



Use Plain Language in CVs

Did you hear about the university graduate who described his previous work experience as:?

Facilitating septuagenarians to negotiate public vehicular accessways, applying mandated guidelines to optimise safety

It turns out he had been a boy scout who helped old people cross roads.

Yes, it's a joke, but try and figure out what these three people do from these real CV examples:

Provide support for an integrated approach to organisational performance management that will result in the organisation's ability to enhance operations and maximise financial results

Facilitate the establishment of viable regional governance structures

Support the development of procedures and practices that reflect the organisational commitment to sustainable development

These descriptions of the candidates' responsibilities are so vague and conceptual that they could mean anything. Did your eyes glaze over as you tried to read them?

Why Plain Language is Critical

Be very clear – **no-one really wants to read your CV. It's a chore.** When faced with a pile of perhaps 50 CVs, an employer very quickly switches to scanning mode. This means the reader does not carefully read each sentence and ponder its meaning – instead their eyes glance quickly over the text looking for key words. If the meaning is not readily apparent, the reader moves on to the next sentence.

Put another way, **if the reader cannot pick up the meaning of a sentence immediately from a brief scan of key words, it might as well not be in your CV.**

That sentence is just black marks cluttering up the page and you can delete it!

Many employers first briefly scan the big pile of CVs they have received, quickly selecting a smaller set for further consideration. They then review those CVs again before making the final selection for interview. It is **unlikely that an employer ever reads a CV carefully and in detail.** If a detailed reading occurs at all, it may be just before an interview, to determine interview questions (in other words, after the CV has already succeeded in its primary objective).

Remember, the role of your CV is to get you into an interview. It's not a list of everything you ever did over your entire career. If an employer cannot understand what it is you do at a basic level, you will not get to an interview to explain your skills in detail. One reason why a CV is such a difficult document to write (and why you really need professional help) is often very complex work tasks and skills need to be clearly yet powerfully communicated in very few words to an unsympathetic reader.

There are many linguistic techniques to improve immediate comprehension and allow a reader to correctly interpret complex ideas while scanning your CV. Here are four of the most important:

Short Sentences

Sentence length has the greatest impact on comprehension. Anything over 15 words is too long. **Most people need to read a 15-word sentence more than once to correctly understand its meaning** (16 words!) With a CV, a reader is unlikely to make this effort – they either skip a long sentence or misinterpret its meaning.

Break longer sentences up into shorter sentences, limiting the number of clauses per sentence to two if possible.

Straightforward Words

Highly abstract, conceptual words with vague meanings are overused in business language. They certainly have no place in a CV. Who wants an employee who “facilitates” when you could have one that “helps”. Would an employer prefer someone who “enhances”, or someone who “improves”? Pompous language highlights someone who is trying to hide something. It certainly does not indicate intelligence or education.

Use concrete, familiar words that the reader understands quickly, rather than abstractions like this:

*Negotiated revised working
arrangements with stakeholders*

Rather than “working arrangements” which is vague, define it more precisely.

Instead of using the empty word “stakeholders” (which could mean anyone), list out the parties involved:

*Negotiated new shift changeover hours
with factory workers, their supervisors
and production scheduling*

The first version could mean anything - so it ends up meaning nothing at all and is skipped by the reader. The second version, although longer, defines the nature of the achievement in a way that can be quickly understood.

Precise Language

Employers are not willing to “read between the lines” on a CV. If for confidentiality reasons you cannot be definitive about what you have done, leave that point out and hope you can get to an interview to talk about it in person. There is no point in describing your achievements in your CV as:

Substantially increased sales

How much is “substantial”? What were sales in the first place? What was the order of magnitude: from \$ 25,000 to \$ 30,000, or \$ 10 million to \$ 30 million? Over what time period? Perhaps the market was booming anyway and you just followed along?

A partial fix for confidentiality issues is using proportions instead of exact numbers, and providing a context:

Increased sales by about 30% over 18 months despite an intensely competitive market

Complexity

Word complexity is another factor affecting how easily your CV can be rapidly read and understood. This relates to both word length (number of syllables) and word familiarity.

In this example, a candidate used the word “productionisation”. It’s doubtful this is even a real word. At best it’s a silly piece of jargon that turns a three-syllable noun (production) into a six-syllable noun:

Creation and implementation of a business model that facilitated the

integration of each division through the end-to-end delivery of projects from inception to productionisation

Eight of the 25 words in the sentence (one third) are three syllables or more. It sounds like the candidate swallowed a business theory textbook. How many employers are searching for people who can create business models anyway? Leave this language in the university.

Jargon may be used selectively within your CV as shorthand to explain the **detail** of your background. However, remember that people outside your specialist field, such as senior management or HR, may read your CV and influence the employment decision. Make sure your main message remains clear for readers who not understand the jargon.

Summary

Check your CV carefully to make sure it is easy to scan quickly. Keep sentences short and use precise words.

And call a spade a spade - not a manually-operated multi-functional dual-handed excavation device.

Article written by Denis Odlin

Examples of Unnecessarily Complex or Vague Words

Vague/complex	Simple translation	Vague/complex	Simple translation
Acquire	Get	Initiate	begin
Apprise	Inform	Make contact with	Meet, phone....
communicate	Call, email, present..	Necessitate	need
Consequence	result	Obtain	get
Disseminate	Send, distribute...	Peruse	read
Enhance	improve	Retain	keep
Facilitate	Help, assist	Subsequent	Next
Forward	Send	Terminate	End, stop
Implement	Carry out	Utilise	use