

## How to write a clear, compelling CV

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In 1482, Leonardo da Vinci wrote a letter that is credited as the first CV. He was looking to land a job as a military engineer from Ludovico Sforza—the ruler of Milan, Italy—whom Leonardo referred to in his letter as "Most Illustrious Lord." The multitalented artist, scientist, and engineer created a [10-point list](#) of his abilities, focusing on skills that were relevant to engineering. For instance, his fourth point (translated into English) read, "I have ... types of cannon, most convenient and easily portable, with which to hurl small stones almost like a hail-storm; and the smoke from the cannon will instill a great fear in the enemy on account of the grave damage and confusion." Only at the very end—after laying out his knowledge of bridges, moats, and catapults—did Leonardo see fit to add that "I can execute sculpture in marble, bronze and clay. Likewise in painting, I can do everything possible."

Leonardo's CV is a model in how to communicate your credentials. He was organized, concise, and confident in his abilities. He also put the most relevant information front and center. Modern scientists, almost all of whom will need to craft a CV at some point during their careers, can learn from his example.

A polished CV—or curriculum vitae, which roughly translates to "the course of my life"—is essential in academia. It's indispensable for job and grant applications, performance reviews, speaking engagements, and numerous other academic activities. CVs provide a far more exhaustive list of a scientist's academic accomplishments than is typical in a resume, often listing degrees, positions, publications, and presentations; teaching, mentoring, and service activities; and other relevant categories.

It's important to craft a CV that you can post on your website and send to colleagues on short notice. So, with that goal in mind, we list four tips for writing a compelling and informative CV. We will also give you advice about creating an online "extended CV"—including a Google Scholar profile and professional website—to make your hard work easily accessible to a broad audience.

- **Tip No. 1: Introduce yourself.** Most CVs start with your name, current title and affiliation, and contact information. Some scientists also mention their date of birth, family details, and other personal information at the top of their CV, but in our experience that is not necessary or relevant. You should include a link to your website if you have one. You may also want to include a short summary of your interests and expertise to give readers a sense of who you are and what you can bring to the table.
- **Tip No. 2: Order matters.** For the remainder of your CV, think carefully about the order of your sections. There is a greater chance that readers will look at and remember items that are placed toward the beginning of a document—a phenomenon known as the [primacy effect](#). So you'll want to start with the sections that are most relevant to the job you're applying for or that feature your most significant strengths. Often, that will mean starting with your position history, degrees, publications, grants, and awards, although if you're applying for a teaching position, you may want to place teaching and mentoring experience ahead of your publications and grants. Place less important sections—such as invited talks, conference presentations, service activities, and society memberships—lower down. Within each section, we recommend specifying the year you accomplished each item and listing the items in reverse chronological order. But don't just take our word for it. The norms may differ in your field and you should ask your own mentors and colleagues for additional advice.
- **Tip No. 3: Highlight important information.** CVs are long—sometimes more than 10 pages in length—so it is fair to assume that some readers might skim your CV or stop reading at some point. If you selectively highlight words and phrases using bold typeface, that can help ensure that your reader doesn't miss the most important information. For instance, in your teaching experience section, you might want to use bold typeface for the title of your position and regular typeface to describe the tasks that you were responsible for and where you conducted the work. We also recommend including hyperlinks to your papers, pre-prints, and other key documents because that will help readers who are interested in taking a closer look at your work.
- **Tip No. 4: Update your CV.** It's important to add items to your CV as you publish papers, receive grants, and carry out other academic activities. It is a good habit to update your CV after each accomplishment to ensure you don't forget to add it. Keep in mind, though, that a long CV isn't the ultimate goal: It's equally important to delete items as the accomplishments on your CV start to add up. If you don't do that, it'll be harder for readers to pick out your most important accomplishments and it might appear as though you're "fluffing" up your resume with minor items. For instance, your summer research job during college might look good on an application to grad school, but over time you'll want to omit that item. To get a sense of when to delete certain kinds of information, check out the CVs of colleagues who are at the same career stage as you. Doing so may also give you an idea of items you can add that you hadn't thought about.

That concludes our list of tips for creating a CV, which is all that Leonardo needed when he applied for jobs in the 15th century. But we all live in the 21st century, so we also need to think about how to disseminate information about ourselves online. A colleague may scour the internet to find out about another scientist after they hear a great presentation, read an exciting paper, or meet someone new at a conference. And a strong online presence might lead to an invitation to give a talk or collaborate. To take advantage of these opportunities, you need to create a professional online presence.

As a first step, we strongly encourage creating a Google Scholar profile, which only takes a few minutes. The platform will list all your publications automatically based on the name that you use in your profile. (But do a quick check to ensure there are no errors!) The default setting orders publications based on how many citations they have received, which will allow web viewers to quickly find your most impactful work. Your Google Scholar profile will update automatically over time when you publish new papers.

At some point in your career, you'll also want to create a professional webpage for yourself or, if you are a principal investigator (PI), for your entire research group. This is particularly important when you are making a career transition—for instance, if you're applying for postdoctoral positions, going on the faculty job market, or pursuing a nonacademic career. But the sooner you build a page the better, because it will take time for your website to appear at the top of search results when someone searches your name.

A website will allow you to provide more details and context about your work than you can otherwise include on your CV. For instance, you could add a biography section, research and teaching statements, and links to materials or computer code that you have created. If you're allowed to do so, you may want to provide an option to download your publications, as that will make it easier for scientists who don't have library journal access to read your work. You can also provide an option to download your CV, and you can link to your Google Scholar profile and any other relevant online presence (e.g., Twitter, LinkedIn, Academia.edu, GitHub, ORCID). And if you are the PI of a research group, create profiles on your website for trainees to help them highlight their own work and accomplishments.

## Bottom line

The goal of your CV—as well as extended information that appears online—is to highlight your accomplishments and make your work easily accessible. Invest the time to make a clear, compelling CV. Keep it up-to-date and honest. And build a web presence so that your work is available to colleagues around the world.

Do you need inspiration to get started? Take some time to look at the CVs and websites of colleagues who you admire. Also, feel free to check out what we've posted online: [Jay's](#), [Leah's](#), and [Neil's](#) CVs; [Jay's](#), [Leah's](#), [June's](#), and [Neil's](#) Google Scholar profiles; [Jay's](#) and [Neil's](#) personal websites; as well as [Jay's](#), [Leah's](#), [June's](#), and [Neil's](#) lab websites. You're welcome to borrow any of the formatting ideas for your own materials. Best of luck!

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