

HOW TO WRITE A CV

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McGill

CaPS

Career Planning Service
Service de planification de carrière

HOW TO WRITE A CV

We see a lot of CVs at CaPS. Every year we read and review literally thousands of them, for job, internship, grad school and funding applications. They are from students of all levels representing each of the faculties and schools at McGill. While there is definitely room for individual variation, some things clearly work better than others. Use the information, tips and samples in this guide to start writing and organizing your CV.

GETTING STARTED

What's the point of a CV?

A CV provides a potential employer with an overview of your experience, background and skills to entice them to invite you for an interview. CVs are also often required as part of graduate/professional school applications.

General guidelines

- **Writing a CV is an art, not a science.** The goal is not to force your content into a particular template, but rather to find a format and style that highlights your experience and strengths. The order and emphasis of your sections should also reflect the level of priority for your reader.
- **Put yourself in the shoes of your reader.** Can they easily find the information they are looking for? Are the skills and experience you would bring to the organization clearly articulated?
- **Use concrete examples** when describing your experience. What did you do/accomplish?
- Your CV needs to be **consistent** and **clear** in terms of its style and format, **professional** in its content and overall presentation, and as much as possible, specifically **targeted** to the position/company/field you are applying to.
- **Do your research!** For your applications to be effective, you need to demonstrate knowledge of the employer and what they are looking for. Be intentional and informed, not generic!
- **Length:** In Canada, outside of academia, your CV can be up to two pages. There are a few exceptions, including the management/business sector, which tends to prefer one page. Ask at CaPS if you are unsure about norms for your particular field/geographic area.

The "Master CV" - Your first draft

To make customizing your CV for each application easier, we recommend compiling a "master CV" that includes everything. The idea is to have a comprehensive record of your activities, experiences and accomplishments that you can draw on for future applications. Use the Common CV Components list on the next page to get started.

COMMON CV COMPONENTS

These are the basic components of a CV for a current undergraduate student or recent graduate. While your contact information always comes first, the other sections can and should be presented in whichever order is most relevant to the position for which you are applying.

Contact Information

- Include your full name, phone number and a professional email in an attractive header
- Including your full civic address is optional
- If pertinent, you can indicate a local and permanent address/city
- Include your website and/or edited LinkedIn URL if relevant
- In North America, personal information such as age and citizenship are not included

Languages

- If you speak more than one language, list these in order of relevance to the workplace
- Indicate your level of proficiency (i.e. basic, intermediate, fluent)

Computer/Technical/Laboratory Skills

- List the specific programs/software or lab techniques you are familiar with

Education

- List all degrees you hold or are working on, most recent first
- Include any specializations (major, minor), thesis or honours work
- You can include scholarships and awards as details here, or in a separate “Awards” section

Awards and Scholarships

- List titles, reason for the award (if not clear from the title) and dates

Experience

There are many ways to organize this information. Early on, general section headings such as “Volunteer Experience” work well. However, once you have more experience and want to highlight patterns you have identified, try to strategically use headers for your experience section(s) in order to incorporate key skills from the job description.

General options include:

- Work Experience
- Volunteer Experience
- Extracurricular Experience
- Career-Related Experience
- Additional Experience

Sample targeted headings:

- Tutoring Experience
- Sales and Customer Service Experience
- Outreach and Marketing Experience
- Writing and Editing Experience
- Research Experience
- Leadership Experience
- Performance Experience
- Administrative Experience

Certifications/Affiliations/Memberships/Additional Training

- List any additional certifications or active memberships you hold, along with the dates

Interests and Activities

- Make sure this section is organized and relatively detailed/specific

LANGUAGE, STYLE & FORMAT

Format

Use a simple, clear format such as the example below:

What (your degree or job title)

date-date

Where (school or company and location)

- Details

General guidelines

- Use formatting techniques such as indenting and bold consistently throughout to increase readability
- Use bullet points for your details; long dense paragraphs are hard to read quickly and **CVs are usually skimmed** in a few seconds, not read word-for-word
- List education and experience in **reverse chronological order** (most recent first “by end date”)
- **Simple, straightforward layouts** tend to work best; avoid tables, boxes, templates
- Choose a standard, legible and professional font in a legible size
- Ensure your email address, voicemail message and any URLs are professional in tone
- **PROOFREAD** your CV carefully for typos, spelling mistakes and poor grammar

Describing your experience

- Aim for a factual, confident and professional tone; avoid embellishment
- **Use active, skills-based language*** and specific examples to highlight your accomplishments
- Start each bullet with an action verb instead of using pronouns (i.e. I, we)
- **Pay attention to verb tenses:** if you are no longer working somewhere, the verbs should be in past tense, for a current activity, use the present tense
- Add a descriptor for clarity if your title was “Volunteer” or “Intern”, (i.e. Volunteer Peer Tutor, Administrative Intern)

* see the list of Action Verbs at the end of this guide

TARGETING YOUR CV

Keep the following tips in mind to ensure your CV is specifically tailored for each application:

- Read the job description carefully and research the organization to identify the key skills needed
- Use targeted headings (see examples on page 3) which speak to the main requirements of the position
- Ensure your descriptive bullets are prioritized and tailored for the role
- Consider the order of your sections to make sure the most important experiences appear early on

SAMPLE: ONE-PAGE CV

Jane Student

Vancouver, BC

Jane.student@mail.mcgill.ca 514-111-9999

Education

Bachelor of Arts: Sociology Major

20xx - Present

McGill University, Montréal, QC

- James McGill Entrance Scholarship (20xx)

Leadership and Communication Experience

Peer Career Leader

20xx - Present

McGill Career Planning Service (CaPS), Montréal, QC

- Meet with students to review and offer feedback on their CVs
- Organize classroom presentations to promote CaPS activities and services
- Peer outreach activities have resulted in a 10% increase in drop-in appointments

Communications Intern (cancelled due to COVID-19)

Summer 20xx

Really Cool Non-Profit, Montréal, QC

Camp Counsellor

Summer 20xx

ABC Daycamp, Vancouver, BC

- Supervised and interacted with a group of 16 children aged 6 to 10 years
- Developed weekly activities and agendas for campers
- Created and led local outings to attractions such as Science World
- Prepared and administered work schedule for all counsellors

Additional Work Experience

Crew Member

20xx - 20xx

Midnight Kitchen, Montreal, QC

- Worked in a team of 8 to produce healthy, sustainably sourced meals for students

Groundskeeper

Summers 20xx - 20xx

Jagre Ridge Golf Course, Vernon, BC

- Collaborated with a team of 12 to groom the golf course each morning for clients

Certifications and Skills

- CPR/First Aid Certified
- Microsoft Office Suite: Word, Excel, Powerpoint, and Adobe Photoshop

May 20xx, exp 20xx

Activities and Interests

Music: Over 10 years of experience as an active amateur musician in orchestras and bands
Achieved Grade 8 RCM standing in both trumpet and piano

Sports: Avid runner, cyclist and skier; annual participant in the Terry Fox Run

SAMPLE: TWO-PAGE CV

Jean-François Student

Montréal, QC

Jean-francois.student@mail.mcgill.ca; 514-330-1123

linkedin.com/in/jfstudent

Languages

English and French (Bilingual)

Education

Bachelor of Science, Honours Anatomy and Cell Biology

20xx - 20xx

McGill University, Montréal, QC

- Minors in Anthropology and Social Studies of Medicine
- Dean's Honour List

Diplome d'Etudes Collegial (DEC), Health Sciences

20xx - 20xx

Cégep de Trois-Rivières, Trois-Rivières, QC

Research Experience

Clinical Research Coordinator

20xx - Present

Bone and Mineral Unit, Royal Victoria Hospital, Montréal, QC

- Coordinate two research projects investigating treatments for osteoporosis
- Liaise between patients, investigators, hospital staff, and sponsoring companies
- Design and provide information and resources for patients diagnosed with osteoporosis
- Successfully recruited hundreds of study participants using innovative advertising

Undergraduate Research Assistant

20xx - 20xx

Professor McGill Lab, McGill University, Montréal, QC

- Welcomed and registered participants and explained study
- Completed data entry, administrative tasks and laboratory maintenance

Community Involvement

Friendly Visitor

20xx - Present

Montréal General Hospital, Montréal, QC

20xx - Present

Centre Hospitalier St-Therese, Shawinigan, QC

20xx - 20xx

- Visit patients in the dialysis unit to provide conversation, and support

Volunteer Service Participant

20xx - 20xx

Katimavik Youth Leadership Program, Hearst, ON, Prince Rupert, BC & Moncton, NB

- Lived with a group of 15 young people in three small Canadian communities for one year
- Volunteered as an Activities Coordinator in a seniors' residence, as a Tree Planter in a deforested area and as a Mentor in a community centre for at-risk youth

Additional Work Experience

Server (part-time)

20xx - Present

Bar le Barouf, Montréal, QC

- Train new staff on service and cash
- Awarded most efficient worker three months in a row
- Nominated point person to deal with crisis situations

Sport Camp Counsellor

Summers 20xx, 20xx-

McGill Sports Camp, Montréal, QC

- Supervised a group of 10 children between the ages of 8-10
- Created and ran multiple activities related to various sports including soccer and basketball
- Encouraged and motivated children to participate and succeed in activities
- Updated parents on daily activities and events

Extra-Curricular Activities

McGill International Student Buddy

20xx - 20xx

International Student Services, McGill University, Montréal, QC

- Communicated with new McGill students from abroad prior to their arrival; advised and assisted them during their entire first year

Orientation Leader

Aug 20xx

McGill University, Montréal, QC

- Led a group of 20 new McGill students through orientation activities

Judo Instructor

20xx - 20xx

Centre de Judo Shawinigan, Shawinigan, QC

- Coached children between the ages of 5-15
- Judged judo competitions for the 5-8 year old category
- Created an information sheet for all participants about schedules and required equipment

Activities and Interests

Sports:

- Varsity soccer, McGill University (20xx-Present)
- Judo – black belt (20xx-Present). Won national championship in 20xx & 20xx

Music:

- Piano – classical & jazz (20xx-Present)

Travel:

- France, England, Spain, Portugal and Australia

SAMPLE: ONE-PAGE CV

◆ Fatima Student ◆

fatima.student@mail.mcgill.ca; 514-398-3334

EDUCATION

Bachelor of Arts and Science, Economics and Mathematics

20xx - 20xx

McGill University, Montréal, Canada

- Minor in History
- Exchange term at University of Edinburgh (Winter 20xx)

International Baccalaureate Diploma

20xx-20xx

XYZ International School, Beirut, Lebanon

CAREER-RELATED EXPERIENCE

Research and Event Planning Intern

Summer 20xx

United Nations, New York, USA

- Researched the advantages of micro financing for female farmers in West Africa
- Assisted with planning for annual agriculture conference
- Translated English conference documents to French and Arabic

VP Finance

20xx - 20xx

McGill Arab Students' Association, Montréal, Canada

- Managed the annual budget for one of McGill's largest student associations

Assistant Analyst Intern

Summer 20xx

ABC Bank, Hong Kong, China

- Translated English financial documents to French
- Documented trade transactions and entered data into Excel

Receptionist

20xx - 20xx

SFT Shipping, Beirut, Lebanon

- Answered client inquiries on the phone and in person in a trilingual environment
- Updated client accounts and entered import and export data

SKILLS AND INTERESTS

Languages: English, French and Arabic: Fluent, Hebrew: Intermediate, Mandarin: Basic

Software: Microsoft Office, Microsoft Teams

Interests: Reading (Politics, Technology), Painting and Genealogy

Sports: Basketball (Team Captain in high school, intramurals at McGill), Ultimate Frisbee and Golf

World Travel: Australia, Germany, France, UK, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, USA and Canada

◆ REFERENCES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST ◆

ACTION VERBS

On the following two pages you will find a list of action verbs organized by skill area. Use these to help you describe your past experiences and skills in your CV and Cover Letter. Make sure to check out all of the categories as many verbs apply to multiple skills!

ANALYSIS

Accounted	Critiqued	Measured	Scrutinized
Analyzed	Deciphered	Observed	Studied
Ascertained	Deliberated	Prioritized	Synthesized
Assessed	Determined	Programmed	Tested
Compared	Estimated	Projected	Validated
Computed	Evaluated	Questioned	Verified
Conceptualized	Examined	Rated	
Concluded	Formulated	Recommended	
Confirmed	Justified	Researched	

COMMUNICATION

Addressed	Counselled	Interpreted	Referred
Advocated	Demonstrated	Lectured	Reported
Authored	Discussed	Listened	Responded
Called	Drafted	Lobbied	Spoke
Clarified	Edited	Marketed	Summarized
Coached	Educated	Persuaded	Taught
Communicated	Elicited	Presented	Transcribed
Contacted	Explained	Promoted	Translated
Convinced	Familiarized	Publicized	Tutored
Corresponded	Informed	Queried	Wrote

CREATIVITY

Adapted	Created	Improvised	Played
Authored	Designed	Innovated	Revised
Brainstormed	Developed	Invented	Shaped
Built	Engineered	Made	Visualized
Composed	Envisioned	Manufactured	
Constructed	Illustrated	Produced	

INITIATIVE

Accelerated	Created	Improvised	Played
Accomplished	Coordinated	Initiated	Revamped
Achieved	Established	Instituted	Reviewed
Acted	Founded	Introduced	Revitalized
Advanced	Generated	Launched	Solicited
Applied	Handled	Proposed	Spearheaded
Attended	Implemented	Rejuvenated	Utilized

ACTION VERBS

LEADERSHIP

Administered	Delegated	Headed	Officiated
Advised	Directed	Hired	Oversaw
Allocated	Empowered	Influenced	Piloted
Anticipated	Enabled	Instructed	Recruited
Appointed	Encouraged	Interviewed	Sanctioned
Approved	Endorsed	Led	Selected
Assigned	Enforced	Maintained	Sponsored
Authorized	Financed	Managed	Supervised
Chaired	Fostered	Monitored	Trained
Decided	Guided	Motivated	Unified

PROBLEM SOLVING

Aided	Fulfilled	Reduced	Solved
Alleviated	Generated	Refined	Streamlined
Ameliorated	Identified	Reformed	Strengthened
Augmented	Improved	Remedied	Supplemented
Customized	Increased	Remodeled	Transformed
Expanded	Polished	Repaired	Troubleshoot
Extended	Reconciled	Restored	Updated
Finalized	Rectified	Saved	Upgraded

TEAMWORK

Accommodated	Contributed	Integrated	Related
Assisted	Cooperated	Mediated	Respected
Balanced	Facilitated	Negotiated	Shared
Collaborated	Harmonized	Participated	
Consulted	Helped	Partnered	

... AND MORE!

Activated	Excelled	Licensed	Shipped
Added	Executed	Navigated	Sought
Appraised	Experimented	Operated	Staffed
Approximated	Familiarized	Performed	Submitted
Audited	Guaranteed	Prepared	Surveyed
Displayed	Involved	Realized	Tailored
Dissected	Issued	Served	



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CaPS



myFuture



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