

# 8

## Preparing a *Curriculum Vitae* and Job Application

### About this chapter

At the beginning of your final year, you will probably start to think about getting a job or possibly applying for a further course. This is the time, if you have not already done so, to think about preparing a *curriculum vitae* (CV), which is a short summary of your education, qualifications and employment history. A CV can be kept electronically and regularly updated as appropriate. Some of you will undertake a period of industrial placement as part of your programme. If so, you will need to prepare your CV much earlier. This chapter gives specific guidance when preparing a job application, including the CV. It will also give guidance on preparation for, and conduct at, interview. The aim of this chapter is to give you help and guidance that will enhance your chances of getting the job, or winning a place on the course.

### Introduction

Before you get round to applying for a job or course, you will obviously need to send a letter asking for further details of the post, and where necessary an application form. This letter needs to be both clear and brief. If you are applying for a job, you should identify clearly the title of the particular job together with any job reference, and where you saw the advertisement. For a course or research degree, you should ask for further details of the range of appropriate

programmes available in the department or school to which you are applying. If, of course, you have already identified a specific programme, you should spell it out in your letter. Do not forget to include your current address and to give your name in typescript below your signature, in case your signature is indecipherable to the recipient. Do not go into details of your qualifications or employment track record at this stage. These will form part of the covering letter for your formal application once you have received the further details and forms. Very often in response to your enquiry you will be sent an information pack. In addition to the details of the job or course this may well include an application form, together with instructions for completion, as well as more general background about the company or department/school to which you have applied. Always read all the information sent to you. It will take time, but reading it will ensure that you will know what you need to give as part of your application, and help identify any queries that you have.

When you are applying for a job, whether placement or permanent, or for a further course in a university or college, you will be expected to complete an application form, supported in many cases by a CV, as well as some kind of covering note. In any case, you ought to have a formal CV tucked away on your computer. You will also be expected to provide the names of referees to support your application, and the choice of referees can be very important.

If you are applying for a placement during your course as part of the requirements for your degree/diploma, you will generally find that your tutor or supervisor will be able to give you advice, and there may also be departmental/school guidelines. When you are reaching the end of your course, you will be looking around for jobs, or for further courses at graduate level. It is advisable to get in touch with your university's or college's Careers Service when you reach your final year or even earlier. Staff there will be able to give you independent and informal guidance on your options. They will help with applications for jobs, either through 'milk-round' interviews, or with guidance on applying to individual companies. They will also be able to give you advice on the choice of graduate courses, and where to apply, if you want to continue your studies at a more advanced level. When you are applying for a graduate course, it is always sensible to talk to your tutor or supervisor. He or she will have had lots of experience in helping students to apply, will, most likely, be one of your referees, and will consequently need a copy of your CV for background information.

You may very well discover when you see the Careers Service or receive details in connection with a job application that it uses its own equivalent of technical language. You will find some of the terms and a brief description below.

## ***The curriculum vitae***

As already stated, a CV is a document that gives an account of your previous employment (where appropriate), your education history and qualifications obtained, as well as details of other experience and skills. A CV is also commonly referred to in the United States and elsewhere as a resumé.

Remember, when you are applying for a job where there is no formal application form, you will also need to include some details in your CV or covering letter that may not normally be included: for example, information about your gender or marital status and, of course, a statement of why you are applying for the job. There will inevitably be differences in the sort of CV required for a company employer and that for a university teaching post. Universities will generally require information about publications, research grants and details of teaching and research activity. Bear in mind that a CV is a dynamic document that evolves as your career develops. The sort of CV you have when you are applying for your first job or placement will be very different from the one you will have when you apply for a post of professor of biology.

### ***Before you start writing your first CV***

You will need to have to hand a lot of key information, such as qualifications and dates obtained, as well as details and dates of jobs you have held. For your educational qualifications, it is wise to have copies of the original certificates. You will always find if relying on memory that you cannot recall all the actual details of your qualifications, and may miss some, unless you have a photographic memory and instant recall. Under no circumstances should you claim to have any qualifications that you do not. The company offering the job or the admissions tutor for the course will check up such details, or will compare what you say with what your referees say. If you have falsified details, like claiming that you have a first-class honours degree when you do not, your application is likely to be disqualified. If the falsification has been discovered late in the process, a job or course offer will be withdrawn.

### ***The introduction to your CV***

The introduction to your CV should always contain personal details, including full name, home address, telephone number and email address. Always give all the names that appear on your birth certificate or passport. This will avoid problems later, for example, in connection with National Insurance details or information about your permission to stay either as a student or worker status.

Avoid using university/college address information and telephone numbers, such as those for a hall of residence, and a university/college email address. These change much more frequently than home contact details. You will often find that employers or universities will include in their application forms opportunities to list your current address for correspondence and telephone number, and you can give your university/college address here and your mobile number if need be. Your covering letter should also normally include your correspondence address. If you know that the application process is likely to be prolonged, as it often is for admission to courses, give your home address as well in your covering letter, unless, of course, you are an overseas student likely to stay at your current address for some time. It is not normal nowadays to give gender, marital status, date of birth or nationality, because of the dangers of discrimination on the grounds of, say, age, gender or race. If there is no application form, and this information is requested, adapt your CV as necessary. In a short CV, after the personal details, you can include a brief statement of the reasons you think that you should be considered for the job.

### ***Previous employment and education***

The order in which you list your previous employment and education can be varied.

- In university/college applications the emphasis will be on educational qualifications, and they will come first. A detailed list of qualifications is usually required. Put dates and institutions attended before qualifications obtained. In both cases you would normally put them in chronological order, starting with the earliest.
- For job applications in industry, the emphasis is usually on previous employment history, and that will come first. Educational qualifications are needed but employers in industry would not normally expect to see details of GCSEs, unless they wanted a specific qualification, such as a grade in mathematics. Just give numbers and dates obtained and a summary of grades. With secondary-level qualifications, if you are applying before you have your degree, or are applying for a placement, it is sensible to give full details of awarding board, dates and grades.
- For previous employment, it is normal to give details of your most recent post and current salary first, followed by a summary of other posts and dates in reverse chronological order. You may wish to give more details about your current post, and aspects of your earlier employment, particularly where they are relevant to the job application. If you

are applying for your first job or placement, then give some details of summer jobs or voluntary work where this is relevant.

- Where appropriate you should give details of professional training or qualifications, such as IT awards or language skills, for example, fluency in French.
- In addition, give details of voluntary/community work where it is relevant to your current application.

### ***Publications and research grants***

Universities and colleges will always ask for details of publications and research grants that you have been awarded when you are applying for an academic or research job. It is not expected that you would have publications if applying for a research job straight after graduation. You should be realistic in making applications: a high-level research post is unlikely to be given to a new graduate. However, a research assistant post, particularly if related to your undergraduate project, is within your grasp.

Lists of publications, if you have them, for example, as a result of a post-graduate research degree, such as a PhD or an MSc, should be incorporated into your full CV, but be prepared to adapt your CV as appropriate. Universities will often give guidance on the order in which publications should be listed, with priority given to research monographs first, followed by journal papers, down to newspaper articles and the like. Within each group they should be listed in chronological order. Often they will also expect grants from research councils to be listed before industrial grants. Again, they should be listed in chronological order within each group.

By contrast, when you are applying for a post in industry, unless it is specifically research-oriented, the employer will not generally want to know about publications. Nevertheless, if your publications or grants are relevant to your job application, refer to them in the statement that you include to emphasize your suitability for the job. You would normally include this after personal details in a short CV or in the covering letter.

### ***Final part***

It is sensible to give some information about your hobbies or any community work that you are involved in. This may be particularly important where you have won awards, such as a sports medal, or perhaps a commendation for your volunteering work. If you are, for example, captain of a sports team, this will

indicate to your potential employer that you have leadership qualities, or, in the case of a course application, that your interests extend well beyond your current course.

Normally you will be expected to include a list of referees at the end of your CV. The number required for a particular application will vary, but always make sure that they are current, and that you have sought their permission. For your first job include your tutor or supervisor and your head of department/school, or someone from outside with recognized standing who can give you a good (and accurate) reference.

### ***General points***

You should always bear in mind the following when preparing your CV:

- lay it out neatly and carefully, generally in two columns, with titles (for example, **full names**) to the left in bold, and details to the right in normal font;
- there are companies that provide model CVs. It is very important if you use one of these that you do not cut and paste indiscriminately, for example, a model statement about background that you think is particularly suitable for your application. Some universities and employers have started to use plagiarism software to identify where an applicant has copied whole passages from models;
- update your CV regularly;
- always have a full CV as your master copy and keep this up to date. You can then adapt it as the need arises. Some employers, for example, will ask for a brief CV. In this case aim for one or two pages. Others may ask for a full CV and possibly a complete list of publications and grants;
- be prepared to trim and tailor your master CV to produce an effective alternative version that matches the requirements of the job or course for which you are applying. Be very careful when adapting a CV that the adaptation refers to the current job, and not one you have previously applied for (this does happen!).

### **Covering letters**

A covering letter is intended to let the person who receives it know what you are applying for. It will also allow you to set out your reasons for applying for

the job or course, and to emphasize key points that you think will support your application. This will give your potential employer or admissions officer an impression of your suitability and of your ability to identify and set out simply what you see as the key features of the job or course. In addition, a well-written letter can make the difference between your being shortlisted, and your application just being left among the bundle of applications that are not really considered seriously.

### ***Before you start***

Read the advertisement and further particulars for the job or the course handbook very carefully, as well as any other information that you have been given in the application pack. In some ways this is like reading the question and initial background material for an essay, or proposal for a research project, except that the information that you have been given in the pack may well be considerably longer, and contain much more detail. The pack will give you the pointers for tailoring your covering letter, as well as any personal statement you will need to include in your CV.

When you are applying for a job, you will obviously need to think hard about your reasons for applying for it. Whatever the economic climate, it pays to set out clearly why you are applying for the job and your career aspirations. It is also important to focus on what you consider to be your most appropriate experience and qualifications for the job, and to bring them out very clearly in the covering letter. Try to get some up-to-date information about the company or institution to which you are applying. Read any literature that they send you. If shortlisted for interview you will be expected to have read it! Try to include something relevant in your covering letter to show that you are aware of, and interested in, the strategic aims of the company. It is also important to know if a company is under pressure, for example, where it has cut back on graduate trainee schemes. You need to look at this sort of thing, if only to consider the implications for your career in the company, and whether you would have a real future there.

If you are interested in pursuing another university course, it is clearly sensible to know about the general perception of the quality of the course and of the department/school that runs it, particularly its teaching standards and research quality. Where these standards have been rated highly, perhaps by external audit, the department/school will not hesitate to publish details in its course handbook or on its website. This can be particularly relevant when you are applying for a research degree. If you are applying for a taught course, you should also look in detail at the course content. It will not help your career if the course you undertake is only marginally related to what you see as the main direction of your future career. Equally, the relevance of teaching standards is

important: you do not want to find yourself on a course where the level of support is significantly below what you would expect.

### ***How to compose the covering letter***

Your letter should be concise and focused. Remember that it will be supported by a CV, and possibly by an application form. You should set out precisely what job or course you are applying for. Your aim should be to spell out clearly why you are applying for it and why you think you are a suitable candidate. Always make sure that what you write is relevant to your application. Take care that your letter is well laid out and follows a structured sequence. It is clearly sensible to follow the order of the key points identified in the advert or prospectus. Do not be too informal in the language that you use, even if you know the person to whom you are writing, as your application is likely to be considered by others on an interview or selection panel. Always run a spell-checker and look carefully at your grammar. As has been implied earlier, a badly written letter will put off an employer or admissions officer; this is particularly so where the letter is full of spelling and grammatical errors. If you do have a disability, like dyslexia, or eyesight problems, get some support and, where appropriate, indicate the nature of your disability.

### **Layout**

When you are applying for a job, always head your letter with the title of the job and the job reference number, where one is given. Most job application letters will be addressed to the human resources section of the company or institution, and they need to be able to identify the post, and who deals with it initially. You should then start your letter with a formal sentence along the lines of: 'I am applying for the post of..., advertised recently in ...'.

Give a code number for the job if there is one. You should then say why you are applying for the job. If you are applying for a job or placement, you will need to say what course you are currently studying and where and, if appropriate, your actual or expected degree result. You should then summarize what you see as your experience and strengths that are relevant to the post, following the order of the key points in the advertisement and person/job specification. You should end with a sentence or paragraph on how you see your role in the job as fitting into the company's strategic aims and how you feel that you can contribute to them.

Where applying for a course or research degree, you should spell out in the header the course or research programme you are applying for. Normally your letter will be addressed to an admissions officer in the department/school, or sometimes in the case of a research degree to a named member of staff. Some



universities and colleges handle applications for graduate programmes centrally or at a faculty level, so it is important in this case to identify the course and department/school that offers it. As with a job application, you should then open your letter formally along the lines of: 'I wish to apply for a place on ...', followed by the name of the course and department/school, if necessary and, where appropriate, the year that you wish to start the programme. If you are applying for more than one programme, for example, where there are masters options and diploma options, you should name both, but state your preference for one. However, by the time you formally apply for a place, you should have identified the topic of the course you want to take. With a research degree application you would normally give the name of the degree, and the research topic that you wish to follow. Sometimes research studentships are targeted at specific research; in other cases they may be open departmental or faculty awards that do not specify a topic. In all cases you should identify the reasons for your interest in the course or research degree and emphasize why you think you are suitable, for example, by outlining particular strengths, such as a very successful undergraduate project. You should give details of the course that you are currently following and the name of the institution, and give either your actual or your expected degree results. If you are applying for a research degree, you should spell out in your final paragraph how you believe you can contribute to the research undertaken in the department or school.

Whether applying for a job or a course, it is always helpful if you set out your reasons for applying, details of your experience and why you believe you are a suitable candidate as bullet points. This can bring added clarity and focus to your application.

After you have drafted your letter, re-read it to check for errors and omissions and to ensure that it actually says what you want to say. If you have to submit a handwritten application (it does occasionally happen!), make sure that it is neat and legible. You should use a fountain pen or a good quality roller ball pen, rather than a biro.

In all cases you should give your current address; you should also give your name in typescript at the end of the letter under your signature. Do not forget to sign and date the letter.

## **Application forms**

Very often, particularly with universities or colleges, you will be expected to fill a formal application form. This is to ensure that the information given by all candidates follows a consistent pattern. Where there is an application form, always complete it: the notes of guidance often say that if you do not, your

application will not be considered. Always complete all sections of the form fully. Do not enter 'see CV' as the only entry for a section.

Application forms for a job will generally be different from those for courses, though there will be some similarities. Both will include detailed instructions on how the form is to be completed, and you must read these very carefully. The detailed instructions and the form itself will emphasize that all sections have to be completed. They will also state that a CV and other information provided will only be considered alongside the application form.

Application forms should, where possible, be typed or handwritten in black ink. Many application forms are now available as downloads from the website, which makes typing easier.

They will also include sections that are to be completed by the office responsible for handling them, for example, application number and date received. Do not write anything in these sections.

### ***Job application forms***

The form will normally start with a section that asks you to identify the post applied for and job reference number and where you saw the job advertised.

Forms will normally follow the sequence of the usual format for CVs; that is, an introduction section requiring personal details, followed by sections seeking details of education and employment history, together with a request for the names of referees. In the personal details section, you may be asked for details of your nationality. If you are not from the European Economic Area (EEA) or Switzerland, the appointment will be made subject to a successful application to work in the UK. The employer will be able to give you guidance on the procedures involved.

All forms will include a section that asks for additional or supplementary information. You should use this section to summarize the main and relevant points of your CV and to set out how your experience meets the criteria outlined in the job/person specification (see below). You should arrange these points in the same order as those of the job/person specification, always bearing in mind that the criteria for each are normally listed separately in the accompanying information pack. Where necessary, you should continue on a separate sheet. You should always summarize the relevant key points of your CV and indicate 'for additional information/details see CV', where appropriate. Do not give a detailed re-run of your CV in this section, unless the further particulars specifically say that you should not enclose a separate CV. Always make sure that what you include in this section is consistent with what you say in your CV and in your covering letter.

The forms will normally conclude with a section asking for the names of referees. Ensure that the names that you give are consistent with those listed in

your CV, and that you have asked their permission to act in relation to this specific job. Normally the employer will send copies of the job particulars to each referee. However, always make sure that each of your referees has an up-to-date version of your CV.

The associated job/person specification will set out the job description and grade and will detail the formal responsibilities of the job and to whom the appointee is responsible. It will go on to describe the principal duties of the post. The person specification will list the skills, experience and knowledge required: for example, experience of supervising others, communication skills and, for example, a working knowledge of Microsoft Office. For both you should summarize your relevant experience, following the order of the points listed, in the additional information section.

You should follow very carefully the guidance notes that accompany the form. These will contain a definition of some of the terms used, like job specification. They will remind you to read the job particulars and person specification very carefully. They will tell you how to fill in the form, and generally warn you that a CV alone will not be accepted as an application. They will also give you information about other matters, such as your obligation to disclose information under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act of 1974, and any Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks that the employer may be obliged to carry out, as well as details of any occupational health requirements. As with 'small print' elsewhere, it will point out that the employer will not accept responsibility for forms arriving late or being lost in the post or over the Internet. They will also inform you about the employer's policy on equality and diversity and the like. Sometimes you will also be required to fill out an equal opportunities monitoring form.

### ***Graduate course application forms***

As with a job application form, you will be asked for personal details; this will include information about fee status and any details about permission to study in the UK. The form will ask for information about courses for which you are applying in order of preference. It will also have sections on qualifications and work experience. As with the job application form there will be a section that asks for supplementary information, which you should use to provide information about the relevance of your educational or work experience. Where you are applying for a research degree, you will be asked to give an outline of your proposed research. Again, if need be, you should continue on additional sheets. In contrast with a job application, you will not normally be asked to provide a CV. Make sure that what you say is consistent with your covering letter.

There will be supporting notes that you should read very carefully. These will include a mix of detailed information about how to complete the form and 'small print' information. The key things here are likely to be information about

fee payment as well as a statement that when you start your course, you are entering into a legal contact with the institution. If you are not from the European Economic Area (EEA) or Switzerland, the offer may be made subject to a successful application to study in the UK. The university that offers the course will be able to give you guidance on the procedures involved.

## How to write a good personal statement

The personal statement, whether in the covering letter or in your CV, allows you to sell yourself. Both employers and admissions tutors will not only be trying to identify those who meet their requirements, but will also be looking for that ‘special’ factor. It is therefore sensible to show how you meet their requirements. More important is to set out what you see as the ‘special’ factors.

Where you are applying for a job, say clearly why you want the job and how you see this as developing and building on your career. You should back this up with a statement that includes:

- why you have chosen your particular career;
- what your future plans are and how this job will help develop your career;
- how your previous experience fits in with the job, and, particularly, how relevant it is;
- what you see as your strengths, such as the ability to manage people, or in your first job, the ability to get on well with people;
- what your personal skills are, and the things that demonstrate your skills, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award;
- how you see your role in the job as fitting into the company’s strategic aims and the way in which you believe you can contribute to them. If you are applying for an academic or research post, how and what you can contribute to the department’s/school’s or research group’s aims.

For your course application you should provide supporting information similar to that in a job application, in particular:

- why you are interested in the subject;
- what specifically interests you in the course, or why you wish to undertake a particular project for a research degree;
- how you see the graduate or professional qualification helping your career development;

- how any previous work experience fits in;
- why you think you will be a successful student, for example, by demonstrating your ability to manage time to meet project deadlines;
- what other activities demonstrate your wider abilities, such as involvement in music or drama, particularly where you have been a lead performer, or in sport where you have been a team captain;
- if you are applying for a research degree, how you believe you can contribute to the research in the department or school and how you will get on well with the rest of the research team.

## Interviews

This section will describe the run up to the interview and the interview process itself. It will give some tips about how to prepare for the interview, the sort of questions you might be asked, and how you might answer them.

### *Sorting out arrangements for the interview*

If you have been shortlisted for consideration for a job or place on a course, you will get a letter from the prospective employer or from the admissions tutor inviting you to come for interview. The letter will give details of the date and time of the interview, and either the venue or the office that you should report to when you arrive. The first and most obvious thing to do is to check that you are actually available on that day and at the time set for the interview. If you do have a clear day, or couple of days to take account of travel times, let the person who sent the letter know immediately. If you have classes, tutorials or laboratory classes on the day of the interview or on the day that you need to travel, let everyone concerned know, and check that they are happy to let you miss your class. If there is a genuine and insurmountable problem with the date and time, immediately contact the person who wrote the letter: you may be able to reschedule your interview. If you do have a very good reason, such as a family funeral or a pre-booked holiday, and the employer or admissions tutor says that the interview cannot be rescheduled, think hard about it. Would you want to be employed by or follow a course run by an employer or department that is so insensitive and inflexible?

Never ask for rescheduling for flippant reasons. If it is a job interview a good employer will be willing to reschedule if you do have some long-standing commitment, particularly if they see you as a good prospect. Admissions tutors generally are a lot more flexible; they do not necessarily have to schedule, say, five interviews for one day. You could always explore the possibility of a

telephone interview, or even an online interview, if, for example, you are at a university abroad. Universities and colleges in particular often have the facilities to do this. If you are applying for a place on a course in a university overseas, this is the sort of approach you need to take. Obviously such an interview will be a little more difficult, but it is worth a try. If you have applied for a job abroad, then the employer will want to talk to you about possible arrangements for travel.

When you have sorted out a date, write formally to accept the offer of interview. Always respond directly to the person named in the letter, and not just to some anonymous department or office. The individual may be a departmental secretary, or a member of the human resources staff of the employer. They will have responsibility for organizing the arrangements for the interviews.

Make a note of the date and time, and check out how you will travel to the venue. If it is a long distance, and the interview is scheduled for the early part of the day, you are likely to have to travel on the previous day and stay overnight. Equally, it may be a late interview, and you may have to stay overnight afterwards. If so, ask the person who sent you the letter if they are able to arrange accommodation, or recommend a suitable hotel. Sometimes they will have arrangements with a local hotel or hall of residence. They will, of course, generally be helpful, especially if the place of the interview is a large city. However, it is sensible to recognize that if you are travelling from Aberdeen to Plymouth, or Aberystwyth to Canterbury, you may have to set aside two or three days for travel and the interview.

Check if you are going to receive travel and accommodation expenses; this may influence how you will want to get to the interview. Public transport is normally the best option, unless, of course, there is no station close by, and the coach schedule is slow and infrequent. If you travel by public transport, you are likely to be far more relaxed than if, say, you have driven 200 miles on the motorway system followed by ten miles driving to get to the centre of a city. Check out the best train and public transport options, allowing plenty of time to get from the station to the venue. Book trains as far in advance as possible: this will save money. However, do not book an off-peak train journey just because it is cheaper, if it means that you have only twenty minutes to get from the station to your venue. If you have to book your own accommodation, go for a relatively inexpensive chain hotel and keep any receipts. It may also be worth checking if any friends living locally could put you up. It may be easier for you to drive a couple of hundred miles on the previous day, and stay with friends, with just a short journey on the day of the interview.

### ***Preparing for the interview***

The first thing to think about is what you will do if you are successful, and are offered the job or a place on the course immediately after the interview. Do

you have other interviews arranged? Is the job or course your top choice? Work out a strategy to handle this. Employers will allow some time for you to consider accepting the offer, but not too long. Admissions tutors are likely to be more flexible: they know that students will have more than one application for a place.

### **What is the format of the interview?**

Find out about the format of the interview. It may be a relatively informal interview with an admissions tutor or potential research supervisor. Equally it may be a very formal interview by a committee consisting of a number of staff; this is much more likely to be the case with a job interview. Read the information you have been given about the interview. Check out if you are expected to give a presentation, which is quite common these days. Find out what the topic and length of the presentation will be, and what format it will take. It may be on the basis of a paper presentation with questions or an oral presentation with a flip-chart. It is much more likely to take the form of an oral presentation using a program like PowerPoint to provide accompanying slides. If so, check out both the software and the hardware to be used. Save your presentation on disk or pen-drive, and if necessary be prepared to take your own laptop, as you may be more confident with it. Also, take a hard copy of your presentation just in case the computer crashes (it is not unknown!). Do not leave the preparation of your presentation to the last minute, and rehearse it several times in advance so that you are fluent in what you want to say, and confident in speaking while handling a computer. Draw on the experience you have gained from presentations on your current course. If you are using a program like PowerPoint, do not repeat word for word what is on the slide show; amplify the points made in your own words (see Chapter 7).

For technician jobs you may be required to take a test to demonstrate your competence in data handling or calculation. For many other jobs you may be required to undergo psychometric testing. Psychometric tests fall into two categories. Aptitude tests look at skills like verbal and numerical reasoning or other specific skills. Personality tests look at personality traits, such as tendencies to be obsessive, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of candidates.

### **The run up to the interview**

A few days before the interview consider having a haircut or hairdo at your local barbers or hairdressers. Unkempt, straggly or scraggy hair can be a turn-off for some interviewers.

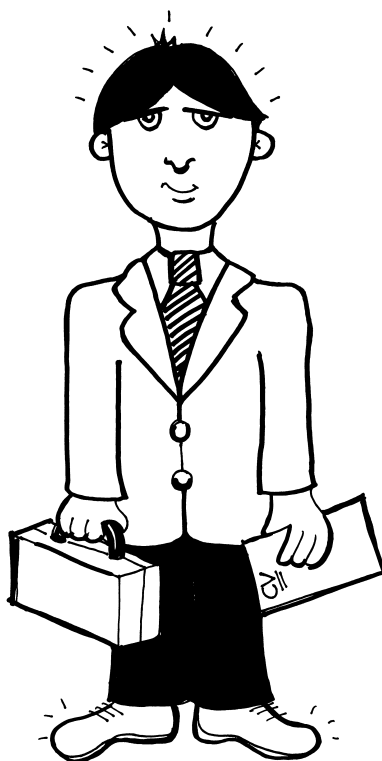
On the day/evening before your interview re-read the job and person specification or course prospectus to re-familiarize yourself with the details and to identify any questions that you want to ask. Also print out and re-read a couple of times the application that you sent in, and highlight the bits that you feel are



important, like your strengths and experience. Think about the sort of questions that you may be asked and how you would reply to them.

If you are travelling on the day before, ensure that you have packed sufficient clothes and your washing kit, and that you have hard copies of your application documents and the applications pack that was sent to you, as well as any receipts in connection with travel expenses. Also ensure that your laptop, if you are taking it, is well charged, and that you have cables that will enable you to connect with other hardware.

On the day of the interview make sure that you are clean and well turned out. Wear clothes that are smart. If you have to travel on the day of the interview, try to refresh yourself before your interview. Even on the most modern high-speed trains you can get sweaty and grubby on a long journey. Avoid the temptation to drink alcohol or have a large meal before your interview. If you are travelling by public transport, make sure that you have plenty of time to get from the station to the venue. If there are transport problems that delay you, ring through to the contact number on your interview letter to let people know. You will inevitably feel nervous. Try practising your favourite relaxation techniques (or learn some, if you do not have any).





When you arrive at the employer's building or the university, ask at the general reception desk for directions to the venue, and the location of other places such as the canteen and toilets. Then go to the office that sent out the invitation letter and ask for the person who sent the letter. He or she will normally be responsible for organizing the interview, and will be able to brief you about the interview procedures. He or she will ask you about your claim for expenses; these must be backed by receipts or ticket copies. You will then either be taken to the interview room or a waiting room close by, where there may be other candidates waiting to be interviewed. Sometimes before a job interview candidates will be invited to a general session or lunch, largely so that the prospective employer can see how each individual interacts with other people. Be relaxed and polite, and do not show off!

### ***The Interview***

1. The interview should be a two-way process: it should allow the interviewers to follow up and explore information that you have given to help them make up their minds; it should also allow you to showcase your strengths. In addition, it will give you the opportunity to follow up further information about the job or the course.
2. The interview should be structured. In selecting its shortlist for a job or a place on a course the committee or group of individuals interviewing the candidates should always have a list of essential and desirable qualities. There will also be a chairperson or 'chair' appointed to run the interview process. Where the committee is interviewing more than one candidate, a good chair will have agreed with his or her colleagues what the main questions should be, and there is an expectation that each candidate will be asked broadly the same questions. Unfortunately there still remain some chairs or interviewers who like to play things by ear, and this can be unfair to candidates. All interviews have to be guided by policies for equality and diversity, and should be conducted on the basis of ability without any kind of discrimination on age, gender or the like.
3. As far as interviews for places on courses are concerned, particularly where there are many candidates to be seen over a period of time, the admissions tutor may be the sole interviewer. The same will hold with interviews for research degrees, where the project supervisor may conduct the interviews alone.
4. Listen to the questions. If you do not understand a question, ask for it to be repeated or clarified. There are still some interviewers who will

ask trick questions, though this is now less common. There are also interviewers who adopt an aggressive style: this may very well be the case where you are applying for a job in commerce or finance, and where the interviewer is trying to make a big impression with his or her colleagues. Do not be fazed, and answer politely. Nonetheless, if you do feel that the questioning is too aggressive, you may want to raise it with the chair, preferably during the course of the interview or afterwards in private, especially if you believe that you are being unfairly treated. Sometimes an interviewer will ask an inappropriate question, like what if you become pregnant, or have problems if children are ill. A good chair, or if it is a job interview, the representative from human resources, will stop such questioning in its tracks, as it constitutes discrimination. If they do not, tell the chair firmly that you do not feel that the line of questioning is appropriate, and make a note of your protest to take it up later if necessary.

5. Always make sure that your answers to questions are consistent with the details you included in your written application, and if necessary explain any differences, for example, where there have been developments between the application and the interview. You may find it helpful to have a hard copy of your application to hand to check the details. There is always the possibility that the questioner has either misunderstood what you have written, or confused you with another candidate.
6. If you are giving a presentation, stick to the time allotted, and do not overrun. Do not simply repeat the wording of your slide show; amplify and explain the bullet points. Be crisp and assured.
7. Ask any question that you have prepared in advance or, as appropriate, things that have arisen during the course of the interview when the opportunity arises. The chair should offer you the opportunity to make points about things that you feel have been overlooked. Identify one or two key issues, and set them out concisely and clearly. This often takes place towards the end of the interview. Do not go overboard and re-run the points that you made in your covering letter or CV.
8. At the end of the meeting thank everyone. You should also leave contact details, especially your mobile telephone number. The chair or secretary may want to contact you as soon as all the interviews have taken place and the committee has reached its decision.

### ***Typical questions and how you might answer them***

This book has provided many pointers to help you develop skills in communication. These skills will help you to perform successfully in an interview for a first job, and especially for a place on an advanced course or research degree. What you have learned during your course should also have allowed you to identify the skills and experience that you will need in employment or for a further advanced qualification, in particular:

- working to deadlines;
- communicating with others effectively;
- working with others in a team;
- researching and selecting relevant information;
- problem solving

Your final-year project is an excellent way to showcase many key skills to a potential employer. Make sure you know your project in some detail, and be prepared to draw on it to highlight examples of the skills you have acquired. Take a copy with you to show the interview panel. Even if they only see the title and cover, this can leave a visual impression. You could also take an A4-sized print of a poster you have completed.

During the interview you are likely to be asked to give examples of your skills and experience, such as:

- **Working independently.** Start your answer along the following lines: ‘When working on my project I had to ...’. You should give examples of how you conducted your COSHH evaluation, thus showing knowledge of health and safety, as well as independent information retrieval. You may have worked individually in the laboratory for long hours. You will have planned your timetable to complete the project, including key stages that had to be completed within the project. You could also cite any occasions in paid employment outside your course when you have had to work independently.
- **Working in a team.** Take as an example how you prepared a poster with your colleagues and spell out how you had to meet regularly, email each other or plan the tasks for each individual in order to complete the job by the deadline for presentations.

- **Effective communication with others.** A good example is how you prepared and presented many oral seminars and your familiarity with PowerPoint presentations. Equally, you could give examples of other experiences in your degree in which you were required to communicate orally or in a written form.
- **Knowledge of scientific information.** Start your answer with something like: 'During my degree I studied ...'. Make sure that you are absolutely familiar with the topics that you have studied during your degree, and how they might be applicable to the job or course you have applied for.
- **How you would apply your knowledge and skills to a different area.** Highlight your ability to search for new scientific information, your communication and other skills, and show how you would be able to adapt these skills to other areas, as the job, course or research requires.
- **Ability to present a set of facts or data to your team.** Tell the interviewer what programs you used, such as graphs generated by Minitab or Excel in your project to display the findings of your study.

### ***After the interview***

If you are offered the job or a place on the course, you should accept the offer immediately, unless you have other offers or interviews pending which you see as having a higher priority. Employers will generally allow some time before you accept the offer, but will expect a reply within a reasonable timeframe and may withdraw the offer if you are very slow to reply. Where you have another interview coming up shortly or already have another offer that you are considering, let the prospective employer know. If employers are really keen on you, they may well offer better terms of appointment. Where you have applied for a place on a course, you will find that admissions tutors are likely to be more flexible, unless it is a very popular course. Where you have applied for a research degree, it is sensible to accept the offer: places for research degree are far fewer than those for taught courses.

If you have not heard about the outcome within a couple of days, ring up to enquire. Sometimes a job will have been offered to another candidate who then turns it down. You may be second in line, so do not despair just yet. However, if you do not get the job or a place on the course, ask for feedback as to why you were not chosen. It is best to get information from the chair of the appointing committee or the admissions tutor rather than the secretary. Learn from the feedback and take it into account for your next application and interview. Even a failed interview can be a useful learning process.

## Personal development planning

You should have heard of personal development planning (PDP) during your studies and you may have been collecting information to create a portfolio to demonstrate your personal skills acquisition and development. This is currently a requirement of UK degree programmes (as a result of the Dearing Report in 1997). The portfolio you have been compiling should show the skills you have developed to date, including an example of when, how or where you were involved in the relevant activity, such as a first-year undergraduate practical to develop numeracy skills. You may have taken the view that numeracy was a weak area for you and taken steps to complete a short ‘catch up’ course on mathematics. Later in your degree you will be developing ‘graduate skills’, including:

- how to retrieve and analyse critically information;
- how to present information;
- how to use information technology.

Skills like these are important to an employer or to an admissions tutor or potential research supervisor because they show you to be the sort of person who can continue to learn, develop and adapt in a changing and demanding job environment.

## Some terms

Employers and careers offices may use some terms that you are not familiar with. Table 8.1 gives explanations for some of these terms. It is by no means exhaustive: human resource departments seem to be able to come up with new terms regularly. It is a bit like technical terms in a rapidly developing subject.

**Table 8.1** Some terms and their explanation

Term	Explanation
Accessibility	For applications this is used to refer to help in providing documents in alternative formats, such as large print or Braille
Accredited course	A course that is recognized by a professional body and gives formal professional status to the holder
AGCAS	The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services. It is the professional body for careers advisors, and publishes helpful material that you may find in your Careers Service centre

**Table 8.1** (Continued)

Term	Explanation
Border Agency	The body responsible for controlling migration in the UK and enforcing immigration regulations. It looks after any applications from nationals of countries outside the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland for permission to stay, work or study in the UK
Careers fair	An organized event for employers to market themselves by means of exhibition stands that give information about jobs on offer. The fairs can be general or subject specific. They take place in a range of towns and cities, normally where there is a large student population
Data Protection Act	Covers issues of confidentiality particularly of personal data, and the circumstances under which data may be made available to others. An employer or institution offering a course should be registered as a data controller with the Office of the Information Commissioner, and should comply with the regulations under the Act. It will have a statement of the data that will be collected relating to individuals, and the bodies to whom specific data will be disclosed
Equality and diversity	Covers the policy that employers and educational establishments will use when considering applications. All applications have to be considered on the basis of ability, and there should be no discrimination on the grounds of age, gender, disability and so on
Human resources	Human resources departments used to be known as personnel departments or appointment sections. They deal with a range of personnel issues from recruitment to staff support. They will also normally include a section that handles discrimination in its manifest forms
Job specification/person specification	Form part of the overall job description. The job specification lists the detailed requirements, and main duties and responsibilities of the job. The person specification lists the characteristics that are sought for the appointee, such as skills, knowledge and experience
Placement	A short period in employment or voluntary work away from your course, but as part of your degree requirements. It normally forms part of a course which includes 'Applied' in its title. Professional courses normally include some kind of placement
Rehabilitation of Offenders/Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks	You are obliged to disclose relevant information about criminal convictions under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act of 1974. The employer may be obliged to carry out CRB checks. Some jobs may be exempted from the Act and require a CRB check before the individual is appointed. The CRB does have a working code of practice that is available online at: <a href="http://www.crb.gov.uk">http://www.crb.gov.uk</a>
Shortlist	A list of candidates called for final interview

## Further reading

Washington, T. (2004) *Interview Power: Selling Yourself Face to Face*. Mount Vernon Press.

The Government's Career Advice Service gives useful advice on preparing a CV. This will be found at: <http://careersadvice.direct.gov.uk/helpwithyourcareer/writecv/?CMP=KAC-jankw08>, together with the associated site of CV Builder at: <https://www.cvbuilder-advice-resources.co.uk/careersadvice/index.php>