

Brilliant

HOW TO  
WRITE A  
BRILLIANT

CV

**JIM BRIGHT, JOANNE EARL & DAVID WINTER**

Brilliant



brilliant

# how to write a brilliant CV

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# **how to write a brilliant CV**

Jim Bright, Joanne Earl  
and David Winter

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PEARSON EDUCATION LIMITED

Edinburgh Gate  
Harlow CM20 2JE  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)1279 623623  
Web: www.pearson.com/uk

First published in Australia in 2000 by Business + Publishing  
First published in Great Britain as *Brilliant CV* in 2001 by Pearson Education  
**Fifth edition published as *How to Write a Brilliant CV* in 2015 (print and electronic)**

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ISBN: 978-1-292-01537-8 (print)  
978-1-292-01539-2 (PDF)  
978-1-292-01540-8 (ePub)  
978-1-292-01538-5 (eText)

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for the print edition is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Bright, Jim.

[Amazing résumés]

How to write a brilliant CV / Jim Bright, Joanne Earl and David Winter. -- Fifth edition.

pages cm

Earlier editions published as *Amazing résumés : what employers want to see--and how to say it*.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-292-01537-8 (lump : alk. paper)

1. Résumés (Employment) 2. Job hunting. I. Title.

HF5383.B69 2015

650.142--dc23

2014039791

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
18 17 16 15 14

Series cover design: David Carroll & Co.

Print edition typeset in 10.5pt Plantin Std by 30

Print edition printed by Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport

NOTE THAT ANY PAGE CROSS REFERENCES REFER TO THE PRINT EDITION

*For Beryl Bright, her sister Sylvia Cox and their mother Violet Parsons –  
three very special women*

*and for David and Brenda Earl*

*and for David's brilliant wife Susanna.*



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# About the authors

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Jim holds the positions of Professor of Career Education and Development at the Australian Catholic University and Visiting Professor in Career Development at the University of Derby, UK. He has published many peer-reviewed journal articles on careers in leading scientific journals. In addition, each year he presents at leading national and international scientific conferences in the area of careers and management. He is a regular guest on radio and television and is frequently quoted in international media. Jim also writes a weekly column on careers in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, as well as hosting a careers blog called *The Factory* at [www.brightandassociates.com.au/wordpress](http://www.brightandassociates.com.au/wordpress) and tweets as @DrJimBright.

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**David Winter** has been a careers consultant at the University of London for nearly 20 years and has lost count of the number of CVs he has looked at in that time. He has worked with undergraduates, postgraduates and graduates of all ages from a wide range of disciplines. He also provides career and leadership coaching and training to mid-career professionals. In addition, on behalf of The Careers Group, University of London, he has provided consultancy and training to a variety of employers on effective recruitment and selection of graduates.

# Acknowledgements

There have been many organisational psychologists, human resource managers and recruitment consultants who have provided us with great assistance in writing this book. We would like to thank Fiona Davies, Prue Laurence, Sonia Hutton (now Manser), Dimitra Papadolias, Sharon Wilkenfeld, Emma Lee, Lynne Clune and Erin Stephenson, whose Masters and Honours research on CVs has provided us with invaluable help. Robert Bright was the human resources expert who started this all off – characteristically over a curry – with the simple question: ‘What do we really know for sure about CVs?’

Jenny Reddin and KODAK Pty Ltd supported our early work. Our research was helped tremendously by Dr Rob Anderson, Rachel Kenny and Jennifer Blake. Special thanks to Ms Doreen Cheong, who has guided our thinking on electronic CVs and co-presented seminars on this topic with us. Kevin Chandler ex Chandler and Macleod Pty Ltd assisted us with their search on photographs and web-based recruitment. Many human resource professionals in Sydney and Melbourne aided us by participating in our studies and reading through all the different CVs. Thanks to all our colleagues who have encouraged us in this project by reviewing our journal articles and even awarding us prizes!

The School of Psychology at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) has supported these studies and many of the staff there have provided useful feedback to us on the processes. Thanks to our collaborator Dr Austin Adams for his generous help. More recently the School of Education at the Australian Catholic University has supported Jim’s work.

Thanks to Audrey Chung for her contributions to earlier versions and to Tim Edwards who developed the original project. Thanks to Allen and Unwin for their support for many years.

Finally, thanks to the publishing team at Pearson Education including Eloise Cook and Steve Temblett.

# Introduction

Remember your first date, or the first time you went out with your partner? Did you make sure your clothes were right, your hair was perfect, you were wearing the right perfume or aftershave? Well, at least that much effort should go into getting your CV right! CVs are ‘first dates’ in the selection process that could land you on a new career path. Like the first date, they are the first time an employer gets to form an opinion about you – and first impressions can make all the difference. Employers routinely receive thousands of CVs from candidates seeking the same job. That can mean odds of 1,000 to 1 or even worse. A bad CV can reduce those chances from a long-shot of 1,000 to 1 to 0. A well thought-out CV can boost the same candidate’s chance of being interviewed to 1 in 3. Think about it: just by changing your CV, you can go from a situation where no-one would interview you to being interviewed on every third occasion. In some cases we are able to boost a CV so that the candidate is always interviewed.

In our experience with career transition clients, they tend to focus their nervous energy on the interview. Perhaps because the interview is closer to the final decision point, people think it is more important. However, it turns out that the interview is no more important in predicting the final decision. We compared the importance of the CV with the interview in determining overall candidate suitability. The CV provides most data on competencies and achievements (or should if properly written), whereas the interview provides more data on interpersonal skills and rapport. CVs count! You must put as much effort into your CV as you do into your interview.

Getting a job today can involve several steps, starting with a CV, followed by psychological tests and interviews. The CV is the only step where you have control over the information that you present. In every other step, the employer decides what questions to ask, what information to collect. The CV is your vital opportunity to present yourself at your best. CVs are important.

There are many different books on the market providing advice on CV preparation. This is the first book that gives clear, down-to-earth advice that has been shown to work scientifically. This book is the culmination of years of scientific research into what makes a winning (and losing) CV. We have interviewed hundreds of recruiters across a wide spectrum of industries and asked them to judge real CVs. The advice we now pass on to you is based on sound principles that have emerged from this work and from the peer-reviewed research work of others around the world, and not on gossip, hearsay or anecdotes.

The aim of this guide is to provide you with no-nonsense advice about how to get the most out of your CV. It will increase your chances of being shortlisted for that all-important job.

We show you how to put together a persuasive CV. We give examples of CVs that work and those that don't and we explain to you why one works and another doesn't. We introduce you to some key job-seeking skills that will improve the quality of your CV. Every person has different strengths and weaknesses. The authors of *How to Write a Brilliant CV* are organisational psychologists and careers experts who understand these differences. Using simple exercises, we will show you how to tailor a CV to your strengths.

In the following chapters, we provide advice on the layout, content and construction of your CV and its covering letter. We also address some of the tricky questions:

- Do I explain gaps in my career history?
- Do I need different CVs for different jobs?
- Should I describe all my duties at work?
- Can I email my CV?
- Can I get any clues from the job advertisement that will improve my CV?

- Do I include a photograph?
- Can I leave stuff out of my CV and, if so, what stuff?

We are confident that this guide will assist you in producing the best possible CV. The recruitment industry has assisted us in all of our work, and the advice we pass on here is a reflection of our close relationship with the people who are making decisions about CVs every day. The results of our work have been published in several industry and international scientific journals, and have been presented at international conferences in Australia and the USA. Training courses based on our work have been conducted in blue-chip companies.

## How to use this book

*How to Write a Brilliant CV* is divided into four parts. Part 1 introduces the concept of a CV as a marketing document, and leads the reader through a series of exercises to help them put together a thorough CV. Part 2 builds on this by showing how they can enhance their CV to make it even stronger. Part 3 provides answers to some of those tricky questions regarding what to include and what to leave out, as well as issues such as referees, dealing with prejudice, the recruiter's thought processes during selection and using the internet. Finally, Part 4 provides a series of valuable resources to assist you in the preparation of your CVs and some useful sources for getting more information on jobs and CVs.

Throughout this book you will see 'Brilliant tips' in boxes. All of these tips come straight from the human resource experts we interviewed and surveyed in our research programme, so you know exactly what the experts want to see! Throughout, and in the last section especially, you will see graphs, figures and tables that report data that have come straight from our studies, so at all times you are getting facts to back up the advice given.

## Notes on the latest edition

We are delighted with the continuing success of this book, which continues to be a best-selling CV guide in the UK. It also has proved popular in the

USA, Australia, China and Vietnam, to name a few countries, and we continually receive emails from readers from right around the globe. We are convinced the success of this book is based upon the sound scientific evidence that we have collected and continue to collect, which informs all of the advice given. It is what sets this book apart from all of the others and, judging by the outstanding success stories we hear from our readers who have followed our model, we are doing something right.

The internet is a great source of information about job vacancies, but it has a long way to go to supersede the convenience of the humble CV. Furthermore, the internet has spawned a lot of total rubbish masquerading as advice to job hunters. If you followed some of this advice (and some of it appears on leading job websites) you could irreparably harm your job prospects. It is worth reflecting that free advice often has the same value – i.e. it is worthless!

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and thus we are most flattered that there now exist publications that have ‘incorporated’ much of the advice and ideas that we have been presenting for the last decade. Ultimately what matters is that you, the job hunter, are given information that has been demonstrated to be effective, and so it is heartening that others see the value in our work and see fit to incorporate it in their own. Issues relating to layout, the analysis of job advertisements in a systematic manner, the use of competency statements, the inclusion of narrative and the metaphor of dating as a model of job hunting have all found their way into the advice now routinely provided to job hunters.

A word about evidence-based and experience-based approaches to job hunting: when we wrote the first edition of *Brilliant CV* we were unaware of any guides that were based upon proper behavioural studies of résumé short-listing. Most books at the time (and still to this day) are simply the opinions of people who claim experience in the field. While experience is useful, it is necessarily narrow and somewhat arbitrary. More recently some imitators have taken to doing surveys asking recruiters what they like to see in a résumé. The trouble with this method is, that what people tell you they will do and what they actually do, can be two very different things. For this reason we went to much greater trouble to set up experiments where recruiters undertook short-listing exercises unaware that we

had carefully manipulated and controlled the résumés they read. By doing this we could see which résumés containing which features were actually short-listed. We also gained access to thousands of real résumés linked to real employment outcomes and carefully analysed the differences between the short-listed ones and the rejected ones. The advice in this book goes way beyond surveys and informal chats with recruiters – and it is far more rigorous and reliable as a result. We wish that more research was done to help job hunters and that more CV guides were truly evidence-based.

Of course we must declare a bias, and say that we think getting information from our particular horse’s mouth is still your best bet! We continue to be actively interested in what best helps the job hunter and to that end we have added yet more material to assist you in navigating an increasingly complex, turbulent and unpredictable labour market.

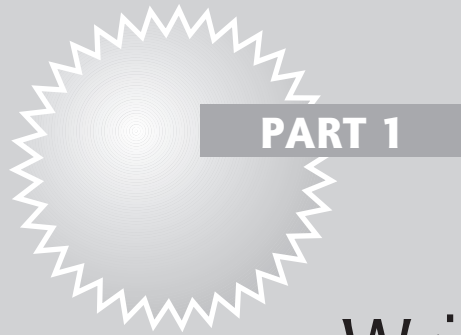
We are thrilled that David has joined the team. David is Head of Corporate Consultancy at The Careers Group, University of London. David has an enviable reputation in the career development world and has led the development of the first careers and employability massive open online course (MOOC) for the University of London, helping over 70,000 people from around the world to take more control of their career development.

We have adapted and rewritten most of the book. Some of the highlights in this edition include:

- specific CV examples
- updated CV research and advice based on the best available peer-reviewed research
- alternative makeover CVs to allow you to choose between different styles reflecting different CV-writing techniques
- updated and online resources
- a brand new approach to writing narratives on your CV – a clever technique that serves as a script for your interview.

In fact there are far too many changes to list here, so the best thing to do is to dive in and start improving your CV right now!

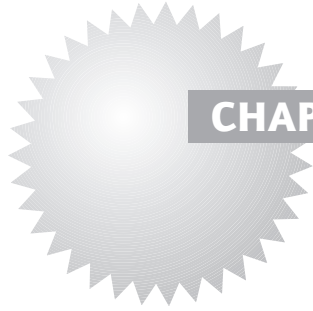




# Writing a CV from scratch

The first part of the book is designed to take you through some of the fundamental stages in putting together your CV. It will be particularly useful for readers who have never attempted to construct a CV before, or for those who have not done so recently. Of course, even if you have a basic CV, it never hurts to revisit first principles to ensure you are building from a strong foundation.





**CHAPTER 1**

# How to sell yourself



**A**ndy Warhol said everybody gets their 15 minutes of fame. The CV is your opportunity to be in the spotlight, but unfortunately most candidates are lucky to get five minutes. It depends on the job and the number of applicants, but recruiters will, on average, spend less than two minutes reading a CV. They'll never admit it publicly, but it is not unheard of for a recruiter to send a CV straight to the waste-paper basket with nothing more than a quick glance.

Your job is to make the most of that tiny window of opportunity to sell yourself to the recruiter. Your CV must sell, sell, sell! It must sell you.

 **brilliant tip**

Remember that you are marketing yourself so, while the integrity of the document is a must, the CV must present your best experience and detail your relevant skills and competencies.

## Standing tall

Some people come over all shy and retiring when we tell them to present themselves at their best. For many people, it is not natural to be forthcoming and assertive. Our language is stacked with words and phrases that reflect this concern – ‘blowing your own trumpet’, ‘bighead’, ‘up yourself’!

The fact of the matter is, you have to sell yourself. Do not think that employers will run to your door, overcome and enchanted by your modesty and understatement.

Still not convinced? Just consider all the other applicants. Will they be equally timid? You have to make your CV better than theirs. You have to make yourself better than them.

Hands up how many of you are thinking: ‘Oh no, I’m being asked to go way over the top, and that’s not me!’

Remember, there are even more ways of selling things than there are ways of skinning cats (and most of them are a lot less noisy).



### brilliant tip

Don’t lay out your life, warts and all, and expect a recruiter to be able to pick through your story, see your inherent skills and marvel at your honesty.

Consider the following three approaches to your CV.

#### Not selling yourself – too negative

*‘I did not enjoy college so I deferred and travelled around for a couple of years. I got to see a lot of different countries but eventually returned home, and I am now seeking a job ...’*

#### Good selling – turning negatives into believable positives

*‘After enrolling at college I was provided with an opportunity to join a crew sailing around the world. I accepted this once-in-a-lifetime challenge, which offered me invaluable lessons in the importance of teamwork, shared responsibility and leadership. I am now seeking to apply these skills ...’*

#### Bad selling – way over the top, unbelievable and undesirable

*‘I found I was not sufficiently challenged by the intellectual rigour of college life and left to pursue more appropriate ventures. I masterminded a round-the-world*

*yacht race and, although there were other crew on board, most would probably agree I was the leader. I can now do wonders for you ...'*

The purpose of checking these three approaches against your CV is to make the point that you should not confuse selling yourself with telling lies, wild exaggeration or deliberately misleading someone.

Selling yourself is about being positive and persuading others to share this view of you.

Suppose you are driving with a friend as a passenger who is getting impatient and wants to know when you'll arrive at your destination. You are halfway there. What do you say to soothe them? If the journey were two miles, then saying, 'Only another one mile to go' would sound better than, 'We're only halfway there'. If the journey were 2,000 miles in total, which would sound better: 'Only another 1,000 miles to go', or 'We're halfway there already'?

Neither statement is untrue, nor misleading, but one serves your purpose well and the other does not. It is the same with CV writing.

 **brilliant tip**

If you cannot say something in a positive way, consider not saying it at all.

### But how positive?

So, selling is important. That said, remember that selling is like perfume – a little used judiciously is attractive and enhances the person, but drown yourself in perfume and it is a big turn-off! The same goes for selling yourself: you need to know when to stop.

The following chapters will go into detail about how best to sell yourself but, before we move on, test yourself on our Over-the-top quiz.

## Over-the-top quiz

Rate each of the ideas using the scale below:

- 1 The work of a sad and deranged mind.
- 2 Not me, but I know someone who would.
- 3 Hmm, sounds interesting, tell me more.
- 4 Who gave you a copy of my CV?

Make your CV stand out by using brightly coloured paper and a really <i>wacky font</i>	1	2	3	4
Get your CV delivered by a bikini-clad woman	1	2	3	4
If you are a bank manager, set out your CV like a cheque-book	1	2	3	4
If you are an architect, design your CV in 3-D, in the form of a house	1	2	3	4
If going for a job in advertising, attach a condom to your CV ('I'm a SAFE bet ...')	1	2	3	4

Now add your points and check your score. How did you do?

**4–5 points** You will lead a long, happy and successful life. You were not tempted by these way over-the-top ways of getting a recruiter's attention. These approaches nearly always fail, despite any rumours you may have heard.

**6–10 points** You are not a bad person, but you have some strange friends or are easily led. Good to see you would not use these methods, but you could offer to rewrite the CVs of those who might be tempted.

**11–15 points** Get help urgently! The help you need can be found below in the section on wacky CVs. Read it carefully and follow the advice.

**16–20 points** To quote from *The Life of Brian*: 'It is people like you wot cause unrest.' Read the following section carefully and, for the sake of your job application, trust us, the wacky way is not the successful way.

## The wacky CV

We have seen and heard of plenty of different ‘way-out’ CVs and, without exception, we would never recommend them. Don’t be tempted, not even for a minute. Some of you might be saying, ‘Well, what’s wrong with that idea?’, or possibly, ‘But you haven’t read my CV!’ Let’s look at each in turn.

### A CV delivered by a bikini-clad woman

If you were going for a job as doorman in the Playboy Club circa 1975, this might just be a good move. Come on!

Anyone using a semi-clad woman to advance their application probably will be written off as insensitive and coarse at best, and a misogynist and chauvinist at worst. Questions of appropriateness and targeting the particular requirements of the position are discussed later.

### Bank manager’s CV set out like a cheque-book

When has being a raging individualist been a prerequisite for working in a bank? A recruiter might ask themselves why a bank manager needed to use gimmicks: what are they hiding? (And how would I get it in the photocopier?)

### Architect’s 3-D CV in the form of a house

This is a bit more understandable but, again, the candidate is risking appearing a bit twee or lightweight. And, of course, there are practical problems for recruiters receiving these sorts of CVs. How do they file or copy them easily?

### Advertising candidate CV with condom attached

Please!

## Using coloured paper or unusual fonts

In a study we conducted with recruiters, all of them hated the unusual CV we showed them – it was on coloured paper and printed with a strange font. When we presented the same CV on white paper in a standard font, all the recruiters were impressed (see Figure 1.1). What is more, they said the unusual CV contained less information, even though the content was the same as the more conventional CV. Recruiters may not even read your pimped up CV!

Findings from other recent independent studies support our results. A recent European study<sup>1</sup> suggests that using a formal versus a creative CV layout almost doubles the applicant's chance of being shortlisted. The advice is clear – use elaborate fonts and be creative with layout at your peril.

You will hear stories of people getting interviews and jobs that they think they got by using gimmicky CVs. These are exceptional cases – do not be tempted.

## Taste test

So, why do recruiters dislike 'wacky' CVs? The answers could fill another book, but there are some examples in life that reinforce this view. First, there is good old taste. A painting by Picasso may be a great work of art to one person, and worse than a child's scribble to another. People's tastes differ. Many people tend to like things that are familiar.

Secondly, people's opinions differ. Just think about politics and sport. In most countries there are two or three political parties that have widespread support and then lots of 'minority interest' parties. Think about the arguments that rage about the selection of sportsmen and women to national teams. How does all this relate to CVs? All we are saying here is that things that are unusual will attract attention – like a Picasso painting or an unusual decision by a selector – and in return will elicit a reaction, positive or negative. If you don't know how the reader will react, why run the risk of rejection unnecessarily?

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<sup>1</sup> Arnulf, J.K., Tegner, L. Larssen, Ø., 'Impression making by résumé layout: Its impact on the probability of being shortlisted', *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 2010, 19 (2), 221–230.

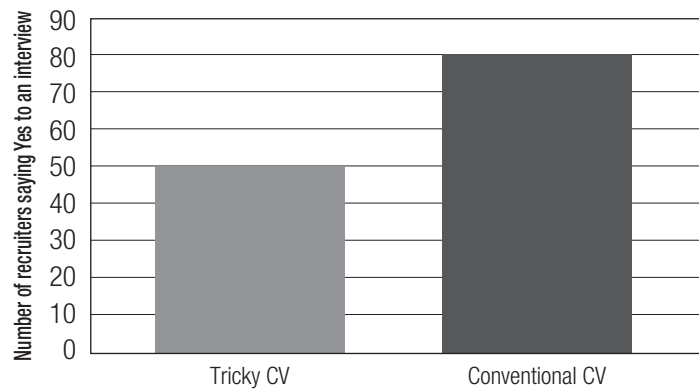
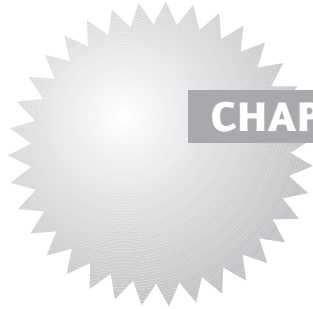


Figure 1.1 Recruiters' responses to unusual CVs

 **brilliant tip**

Never be tempted to use an unusual layout, no matter what stories of success you hear.





## CHAPTER 2

# The applicant— employer fit