



# How to Write a CV That Works

GUIDEBOOK



written by  
**Paul Withers**

# Introduction: Why This Guide Exists

You don't need a CV written by a copywriter.

You need one that explains who you are, what you've done, and why you can help solve a company's problem.

That's it.

I've worked in HR recruitment for over 20 years. I've seen thousands of CVs, some excellent, some confusing, some trying too hard, and many that just didn't explain what the person actually did.

This guide is here to help you avoid that.

It's not about "standing out" with fancy designs or buzzwords.

It's about telling your story clearly and confidently. Think of your CV as your career in print.

Does it make sense?

Have you shown how you added value?

Can someone reading it understand where you've been and where you're going?

This guide walks you through each step.

You don't need special tools or big words.

You just need to explain yourself well.

Let's get started.

## **Chapter 1: Why Your CV Matters (And What It's Really For)**

Let's get one thing straight: your CV is not a work of art.

It's a work document.

Its job?

To show a recruiter or hiring manager that you can help them solve a problem.

They're not reading your CV to admire your formatting or guess what you might be good at.

They're reading it because they've got a role to fill—and they want to know if you can do it.

So what should your CV actually do?

## **1.1 Tell your story clearly**

- Where have you worked?
- What did you do there?
- How did your career progress?
- Does it all make sense?

If you've made a change, taken a break, or moved industries—that's fine.

Just explain it. Briefly. Clearly. No need to waffle.

## **1.2 Show how you can help**

Every job exists to solve a problem.

Your CV should show that you've solved similar problems before.

Think about:

- What results did you deliver?
- What problems did you fix?
- What did you improve, change, or build?
- Can you back this up with numbers or outcomes?

If you don't tell them, they won't know.

## **1.3 Keep it simple**

No need for:

- Fancy fonts
- Colourful designs
- Boxes, logos, or headshots

They're not hiring your Canva skills.

They want to know what you've done and whether you're a fit.

## **1.4 It's not about you (at first)**

That might sound harsh, but it's true.

When someone reads your CV, they're thinking:

“Can this person help us?”

Once they see that you can, then they'll want to know more.

### **Key message:**

Your CV is not about impressing.

It's about explaining—clearly, honestly, and with purpose.

## **Chapter 2: Planning Your CV – Before You Write a Word**

You don't need to start with a blank page.

Before you write anything, take time to get clear on a few things.

This will save you time and help your CV read better.

### **2.1 What job are you going for?**

Be honest, are you applying for anything and everything?

Or do you know what you want?

Even if you're open to different roles, you still need a clear message.

If your CV tries to cover too much, it will say very little.

#### **Ask yourself:**

- What kind of role do I want next?
- What experience do I have that matches this?
- What do employers hiring for this role usually look for?

If you're not sure, look at 5–10 job adverts. Highlight what comes up again and again.

## **2.2 Take stock of your experience**

Write out the basics:

- Job titles
- Company names
- Start and end dates
- Team size, and who you reported to
- Key responsibilities
- Projects and achievements
- Any facts or results you can include

This doesn't need to be polished—just get it down.

You'll shape it later.

## **2.3 Explain your transitions**

If you've moved sideways, taken a break, or changed industries, no problem.

But explain it clearly.

**Examples:**

- “Left role due to company restructure”
- “Took a six-month break for caring responsibilities”
- “Relocated from Berlin to Manchester in 2023”

Don't leave people guessing. Gaps are only a red flag when they're unclear.

## **2.4 Early career or senior?**

Tailor your approach.

### **If you're early in your career:**

- Include part-time roles, internships, side projects
- Focus on transferable skills
- Add education and training early in the CV

### **If you're more experienced:**

- Focus on impact, leadership, and results
- Cut early jobs if they're no longer relevant
- Make sure your CV reflects your seniority

## **2.5 Collect the facts**

Your CV is stronger when it includes evidence.

Start gathering:

- Metrics (cost savings, headcounts, budgets)
- Outcomes (process improvements, project wins)
- Real-life examples of your work

You'll use these to show what you achieved, not just what you were responsible for.

## **Key message:**

Get your information straight before you start writing.

That way, your CV will tell the right story, with no gaps or guesswork.

## **Chapter 3: Writing Your CV – Step by Step**

You've done the prep.

Now let's write it.

Your CV should be clean, simple, and easy to follow. Reverse chronological order (most recent job first) is best.

### **3.1 Start with your contact details**

At the top, include:

- Full name
- Email address
- Phone number
- City and country (no full address needed)
- LinkedIn profile (if it's up to date)

No date of birth, no photo, no personal statements like "married with two children."

## 3.2 Write a strong profile paragraph

This is your opening pitch. 4–5 lines max.

It should:

- Say what you do
- Highlight your most relevant experience
- Point to your key strengths or achievements
- Reflect the type of role you're going for

Avoid fluffy phrases like “results-oriented team player.”

Say what you actually are.

### **Example:**

“Senior HR Business Partner with 12+ years’ experience in global tech and professional services.

Proven track record of delivering organisational change, building leadership capability, and leading on employee relations.

Trusted adviser to C-suite leaders across the UK and DACH region.”

### **3.3 Work history – make it easy to read**

For each job:

- Job Title
- Company Name
- Dates (month + year)
- Short company description (1–2 lines if not widely known)
- Team structure (who you reported to, team size, location, etc.)
- What you did (core responsibilities)
- What you achieved (use examples, facts, or outcomes)

Tip: Start bullet points with action verbs like led, managed, delivered, improved, launched and built.

### **3.4 Education and qualifications**

Keep it simple:

- Degree(s), institution, year
- Professional qualifications
- Relevant short courses or certifications

If you're early career, move this higher up.

If you're experienced, keep it short and at the end.

## **3.5 Skills, systems, and languages**

Add a short section listing:

- HRIS or ATS systems
- Software (Excel, PowerPoint, HR tech tools)
- Languages spoken
- Any sector-specific tools or platforms

Only list skills you actually use or understand.

## **3.6 Optional extras**

You can add these if relevant:

- Publications or speaking engagements
- Volunteer roles
- Board positions
- Projects or consulting work

Make sure they add value and are linked to your target role.

### **Key message:**

Write like you speak.

Focus on what you did and why it mattered.

Keep it clear, concise, and honest.

## **Chapter 4: How to Show Achievements with Impact**

A recruiter or hiring manager skims your CV to answer one question:

Can this person help solve my problem?

Your job is to make that answer obvious by showing what you've achieved, not just what you were responsible for.

### **4.1 Don't just list tasks**

Too many CVs say things like:

- “Responsible for onboarding”
- “Managed HR projects”
- “Involved in change initiatives”
- 

These tell us what you were meant to do.

They don't show whether you were any good at it.

### **4.2 Use real examples**

Show what actually happened.

## **Weak:**

“Led employee engagement programme.”

## **Stronger:**

“Introduced new engagement survey and action plan that led to a 15% increase in participation in year one.”

That’s the same task, but with proof it worked.

## **4.3 Add data where you can**

Data gets attention.

## **Think about:**

- % increases or decreases
- Budget sizes
- Time saved
- Headcount supported
- Locations or regions covered
- Project timelines
- Turnover, attrition, retention

You don’t need numbers in every bullet, but add them where it makes sense.

## **4.4 Use action verbs**

Start each bullet with a strong verb:

- Led
- Built
- Delivered
- Created
- Solved
- Simplified
- Improved
- Negotiated
- Advised

It helps your CV feel active, not passive.

## **4.5 Make sure your best bits stand out**

Put your biggest wins near the top of each job section.  
Don't bury the good stuff at the end.

### **Key message:**

Achievements make your CV come alive.

They tell your story and show the value you bring.

# **Chapter 5: Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them**

Even experienced professionals trip up on the basics. These small things can cost you interviews.

Let's fix them.

## **5.1 Overcomplicating the layout**

### **Avoid:**

- Fancy fonts
- Columns that confuse applicant tracking systems (ATS)
- Logos, headshots, charts, or graphics
- Headers in capital letters only (they're harder to read)

### **Stick to:**

- One clear column
- Black text, white background
- Bold for headings
- Consistent font and spacing
- PDF format when submitting

## **5.2 Too long, too short—or just waffle**

Use this as a rough guide:

- 1–2 pages if you're early career
- 2–3 pages for mid to senior level
- 3+ pages only if you've had a long, international, or project-heavy career

Don't waste space with long paragraphs.

Use bullet points to break up text.

## **5.3 Tailoring for the role**

One CV does not fit all jobs.

It needs tweaking based on:

- What the job ad is asking for
- The language used
- The main challenges of the role

You don't need a total rewrite.

Just shift the focus so it's clear why you're a match.

## **5.4 Typos, bad grammar, or messy formatting**

Spellcheck won't catch everything.

Common issues:

- Inconsistent spacing
- Sentences that don't flow
- Different date formats
- Random bolding or alignment errors

Ask someone else to proofread it.

Or read it out loud to yourself—it helps spot mistakes.

## **5.5 Letting gaps or transitions go unexplained**

If you've had:

- Career breaks
- Job hopping
- Freelance roles
- Redundancy or relocations

Say so. Briefly, and confidently.

You don't need to justify your life choices.

You just need to keep your story clear.

## **Key message:**

Make your CV easy to read and easy to trust.

Don't let sloppy details undermine a strong career.

## **Chapter 6: Final Checks and Getting Feedback**

You've crafted your CV.

Now it's time to make sure it's in perfect shape before sending it out.

### **6.1 Step back and review**

Before you hit send, take a break.

Give yourself some time away from your CV—hours or even a day—then come back to it with fresh eyes.

- Does it tell your story clearly?
- Does it feel cohesive and concise?
- Is everything easy to read and well-structured?

If it's not clear to you, it won't be clear to the recruiter.

## **6.2 Get feedback from someone else**

You're too close to your CV to see it objectively.

Ask a trusted friend, mentor, or colleague to look it over.

They can catch things you might've missed, like:

- Missing details
- Unclear wording
- Errors in dates or names

## **6.3 Check for ATS compatibility**

Many companies use applicant tracking systems (ATS) to screen CVs before a human even sees them.

To make sure your CV isn't overlooked:

- Stick to standard fonts (e.g., Arial, Times New Roman)
- Avoid headers and footers
- Use standard section titles (e.g., "Work Experience," "Education")
- Save it as a PDF unless the job ad asks for another format

## 6.4 Double-check contact information

Sounds basic, but it's easy to overlook.

Make sure your contact info is up-to-date and clearly visible at the top of your CV.

- Email address
- Phone number
- LinkedIn profile (optional but recommended)

## 6.5 Read it one last time

Finally, read through your CV one last time.

- Is it easy to follow?
- Are the most important points standing out?
- Is the language direct and confident?

### **Key message:**

Your CV is your professional story.

Make sure it's telling the right one—clearly and confidently.

After that, it's time to send it out and wait for the calls to start coming in.

## Chapter 7: Using Your CV Effectively

Creating a strong CV is only half the battle. You now need to use it strategically to land the right role.

### 7.1 Where to Use It (Job Boards, LinkedIn, Direct Applications)

Your CV needs to be accessible across multiple platforms.

**Each has its own rules:**

- **Job boards:** Make sure your CV is optimised for the specific platform.
  - Upload it as a PDF (unless the site asks for a different format).
  - Include relevant keywords for ATS systems to scan.
- **LinkedIn:**
  - Keep your LinkedIn profile aligned with your CV.
  - Update it regularly, and add a brief, compelling summary at the top.
- **Direct applications:**
  - Send it directly to hiring managers or recruiters when you see roles that match your skills.
  - Personalise your email or message to make an impact.

## 7.2 How to Tailor It for Different Roles

One CV doesn't fit all jobs.

You need to adjust it to match the role you're applying for:

- Read the job description carefully: Focus on the keywords used (e.g., specific skills, job titles).
- Highlight relevant experience: Shift the emphasis of your CV based on what the company values.
- Use language that matches the job ad: If they mention "team leadership" and "strategic vision," ensure those terms are visible in your CV if they're part of your experience.

- 

Tailoring doesn't mean rewriting everything, just adjust the focus to show why you're the right fit.

## 7.3 Cover Letters: Do You Need One? (Yes, Sometimes—Here's How to Keep It Simple)

A cover letter can make or break your application.

But you don't need to overcomplicate it:

- **When you need one:**

- If the job ad specifically asks for it.
- If you're making a direct approach to a hiring manager.
- If you're changing industries or have a unique story to explain.

- **How to keep it simple:**

- Start with a brief introduction: Who are you, and why are you writing?
- Mention the role you're applying for and why you're a good fit.
- Highlight 2-3 key achievements or skills that make you stand out.
- Close with a polite and confident sentence inviting the recruiter to discuss further.

Don't make it long-winded.

Keep it to the point and relevant.

## **7.4 Using Your CV in Networking**

Networking is not just about handing out business cards.

Use your CV to back up your professional story:

### **At events or online:**

- Be ready to share your CV when you meet someone who can help you.
- Keep it simple, but offer a digital copy that's easy to forward.
- Use your CV to back up your conversation—show how your skills are a match for what they need.

### **In casual conversations:**

- Be prepared to explain your career progression.
- Use your CV as a tool to clearly outline your key skills and achievements.

## 7.5 Following Up Without Being Pushy

Following up is important, but timing is key.

Here's how to do it right:

- Wait 5-7 days after submitting your CV or having an interview before following up.
- Keep it polite: Send a short email asking about the status of your application.

### **Example:**

"I just wanted to check in and see if there's any update regarding the [Job Title] position. I'm still very interested in the opportunity and would appreciate any feedback."

Be professional, not pushy: Don't bombard recruiters with multiple emails or phone calls. If they haven't replied after a second follow-up, leave it at that.

### **Key message:**

Your CV isn't just a document for applications—it's a powerful tool for networking, job searching, and personal branding.

Use it smartly across multiple platforms, and make sure it's always tailored and ready to go.

## **Chapter 8: Keep It Updated and Ready**

Creating your CV isn't a one-time task.

It's a living document that should be kept updated and fine-tuned so it's always ready for your next opportunity.

### **8.1 Keep a Master Version and Tweak as Needed**

Your master CV is like your career database. It holds every detail you've ever achieved, no matter how big or small.

#### **Include everything:**

- All roles, skills, and achievements.
- Full descriptions of your responsibilities and accomplishments.

When applying for jobs, tweak this master version to suit the role.

- Adjust the focus depending on the job you're applying for.
- Pull out key achievements relevant to the position.

You never want to start from scratch.

Having a strong base version saves you time and ensures nothing gets overlooked.

## **8.2 Add Achievements as You Go**

Every time you reach a new milestone, update your CV.

Don't wait until you're actively job hunting

- New skills? Add them.
- Completed a major project? Highlight it.
- Got a promotion or raised your team's performance? Include that too.

Your CV should evolve as you do. When you keep it current, you avoid the stress of cramming years of progress into a single weekend when you need a new CV in a hurry.

## **8.3 Review Every Few Months—even If You're Not Looking**

Even if you're happy in your job, take the time to review your CV every few months.

It keeps your career progression fresh in your mind and helps you:

- Spot any gaps or outdated information
- Reflect on any new skills or responsibilities you've gained
- Ensure your achievements are up-to-date

Regular reviews prevent the sudden rush of trying to remember what you've done when an opportunity arises unexpectedly.

## **8.4 Confidence Check: Does This Reflect Your Best Version?**

When you review your CV, ask yourself:

- Does this document accurately reflect my strengths?
- Am I proud of every role listed?
- Does it highlight my most impactful achievements?

Your CV should make you feel confident about your career.

If you're not happy with how it reads, make the changes necessary to ensure it truly reflects your best self.

### **Key message:**

Your CV isn't static. Keep it fresh, current, and ready to showcase your evolving career.

By maintaining a master version and regularly updating it, you'll always be prepared for your next step whenever that may come.

## Section 9: Using AI to Refine Your CV

By now, you've worked through each part of your CV and created something that reflects your skills, experience, and goals.

Now it's time to use AI, like ChatGPT to help improve what you've written.

This section isn't about writing your CV from scratch using AI.

It's about treating ChatGPT as an editor and support tool to sharpen and polish what you've already done.

The aim is to keep your tone and voice, but improve clarity, structure, and wording.

When used well, ChatGPT can help spot areas to tighten up, suggest stronger phrases, and ensure consistency across your document.

But remember, this is your CV. It needs to sound like you.

## Tips for Using ChatGPT to Refine Your CV

- Paste one section at a time
- Focus on one part, like your profile summary or a job description, rather than uploading the whole CV. It's easier to manage and edit in smaller chunks.

### Ask for plain English suggestions

- Try: "Can you simplify this paragraph without losing the meaning?"

### Check tone and clarity

- Ask: "Does this sound clear and professional?" or "Is this too formal?"

### Look for repetition

Prompt: "Am I repeating the same words or ideas in this section?"

### Ask for stronger verbs

Use: "Can you suggest stronger action verbs for this bullet point?"

### Keep your voice

Always review AI suggestions and adjust anything that doesn't sound natural to you.

Don't over-edit

It's easy to lose your personality. Use AI to polish—not rewrite—your CV.

## **Helpful Prompts**

Here are a few example prompts to use with ChatGPT when reviewing your CV:

- “Here's my professional summary. Can you make it more concise while keeping the same message?”
- “Can you help rewrite this bullet point to sound more impactful?”
- “Does this section make sense to someone who doesn't know my industry?”
- “What keywords could I add to match job ads in HR?”
- “Can you check for grammar and spelling errors in this paragraph?”
- “Can you suggest an alternative way to say ‘responsible for’?”

## Final Word from Paul

Congratulations!

If you've followed these steps, you're well on your way to creating a CV that's not just good, but great.

Remember, your CV is your personal story, and when you tell it in a clear, confident, and straightforward way, it's bound to grab the attention of hiring managers and recruiters.

You don't need fancy formatting or gimmicks—just a clean, well-structured document that shows off your skills and achievements.

By keeping things simple, staying honest, and tailoring your CV to each role, you're setting yourself up for success.

Most importantly, be proud of your story. You've got valuable experience, skills, and insights to offer, and your CV should reflect that.

Take the time to craft it properly, keep it updated, and use it strategically. I'm confident that if you stick to these steps, you'll not only have a CV that opens doors, but one that you're genuinely proud of.

So, go ahead, create that awesome CV, and get ready to land your next great opportunity.

You've got this!