chronological, however with skills listed additionally separately.

Roles

Each role needs the details:

Company name / University Name

Start/leaving date (month and year is fine)

Job title

Description of interesting activities. Dissertation title and achievements are a great place to start, alongside the techniques you used the most. This detail should all be relevant to people considering if you've got the skills for a job, so if you're doing a PhD, it's best to skip 'Good at keeping a Lab book' and 'I cleaned my lab space'

Example

We want:

Masters' Degree – University of Taylorrollinson September 2014 – September 2015

"An in vitro study of Staphylococcus inhibition from unknown mould secretion". We looked into the MIC of Staphylococcus colonies due to an unknown mould secretion, have submitted a publication to Nature and hope for the clinical use of penicillin in the future. I had a supervisor, but worked autonomously, and this role required extensive innovative experimental design and optimisation of microbial assays, particularly MIC curves.

Not:

Masters' Degree – University of Taylorrollinson September 2014 – September 2015

"An in vitro study of Staphylococcus inhibition from unknown mould secretion" I did Aseptic Technique, Cell Count, Disinfection, media preparation, and MIC curve development. We first grew Staphylococcus then we found that some was inhibited, and investigated what inhibited it using microbial Assays.

Level of Detail

The detail for each role should be changed on a role by role basis. For a research role we're most interested in the technical detail and techniques relevant to the role. For a CMO role we need a balance between your technical experience and your commercial experience; bar jobs or other commercial exposure are a great way to show this.

Jobs become less relevant the longer ago they are, play around with the detail, or omit detail entirely sometimes.

This is a promotional document, not a list of everything you've ever done, so it all needs to be true, but don't feel you need to put everything you've ever done.

Education

All relative to how much experience you have. You don't need to put you're A-Levels when you've got a degree or higher, and you don't need to put the individual units in your degree if you've got a PhD.

Hobbies

Opinion is divided on hobbies, but we recommend you put Hobbies/Interests on your CV, particularly when you feel they demonstrate good qualities. Evidence working in teams, or holding roles of responsibility in your interests are really useful, and travel can also be a good thing to put here. With this, if you don't feel you've got anything interesting to say, it can be better to omit it. Running an online business, attending a book club, and backpacking across Europe, yes. Browsing the Internet, Reading, and trips to Sunny beach, no.

Career Gaps

If you've got a gap, give anything you can to show what you've been doing. Always non-scientific work that you've done if you've got spaces post-graduation. If you were traveling, relocating or doing a Coursea course, we want to see any evidence that you've had a daily routine beyond Netflix and COD.

Common Mistakes

Jack of all trades

Don't put every technique under the sun on your CV. No-one expects you to have done everything, and if you're claiming to be an expert on every technique, we can't see what you're really good at, and if you've only done a PhD, and you're claiming to be an expert at all of Cellular and Molecular Biology, we won't believe you. Make it clear what you're brilliant at, and what you're competent at.

Publications

Don't put a solid page of publications on a commercial CV. You should put a selection of your highest impact/most recent/most relevant papers, even if still pending, but the 4 page limit includes papers. Include posters, conferences and book chapters when they are important, but you shouldn't put a huge amount of detail here.

Perfectionism

Should that title be 2 mm to the left? As a scientist, your CV doesn't need to be a work of art. Proof read what you write, but don't worry too much on phrasing or layout.

Standing out

Science CVs stand out because of your work and your publications. If your CV stands out due to formatting, it's normally for the wrong reasons.

Buzzwords

This is an easy mistake, and not one to feel too bad about. Avoid using phrases that don't make sense, or don't really say much, and display the skills instead.

Instead of

'Great communication skills' or 'Great teamwork skills'

Put

'Assisted on a successful grant proposal' or 'Regularly train and compete in the Taylorollinson rowing team.'

The Rest

Don't put CV or Resume at the top

Don't forget your contact details

Don't refer to yourself in the third person

Don't revolutionise the CV – Tables of skills aren't needed

What else?

Content first

A great CV is based on content, not style, and this is only possible if you've got the content to put in it. If you have an active life of interests outside work, you should be able to put this in hobbies. If you need extra experience, an internship, industry collaboration, or a Coursea course is a great start.

Where to apply?

Where you send your CV is as important as your CV. There are plenty of different paths to take from a PhD in life sciences, and it's important that you know what you're getting into, and what you're missing out on when you take different paths. Do your research on:

Big or small company

R&D, Process Development, Contract Testing, RA/QA, Medical Affairs, Sales and marketing or another path?

What comes with each of these careers after 10 years?

Will you need to relocate after 10 years?

When to apply

Start looking for the next role 3 months before your current role ends.

When you do have a new role, have an exit plan. If you want to get to the top, you should view every role as a 3 year assignment, with a defined idea of what you will gain in those 3 years, and where you will go next.