

# The School Leaver's Guide to CV Success



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# What is a CV, and why do you need one?

CV stands for *Curriculum Vitae* in Latin which roughly translates as the “course of (one's) life”! A CV is a snapshot of you - the course of your life so far, showcasing your skills, experiences, qualities and strengths. It's how you introduce yourself to potential employers and demonstrate what you can bring to the table. Even if you're just finishing school and haven't had a "real" job yet, you can still create a CV that highlights your strengths.

However daunting it may feel to write a CV without much work experience, it's important to remember that everyone starts somewhere and employers appreciate this. So to stand out you need to reflect upon everything you've done, such as school projects, volunteering, or joining clubs. These all count as valuable experiences demonstrating your skills, like teamwork and leadership.

Creating a CV also helps you understand your own strengths and what you can offer. It's a chance to reflect on your achievements and feel good about what you've already accomplished. This can boost your confidence and help you communicate effectively in interviews and when networking. So, embrace the challenge of writing your first CV and take that initial step towards a bright future!

A great start for your CV is to use our [Free CV Builder](#) which does all of the hard-lifting, such as formatting and style for you!

## The Role of a CV in Job Applications

Your CV is like your personal highlight reel, showcasing your skills and potential to future employers. It's a sneak peek of what you're capable of, even if you haven't had a "real" job yet.

Think of your CV as a movie trailer for your career! It needs to be clear, organised, and grab the employer's attention. Make sure it's easy to read and packed with interesting information that shows why you're the perfect fit for the job.

Just like a superhero has a unique origin story, your CV tells your story, too. It shows your strengths, passions, and what you hope to achieve in your career. Use your personal statement to express your enthusiasm and career goals, making employers eager to learn more about you.

Ultimately, your CV is your first step in showing employers why you're awesome!

### Identifying Your Skills and Strengths – Recognising Transferable Skills

For individuals who have recently finished school and have limited work experience, it's essential to identify transferable skills to create a strong CV.

Reflecting on past experiences, such as group projects or leadership roles, can reveal transferable skills like teamwork, communication, and organisation. Overcoming challenges, whether in academics or personal life, demonstrates problem-solving and resilience, highly valued by employers.

Before you start, think of your strengths and make a list. Ask a best friend or a parent, someone who knows you really well, for what they consider to be your strengths. Then, think of examples of when you've used each strength and how it benefitted someone. For instance, instead of simply stating "good communicator," explain how you presented a project idea to a team and how it benefited them.

For instance, *"I am a great communicator. During a science lesson, I was part of a team tasked with deciding on a project to demonstrate velocity. I suggested and persuaded my peers to conduct an exercise comparing the average walking, running, and cycling velocity. We proved that cycling had the highest average velocity over 100 meters with a stopwatch, measuring tape, and a calculator. It was a fun experience, and as a team, we achieved the highest score in the class."*

You may find it useful to use the STAR method to help tease out this information. More details on the STAR method is here: <https://www.aaronwallis.co.uk/candidates/advice/sales-interview-advice/wow-at-first-interview/how-to-prepare-for-a-competency-based-interview/>

### Highlighting Soft Skills vs. Hard Skills

In today's job market, school leavers need to understand the difference between hard skills (technical abilities) and soft skills (interpersonal abilities). While hard skills are acquired through education and training, soft skills such as teamwork and communication are developed through everyday experiences like group projects and extracurricular activities. Employers value both types of skills, so it's essential to highlight them on your CV.

Even without extensive work experience, you've likely developed valuable soft skills. Showcase these by providing specific examples. If you've worked on a team project, describe your contributions and the results achieved. Participation in sports or clubs can demonstrate leadership and communication skills.

A strong CV should showcase both types of skills. Include relevant hard skills and integrate your soft skills throughout your experiences. Use action verbs and quantify achievements to demonstrate how your soft skills have contributed to your success. This will present you as a well-rounded and adaptable candidate.

Another thing worth weaving into your CV are your 'values'. Vroom (1964), broadly stated that motivation for a given action was underpinned by how much an individual 'values' the desired outcome. Therefore values underpin behaviours which result in action which in turn, determines results. More and more companies are looking for employees whose values match those of the organisation. A two-page list of values can be downloaded here - <https://www.aaronwallis.co.uk/list-of-values.pdf> Choose a maximum of ten of these which resonate with you, and once again, think of examples of when you've demonstrated this 'value'.

Finally, it is good practice to list all of your skills at the top of your CV in a three- or four-column table. This ensures that your skills will be recognised by recruitment software and AI tools.

### **Think About all of the Things You've Achieved**

While it may seem like you lack experience, consider everything you've done, from school projects to volunteer work. Each experience contributes to your skills and showcases your abilities to employers.

Start by listing all your experiences, no matter how small. Think about part-time jobs, internships, or even helping a friend. These instances can highlight teamwork, leadership, or problem-solving skills. Employers value engagement and skill development, not just extensive work history. This reflection builds confidence in your abilities.

As you reflect, identify the skills gained from each experience. Did you develop communication skills through presentations or time management skills by balancing various commitments?

Seek feedback from teachers, mentors, or peers. They can offer valuable insights into your strengths. Use their feedback to refine your understanding of your experiences and skills. This collaborative approach creates a more comprehensive view of your capabilities.

Every experience matters, and your journey is just beginning. Embrace your unique background and the story it tells. Reflecting on your experiences thoughtfully allows you to create a CV that stands out and demonstrates your potential.

## Structuring Your CV – Choosing the Right Format

When creating your CV, choosing the right format is crucial, especially if you have limited experience. A well-structured CV can highlight your strengths and leave a positive impression on potential employers.

There are three main formats to consider:

1. **Chronological CV:** This lists your experiences in reverse chronological order, showing your growth over time. It's good for school leavers with part-time jobs, internships, or volunteer experiences, as it allows employers to see your progression and the context of your skills.
2. **Functional CV:** This format emphasises skills and abilities over chronological order. It's a great option if you have limited work experience. Group your skills under relevant headings and provide examples from school projects or volunteer work. This format focuses on what you can offer, rather than your work history.
3. **Combination CV:** This format merges elements of both the chronological and functional formats. It highlights your skills while providing a timeline of your experiences. It's useful if you have a few relevant experiences to showcase alongside your skills.

The best format for you depends on your experiences and the roles you're targeting. Present your information clearly and concisely, and tailor your CV to each job application.

More information on how to format a CV can be found here:

<https://www.aaronwallis.co.uk/candidates/advice/cv-advice/cv-templates-and-format/>

## Essential Sections of a CV

Each section of your CV should highlight your strengths and potential. Start with clear and professional contact information. Then, introduce yourself with a brief personal profile, expressing your enthusiasm and highlighting relevant skills.

For school leavers, the education section is crucial. Detail your academic achievements, including qualifications and grades. In the experience section, include part-time jobs, internships, volunteering, or even school projects and extracurricular activities. Focus on responsibilities and skills learned.

Then, add a skills section tailored to the specific job, listing both hard and soft skills. Finally, finish with Hobbies and Interests. You will be amazed at how your hobbies and interests can showcase your skills, qualities and values.

More information on what every CV should include can be found here:

<https://www.aaronwallis.co.uk/candidates/advice/cv-advice/what-to-include-in-your-cv/>

## Tailoring Your CV for Different Opportunities

Tailoring your CV is crucial for securing interviews. To begin, carefully read the job description and pinpoint the key skills and qualities required. Then, align your experiences, including activities like school clubs or volunteer work, with those requirements. Use the same language as the job listing to demonstrate that you possess the desired qualities.

Emphasise relevant education and coursework. For school leavers, education is a significant part of your CV. Include projects, assignments, or extracurricular activities that demonstrate relevant skills. Create a story that connects your background to the job requirements.

Adapt the format of your CV to highlight the relevant sections. If volunteer experience is important, make that section prominent. If technical skills are key, ensure those stand out. This flexibility allows you to present a focused and compelling application.

Tailoring your CV demonstrates genuine interest and adaptability. By making these adjustments, you increase your chances of getting noticed. More information can be found on the [10 Things That Employers Want to See on a CV](#)

## What is a Personal Statement?

When creating a personal statement for your CV, focus on your unique qualities and experiences. Reflect on your skills and interests, and use even small experiences to showcase your capabilities and enthusiasm.

Begin with a strong opening that captures attention, such as a personal anecdote or a brief story about your passion for the field. Be specific about your skills, providing examples to demonstrate your qualities.

Express your willingness to learn and grow, highlighting any steps you've taken to enhance your skills. Finally, close with a confident and optimistic note, reinforcing your enthusiasm and readiness for new challenges. Even with limited experience, a well-crafted personal statement can effectively showcase your potential.

## Listing Your Educational Background

The education section of your CV is crucial, especially when you have limited work experience. Start by listing your most recent school, attendance dates, and qualifications, such as GCSEs or A-levels. Include relevant coursework or projects. Mention extracurricular activities, clubs, or organisations you participated in, as these demonstrate valuable skills like teamwork and time management.

Add any certifications or training you've completed, even outside of formal education (DofE, Music grade exams, dancing exams, football coaching badges, etc) as these can set you apart and show your commitment to personal development.

## Include Extracurricular Activities

Remember to include extracurricular activities on your CV, as they can significantly enhance your attractiveness to employers, particularly if you have limited work experience. These activities demonstrate your skills, interests, and personality beyond academic achievements.

When describing these activities, focus on the skills you developed and the roles you played. Highlight skills such as public speaking, teamwork, and leadership. Include a variety of activities to showcase your diverse interests and adaptability.



Be specific about your contributions and achievements. Use bullet points to outline responsibilities and measurable outcomes. This demonstrates your initiative and provides evidence of your capabilities.

### **Gaining Experience Without a Job – Volunteering and Internships**

Volunteering and internships are extremely valuable experiences that can significantly enhance your CV, especially when starting your career. They allow you to gain practical skills and demonstrate your commitment to potential employers.

Volunteering offers hands-on experience in various environments, helping you develop skills such as teamwork and communication. Internships provide a more structured experience, allowing you to gain insights into a specific field and clarify your career goals.

When including these experiences on your CV, focus on your skills and achievements. Use action verbs and quantify your accomplishments to illustrate your abilities.

Remember that networking during these experiences can lead to future opportunities. Build relationships and seek feedback from supervisors.

### **Making the Most of Part-Time and Freelance Opportunities**

Even if you haven't had a "real" job, you can still build an awesome CV! Part-time jobs and freelance work can help you gain skills and make a good impression on future employers.

Part-time jobs, such as working in a shop or restaurant, teach you important skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. These experiences also help you get comfortable in a workplace. When you describe these jobs on your CV, focus on what you learned and what you were responsible for – even small things matter!

Freelancing involves working for yourself, such as designing websites, writing articles, or tutoring. It's a great way to explore your interests and learn skills like time management and working with clients. Keep track of your achievements and any positive feedback you receive, as this can really enhance your CV.



Both part-time jobs and freelancing help you connect with people in different industries. This is known as networking, and it can help you find mentors, receive advice, and even secure a full-time job in the future!

### **Crafting a Compelling Work History Section – How to Present Limited Experience**

When creating a CV with limited work experience, highlight your strengths. Begin with your education by listing your academic accomplishments, special projects, and relevant coursework.

Next, discuss any volunteer work, internships, or part-time positions you have held. Even small roles demonstrate your willingness to learn and work diligently. Describe your responsibilities and the skills you developed.

Don't overlook your involvement in clubs, sports, or community activities. These experiences illustrate your ability to collaborate in a team, take on leadership roles, and manage your time effectively. Connect these experiences to the job you are pursuing, demonstrating how they have prepared you for the role.

Lastly, remember to showcase skills you have acquired from various sources, such as communication and problem-solving abilities. For example, organising a school event showcases your organisational skills and financial management capabilities.

### **How to Use Action Verbs to Describe Your Roles/Activities**

Remember to use strong action verbs on your CV. This can make a big difference, especially with limited work experience. Instead of saying you "helped" with something, use words like "coordinated" or "led." This shows that you take charge and get things done.

Even simple tasks can sound impressive with the right words. Instead of "cleaned," try "streamlined." This shows that you can think critically and solve problems.

Words like "achieved" or "innovated" show that you're enthusiastic and passionate. Employers like people who are motivated and ready to contribute.

Be specific! Instead of just saying you "assisted," explain what you did and the results you achieved. This makes your experiences more impressive.

## Avoiding Gaps in Employment History

Don't worry about gaps in your work experience when writing your CV as a school leaver. Instead, focus on what you have done: volunteering, internships, hobbies, or personal projects. These activities demonstrate your skills and dedication.

Rather than viewing gaps as a negative, use them to your advantage. Caring for a family member shows responsibility, and personal projects can demonstrate commitment.

Fill in any gaps by seeking volunteer positions or internships. These opportunities provide valuable experience and help you build connections. Online courses and workshops can also enhance your skills and fill those gaps.

Be clear and honest about any gaps. Explain them briefly in your cover letter or interview, focusing on how you used that time effectively. Employers appreciate transparency and understand that not everyone has a traditional career path.

## The Importance of References – Who to Ask for References

Your CV references can help you stand out, even if you don't have much work experience. References are people who can talk about your skills and character. This could be teachers, after-school coaches/leaders, or even family friends who know you well.

Teachers can talk about your schoolwork and how you learn. After-school coaches/leaders can talk about your teamwork and leadership. If you've volunteered or had a part-time job, your supervisors there can also be references.

Family friends who know you well can also be references, especially if they have professional jobs. Just make sure they can talk about your skills and the kind of jobs you want.

## The Importance of Spelling and Grammar

Good spelling and grammar on your CV are extremely important. They demonstrate that you care about details and are professional. Even if you don't have much work experience, a well-written CV can help you stand out. It shows that you take pride in your work and can communicate clearly.

Mistakes can make your CV look messy and confusing. Use spell check and ask someone to review it for you to catch any errors.

See [20 Tips for Writing a Winning CV](#) for more guidance

## Getting Feedback from Others

Getting feedback on your CV is really important, especially if you lack work experience. Ask people you trust, such as friends, family, or teachers, to read it and give you their honest opinion. They might notice things you missed and help you improve it.

Ask specific questions like, "Does this show my skills well?" or "Is anything unclear?" Be open to their suggestions and use their feedback to enhance your CV.

It's a good idea to ask a few people to look it over, as they might have different ideas. If multiple people point out the same thing, you probably need to change it.

And don't forget to thank people for their help!

## Final Touches Before Sending Your CV

Before sending your CV, make sure to give it a final polish. Check for consistent formatting and ensure that the content is clear and easy to read.

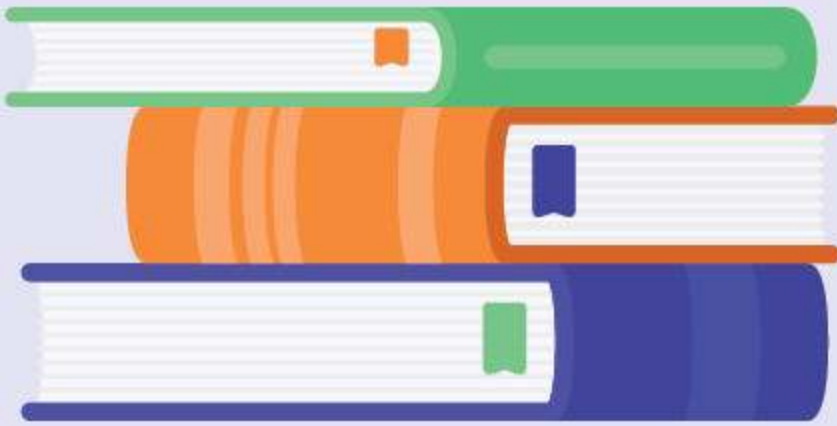
Ensure that you've given examples to demonstrate your skills. A great piece of advice is to go through your CV line by line and ask yourself, 'so what?'. For instance, if it is something like 'respond to emails that were received', then that's what everyone does. This can be made more powerful by something like 'responding in a timely fashion to all emails received, which resulted in two positive Trustpilot reviews and recognition from my Manager'.

Proofread once again to catch any typos or errors. If you're emailing your CV, use a professional subject line and email address (not [citysbiggestfan@gmail.com](mailto:citysbiggestfan@gmail.com) or worse). Then, convert your Word Doc or Google Doc to a PDF so the formatting remains the same.

Click here for more information on [The Ideal CV Structure and Format](#)

Good luck with securing your first role!

# About the Author



Rob Scott's career path has been anything but conventional. Initially drawn to the fast-paced world of finance, he soon discovered his true calling lay elsewhere. After a brief stint in stockbroking, Rob embarked on a global adventure, which included a solo cycling expedition up the East Coast of Australia. Upon his return, he transitioned into the field of education, leading historical tours for student groups. This experience ultimately led him to the recruitment industry, where he excelled, rising to the position of Marketing & Sales Director within a major recruitment group. In 2007, Rob founded Aaron Wallis, a leading sales and marketing recruitment agency specializing in technical sales.

Academically, Rob holds an MBA (Merit) and a first-class honours degree in History. His expertise in recruitment and sales is widely recognised, leading to publications in prominent media outlets like The Guardian, The Financial Times, and The Times. He has also authored the acclaimed "Career Success Masterclass" e-book and podcast series. Beyond his professional pursuits, Rob enjoys family time, playing guitar, and exploring his interest in history. He resides in Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire with his wife and four children.

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