

# Vitae

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Menachem Wecker • September 3, 2013

## Common Pitfalls to Avoid in Your CV

If you are applying for a staff position in academe, you may know a bit about the tug-of-war inherent in trying to collapse your entire career into a single-page, one-sided résumé, without resorting to microscopic fonts and invisible margins.

Faculty members applying for teaching roles tend to have more leeway in their page counts, but even with the extra space, it is very difficult to fashion a curriculum vitae that effectively sells your real-world accomplishments in a matter of words without sounding too abstract or too promotional and self-centered.

Professors, senior staff, and career coaches, who have evaluated countless job applications, shared advice to help academic job applicants

avoid several common mistakes in composing their CVs.

## 1. Forget journal articles in progress.

Although it's acceptable to mention longer monographs, such as books, that are under contract, it's always a mistake for professors to reference a journal article as a "manuscript in preparation," said Holden Thorp, provost and executive vice chancellor for academic affairs at Washington University in St. Louis.

"If it's a journal article, then either it's submitted and you can put down the date you submitted it, it's in press, or it's published," said Thorp, a professor of chemistry and of medicine. Otherwise, it's always better to leave it out, he said. "The first thing you'll get asked on the interview is where it stands."

## 2. Publications aren't presentations.

Newcomers to the academic market increasingly tend to combine their publications and presentations in the same section and to use a heading, such as "Publications, Invited Talks, and Presentations," said Joshua Eyler, director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Rice University, in Houston.

Rather than clarifying applicants' achievements, those blended sections really "muddy" CVs in detrimental ways, according to Eyler, who has served on many search committees and has led professional-develop-

ment initiatives for graduate students.

“This is an even bigger miscue than including works that are either in progress or under submission with actual publications,” he said, noting that the conflated sections suggest that applicants weigh those achievements equally, and they require search committee members to spend excessive time searching for information.

“A CV should be nothing if not exceedingly clear and easy to use,” he said.

### **3. Don't skimp on service.**

Another common mistake that Eyler has observed is applicants selling themselves short on their service, such as committees and working groups. Those sorts of experience help tell your story, according to Eyler.

“Almost everything is important for telling the story of your career. List all of your committees, task forces, working groups, initiatives led, service to the profession”—such as peer-reviewing journal articles, for example, he said. “As long as these activities are somehow connected to academia, they will aid in presenting a holistic picture of who you are and what you can offer a department and a university.”

Applicants sometimes think that kind of information isn't very important or that search-committee members don't care about it. “That couldn't be further from the truth,” he said.

## 4. Quantify your information.

Faculty job seekers tend to overwhelm readers of their CVs with too much narrative, according to Sharon DeLay, the founder and president at BoldlyGO Career and Human Resource Management, in Columbus, Ohio.

DeLay recommended that professors use design elements, such as bullet points and white space, and numbers to convey their accolades. “Avoid getting too word-heavy,” she said.

Applicants for higher-ed staff jobs should also insert numbers and statistics where possible, DeLay advised, including specifying where they saved time or money in their jobs, and how, for example, they have helped their employers raise money or gain media exposure.

## 5. One size doesn't fit all.

Faculty members who are applying for administrative positions can't just recycle their academic CVs, because lists of courses taught and scholarly publications aren't appropriate for a staff positions, warned DeLay.

Academic CVs also tend to have “nothing about their management and business skill set,” she said.

## 6. Don't lose your readers.

Including crib notes at the beginning of an otherwise lengthy CV can help

“hook” your readers and draw them into later sections, where they will wade through more detail, DeLay said.

“Use a summary at the beginning of your CV to highlight some key information for your target audience,” she advised.

The opening summary, if customized correctly, can show through current and past positions “what kinds of things you’ve done that touch on roles, responsibilities, and requirements of the position you’re applying for,” said Rachel Reuben, associate vice president for marketing communications at Ithaca College.

## **7. Don’t be vague.**

Reuben, who has “a great deal of experience” reviewing résumés and application materials, recommended that applicants avoid using generic objectives, or ones that have “absolutely nothing to do with the position you’re applying for.”

She’s also noticed a tendency to undersell one’s achievements. “Some candidates I’ve either overlooked because it wasn’t detailed enough,” she said, or “others I’ve learned much further in the interview process that they actually have far more experience than their résumé let on.”

## **8. And don’t just dump info.**

Reuben has noticed, as has DeLay, that many faculty members who are

applying for academic staff jobs fail to move away from lengthy, scholarly-focused résumés. Reuben has also seen many other higher-ed job applicants neglect to customize their CVs to meet the position they are applying for.

It's common for some to put “absolutely everything from their history” in their CVs, she said, while it's also common for job seekers to fail to add dates to their résumés to accurately and seamlessly tell a story of their progression.

“While details are helpful, so is having a sense of who will be reading them and knowing they're doing a lot of other tasks beyond reading résumés and serving on a search committee,” she said. “Be brief, but powerful.”

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