

Writing a CV for Modern Professional Practice: How to Avoid Common Mistakes and Pitfalls

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The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of common pitfalls that occur when revising your CV as a psychologist. In our professional work, we have had the opportunity to review a host of CVs, including those of graduate students and postdoctoral applicants, as well as psychologist peers across the country who hold a variety of professional roles across the career lifespan. This has provided us with a wide view of how psychologists in actual practice are currently writing their CVs, and also common pitfalls that can become problematic, particularly within a culture of social media and internet searching by potential employees and patients alike.

Let us be clear - the types of CVs and subsequent lists of suggestions are not exhaustive. Nor is this article focused on applicants to undergraduate or graduate school programs. Instead, the function of this article is to provide guidance for early career professionals who are making the transition from graduate school or fellowship into professional careers. Some of you may be writing a professional CV for the first time or creating one for promotion and tenure, and these identifiable problems and practical solutions are applicable for creating the “professional face” of your CV.

Common CV Problems and Related Solutions

The Problem - The Sloppy, Unreadable, or Disorganized CV

An easy pitfall is to develop or update your CV without taking care to ensure that it is readable. From misspelled or missing words to unreadable fonts, large spaces, or dense prose, it is important to think about the readability of your CV. Sometimes, your CV is not reviewed by a fellow psychologist or mental health professional in your field, but by others within other disciplines you may be interacting with, the HR or other administrative representative(s), or even the support staff who may be

coordinating your interview. The message you are sending to the reader if you present a sloppy or unreadable CV is that you didn't (or couldn't) take the time to organize or proofread a document that represents your optimal professional self. This, unfortunately, could create biases about your actual professional work, including assumptions that you lack professional training and the necessary work ethic for the position.

The Fix – Proofread and Get Organized

Proofread and refine your layout. Proofread your CV for grammar and spelling errors and use APA formatting for your citations. Let us say this again – proofread, proofread, proofread. Also, use a font size and style that is easy to read instead of a small or elaborate font, as you should be mindful of potential reviewers who may have difficulty with smaller print. Similarly, don't use an overly-large font size, extremely wide margins, or elaborate colors/borders to make your CV seem longer than it actually is or to make it “stand out.” Keep the same font style, size, and formatting throughout your CV. This is especially important to remember as you will be updating your CV over time and should review it for consistency.

Get your sections organized. As you are developing your CV, clearly outline your educational background, licensure status, professional positions, organizational memberships and related leadership positions, research experience (including manuscripts published in refereed journals and conference posters/presentations), teaching experience, and grant funding. For each professional position, lead with the title of the position so the reviewer doesn't have to search for it in the description. Also, consider grouping similar activities together if you only have one per category. For example, if you have only completed one supervision activity, consider grouping “teaching and supervision” together for now, until your CV begins to expand with experience.

List most recent activities first, and include timeframes. Include your relevant professional degrees and certifications, with the most recent degrees and licenses listed first. This is usually listed as

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the highest degree completed first, continuing through undergraduate degree(s) received. Include start and stop dates. It is important to indicate when you started and completed your graduate training and any clinical or research jobs, and for you to specify which experiences are/were independent and which were supervised.

Listing dates and timeframes also applies to professional organizations and committees to help the reviewer know if these activities are still active or relevant. For example, you may have been actively involved in the Georgia Psychological Association in graduate school, but if you have moved to Oregon, the end date of your Georgia affiliation should be clear.

Minimize unique acronyms. Make sure to spell out acronyms for the reader. Although many professionals in your field may know what “CBIT” stands for, there may be a wide range of professionals reviewing your CV. Therefore, spell out any unique acronyms the first time they are mentioned (i.e., Comprehensive Behavioral Intervention for Tics (CBIT)).

Use bold font and bullet points to help clarify. Although not mandatory, it is helpful to bold or italicize your name in citations, to help the reader easily see your contribution. Similarly, bullet points (instead of lengthy paragraphs) can highlight what is important when describing job or research positions. It is unnecessary to write a long paragraph (or multiple paragraphs) detailing your duties for each and every position. You need only briefly describe, highlight, or bullet point the most relevant clinical, supervision, and research contributions. More detail can be included in the cover letter or interview.

The Problem - The Outdated or One-Size-Fits-All CV

As unusual as this might seem, we have seen both handwritten-and-then-photocopied and typed-on-a-typewriter CVs. There are specific extenuating circumstances that play a role in both of these instances, sometimes including lack of access to necessary technology and/or lack of familiarity with more recent technology. There is no shame in having your favorite form of writing or note-taking that is

not on a computer (in fact, one of the authors of this article loves a good fine-tipped Sharpie for taking conference notes!). With that being said, your CV is a representation of your best professional self and also carries with it certain assumptions about your work abilities. This includes familiarity with technology and potentially biased opinions about your ability to “keep up” with changes in the field. A related pitfall is the submission of a highly outdated CV that lists the person’s most recent work, education, and/or publications as occurring 5 or more years ago, without explanation for the gap. This can reflect a lack of attention to one’s CV and professional progressions, or mistakenly gives the impression that a person simply hasn’t done much of anything for several years (which is rarely the case).

Yet another issue occurs when psychologists attempt to recycle the same CV for each and every purpose or request, without tailoring it. It is not unusual for work environments to require a specific CV for promotion and tenure, but this would be inappropriate for submission to the NIH as part of the required biosketch within a grant application.

The Fix – Update your CV and Create Multiple Versions

Use current technology. This recommendation may be less of an issue for newer graduates and early career professionals. However, as a reminder, it is important that you continue to format your CV using current technology. If this is not your area of expertise, enlist help from more technologically-savvy colleagues, friends, or family, or take one of a host of free online training courses on different resume-writing formats and templates.

Update your CV regularly. It is important to update your CV annually or even more frequently, such as when you have completed a new significant activity or position. As you move through your career, you will continuously grow, engage in new opportunities, give talks to the community or peers, and/or gain new grant funding. It is important to keep an accurate track of each of these activities, particularly for those who are (considering) working in an academic setting. An accurate record of these

types of activities will certainly matter when going up for promotion and/or tenure. As discussed above, it will be important to note the dates of these activities.

Be open to creating multiple CV versions as needed. It may be necessary at times to create alternate versions of your CV. You may have one in a “CV template” required by your current employer for the promotion and tenure process, a brief CV that you use for external job applications, a “social media friendly” version that you post on your private practice website for clients to review, a “research” CV that goes into more detail about your grants and research mentoring, and even a CV in a specific format such as the template required by the NIH for grant applications. If you expect to use the same CV for every purpose, you might end up missing the mark.

The Problem - The Overly Personal CV

It is not unusual for clients to look for and find personal information about their psychotherapists online. A recent survey found that not only did 86% of clients in psychotherapy intentionally look up their therapists’ information, but over 97% found it using a basic search engine and more than half revisited the site at least once to see if there was any new information (Kolmes & Taub, 2016). In addition, estimates suggest that up to 11% of mental health workers experience stalking (see Carr, Goranson, & Drummond, 2014) and results from surveys in the U.S. suggest that 29%-49% of psychologists and mental health therapists reported fearing verbal and physical aggression from patients (see Cornish, Smith, Holmberg, Dunn, & Siderius, 2019 for a brief review). These incidents are likely increasing with easier online access to personal information. While there are established models for managing and preventing risk relate to patient stalking (e.g., Carr, Goranson, & Drummond, 2014) as well as increasing continuing education offerings related to the safe and appropriate use of digital and social media in professional practice, personal information can and does show up in a CV with alarming frequency. In a world where almost anything can be found on the internet, so too does the information from our CV “live forever” online as a permanent record for colleagues, patients, and anyone with

access to a search engine. While it is common practice within forensic psychology for the CV to never include any form of personal information, this practice is not common within the rest of the field.

In addition to safety and privacy concerns, including personal information, such as hobbies, family status, and photographs on a CV risks creating unwanted biases and assumptions. For example, one study looked at which personality traits are attributed to individuals based on a personal photograph inserted into a CV (Fernandez, Stosic, & Terrier, 2017). Results reflected that characteristics such as agreeableness, extraversion, and even emotional stability are assumed from things such as attire, facial expression, and even background used.

The Fix – Scrutinize and Remove Private Information

Include necessary basic information. Your name should clearly be listed at the top. This should include your full professional name, graduate-level degree(s), and license(s). If you have used another name during the course of your education or professional career, include that name as well, particularly if that is the name used in publications or presentations listed on your CV.

Think through how your contact information is listed. Include appropriate contact information such as a current phone number, address, and email address. A caveat here – make sure that any contact information listed is information *that you wouldn't mind being publicly accessible to anyone*. Remember that if you are ever involved in any forensic matters (as a fact or expert witness, or as a result of a subpoena), you will likely need to provide your CV. That CV could subsequently end up as part of the public court record, which can be openly searched by anyone. Also, check to make sure your email address looks professional and if it is questionable (e.g., "Party1999@Yahoo.com"), consider creating a new email account. In addition, ensure the voicemail associated with your contact number contains a professional or generic voicemail message.

Eliminate specific types of private information. It is unnecessary to include your social security number, date of birth or marriage, number (and names) of children, parents' names, current salary,

home address and/or private cell phone number. While this may seem unheard of, we have *routinely* seen a combination of all of these examples on professional CVs.

Don't routinely include your picture or other personal photos. As a caveat, including a photograph may be more relevant for specific types of positions for which you might apply (e.g., in I/O Psychology), but is not typically a routine practice for most professional psychologist CVs. Just as with confidential or personal information, your picture can identify you to anyone who has access to it. On a related note, don't include a picture of your pet, boat, or your favorite alcoholic beverage.

Personal mission statements are often unnecessary. It is often unnecessary to include a summary paragraph at the beginning of your CV about your general life or work philosophy, personal history, and/or career aspirations. In general, your CV should speak for itself and convey the type of work you have done. You can include this information in your cover letter, if and as appropriate.

The Problem - The Embellished CV

As a postdoctoral fellow or early career psychologist eagerly looking for a first position, it is tempting to want to create an impressive CV. One of the authors recently had the opportunity to review a much more senior colleagues' CV. It was no less than 55 pages in length and contained hundreds of legitimate chapters, invited presentations, and peer-reviewed publications. This can be extremely daunting, particularly if your areas of strength are not in traditional research!

Unfortunately, an "impressive" CV is sometimes confused with having a lengthy CV. This can lead to the creation of an embellished CV that, while not necessarily falsified, includes irrelevant, repetitive, or otherwise enhanced information to create a different perception. For example, it may be tempting to elaborate on brief 2-hour trainings to the point that it creates the impression of expertise or certification in a specialty area. Another example is listing publication projects as "in preparation" or confounding poster presentations with peer-reviewed publications, so as to create the impression of greater academic productivity.

Deciding what to retain in a CV and what to remove becomes even more challenging when one is transitioning from a graduate student to a postdoctoral fellow or early career professional. Trimming anything from a potentially brief professional CV feels potentially deflating and a threat to maintaining an impressive (i.e., lengthy) CV. Therefore, irrelevant and outdated information (e.g., 5th grade local spelling bee championships) is sometimes maintained on a CV far past the point of utility.

The Fix – Trim Irrelevant Information

Quality is more important than length. Regarding length, there is no standard for this within our field, and this will depend on the purpose of the CV and the length of your career. However, CVs can become unwieldy and unreadable if they include all accomplishments amassed throughout a career. Look at your CV with a critical eye, and see if it truly represents the highlights of your career.

Include only relevant certifications and additional training. Make sure you include certifications that are meaningful and widely understood. For example, if you work in autism research or practice and are a BCBA (board-certified behavior analyst), this is highly relevant and should be listed. Similarly, if you have a teacher certification, this may be relevant for specific types of psychologist positions, unless it expired approximately 15 years prior and has no relevance to your current professional trajectory. Similarly, remove any irrelevant certifications or workshops attended. Getting a “certificate” because you attended a 2-hour ethics workshop, is not the same as having a specific certification that requires far more effort, qualifications, and oversight. For example, you may have completed a 3-hour additional workshop on trauma, but this is considered part of professional training and continuing education, and therefore should not be listed separately as a “qualification” once you become a professional. This same rule should be applied to additional certifications such as being a 200-hour yoga instructor. While this certification may be highly relevant in specific job settings for psychologists, it could be considered personal qualifications that do not add quality to your professional CV. Finally, don’t include completely irrelevant work experience, such as work experience as a babysitter, barista, ranch hand, etc.

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This also applies to general skills that are relevant, but virtually mandatory in our field. Avoid listing accomplishments such as proficiency in Microsoft Word, e-mail, or fast typing skills. However, if you have specific expertise or training in a wide variety of statistical software and are on a research track, this very well may be useful to highlight on your CV.

Remove irrelevant awards or accomplishments. Your postgraduate professional CV is not the place to include irrelevant awards, scholarships, accomplishments, or undergraduate organizational memberships (e.g., Psi Chi), particularly those that are from the high school or undergraduate level that are now irrelevant to your current professional trajectory. While it may have been highly important to list these accomplishments when applying to your graduate program(s), these become less relevant as you move along in your professional career. For example, you may have been on the Dean's List for four years in a row as an undergraduate student, but there are likely better ways you can use that space on your CV to reflect your graduate and professional experiences.

A caveat to that is that include if you received significant grants (e.g., through the NIMH or other organization) or national awards that directly relates to your professional practice, even if these were awarded during your undergraduate or graduate education - absolutely continue to include these! Include a brief description of each award as well, to help your reader understand exactly what the "ABC123 Award in Innovation" actually entailed and why it helps speak to your qualifications. Another caveat is that it is appropriate to list prior or continuing membership in professional organizations from undergraduate or graduate school that you have carried into your professional career.

Avoid repetition. While it might be tempting to list every presentation or lecture you have given as a way to lengthen your CV, avoid this practice. If you give the yearly diversity talk for the residents and fellows at your medical school, it is not necessary to list out each talk separately. Rather, you can identify this as a continuing activity (e.g., 2014-present) under a teaching experience header.

Be accurate about the status of presentations and publications. It is perfectly understandable why one would include publications that are under review or in process. However, this gives the impression of attempting to “pad” your CV. Stick to the facts and include publications that are currently in press or published, noting each of these as such. Remove citations for publications that are currently “under review” or “in process / preparation.” In addition, use separate headers in your CV to clearly delineate what is a peer-reviewed publication, a non-peer-reviewed publication (such as certain book chapters or popular culture op-ed), and what is a conference poster or presentation. Avoid combining these together under “peer-reviewed” as if they are equivalent, as this also gives the impression of either padding or lack of understanding of what the peer-review process entails.

The Problem - The Falsified CV

Your CV is assumed to be an accurate statement of fact about your credentials and accomplishments. However, it is not uncommon for CVs to include purposefully erroneous information that is self-promoting in nature (Henle, Dineen, & Duffy, 2017). Academics are not immune to this phenomenon. Phillips and colleagues (2019) conducted an empirical evaluation of 180 faculty applicant CVs, and found that more than half of the CVs reviewed listed at least one publication that was unverifiable or inaccurate. Other studies have reflected falsifications in clinical credentials (Shaffer, Rollo, & Holt, 1988).

Granted, some of these, as noted by Phillips, et al. (2019) may be due to miscommunications among team members about authorship and/or lack of understanding of the differences between submission, review, and publication status among trainees and less experienced faculty. Others take a more jaded view of why falsification may be occurring at higher rates (see interesting commentary on “pathological publishing” and related “impact factor mania” by Buela-Casal, 2014). However, even purposefully “blurring the lines” between preparatory and acceptance phases of publications constitutes a purposeful falsification of information in the CV. More deliberate falsification of information, including

claiming degrees from nonexistent programs, grants never received, and/or first authorship on publications belonging to others represents misconduct.

Falsification is clearly problematic for several reasons. It misleads search committees, is unfair to others who submitted truthful CVs, and undermines necessary and essential trust among colleagues in academia (Phillips et al, 2019). Further, when scientific fraud is discovered and disseminated, belief in science is jeopardized. Finally, falsification can certainly lead to dismissal and/or legal consequences.

The Fix – Truthfully Represent Yourself

Be transparent about your degrees, licensure, and board-certification status. For example, you may be in the process of completing licensure or degree, but take care not to represent yourself as farther along the process than you actually are.

Be honest about your skills. It is imperative that you not misrepresent your skills to a prospective employer or public audience. For example, if you have taken an adult assessment course in graduate school and administered one full IQ test, it is inappropriate to indicate that you are “proficient in IQ assessment.”

Don’t falsify information on your CV. Falsification can occur in many ways. One common approach includes listing degrees or trainings that were never received, or listing degrees from universities that do not actually offer those programs. In addition, falsification includes citing publications that do not exist, inserting (or misrepresenting) yourself in the author list of a publication that does exist, or listing grants you did not receive. Anyone interested in scrutinizing your CV can do a fairly cursory search for an active license number, a listed degree-granting institution, and a search for a cited publication, which will very quickly turn up falsifications and misrepresentations in a CV.

Conclusion

Developing and maintaining a readable, professional, accurate CV is critical for all psychologists across the entire career lifespan, but particularly pertinent for those entering the profession and

creating a non-student CV for perhaps the first time. While some have adhered to the rule(s) of thumb of *more is better, one size fits all, nobody will know the difference*, etc., the problematic CV styles described above can have serious consequences on your ability to make a solid and honest first impression. Sometimes psychologists are passed over for opportunities, not because of true ability, but because there are problems with the CV that make it difficult for the reader to accurately gauge experience and professionalism. There are also negative biases that can result from reviewing a CV that appears highly outdated or is written in a form that does not mirror current technology. Further, in the age of social media, a CV can become a digital footprint that is easily searchable. As a result, anyone can potentially find information on both professional background and any personal information that is mistakenly included in the CV.

We hope that these fundamental recommendations will assist in developing a CV that provides an accurate representation of your education, skills, and accomplishments as a psychologist. As you are writing or reading through your CV, ask yourself:

- “If I wouldn’t self-disclose this to a patient, should I include it here?”
- “Would a grammar teacher give me an A on this paper?”
- “Is this CV version appropriate for this specific purpose (job application, forensic setting, NIH grant, etc.)?”
- “Would this document pass a detailed fact check?”

If the answer is no to any of these, perhaps your CV is not *quite* finished.

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