

This set of tips comes from the personal experiences of Associates both as individuals applying for jobs and as people who have a great deal of experience in recruiting others.

## Notes on CVs/applications

### The point of the CV is to get you the interview.

- On a first skim a reviewer will spend perhaps 30 seconds on your CV . if you are lucky. This is your chance to sell yourself, so **work on it**. Make sure it is immaculately presented, to convey professionalism, presentational skills and IT proficiency. It needs to look good, be easy to read, and show you have marketable skills. Don't be surprised to find it's hard to write your CV (it's still hard at 40!). It needs and repays the time spent. The effort you put into your CV or application is obvious to the reviewer. More tips on this below.
- Develop a basic CV, but **tailor it to the job** as necessary. Why should *this* person, *this* company, want you to work with them? What about you might be particularly relevant to *this* position? Highlight particular areas of your experience, interests and qualifications which might be relevant to this field, organisation and/or role.
- Make sure you **keep referring to what they are actually asking for**, both in terms of the job and the application process.
- **A three-five line summary up top** is worth doing in terms of what you think your main selling points are and what you are looking for. Put your strongest messages first . they may not read any further.
- **Education:** most recent at the top. You may want to include specific courses at degree level if they are relevant; e.g. a statistics option for a social scientist provides good evidence of numeracy. If you are coming out of a graduate degree, you may want to include your thesis topic, but later on it will depend more on the specific job you are applying for. PhDs: only put publications if they are highly relevant to the job. Otherwise, just put %details available on request+
- **Experience:** include any evidence of work outside academia. But think what you learned from it, and mention any good hooks for discussion e.g. responsibilities, creative approaches, any changes you made, interaction with the public/customers. Not all valuable experience is paid work . you may have been helping a charity, teaching someone something etc. Don't assume that the reader will necessarily know what every job or occupation you list actually involves: you may need to spell it out a bit.
- **Interests**, hobbies etc: maybe, but make sure they are constructive and show you in a good light. Reading, watching TV and drinking with friends don't help. Be careful about things about which other people may not share your views: religious/political party membership, sexuality, attending sci-fi conventions. Don't put them down if they are just membership, but you might want to include them if they provide evidence of other skills e.g. leading a church youth group, or organizing a convention. But be aware that you might be labelling yourself with something that is nothing to do with work. Mention of travel, experience of living/working abroad can be useful, particularly if it shows initiative, organisation, independence or simply evidence of broader horizons.
- **Mention other relevant skills/qualifications:** eg clean driving licence, first aid, languages, specific computer skills.

- **References:** include a non-university reference, preferably contacts from work experience, previous employers rather than school teachers, family friends, godparents, and don't forget to check that it is OK with them.
- Despite all the above, **less is more!** If someone with 20 years of experience can fit the essentials into two pages, so can you. One page is better. Leave some white space, and don't justify the right hand side. Highlight what you want read. Make sure your name stands out. Put in contact details during holidays as well if timing makes this likely. Typos will get you binned. Proofread and give to a friend/parent to comment.
- Use only one font (two are OK if one is used for headings). Keep it **simple and businesslike:** no fake handwriting. Use a font such as Times Roman or Arial that everybody has, otherwise they may scramble when e-mailing. Minimum size should be 10 points (like this): you want your CV to be easy to read without a magnifying glass. Consistency in font, format and layout throughout is very important; otherwise it just looks a mess.
- If you need to send **hard copy, use plain white paper**, but maybe not the very cheapest photocopying paper. Definitely no gimmicks - such as coloured paper/fancy fonts etc. It is extremely off-putting and suggests the content must be poor.
- A **photograph** can be helpful to make you stick in the reviewer's mind- but is not usually essential. If you do - make it a pleasant passport type one - not a glamour shot.
- **Write action-oriented sentences** (I managed to rather than I was responsible for...). Give one or two details (for example, how many people you supervised), this makes you more credible and memorable. Sell yourself proactively, but don't lie.
- **Covering letters:** can be a good idea. These should not be more than one side - and should explain about motivation/aspirations etc. but should not be too gushing (avoid the exclamatory style!). Sometimes if there is an obvious gap/poor grades etc. in the CV the letter can be used to explain "mitigating circumstances". It can work, but the candidate must be prepared to discuss this at interview.
- **Don't put anything on your CV that you are not prepared to talk about at interview.** Never seek to excuse anything e.g. the quality of your degree unless there is some major reason.

## Notes on Interviews

**The point of the interview is for them to decide whether to offer you a job, and to help you decide if you want it.**

- **Research** the company, the industry and - if you know - the person who's interviewing you. Research can impress the interviewer, and help you decide if you want to join them - this is a two way process!
- **Think about some answers for obvious questions** - why do you want this job? tell me about yourself what have you got to offer us? You may be asked what you consider to be your weaknesses - If possible, think of a weakness that could have a positive slant (keep a straight face while describing your perfectionism, now is not the time to confess to homicidal tendencies). Most employers use competence-based interviews where they are matching your answers to a list of what they are looking for in terms of skills, abilities and behaviour. They are looking for evidence in your answers against this list. The website and/or job description often tell you these selection criteria (we are looking for.....). Prepare with these items in mind.
- **Prepare intelligent and genuine questions** about the job - you will almost always be asked for these and, if not, engineer an opportunity to ask them.
- Running through a couple of **practice interviews** with a friend, relative etc can be helpful.
- **Basic topics:** the job, you, and how the two will fit together. The only information the interviewer has about you is your CV. So expect to be asked about what you have written. The interviewer is trying to find out what you are good at and interested in, why you might be a match for this particular organisation and role, and what your motivation is like. Also to suss out any potential issues/problems.
- **Be on time** - unbelievably easy to get this wrong. Check the location and allow plenty of travel time, including contingencies for delays etc. It is stressful running to get there and gives a bad impression if you are late. Better an hour early than five minutes late.
- Presentation at an interview is very important. **Dress well** - it shows that you can be professional if needed and are taking this seriously. Be clean and neat, and don't let anything about you detract. You may well need to buy an interview outfit. You should dress like your interviewers - if any of this presents a problem, you're probably looking at the wrong job. Carry a decent bag - buy or borrow one. Take a copy of your CV for you to read on the way and for them if they've lost it (this has been known to happen), paper and pen, company address/map.
- Your manner is as important as your appearance. Be prepared to **give a firm handshake, maintain eye contact, and smile**. Sit up straight. Don't fidget. Speak up but do not interrupt. Nod to show you are paying attention. It's OK to take a drink if you are offered one (non-alcoholic) - you look more confident and can buy time sipping it if you are asked a difficult question. Often the way in which the question is answered is more important than the actual answer. You want the job - so it's OK to appear enthusiastic, but don't gush. Don't say just Yes/no/in answer to questions.
- **Breathe!** This will help you keep calm; and if you don't, you're dead, and they'll have to give the job to someone else.
- **Be specific** in any responses to questions and give specific examples. Reply using **It's**, i.e. **It did the following** - **As a result of the action I took** - This shows that YOU had an impact on the situation.

- **Be able to expand on every bullet point on your CV.** Have a paragraph in your brain on each point saying what you did and what the benefits were to you and, more importantly, to the other parties involved. Make it clear that you had an impact on the situation, i.e. the outcome would not have been as good if you had not been involved.
- **Get feedback.** If you are rejected from a job you really want, steel yourself to ring up your interviewer and (politely) ask why. Handle it in a mature way, and you will feel better, and may get some useful insights that you can put to use in the future.
- **Don't be fazed by rejection .** it's almost inevitable at some point . and probably means it wouldn't have been a good fit.
- **When you do get a job offer, the power has moved to you!** Now is the time to really ask yourself if and why you want the job, go back to your contact with whatever questions you still want answered and check the contract. It's also a good idea to make sure you understand the timescale in which you need to say yes or no - you may be waiting to hear from other potential employers.
- **Keep your confidence up, keep applying yourself, and you'll come through.**

## Interview Questions and Tips on Answers

### Q. Tell me about yourself. Take me through your CV.

Tip. Have a 1-2 minute speech prepared to answer this question.

Run through in chronological order but flesh out main points so it does not sound like a shopping list!

Don't cover just academic achievements. Also include work experience, travel, voluntary work.

Explain why you made your choices, e.g. choice of A level subjects, degree subject, gap year travel destination, and what skills and experience you gained from each part of your life. Finish by saying something like, 'I am now looking to start a career in [industry] because I believe that my background and skills will enable me to make an effective contribution as well as develop an interesting and challenging career.'

### Q. What are your strengths?

A. I would bring out 3: [TIP: specify 3 only, don't ramble. Relate them to the competencies needed for the job]

- Strength 1. I am very organised so I can meet tight deadlines and manage multiple workstreams effectively.
- Strength 2
- Strength 3

I can give you specific examples of those strengths if you would like me to.

TIP. Have a practical example of a situation where you demonstrated each strength.

### Q. What is your biggest weakness?

A. Be ready for this question and turn it into a positive. E.g. I am not a person who seeks confrontation and perhaps there are situations where I do not take a very aggressive stance.

However, this means that I have good relations with others and I can usually get my point across in a softer and more effective manner because my action does not result in others taking entrenched positions. That said I can be tough when needs be.

### Q. What is your biggest achievement?

TIP. Don't focus too much on academic achievement.

### Q. Define success.

TIP. Don't focus too much on academic success. Give your definition of success and follow it with a practical, specific example of something you have done which illustrates your definition of success.

A. Success for me is carrying through a project from the planning stage to final implementation in a way that creates something of long term benefit. For example, I set up the [\*\*\*] society successfully. This had not existed before I decided to set it up. I raised the funding, got together a small team to do the marketing and launched the society. It is now an established part of College life.

### Q. How successful are you?

A. I believe that I have been successful. I have achieved the goals I set out to achieve. But I recognise that success is a moving concept and I want to continue to achieve goals in the future.

### Q. Tell me about a time you have failed.

TIP. This has to be real, has to show what you have learned from the experience and what you would do differently next time.

**Q. What is your long term career ambition/aspiration?**

A. I don't think that anyone can say clearly what they will be doing in 10 years, but I want to pursue a career in [industry / sector] with a view to [running a significant division of a large company in the sector / becoming a specialist on .../ running my own business / setting up a unit which researches...]

**Q. Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?**

A. By then I would like to have built significant knowledge of the [sector / industry] and to have developed a network of contacts. I would like to be [running my own team / lab / projects / have responsibility for...]

**Q. Describe yourself to someone who has never met you.**

TIP. Give about 5 adjectives, no more! Don't comment on the physical! I am organised / analytical / goal driven / a clear thinker / creative / diplomatic / good at building trust.+

**Q. How do others, your director of studies, your peers describe you?**

TIP. Give about 5 adjectives, no more!

**Q. What motivates you?**

**Q. What value would you bring to your job if you were taken on?**

A. My experience has been varied and I have developed a lot of skills, but I would single out in particular the following which I think are very valuable and transferable. [TIP: Describe 3 only and relate each to the requirements of the job.] Through my involvement with the May Ball Committee I have learnt how to publicise and market an event, using many channels including new media. If I were to work in your company, I would be able to contribute to developing your new media strategy and develop access to younger customers.

**Q. Why do you think you could handle this job?**

A. I believe I have the qualities that are required to do this job well. [TIP: list 3 and relate them to the job]. I can work well under pressure so I believe I can handle the tight deadlines that are a feature of the job. I am appreciative of other cultures, so I believe I will be able to build good relations with international customers. I am able to assimilate a lot of information quickly and draw out the key themes concisely so I believe I will be effective in preparing policy briefs. I have been faced with a number of challenges in the past, some of them unexpected and unplanned, and in every case I have risen to the challenge and not been overwhelmed. I think this holds me in good stead to handle this job well.

**Q. How much are you looking to earn?**

A. I am expecting an appropriate level of remuneration, consistent with internal realities and the external market.

**QUESTIONS TO ASK THE EMPLOYER / RECRUITER**

- ~ What are the qualities you most value in new graduates starting work in your company?
- ~ Where do you see this organisation moving over the next few years?
- ~ Please tell me a little more about the kinds of development and career options you see for someone like me coming into your organisation.
- ~ Do you see any particular business challenges or opportunities at the moment for which my skills and knowledge may be especially relevant?

## **Further sources of information and support**

You can contact individual Newnham Associates who may work in fields which interest you or have studied the same subjects as you through the Associates website.

[www.newnhamassociates.org.uk/](http://www.newnhamassociates.org.uk/)

Further, extensive resources on how to plan your career and get work are available on the University Careers Service at [www.careers.cam.ac.uk/](http://www.careers.cam.ac.uk/) and the national graduate careers website

[www.prospects.ac.uk/](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/)

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