

## Applying For Jobs: Covering CV Writing, Application Forms And Cover Letters

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### Introduction

Having identified a number of jobs that you are interested in, there is no shortage of advice and guidance out there around writing CVs or how to complete the perfect application form and it would be remiss not to touch on these areas. However, the real value is understanding what skills, abilities, and qualities you possess and what you can bring to a specific job application to 'sell' yourself effectively.

### Deciding To Apply

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Before spending time and effort completing an application form for a job or creating a compelling CV, the most important decision is whether to apply for the specific role or not. Taking a methodical and considered approach to this decision is critical.

When organisations develop job descriptions or role profiles they do so for a reason. This is to allow you, as a potential applicant, to identify whether you might fit their requirements and expectations and make a self-selection decision as to whether you think you should apply or not. This is to save both you and them from frankly 'wasting each other's time'.

The detail in the job advert and role profile is provided for a reason so the critical first step is to use it and make informed decisions about whether it is the right role to invest your time applying for. The best advice around this is to take each aspect of the advert and role profile (e.g. essential qualifications and experience, job requirements, relevant skills, personal qualities and competencies) and work through these in detail to identify where your profile matches, and importantly doesn't match, the criteria.

To support you in doing in evaluating the fit between the criteria and expectations for the role and your personal profile, we have developed a simple 'job criteria matching template'. This has been developed to support you in doing so in a structured and methodical way.

### CV Writing

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As already mentioned there is a wealth of information around about how to write a CV and the danger is that this can convince people that a magic formula exists. The reality is that the style and content of any CV needs to not only match the individual's specific experiences and skills but also the specifics of the role they are applying for. This means adapting and bespoking your CV for different roles and jobs in different organisations that you apply for.

Tailoring a CV requires some background work and additional thought which isn't difficult but it will help distinguish you from the other applicants. Simple steps include researching the company to understand what they are about and what they stand for (e.g. organisational values). You then need to use the job advert along with the role profile to work out exactly what the organisation is looking for and then tailor your CV to clearly outline how you match their requirements.

To help in getting started this guide aims to provide some key points to get the basics right. Understanding both the employer and applicant's perspectives on using CVs will hopefully help to make these points clear.

### **Why are you writing a CV?**

The CV represents a fairly straightforward way of introducing yourself to an organisation and letting them know what skills, qualifications, experiences and qualities you have.

The purpose of the CV from an applicant's perspective is to enable you to progress to the next stage and secure a meeting or interview with the organisation. For all intent and purposes the CV is a sales document. It is helpful to think of it as an introduction to you and what you are about and it needs to market 'you' as well as it can. It is also important to remember no matter how good your CV is, it will not get anyone a job in its own right.

From the organisation's perspective, the CV can provide a low cost and resource efficient way of gathering information about potential applicants and identifying the 'most suitable'. In this respect it is often a case of selecting the 'best few' rather than just dropping the weakest. Therefore as an applicant the focus needs to be on selling yourself as the best you can rather than merely trying to get a 'foot in the door'.

### **What happens to the CV?**

Anyone involved in recruitment process might read your CV. In some instances this might actually be the hiring manager or a HR Officer but in many cases it could be a member of administrative staff whose task is to cut the pile down from 500 to 50! In fact, it could even be electronic scanning software specially designed to scan and identify the essential criteria and key words specific to the role / job.

Your CV has to be worded and developed carefully enough to be understood and bought into by all of these different groups and the potential 'computer says no' software. Given the scale and size of the applications that employers can receive, the time invested in each is likely to be limited therefore the old adage around the 'importance of first impressions' has never been truer.

It therefore follows that the information at the top of the first page of the CV is crucial to engaging the reader and gaining their interest. Keeping the length of the CV reasonable contributes towards this. As a general guide you should be able to get the relevant information into two pages (and not just with a smaller font size!). A similar point goes for fonts and layout – the key is to make the information as accessible and easy to identify as possible. Keeping some 'white space' around big blocks of text can assist to make it more presentable and easier to understand.

This is also why it is important to ensure the CV is error free as this provides a simple and easy way for the CV to sift it out.

A good guide can be to seek the opinion of other people who may look at your CV from a different perspective to you (this includes critical friends as well as professionals working in this field). So before you send it off, consider the type of people who may read it, make a list of who you know who could provide an objective and informed view about

the content and quality ask them to review it, amend as appropriate and then send off a final version.

### **What are employers looking for in my CV?**

Evidence suggests that the three main sources of information that employers are looking for from a CV are:

- Previous work related experience
- Relevant qualifications and skills
- Being easy to read

This isn't to say this is all a CV needs to cover but gives an idea of where the majority of your focus and content should be directed.

One of the potential challenges for police officers is that they may have undertaken lots of jobs across a 30 year career within the same organisation. Considering how best to represent this within a two page CV will be key and it is likely that experience 28 years ago as a probationer is not relevant to the types of you role / jobs you are applying for now.

However, this does not mean that this information is omitted, rather it is an opportunity for you to show how you have successfully delivered the same type of tasks/objectives that the employer is looking for someone to do now.

In considering which qualifications to include, it is again important to think about their relevance to the role. For example, it would often be unnecessary to include your school exam results but if a job asks for 'GCSE English at Grade C or above' then you need to reference that you have it. As we move to a world where accreditation and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is more valued, it can also be helpful to include a section under 'Professional Qualifications and Training'.

It is also common practice to include a personal statement or profile at the top of your CV. This provides the perfect opportunity to highlight your experience, qualifications and key skills that relate to the specific role and organisation you are applying for. This will likely be the first bit the employer reads so this is where you can really sell yourself, what you stand for and are about. Even if other parts of your CV remain fairly consistent, we would recommend that this should be tailored for each specific role.

### **What are employers not interested in?**

The debate around including hobbies and interests is not one that there is a clear answer to. Some say it makes someone seem more human others will say it is a waste of space. This will be a personal decision and again may depend on the specifics of the role but if including this means losing describing some valuable experience relevant to the role then you will need to weigh up the relative merits of each. One example where it can be helpful is if your work history includes a number of solitary roles and the new job values 'team working' as a criterion, then a hobby may be a way of demonstrating where you have demonstrated this ability.

### **Common mistakes**

- *Using a standard CV rather than tailoring this to the specific requirements of the role.*
- *Including spelling or formatting errors.*
- *Not explaining your experiences in a way that the reader will understand or value (e.g. using policing language or jargon).*

- *Providing experience, achievements or qualifications which are important to you but not relevant to the specific role.*
- *Listing roles or qualifications that go too far back and are not relevant to the role.*
- *Including too much irrelevant information – especially if the CV goes over 2 sides.*
- *Providing false or exaggerated experiences that cannot be backed up in interview.*
- *Listing hobbies and interests that are irrelevant to the role.*

## Cover Letters

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Compared to your CV, the cover letter that accompanies it can often be overlooked or even left out altogether. That said, the strength and content of your cover letter will only get you so far so 'more isn't always more'. In sending your CV or an application form to a prospective employer the cover letter should be an important document and a key part of your application.

As with a CV, the amount of time that an employer spends looking at your cover letter is likely to be very limited and so getting it right is critical. A poor cover letter could see your application rejected before the recruiter even gets to consider your CV. Similarly, presenting a strong cover letter could really help your application stand out from the crowd.

### What makes a good covering letter?

Your covering letter is designed to make sure the recruiter wants to look at your CV or application and ensure it gets the attention you want it to. To do this ultimately you want to convince the people reading it that you are worth inviting to interview and ultimately the right person for the job.

The purpose of the covering letter is not just to replicate your CV and needs to be kept brief. As a guide apply a limit of one side of A4 and pick out how you meet the most critical criteria and requirements for the role and reflect these in the letter. This might be just 3 or 4 core points.

Given the pressure on keeping content down and emphasising your strengths, try to be as concise as possible. For example, open with a brief introduction as to why you are contacting them (e.g. in response to a job advert) and close with a proposal of what you would like to happen next (e.g. meet to discuss the job further).

As explained your cover letter is part of your attempt to gain the recruiters attention and interest in you. This doesn't mean filling it with witty one-liners but does suggest that using language that communicates your personality and enthusiasm for the role should help.

### What else should you consider?

As with CVs, covering letters need to be bespoke and tailored to the job you are applying for and specifically the organisation it is with. Researching the organisation should already have been part of your decision to apply for the job in the first place but if not then you need to do it now before writing your cover letter. This might include understanding what strategic messages the organisation are giving out, what changes the company has been through, where they are placed in the market, etc.

This information can help you tailor your cover letter and CV to the specific organisation and role but also allow you to use the language and behaviours that are specific to the

organisation. Once armed with this information then the key is to try to link this with the language and rationale presented in your cover letter for why you are right for the role.

### ***Common mistakes***

The above guidance should help you develop a straightforward and engaging cover letter that will keep your CV in the 'yes' pile. Some of the most simple and common mistakes that applicants make is in how they present their cover letter.

For starters it should be:

- *Typed using an easy to read and professional font*
- *Set out as a professional letter and addressed to the relevant person*
- *Generally no more than one side of A4*
- *Include your contact details and be signed by you*
- *Use correct spelling, grammar and punctuation.*

## **Application Form Writing**

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Many of the same concepts and guidance outlined above in relation to CV writing can also be applied to completing application forms. The most obvious difference is that the organisation will be providing a more direct steer as to what information they want from you when producing an application form and so in some ways it should be easier to make sure your application is customised to meet these.

One of the most important similarities is the way in which the application forms are likely to be sifted within the employing organisation, or via an outsourced agency/recruiter, and so the key is to avoid giving the person doing this job any opportunity or reason to put your application in the 'no thank you' pile.

### **What are employers looking for in an application form?**

As with CVs, the employer is looking for the applicant to provide evidence of their ability to meet the specific requirements of the role as defined by the role profile/job description. This will often be aided by specific questions or response options within the application form that are targeted towards these key requirements.

Just as with CVs, it is vital that the content of your application form responses is tailored to the specific organisation and the demands of the role you are applying for.

### **What can I expect from an application form?**

Application forms can take many different forms and come in all shapes and sizes. From on-line to pen and paper versions, from covering basic question areas to more in-depth competency based examples. In many cases the application form may just be a structured way of providing the type of information covered on your CV therefore all the same points covered above apply. The fact that the employer is providing a steer on what information they require makes it even more unforgiveable to miss something out. Where application forms can become more challenging is when a personal statement or description of relevant experience is required. This provides the same opportunity to sell yourself and demonstrate how you meet the specific requirements of the role. The best advice here is to use the role profile as a checklist and make sure that you have covered all the relevant criteria in your response.

Often application forms will include a word count to limit the length of responses and so you may need to take some time to get in evidence against all of the criteria whilst still keeping under this. Depending on the employer's approach, going over a word count may have no impact or it may just mean your subsequent words are not assessed. However, worst case scenario is that this just provides a reason for the person doing the sifting to determine that you cannot follow basic instructions and sift your form straight out. So make sure you stick within the limit.

Some application forms may go into more detail and require you to provide evidence of when you have demonstrated a certain technical skill or behavioural competency. The latter are commonly used within policing. This approach is sometimes adopted as it provides a more effective opportunity to differentiate between different application forms and potentially avoid introducing further assessment sifting stages (e.g. telephone interview, psychometric tests, etc).

Much of the same guidance applies to this type of question in that the key is to ensure that your example meets the criteria set for the role. This includes providing an example that:

1. *Answers the specific question posed.*
2. *Is at an appropriate level for the role.*
3. *Covers the breadth of the criteria / competency area in question.*

In pulling together the specific examples that you might use within your application form, it is a good idea to take some time to review the specific criteria or competency areas that are covered and think through various examples of work experiences you have that would meet these. Not only will this tell you whether you might be suited in the first place for the role but also provide a basis for planning which to choose to best meet the criteria. This has a further benefit in that it can also act as useful preparation for any subsequent interview you might be invited to as part of the selection process.

In selecting your examples try to avoid just automatically choosing the biggest or 'sexiest' work that you have been involved in. This is often the temptation as a means of showing off your best work but such scenarios are often where you may have had least involvement or influence. The key point is to select the scenario that is most relevant to the question and best demonstrates your skills and abilities.

In addition, don't waste time (in this case 'words') with too much scene setting. Whilst it is important that the reader understands the scale of the challenge and the importance of what you achieved/delivered, the majority of your response should focus on what you did personally and how you did this. Basically, make all your words count.

A specific consideration that may be relevant to people who have worked in certain specialist roles (e.g. policing, military) is the suitability of using experiences that may be controversial or contain sensitive information. Individuals who have worked in these fields will already be familiar with restrictions around what can and can't be shared outside of the working context and it makes sense to apply the same approach to 'sanitising' application information.

### ***Common mistakes***

- *Not tailoring your application responses to reflect the specific demands of the role.*
- *Including spelling or formatting errors.*
- *Using policing language or jargon that other employers won't understand.*

- *Providing information that isn't requested or is not relevant to the role – this can distract the reviewer from the positive evidence of why you meet the criteria.*
- *Exceeding any word limits provided.*
- *Not answering the specific questions posed (e.g. providing a generic experience rather than one tailored to a specific question).*
- *As with CVs – providing false or exaggerated experiences that cannot be backed up in interview.*

#### Review of key points

- **Focus on the specific requirements of the role you are applying for.**
- **Remember to sell yourself.**
- **Ensure it is error free.**
- **Focus on making it easy to read.**
- **Keep CVs to a manageable length (2 sides as a guide).**
- **Answer the specific questions presented in application forms.**

#### Next Steps

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After finding the right job and getting through the application process, our final guide provides an insight and preparation advice to support you in performing at your best during an interview process. Access this guide [here](#).