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TIPS ON WRITING A CURRICULUM VITAE

Perhaps no other document is as important to those seeking an academic position as the curriculum vitae. Do it by the book and a candidate could be in the running for a coveted faculty position. Do it wrong and the application may land in the trash bin with a thud.

Trouble is, little agreement exists among experts about what are the principal ingredients of an effective C.V. Ask seven chemistry professors who routinely review C.V.'s as part of their jobs, as we did, and you can get seven different answers.

While there is general agreement that an academic application should include a strong cover letter, a C.V., a research proposal and a teaching philosophy, there is little consensus over which of these elements is the most important. Some say the cover letter is all-important. Others point to the research proposal and the teaching statement. Still others are adamant that it is the C.V. that can make or break a job candidacy.

In their authoritative book, *The Curriculum Vitae Handbook*, (Rudi Publishing, 1998), authors Rebecca Anthony and Gerald Roe echo this sentiment by dismissing the notion of one correct and proper format for every C.V. as a "persistent myth." The authors go on to say that a C.V. is a "lifelong companion" that remains in a constant state of being unfinished. "You will never write a final version," they advise.

But around some key points, the group of professors reached a consensus about what makes an effective C.V. First, style is much less important than content. Manuals such as Anthony & Roe's and *The Academic Job Search Handbook* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992) by Mary Morris Heiberger and Julia

Miller Vick, are replete with examples of standard C.V.'s and cover letters for a variety of academic positions.

According to Nancy E. Levinger, associate professor of chemistry at Colorado State University, the primary concern should be ensuring that the C.V. includes all of the information and background that reviewers will want at their fingertips. She has reviewed thousands of C.V.'s in her position and believes that the standard C.V. begins with a simple, straight-forward format: contact information followed by educational background and a list of awards.

"I want to know where you got your degree and what's special about you," she says. Next should follow an employment history and professional accomplishments. Candidates are free to include their personal hobbies, age, marital status and their children's names and ages. But Levinger considers these irrelevant and suggests they be left out.

Secondly, experts note that C.V.'s are routinely longer than resumes. Length should not be a concern. C.V.'s should include an exhaustive list of publications and presentations, research grants, a description of courses taught, and lists of letters of reference and of students mentored and where they are currently located.

"My impression is that a C.V. is kind of an encyclopedic inventory of a person's work," notes Brian Coppola, professor of chemistry at the University of Michigan. "Coupled with a philosophy of instruction and a set of research proposals, I think it should build a complete picture."

In larger research universities, the teaching philosophy and research plan are standard parts of the application. Professors reviewing C.V.'s for the department give careful consideration to the accompanying teaching philosophy and a detailed description of the candidate's research goals. This latter document would include whether their research proposal is feasible, whether the department has the necessary equipment on hand and how it will make a difference to science, says one professor at an Ivy League university.

"My comments on that are, 'For crying out loud, you should research the equipment available at the institution where you are applying,'" says Ray O'Donnell, coordinator of graduate studies in the chemistry department at State University of N.Y. at Oswego and a veteran ACS Career Consultant.

Resources available at a large university are considerably different from those available at a small liberal arts college or a community college, O'Donnell adds. "If the only research of interest to the applicant requires the use of a particle

accelerator, then plan on teaching at a university that has one,'' he notes.

The third point on which the academics agree is the importance of knowing your audience. Make it sound that you know about the college or university and what their needs are. For example, do some research so that you don't stumble into addressing the female head of a chemistry department as, "Dear Mr. Chairman."

C.V.'s are routinely discarded for other reasons. The most common pitfall in writing C.V.'s is sloppy grammar or mangling an English word, several professors say. "That is the biggest boo-boo. It's a knockout factor — it will get thrown out,'' says Dr. O'Donnell. The best defense against an unpleasant surprise is asking several people to read the C.V. before it is submitted for a position, experts say.

Another common mistake, notes Dr. O'Donnell, is a candidate using a narrative under the section on experience and accomplishments. "Your experience and accomplishments can be formatted with bullets, much in the same way you would for a well-prepared industrial resume,'' he says.

It should also be recognized that there is less room for error when being considered for a tenure-track appointment, Dr. O'Donnell adds. It is a very painful experience for all involved when a faculty member fails to be granted tenure. Industrial appointments generally allow for more flexibility in creating a better "fit'' for an employee, he says.

But the most common mistake candidates make in their C.V.'s is not what they include but what they leave out, says Dr. Levinger. "The most important thing about a C.V. is that it be complete and include all the information that someone would need to evaluate you,'' she says.

In her view, the C.V. is an integral part of an application that could generate an interview. Completeness is important because "you want people to look at it and say, 'Wow, this person does a lot.'"

Candidates should present a comprehensive picture of their academic activities since they were an undergraduate. This could include volunteering for American Chemical Society local section activities to judging science fairs to formal presentations and seminars, says Nina M. Roscher, professor and chair of The American University's chemistry department.

She advises candidates to know their audience and be explicit in their applications about what types of instruments they would need to conduct their research. "Some departments have millions to spend on instruments. The rest of us would need to know what kind of instrument the candidate needs before we can determine if there is any hope of a match," Dr. Roscher says.

She also encourages candidates seeking research positions to include three to four lines on their C.V.'s about the instruments they can trouble shoot.

And foreign-born students should take extra steps to ensure that their academic background can be clearly understood by American academics, one expert says. Their C.V. should demonstrate how well the candidate knows the American university system and provide evidence that they can give a presentation in English, Dr. Levinger says.

Despite the importance of making a C.V. as complete as possible, some experts question whether it matters as much as the cover letter. Others say search committees don't care how a C.V. looks stylistically unless there are glaring errors. "They don't really care,'' says one professor at an Ivy League university. The true test is that the "C.V. must not discourage us from looking at the research plan.''

According to Dr. Levinger, the C.V. is vital to a search committee but it is not the most important part of the application. "A good C.V. won't get you a job. But submitting an incomplete one could cost you that job,'' she concludes. "The most important part of the application is the research proposal and the teaching statement.''

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Additional information

Related information on academic employment is available from the ACS in two other Department of Career Services publications: *How to Write a Teaching Philosophy* and *How to Prepare a Teaching Portfolio* (due April 2001). Copies of these publications are available free of charge from the ACS Department of Career Services, (800) 227-5558.

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