

Get that job!

**A How-to Guide from Plain Words
Limited**

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Introduction

This guide is designed to help you write a CV and covering letter or email that will get you that job! It explains what to include and, equally important, what to leave out. You'll learn how to interpret job requirements from an advert and tailor your CV accordingly. There's also the chance to practice what you've learnt using the templates and checklists you'll find at the back of this guide.

Writing a Compelling CV

Andy Warhol once said that everyone 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 have admitted to spending less than two minutes reading a CV. Your job is to make the most of that tiny window of opportunity to sell yourself to the recruiter. Your CV must sell YOU.



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.

How not to do it

Here are some classic lines from unsuccessful CVs:

- ❑ "My sister once won a strawberry-eating contest."
- ❑ "I work well in the nude."
- ❑ "Organised the office lottery entry for five years."
- ❑ "Was sent on an anger management course."

Other bad ideas include printing your CV on blue paper with teddy bears round the edge, pink paper with a Hello Kitty watermark or indeed, almost anything except plain white or buff paper.

How poor are CVs?

How bad can CVs really be? A recent survey by fish4jobs reported that 73 per cent of employers were more irritated by badly written CVs than by applicants who arrived late, wore inappropriate clothes or swore during an interview.

And what constituted badly written CVs?

- ❑ 89% cited grammatical errors
- ❑ 67% hated bad spelling, especially of key words such as their company names
- ❑ 65% were annoyed by irrelevant information
- ❑ 63% mentioned inappropriate email addresses.

Simply by avoiding these problems, you will have an advantage over other job seekers.

Regarding spelling, too many people rely on the spell checker - it's no good for words like their/they're/there or manger/manager. You can find a list of commonly confused words and their meanings at the back of this guide in Appendix B.

What should you leave out?

Here are some examples of what not to include:

- ❑ Secondary school results if you've been to university
- ❑ Negative opinions of current or former employers
- ❑ A letter from your mum (no, we're not kidding)
- ❑ The intensity of your religious views
- ❑ 'References available on request' – this is assumed and just sounds old-fashioned.

Email addresses

And what's an inappropriate email address anyway? Well, how would you feel about hiring lazydaisy@anymail.com or minesapint@somethingmail.com?

You're much better off using your name: FredBloggs@anymail.com. If necessary, create an email address just for your job search and if your name is already taken, use a variation such as FredBloggs123@anymail.com

Your experience

Be specific about what you've done and include details. Include any statistics you can:

- ❑ saved company money by reducing expenditure on widgets
- ❑ reduced widget expenditure by 14% over eight months
- ❑ Account Manager, Sept 05 – present - Managed company's key accounts
- ❑ Account Manager, Sept 05 - present - Managing key accounts worth 3.7m

Relate your experience to the job you're applying for

Read the advert carefully and tailor your CV using the terms, definitions and descriptions the employer uses. Remember that the first sorting of CVs may be done by somebody who is not familiar with the job. They may simply go through a pile of applications and select those that match key terms. If you refer to an essential skill or experience using different words, they may not know enough to realise you're talking about the same thing.

Don't lie, even by omission

There was a case of a council suing someone who said in their CV that they were in good health, but then took a lot of time off work for a pre-existing condition. They eventually retired due to ill-health, with a generous pension. The court case was on the grounds of 'fraudulent or negligent misrepresentation' in answers to questions about medical history.

Understanding the function of a CV

Your CV will never get you the job – you will do that – but you have to get in front of the person who has the power to make the appointment. The role that your CV plays in that process can vary, depending on your approach and who is going to read it.

When responding to an advertised vacancy

When you respond to an advert for a job, you will generally send in your CV together with a covering letter or email. This will determine if you get an initial meeting, either in person or via Zoom, usually with the recruiter. Most recruiters use CVs as a method of ruling people out, rather than in. What's more, many recruiters are now using technology to relieve them of the time-consuming and boring job of conducting the initial screening of CVs.

It is important that you understand how this process works and how to ensure that you get ruled in rather than out by the recruiter – whatever method is used to screen the CVs.

When you are being headhunted

When an appointment is being headhunted, you will normally have spoken either to a researcher or a consultant who is handling the assignment before you provide the CV. Then you can normally send in your CV, or take it with you to a face-to-face meeting. Either way, you should have learnt a fair amount about the job in the telephone conversation before you submit your CV. Also, don't forget that headhunters rarely pass your CV on to the client. Instead they prepare their own report on you, which you may never see.

You can of course send your CV to a headhunter on spec. In this case it will be used to decide whether to put you into their database.

When you are networking

When you are networking in person you can take your CV along to meetings to give copies to your network contacts, which they may in turn pass onto other people who may be looking to recruit staff.

When you are making speculative applications

Speculative applications work best when you send a letter to possible contacts or companies. You can take a CV along to any meetings you get or email it before a Zoom call. Your CV would then most likely be used as a reference during the meeting to provide some sort of structure when investigating your experience and skills.

What all this means is that one CV cannot fulfil all these roles.

Who are you and what have you got?

When creating a CV, most people describe their duties, rather than their achievements. Potential employers are more interested in your achievements than your duties.

The first thing to do is to make a list of everything you have to 'sell' to a potential employer. Don't just think about your current or last job, or even just about your career to date. Think about every aspect of your life, including business, community, social and leisure activities. List all the following:

❑ **Qualifications**

You shouldn't have any problems here. Also remember to add any memberships of professional institutes.

❑ **Experience**

This has two aspects to it: what you have done and where you have done it. The where covers the sector (eg public, private or voluntary), the types of products or services, and the size and kind of organisation (local or national government, owner managed company, partnership, family owned business, public quoted company etc).

Listing all your duties and tasks to get to your experience can take a while. However, you never know just what might be required to plug an otherwise awkward gap. For example, a job you are applying for may call for experience of committee work. You may not have had this experience in your business life, but you may have served on one in connection with a sporting or voluntary organisation.

❑ **Achievement**

Although you don't want to brag in your CV, you can do yourself damage by being too modest. Think of every accomplishment that has given you a little glow of pride. Again, don't confine yourself purely to your career. Consider all aspects of your life. In an interview, your attributes can be seriously strengthened by bringing in examples drawn from outside the working environment, such as a community or sporting activity.

❑ **Skills**

Analyse your achievements to see which aptitudes and personal qualities contributed to the success in question. Most people undersell themselves on skills. Here are some to start you off:

People skills	Communication skills
advising counselling interviewing managing mediating motivating persuading training	drafting reports reviewing and editing reports servicing meetings: agendas and minutes writing promotional material, newsletters, brochures etc oral presentation to meetings public speaking foreign languages

Now do the same for other skills: analytical, computer, negotiating, numerical, organisational, planning and so on. Don't forget things like delegation, running meetings and developing new business Personal strengths – this can be even harder than the previous skills section. If your achievements seem a bit thin in this area, give some thought to what made a difference to successes you have had.

❑ **Ways in which you have developed over the years**

This follows on from your strengths. Many of your qualities have developed as you have climbed your career ladder. Detailed below is how skills may have developed in the accountancy world:

Role	Qualities
Accountant	accuracy, thoroughness, honesty.
Financial Controller	ability to analyse and interpret figures, make forecasts, communicate with non-accountants
Financial Director	development of vision, formulation of strategies and policies, negotiate with financial institutions

- ❑ **Any other assets**, eg business and personal contacts which may be of use.

Having done this exercise comprehensively you will now find that rather than having too little information, you now probably have rather too much! The trick here is to take the relevant information to customise your CV for each job application. Think of this as your personal asset register from which you can select the relevant skills.

What to include and what to leave out

What to include

❑ **Personal profile**

You can start to stand out from the crowd by devising your own Unique Selling Proposition (USP). You know why you are just the right person for the job. If you don't know what your USP is, how can you expect your potential employer to?

- ❑ Go back to your asset register, look at your experience and the organisations you have worked for to find those that most closely match the job in question.
- ❑ Now add some personal strengths that are relevant. Make sure you match this to the job, for example there is no point in saying you are dynamic and entrepreneurial when what they want is a safe pair of hands.
- ❑ Now take another look at your asset register and add a few carefully selected achievements.

❑ **Skills and achievements summary**

These should be customised to the job you are applying for. Review your asset register and select those that are relevant to the job. See the next chapter to learn how to achieve a good 'fit' with the job in question.

❑ **Career history**

- ❑ For each employer state your job title. Unless the organisation is a household name, indicate its size and what it does.
- ❑ Concentrate on achievements rather than your duties. Think about why the organisation was better off for your contribution and get this across in a succinct manner.
- ❑ Go into more detail with your current and most recent position, (unless an earlier job is particularly relevant to your application) and include progressively less as you work backwards. If you had several short periods of employment at the beginning of your career, summarise them rather than listing individually.

What to leave out

Be ruthless about removing anything in your CV that you don't need to mention. Here are some examples:

- ❑ Only list leisure interests if they positively strengthen your application, for example if you are actively involved in professional and trade associations. Also include hobbies that demonstrate qualities like fitness and tenacity. Anything else tends to add clutter. Oddball interests can be a liability.
- ❑ Political or religious affiliations should be kept private.
- ❑ Only add voluntary or community work if it is relevant. While a potential employer may admire your public spiritedness, others may fear a conflict of interest with the demands of your new job.
- ❑ You don't need to provide references unless they are requested.
- ❑ Addresses and telephone numbers of your current or past employers are not required.
- ❑ Don't include jargon or abbreviations that may be meaningless to the person reading the CV.
- ❑ Remove details of your remuneration. You could under- or over-price yourself, so only discuss this if asked. If you are asked to include it, deal with it in your covering letter or email.
- ❑ Reasons why you left previous jobs can be a minefield. Discuss these at interview, and only if asked.

- ❑ Be cautious with career goals and ambitions. Unless they match the specific job leave them out.
- ❑ If you make a statement in your CV, you may be asked to justify it in the interview. Don't include anything you can't prove.
- ❑ Explain gaps between jobs, otherwise people may jump to an unfavourable conclusion.
- ❑ Avoid lies. You can sometimes get away with being economical with the truth, but it is too much of a risk to be caught out being deceptive. It will certainly end your chances of the job in question. Most recruiters will check qualifications, while other matters – dates of employment, details of salary and benefits – will be verified by taking up references.

Writing style—what is appropriate for a CV?

Presentation is not all about layout. It is also about the words you use – and the ones you choose not to use.

- ❑ **Every word must earn its place**
Starting from the top. Do you have to put Curriculum Vitae? Do they need to be told this is your CV? Couldn't you just head it up with your name?
- ❑ **I and me**
The problem with using these words is that they tend to get over used and you may sound egocentric. Make sure the document is reader-centred not you-centred. Equally, avoid writing in the third person – as if someone else had written the CV for you (eg Bloggs spent 5 years as a shelf stacker in the local supermarket). The trick is to remove 'I' and 'me', but also a lot of other unnecessary words like 'a', 'an' and 'the' by using note form.
 - ✗ *I installed a fully computerised accounting system which resulted in a reduction in the amount of time it took to produce the monthly reporting package from thirteen days to seven days.*
 - ✓ *Installed fully computerised accounting system, reducing time taken to produce monthly report from 13 days to 7.*
- ❑ **Write in note form**
Writing in note form ensures that you avoid long sentences and heavy wedges of solid text. It also encourages you to use bullet points throughout your CV – in your personal profile, skills and achievement summaries and career history.
- ❑ **Economise on space**
Your reader needs to get to the important stuff quickly. You should be able to get your address on one line. Another line can hold your numbers and possibly your email address.

❑ **Use the right words**

Try to use words that precisely convey exactly what you are trying to say. This can give you a sense of individualism that can make you stand out from the crowd. Don't forget you can use a thesaurus to select just the word you want to use.

Here are some useful words you can use:

Achievement	Initiative	Leadership	Problem Solving
accelerated accomplished achieved attained carried out completed conducted delivered demonstrated doubled effected enhanced enlarged exceeded expanded expedited finished implemented improved increased negotiated obtained perfected performed produced secured succeeded surpassed tripled won	created designed devised established extended formulated generated improvised initiated instituted introduced launched originated pioneered redesigned setup started	controlled developed directed drove guided headed inspired led managed organised revitalised undertook	analysed corrected cut eliminated ended evaluated examined identified investigated refined reduced reorganised repositioned reshaped resolved restructured revamped reviewed revised simplified solved streamlined strengthened tackled traced trimmed turned around uncovered unified used



For more 'power words' see Appendix A.

Avoiding common grammatical and punctuation mistakes

Why bother? Firstly, to avoid ambiguity and secondly because some people get very worked up about it! You don't want to lose the opportunity of a job interview, because you haven't checked your CV properly.

Ambiguity examples

- ✘ *Pilots, whose minds are dull, do not usually live long.*
- ✓ *Pilots whose minds are dull do not usually live long.*

- ✘ *The mummy said the archaeologist was encased in a lead coffin.*
- ✓ *The mummy, said the archaeologist, was encased in a lead coffin.*

- ✘ *The air was full of bacteria carrying dust particles.*
- ✓ *The air was full of bacteria-carrying dust particles.*

Apostrophes

Apostrophes have two uses:

1. Possession (who owns what):

- ☐ David's dog
- ☐ James's cat
- ☐ The ladies' coats

2. Contraction (missing letters):

- ☐ I'm = I am
- ☐ we've = we have
- ☐ shan't = shall not

An exception to possession is possessive pronouns:

- ☐ its
- ☐ his
- ☐ hers
- ☐ ours
- ☐ yours

Punctuating lists

For short points use a colon (:) followed by the list with no punctuation. If your list is part of a sentence you can:

- ❑ put a colon after the introduction;
 - ❑ put a semi colon or comma after each point;
 - ❑ start each point lower case;
 - ❑ put an 'and' or 'or' at the end of the penultimate point; and
 - ❑ put a full stop at the end of the last point.

Some people consider this old-fashioned. An alternative is no punctuation after each bullet and just a full stop at the end.

Only use numbers where:

- ❑ You refer your reader back to them later
- ❑ The list is a series of steps done in an order
- ❑ It shows a list of things in order of importance

Spelling

Don't rely totally on your spell-checker!

*I have a spelling checker. It came with my PC.
It plainly marks four my revue mistakes I cannot sea.
I've run this poem threw it. I'm sure your pleased to no.
Its letter perfect in it's weigh. My checker tolled me sew.*

Infinitives

An infinitive is the word 'to' followed by a verb. The two words should be kept together:

- ✘ to quickly and correctly enter the values...
- ✓ to enter the values quickly and correctly...

Things that make some people cross...

- ❑ The greengrocer's apostrophe
- ❑ The wrong 'its'
- ❑ Split infinitives

- ❑ Sexist language
- ❑ Americanisms

Help is at hand!

If you struggle with spelling, grammar or punctuation, check out:

- ❑ **Apostrophe Catastrophe** – a FREE self-study course that demonstrates our fool-proof process for determining when and when not to use an apostrophe.
https://www.plainwords.co.uk/co_apostrophe.html
- ❑ **Sharpen Up Your Grammar!** – this half-day tutor-led course covers the core concepts of grammar, punctuation and sentence building. It will increase your confidence by helping you to recognise and avoid many frequent errors.
https://www.plainwords.co.uk/co_sharpen_grammar.html

Proofing your own work

Proofing your own work is not recommended. You are too familiar with the content and are likely to miss errors. You read what you expect to see rather than what is actually on the page. This is because we have a natural survival skill called 'visual closure', which enables us to create a complete message from partial input. Cavemen who could infer a sabre-tooth tiger from a flash of stripe in the jungle lived to pass on their genes.

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mttar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteres are in the rghit pcleas. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by it slef but the wrod as a wlohe.

Hints for proofreading

Schedule time: this is a valid part of the writing process, not an afterthought!

If possible, leave time between finishing the writing and starting to check. You spot many more mistakes if you can leave a day between tasks. Try to schedule the time when you're not too tired: you can spot much more when you're alert, and proofreading needs concentration.

Make the text look unfamiliar: re-display the text in a much smaller point size. This stops you scanning sentences and reading what you expect to see. Also, it forces you to look at each word.

Read through the whole document several times. Check for something specific each time, for example:

- ❑ Check layout and formatting, white space, consistent use of fonts.
- ❑ Check headings, headers, footers, captions – are headings and sub-headings consistent? What about capitalisation of names, job titles or processes?
- ❑ Read for meaning, logical flow of arguments, making sure you haven't copied and pasted and left the text in more than one place.
- ❑ Have you checked to make sure you haven't used any acronyms that may not be understood?

Spread the proofreading tasks over more than one session. Breaks help you to stay alert. If you're tired, you'll find yourself skimming the material.

How to make it look good

Good presentation will never make up for weak content, but it is easy to ruin strong content by poor presentation.

Your CV should be smart, positive and professional, and convey an image of efficiency. Give some thought to the following:

- ❑ **Length**
A couple of pages should be enough, three at the most. If you need to include technical information (for example to IT people, academics, or scientists), then do so in an appendix attached to the end of your CV. Do not include copies of reference letters, detailed job descriptions or certificates relating to professional qualifications.
- ❑ **Spacing**
Do not sacrifice legibility for brevity. Three well spaced pages using bullets, indents clear margins etc, will be more favourably received than two cramped ones.
- ❑ **Priority**
You want to capture your readers and make sure they read to the end of your CV. Remember to put some of the really interesting details on the first page. Only provide the absolute minimum of personal details (name, address, telephone number, professional qualifications, relevant educational details), then go to your strongest selling point for this job. Include a succinct personal profile, a skills summary and your most relevant experience and achievements.

□ **Typography**

Stick to a single typeface. Mixing typefaces creates a messy looking CV. Choose a businesslike typeface like Arial and use a size that will not cause eye strain – for example 11 point. You can achieve some variety by using capitalisation and boldening. Avoid italic and underlining as they can contribute to a messy looking CV.

There is a huge range of example CVs and templates that you can download from the internet and use for free. We recommend that you have a look around go to find one that you like.

It's All About What They Want

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.

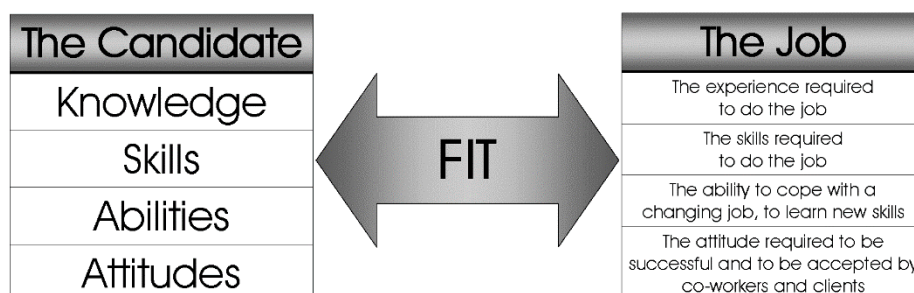
Understanding how recruiters read CVs

So, how do recruiters decide between CVs when they are shortlisting? Although not everyone follows the same procedure, here are some of the most common strategies used when shortlisting:

- ❑ Review the covering letter to identify:
 - ❑ The standard of writing and ability to address advertisement requirements.
 - ❑ The quality of written words and the structure of the covering letter.
 - ❑ Relevant experience.
 - ❑ Evidence of activities that indicate the nature of the applicant.
- ❑ Review academic qualifications, followed by a scan of the CV.
- ❑ Identify recent work experience. Look for experience that mirrors the requirements of the job.
- ❑ Match the candidate's competencies and skills. Gauge candidate's level of achievement, responsibility, team involvement etc.

Why you need to tailor your CV

The function of a CV is to find out if you are a good 'fit' for the job being advertised. Recruiters are always looking for a good 'fit' between an employee and employer. Here is a diagram which illustrates this concept of fit:



Factors in finding the right fit

The best candidate for a job will be the one who matches all the requirements of the job. The four different qualities that employers are looking for are:

- ❑ **Knowledge**
This refers to the experience and qualifications that you possess.
- ❑ **Skills**
This is the demonstrated skills you have (perhaps evidenced by your qualifications).
- ❑ **Abilities**
This shows your potential to carry out a range of different tasks beyond your immediate skills and knowledge, and the degree to which you can take on new tasks successfully or be trained in new methods or equipment.
- ❑ **Attitudes**
This is an indication of your personality, and the degree to which you are enthusiastic, flexible, and positive in approach.

So you can see that just setting out your life history in a CV is unlikely to offer the best fit. This is why it is so important to tailor your CV to a particular position – to increase the fit between you and the job.

Reading their requirements accurately—how to decode job ads

To produce the best 'fitting' CV you need to know about yourself and you need to know about the job you are applying for. So how do we find out what is required to do the job? It is important to think about what the employer is looking for and then reflect that in your CV.

Sources of information about a job and company

The main source of information about a job and company is normally from:

- ❑ a job advertisement
- ❑ a job description
- ❑ a friend in the company
- ❑ the media
- ❑ the internet
- ❑ gossip and rumour
- ❑ someone already doing the job or similar

How to analyse the job advert – seven magic questions

Job advertisements and descriptions are clues to what the employer is looking for. There are seven magic questions:

- 1. Is there anything you don't understand about the advert?**

This could be jargon that you don't understand. As a rule you can find an explanation of most jargon on the internet. Their importance to the job can be gleaned from the position they have in the advert. For example, if the jargon word appears next to the description of qualifications required, it will mean this is a skill you will need. If it appears with the contact details, or near to a description of the company then it may refer to general conditions of employment.
- 2. What type of industry or company is it and what's happening currently?**

There can be clues to this in the job ad – for example if they refer to their 'European division' and ask for experience of multi-nationals you can guess this is a global company. The job may involve overseas travel. Make sure you investigate the company on the internet.
- 3. What is the main purpose of the role?**

This is usually listed in the job advert.
- 4. Why is this role important to the company?**

Think about how important this role is to the company – what sort of an impact will the company expect?
- 5. What types of skills do they want and what other skills might be needed?**

Review the job advert to find out what skills are listed as being required. Sometimes you can make reasonable assumptions, for example if the job is for a trainer, then you can assume that there is a good chance that you will be asked to produce clear training materials and have good communication skills. If the advert mentions the word 'strategic' they may require general business and commercial awareness.
- 6. What personal qualities do they want and what other qualities might be needed?**

Look for adjectives that may describe personal skills. For example, 'dynamic' may mean they are looking for someone who can motivate others and generally be enthusiastic. Communication and team player skills mean you need to get on well with others, speak well and write well.
- 7. What knowledge and training do they want and what other knowledge/training might be needed?**

Do you have the necessary qualifications and training to do the job well? They may not list specific requirements, but you can often make an educated guess based on the requirements of the job.

How to tailor your CV

Each time you need to submit a CV ask yourself the following questions:

- ❑ What am I selling?
- ❑ To whom am I selling it?
- ❑ Why do they need what I have to offer?
- ❑ Why should they go for me rather than other candidates?

Being positive

Consider the following three approaches to your CV:

Too negative	I did not enjoy college so I deferred and travelled 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 given 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 those 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 work wonders for your organisation ...

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

They want me to fill in a form! I hate filling in forms!

Sometimes – even in the early stages of your application – you may be asked to complete a form either online or on paper.

Because so many applicants either refuse to complete the form, or make excuses or a very bad job of it, this is another area where you can excel.

Generally, employers will only ask you to complete a form for a good reason. This is often because they want to have every applicant's key

information in a standard format, or they may need to gather information to form part of a personnel file. It can also demonstrate that they are operating an equal opportunities policy.

Use the form to create a good impression and use the following checklist:

- ❑ **Read the whole form thoroughly**
Pay special attention to requirements like listing your career in chronological or reverse chronological order. Check whether you can refer to your CV in certain places rather than repeating information, or if they prefer you transfer the information for them.
- ❑ **Do not type/write information straight into the form**
Draft your answers on blank paper or, better still, download or photocopy the form. Leave your draft for 24 hours before checking it and making amendments. Only then should you copy over the information to the actual form.
- ❑ **In the case of paper forms, pay attention to neatness and layout**
Do not try to type your answers. They rarely line up properly and can look messy.
- ❑ **Take every opportunity to tailor your answers to the advertisement**
Include information you have gathered through research and the value you can add to the company.
- ❑ **Make optimum use of any open questions**
These are questions that invite you to state how you believe you match the requirements of the job or provide any further information you consider relevant. A lot of candidates fail to make the most of this opportunity to shine, so make sure you don't miss out.

Don't forget that application forms can be used to expose matters which candidates have accidentally, or deliberately, omitted from their CVs. This can include things like gaps in their employment history, health problems or the lack of a driving licence due to a court ban. If you fail to answer this sort of question, it is generally an invitation to the interviewer to probe more deeply. It is best to have an open approach, volunteering the facts but providing an explanation of any circumstances that will limit any potential damage.

Writing the Covering Letter or Email

The CV is NOT the first thing that the employer reads, it is of course the covering letter, so like any other sales piece you have about five seconds to grab their attention. After all they have a lot of CVs to get through!

Your covering letter's only job is to get your CV read. This letter tells your next employer 'I can do this job because of my experience'. It tells them how you meet their corporate requirements by relating your experience directly to the organisation.

Normally the covering letter will be read before the CV. This means it is the best place to emphasise your key achievements and to make sure you emphasise the 'fit' between you and the job.

Letter or email, which is best?

Most employers are happy to receive covering letters and CVs electronically via email. This can speed up the recruitment process and save money too. But always make sure that the company is happy to accept electronic covering letters and CVs.

One downside to sending a covering email rather than a covering letter is that when it is printed it does not look as attractive as a normal letter. You can get around this by sending a covering letter as an attachment along with your CV and just use the email to explain that the covering letter and CV are attached.

Don't forget that CVs sent electronically may not be as secure as those sent by conventional mail. If your application is very sensitive, you should consider this. Many companies routinely monitor their employees' email and internet usage, making this a less secure medium. Your current employer may take a dim view of your using their technology to apply for a job with another company. Besides, you don't really want others to know your business. You can get around this by sending it from home if you have the right equipment there, or you could use an internet café.

Another consideration is the format that you send your documents in. If you send them as Word files, they can easily print out quite differently at their destination from the way they do on your system, if you use a template or styles that the recipient doesn't have. Make sure this doesn't happen by sending them as PDF files. You can buy software that makes PDFs and you can also download freeware that does the same thing.

One size won't fit all—covering letters for different situations

A covering letter is a letter of introduction, and you should never send your CV without one. This letter is what tells the employer what type of job you're interested in and in what way you are qualified for that position. Very few employers look at CVs that are not accompanied by a covering letter.

The more dynamic and professionally written your letter is, the more likely the employer is to consider your application. It's the most important part of your 'sales package', it is you.

It is important to write an original letter for each job application. This is because the covering letter should be tailored to the requirements of the job. It should lay out quite clearly why you are the best person for the job – why you are the best 'fit'.

Be specific about how you can contribute to the company. If everyone else makes woolly and clichéd statements, you will stand out by being specific. Make sure your letter answers the question 'Why should I be hired?'

Laying out your covering letter

Your letter should always be to a named person. If someone has referred you to the company, mention them by name.

A covering letter clearly signposts and highlights specific parts of your CV, making short, sharp and incisive connections back to their needs. It gives a brief overview of your understanding of the company and the role and states clearly why you are applying. You must inspire and grab their attention in only three to four paragraphs.

A strong opening paragraph must provide evidence of the 'fit' between you and them.

In the second paragraph make sure you explicitly refer to any particular skills, knowledge, experience or competencies they are looking for. Tell them you have what they want.

In the third paragraph express your interest in helping the company do more and the part you'd play in their ongoing success. Convey to them that you want to work for them and not just anyone in their industry.

You need to round it off with a call to action that is polite and firm but not pushy.

Observing email etiquette

When sending a CV and a covering letter via email you must still observe the usual email etiquette. Here is a list of things to remember:

- ❑ The subject line should contain the job title and your name so that the purpose of the email is clear.
- ❑ Address the email to the correct person and don't copy in anyone who is not part of the selection process.
- ❑ The email greeting should be appropriate. If you don't know the people involved an opening of 'Hi Sue' will not be appropriate. Much better to use the slightly more formal 'Dear Ms Smith'.

- ❑ Make sure your email is no longer than one screen of information: many people only read what they can see in the preview window.
- ❑ Use bullet points and headings where appropriate.
- ❑ Always include a signature which contains your name, address, email address and telephone number.



Make sure you have an appropriate email address to use for your job search.

How to get your application noticed—they won't be fooled by gimmicks

Many applicants say little more in their covering letter than that they are interested in the job in question and that they are enclosing, as requested, their CV.

However, put yourself in the shoes of the recruiter having to read a pile of two or three hundred applications, looking for a handful of key criteria which can rule the candidate either in or out. If someone has listed their attributes for you this can make the job a lot easier.

If the advert calls for five criteria and you only possess four, just list those out and ignore the other one. Since most recruiters sift applications into three piles on the first screening – probables, possibles and rejects – you should at least end up in the possibles.

Assuming you are a reasonably close match, here is the way to go straight to the probables pile.

- ❑ **Avoid being too familiar**
Although most recruiters put their full name in their ads, they usually prefer to be referred to in a more formal manner to start with. So stick to the Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms.
- ❑ **Use a clear heading or subject line**
Include the title of the advert, the publication it appeared in, and any reference number.
- ❑ **Catch the reader's attention in the first sentence**
Demonstrate that you have a genuine reason for being attracted to this specific position. Do not just say 'I wish to apply for...' Say something like 'I was particularly interested in your advertisement because I enjoy the challenge of extensively restructuring manufacturing facilities while operating to tight deadlines.'
- ❑ **Now go straight to the main body of the letter**
Show how you match the requirements of the post. We recommend you use a bullet point format rather than solid text. It is easier for the reader to take in.
- ❑ **End with a brief but positive sentence**
For example, 'I would welcome the opportunity to meet you to discuss this position further'.

Application letter rules

Remember these do's and don'ts when writing your covering letter:

Do:

- ❑ Address the letter to a named individual. (Find out who would be looking at your CV.) The addressee must be correct – do not cut and paste letters.
- ❑ Write an original letter, not something that's been copied from somewhere, or mass produced.
- ❑ You must write a new one for each job application.
- ❑ The date must be correct.
- ❑ The letter should be as well laid out as your CV.
- ❑ Unless a handwritten response is specifically asked for, you should type your letters.
- ❑ Use simple and uncomplicated language, avoiding unnecessary words.
- ❑ Use action verbs.
- ❑ If responding to an ad or posting, tailor the letter to the requirements of the job.
- ❑ Keep it brief. No more than a page and well under a full page. If you are emailing, then shorten it so it fits one screen.
- ❑ Be specific about how you can contribute to the company.
- ❑ Say where you can be reached.
- ❑ Your letter should answer the question 'why should I be hired?'
- ❑ Make sure you personally sign each of your letters. It can look better if you sign in an ink colour that is different from the one used for your letter text.
- ❑ Proofread your letter, or ask someone else to, to make sure you have made no obvious mistakes.

Don't:

- ❑ Use a sexist salutation (eg Sir, or Gentlemen)
- ❑ Use clichés (eg enclosed is my CV)
- ❑ Repeat what's in your CV. Your cover letter should only highlight the points relevant to the position.
- ❑ Send a letter with typos, misspellings, or wrong grammar.

- ❑ Forget to personally sign the letter.
- ❑ Expect the employer to take action first. You should act and request an interview or follow up.

Help to Get You Started

What do you have to offer?

Use this form to list to 'brainstorm' your CV before you start to write it. The different headings will help you think about what to include and how to structure it.

Qualifications
Experience
Achievement
Skills – remember the following skills: people, communication, analytical, computer, negotiating, numerical, organisational, planning skills
Personal strengths
Ways in which you have developed over the years
Any other assets

Write a personal profile

Using the information in Writing a Compelling CV write a personal profile for the job you currently hold, or the previous job you held. Think about what your USP might be to get you this job.

Practising note form

Write out in note form three achievements from your current or most recent job.

Example:

- ✘ I installed a fully computerised accounting system which resulted in a reduction in the amount of time it took to produce the monthly reporting package from thirteen days to seven days.
- ✓ Installed fully computerised accounting system, reducing time taken to produce monthly report from 13 days to 7.

Check your grammar

Exercise 1: Use the right word

Using the wrong word can quickly erode your credibility. Here's a quiz to help you brush up your knowledge of English.

For each sentence below, choose the correct word:

1. I couldn't tell **weather/whether** she was serious or not.
2. **They're/There/Their** are too many possible answers to this question.
3. Reading that book had a peculiar **affect/effect** on Monica.
4. I'm afraid I'm going to **loose/lose** my grandmother's wedding ring.
5. My brother has been **laying/lying** in bed all morning.
6. It's usually colder **than/then** this in February.
7. When **you're/your** finished, proceed/precede to the next question.
8. Her remarks seemed **insipid/incipient**, and we chose to ignore them.
9. If you have doubts about the values **that/which** our organisation embraces, you should leave.
10. If I had that kind of money, I would **flaunt/flout** it.

Exercise 2: Use the right punctuation

Test your punctuation skill with these questions.

1. Jane has too many ____ in her sales letter.
 - a) I and me's
 - b) Is' and Mes'
 - c) I's and me's
2. ____ not where we're going, ____ where we've been.
 - a) It's ... its
 - b) Its ... its
 - c) It's ... it's
3. Is the contract ____ or Val's?
 - a) her's
 - b) hers
 - c) hers'

4. 'To date, IT staff have almost completed the systems analysis'.
In the sentence above, the comma
- a) is necessary
 - b) is optional
 - c) should not be used
5. Which sentence is correct?
- a) The manager, who developed the new data files will hold a meeting today.
 - b) The manager, who developed the new data files, will hold a meeting today.
 - c) The manager who developed the new data files will hold a meeting today.
6. Please don't ____ I haven't finished the song yet.
- a) leave,
 - b) leave;
 - c) leave; because
7. Which sentence is correct?
- a) Please bring: your ticket, photo ID and traveller's cheques.
 - b) Please bring, your ticket, photo ID and travellers cheques.
 - c) Please bring the following items: your ticket, photo ID and traveller's cheques.
8. The lab technician reports ____ of bacteria.
- a) steadily increasing levels
 - b) steadily-increasing levels
 - c) steadily increasing-levels
9. Maria's mother was born in the late ____.
- a) 1920's
 - b) 1920s
 - c) 1920s'
10. Which sentence is correct?
- a) The house which has the cute gnomes in the front garden sold for very little.
 - b) The house, which has the cute gnomes in the front garden sold for very little.
 - c) The house that has the cute gnomes in the front garden sold for very little.

Check your grammar – How did you do?

Exercise 1: Use the right word

1. whether
2. there
3. effect
4. lose
5. lying
6. than
7. you're, proceed
8. insipid
9. that
10. flaunt

Exercise 2: Use the right punctuation

1. (c) Jane has too many I's and me's in her sales letter.
2. (c) It's not where were going, it's where we've been.
3. (b) Is the contract hers or Val's?
4. (a) 'To date, IT staff have almost completed the systems analysis'.
In the sentence above, the comma is necessary.
5. The answer depends on whether the clause "who developed the new data files" is an essential or non-essential clause. If it is an essential (also known as restrictive) clause then this is correct:
(c) The manager who developed the new data files will hold a meeting today.

If it is a non-essential (or non-restrictive clause) then this is correct:
(b) The manager, who developed the new data files, will hold a meeting today.
6. (b) Please don't leave; I haven't finished the song yet.
7. (c) Please bring the following items: your ticket, photo ID and traveller's cheques.
8. (a) The lab technician reports steadily increasing levels of bacteria.
9. (b) Maria's mother was born in the late 1920s.
10. (c) The house that has the cute gnomes in the front yard sold for very little.

Finding the 'Fit'

Below are three candidates who have applied for a sales job in a chemist. From reading their CVs, the employer has listed each candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities in a grid, next to the job requirements. Which candidate fits the job best?

	Job requirements	Ali	Liz	Jane
Knowledge	Knows how a cash register works. Knows procedures for dealing with customers.	Degree in English, worked part-time in a burger bar for 18 months.	Worked in father's hardware store for 10 years.	Worked in a shoe store for 3 years.
Skills	Numeracy. Good communication skills.	Easily able to handle cash and card transactions.	Easily able to handle cash and card transactions.	Easily able to handle cash and card transactions.
Abilities	To learn to process credit cards, electronic transactions.	No difficulty learning new skills.	No evidence of learning new skills.	Probably able to deal with new payment methods with some training.
Attitude	Polite, punctual, trustworthy, calm.	Strong-minded, self-confident, assertive.	Honest, a bit aloof at times.	Calm, honest, level headed.
Degree of fit				

Finding the 'Fit' – How did you do?

We think that Ali is the weakest candidate. He has the best academic qualifications, but these are unnecessary for the position offered. Although Ali could easily learn new skills and accommodate changing demands in the job, the comment in Ali's CV "I am a strong minded person who is not afraid to stand my ground in disputes", gave an unfortunate impression of someone who may be argumentative with the general public.

Liz clearly has a lot of experience in retail, but in a very different area. There could be some concerns with her ability to deal with customers sensitively. There does not appear to be much in the way of development of new skills in the last ten years, and little evidence that she would adapt to new payment processes easily.

Jane looks like the strongest candidate. She has the necessary experience, and should be able to adapt to most new processes with training. She is not over- or under-qualified for the job and seems to be the best prospect.

	Job requirements	Ali	Liz	Jane
Knowledge	Knows how a cash register works. Knows procedures for dealing with customers.	Degree in English, worked part-time in a burger bar for 18 months.	Worked in father's hardware store for 10 years.	Worked in a shoe store for 3 years.
Skills	Numeracy. Good communication skills.	Easily able to handle cash and card transactions.	Easily able to handle cash and card transactions.	Easily able to handle cash and card transactions.
Abilities	To learn to process credit cards, electronic transactions.	No difficulty learning new skills.	No evidence of learning new skills.	Probably able to deal with new payment methods with some training.
Attitude	Polite, punctual, trustworthy, calm.	Strong-minded, self-confident, assertive.	Honest, a bit aloof at times.	Calm, honest, level headed.
Degree of fit		POOR	AVERAGE	GOOD

When you set out job requirements as clearly as this, it is easy to see how you can start to mould your CV to match the job. Each of the candidates above could make themselves the best candidate by altering their CVs.

How to decipher a job advert

Evaluate this job advert to find out what the company is looking for:

Sales Representatives

CBA Co in Birmingham requires Sales Representatives to expand their sales to corporate clients. While experience in the waste industry is not essential, a proven sales and service ability in the above market would be a clear advantage. You should be highly motivated and focused on building a client base. You understand that success comes from building relationships with customers and tenaciously developing and promoting waste solutions to a wide industry client base. The position suits a practical results-driven achiever who seeks an attractive remuneration package.

Send your CV to: Fred Bloggs, Bloggs Recruitment, PO Box 133, Birmingham, B4 7UH

1. Check terminology

2. Type of industry/company

3. Main purpose of the job

4. Importance of role to the company

5. Skills wanted

6. Personal qualities wanted

7. Knowledge/training wanted

How to decipher a job advert – How did you do?

Sales Representatives

CBA Co in Birmingham requires Sales Representatives to expand their sales to corporate clients. While experience in the waste industry is not essential, a proven sales and service ability in the above market would be a clear advantage. You should be highly motivated and focused on building a client base. You understand that success comes from building relationships with customers and tenaciously developing and promoting waste solutions to a wide industry client base. The position suits a practical results-driven achiever who seeks an attractive remuneration package.

Send your CV to: Fred Bloggs, Bloggs Recruitment, PO Box 133, Birmingham, B4 7UH

1. Check terminology

There is little or no jargon here. The main issue is to ensure that you understand what they mean by 'corporate clients'. (It probably means big business, but may just refer to the fact that you are selling to other companies rather than the general public).

2. Type of industry/company

CBA Co – Waste management company. Exactly what products and services do they offer? How can you find out? You could call them for a brochure, or investigate them on the internet. Do you know anyone who works in the waste industry?

3. Main purpose of the job

Selling waste disposal services to corporate clients. This will probably involve persuading companies to use your company to collect their waste and/or dispose of it.

4. Importance of role to the company

Expanding sales via building and servicing a new client base. This sales position is crucial for many companies, because without customers there is no business.

5. Skills wanted

The sorts of skills required will include: selling skills – securing new clients, customer service – looking after existing clients, problem-solving – identifying opportunities for new clients.

6. Personal qualities wanted

You need to be the type of person who will go and look for new opportunities (motivated), bounce back after set-backs (tenacious) and have a need to achieve goals or meet sales targets (achievement-orientated). This may be important if your salary contains an element of commission.

7. Knowledge/training wanted

Knowledge of the waste industry. This could be quite technical – if no experience is available you must be prepared to learn about a new business which could involve training. Know who your competitors are and likely good clients. Knowing how to build a client base or network is also important.

Appendix A – Power Words Help You Write a Winning CV

Personal Qualities to put on a CV

Here's a list of words that represent personality traits people in the business world find positive. Go through the list and select the words that seem to describe you. Use them (in moderation) in your CV and in interviews.

- A able, accurate, adaptable, adept, adroit, alert, ambitious, analytical
- B bilingual, bright
- C capable, competent, confident, consistent, co-operative, creative
- D dedicated, dependable, detail-orientated, dynamic
- E educated, effective, efficient, energetic, enthusiastic, executive calibre, experienced, expert
- F fast, fit, flexible friendly
- G gregarious
- H hardworking, healthy, highly motivated, honest
- I imaginative, ingenious, innovative, intelligent, inventive
- J judicious
- K kind
- L licensed, literate
- M managerial, multilingual, multitalented
- N non-smoking
- O organised, outgoing, outstanding
- P patient, people-orientated, perceptive, personable, poised, polished, principled, productive, professional, proficient
- Q qualified, quick-thinking
- R ready, reliable, resourceful, responsible
- S sane, scholarly, scrupulous, seasoned, self-assured, self-reliant, serious, shrewd, skilled, smart, spirited, stable, successful
- T talented, tenacious, top-level, trained, trustworthy
- U upbeat

- V valuable, versatile, veteran
- W well-educated, well-groomed, willing, witty, worldly
- X
- Y young, youthful
- Z

'Action' Words

These words make a strong impression when you want to promote your achievements. They're ideal for CVs, reports and memos.

- A accelerated, accessed, achieved, acquired, acted, administered, advised, appointed, arranged, assigned, assisted, attended
- B booked, broadened, budgeted
- C checked, collaborated, competed, completed, conceived, conducted, constructed, consulted, contributed, controlled, coordinated, correlated, counselled, created
- D delegated, demonstrated, designed, determined, developed, devised, directed, doubled
- E edited, effected, eliminated, established, evaluated, executed, expanded, expedited, explored
- F formulated, founded
- G generated, guided
- H handled, heaped, helped, hired
- I identified, implemented, improved, increased, initiated, instituted, instructed, interacted, introduced, invented, investigated
- J
- K
- L launched, led
- M maintained, managed, marketed, met with, monitored, motivated
- N negotiated
- O opened, operated, organised, oversaw
- P participated, performed, pinpointed, planned, prepared, presented, prevented, processed, produced, programmed, promoted, proposed, provided, purchased
- Q questioned
- R recruited, reduced, reorganised, reported, represented, resolved, restructured, reversed, revised

S saved, scheduled, secured, selected, set priorities, set up,
shaped, sold, solved, structured, supervised

T taught, tested, tightened, trained, trimmed

U upgraded, used

V

W won, worked with, wrote

X

Y

Z

Appendix B – Commonly Confused Words

Word Pair	Definitions
Abut About	Generally, use 'abut', a verb, when you mean 'to border' or 'to lie next to', Use 'about', an adverb, when you mean 'almost' or 'nearly'.
Adept Adapt	Generally, use 'adept', an adjective, when you mean 'skilled'. Use 'adapt', a verb, when you mean 'to adjust'.
Adepts Adopts	Use 'adopts', a verb, when you mean 'takes in', 'takes up', or 'votes for'. 'Adepts' is always incorrect.
Ads Adds	Use 'ads', a noun, when you mean advertisements. Use 'adds', a verb, when you mean 'combines' or 'expands'.
Advice Advise	Generally, use 'advice', a noun, when you mean 'suggestion' or 'guidance' — for example, 'The manager gave Jenny advice'. Use 'advise', a verb, when you mean 'to suggest' or 'to give advice to' — for example, 'Will you advise me before I go into the meeting?'
Affect Effect	Affect is a verb meaning to have an influence on something or to bring about a change in something. It can also be used in the sense of imitating or pretending: 'He affected complete indifference.' Affect is used as a noun by psychologists, to mean an emotional state. Effect is both a verb and a noun. As a verb, it means to bring about a result, make something happen; to accomplish. As a noun it means a result, an outcome or a consequence.
Aid Aide	Generally, use 'aid', a noun or verb, when you mean 'help' or 'assistance'. Use 'aide', a noun, when you mean 'a helper'.
Ail Ale	Generally, use 'ail', a verb, when you mean 'to feel unwell' or 'to have pain'. Use 'ale', a noun, when you mean a type of drink.
All ready Already	All ready means everyone is in a state of preparedness. Already is an adverb, meaning that something has taken place, or will occur at, a particular time.
Alters Altars	Use 'alters,' a verb, when you mean 'changes.' Use 'altars,' a noun, when you are referring to tables used in religious ceremonies.
All together Altogether	All together means many people or things joined or united. Altogether means entirely or completely: I am not altogether convinced of that.
All ways Always	All ways means all methods or manners: They tried all ways of doing it. Always means every time or constantly: They always get it right.

Word Pair	Definitions
Assess Asses	Use 'assess,' a verb, when you mean 'to evaluate.' Use 'asses,' a plural noun, when you are referring to the animal.
Augur Auger	Use 'augur,' a noun or verb, when you mean a prophet or the act of prophesying —for example, 'He has traits that augur well for his success.' Use 'auger,' a noun, when you are referring to the tool.
Bare Bear	Generally, use 'bare,' which can be an adjective or verb, when you mean 'undressed,' 'simple,' or 'to reveal.' Use 'bear,' which can be a noun or a verb, when you mean the animal or 'to support' or 'to produce.'
Beet Beat	Use 'beet,' a noun, when you mean the plant. Use 'beat,' a verb or a noun, when you mean 'to hit,' 'to win,' or a rhythm.
Bettor Better	Use 'bettor,' a noun, when you mean a person who bets. Use 'better,' which can be a noun, adjective, verb, or adverb, when you mean 'superior' or 'to improve.'
Border Boarder	Use 'border,' a noun or verb, when you mean 'edge' or 'to be alongside of.' Use 'boarder,' a noun, when you mean a paying guest.
Breath Breathe	Generally, use 'breath,' a noun, when you mean the process of breathing, inhalation, or exhalation — for example, 'She took a deep breath.' Use 'breathe,' a verb, when you mean 'to inhale and exhale' — for example, 'Breathe deeply and smell the lilacs.'
Bridal Bridle	Use 'bridal,' an adjective, when you are referring to a wedding. Generally, use 'bridle,' a noun, when you mean 'a harness.' Use 'bridle,' a verb, when you mean 'to harness' or 'to show resentment' — for example, 'she bridled at the suggestion.'
Broach Brooch	Use 'broach' as a noun when you are referring to the tool or as a verb when you mean 'to bring up' or 'to pierce.' Use 'brooch,' a noun, when you mean a pin or clasp.
Brows Browse	Use 'brows,' a noun, when you mean the eyebrows. Use 'browse,' a verb, when you mean 'to scan through.'
Callous Callus	Generally, use 'callous,' an adjective, when you mean 'unfeeling.' Use 'callus,' a noun or verb, when you mean a thickened part of the skin or to develop a thickened part of the skin.
Cant Can't	Use 'cant,' a noun, when you mean 'slope' or a type of speech. Use 'can't,' a contraction, when you mean 'cannot.'
Cloth Clothe	Use 'cloth,' a noun, when you mean 'fabric.' Use 'clothe,' a verb, when you mean 'to dress.'

Word Pair	Definitions
Compliment Complement	Each of these can be used as either a noun or a verb. To compliment someone, or to pay them a compliment means to express praise or admiration. A thing that complements another or is a complement to it is something that completes it, either as part of a set or by providing a balancing contrast.
Complimentary/ complementary	As adjectives, complimentary means like a compliment, or given without charge, but complementary means that something works as a contrasting opposite of another, as in complementary colours.
Confident Confidant	Use 'confident,' an adjective, when you mean 'assured' — for example, 'She is confident she will get the promotion.' Use 'confidant,' a noun, when you mean 'a trusted friend' — for example, 'He is her only confidant.'
Decent Descent	Use 'decent,' an adjective, when you mean 'proper' or 'adequate.' Use 'descent,' a noun, when you mean 'a slope' or 'a downward motion.'
Dependent Dependant	Use 'dependent,' an adjective or noun, in the context of relying on someone or something. Use 'dependant' only as an alternative spelling of the noun form.
Desert Dessert	Generally, use 'desert,' a noun or verb, when you mean a type of land or 'to abandon.' Use 'dessert,' a noun, when you mean a class of food.
Dingy Dinghy	Use 'dingy,' an adjective, when you mean 'dirty' or 'worn.' Use 'dinghy,' a noun, when you mean a type of boat.
Dominant Dominate	Generally, use 'dominant,' an adjective, when you mean 'most influential' or 'prominent.' Use 'dominate,' a verb, when you mean 'to control' or 'to rule over.'
Downwards Downward	Use 'downward,' an adverb or adjective, when you mean 'descending' or 'declining' — for example, 'We do not see a downward trend in sales.' Use 'downwards' only as an adverb when you mean 'descending' or 'declining.'
Elicit Illicit	Use 'elicit,' a verb, when you mean 'to obtain.' Use 'illicit,' an adjective, when you mean 'illegal.'
Envelop Envelope	Use 'envelop,' a verb, when you mean 'to enclose completely.' Use 'envelope,' a noun, when you mean a type of container.
Extant Extent	Use 'extant,' an adjective, when you mean 'still in existence.' Use 'extent,' a noun, when you mean the range or area that a thing covers.
Faze Phase	Use 'faze,' a verb, when you mean 'to disturb.' Use 'phase,' a noun, when you mean a certain stage or condition.

Word Pair	Definitions
Feat Feet	Use 'feat,' a noun, when you mean 'an act of courage or achievement.' Use 'feet,' a noun, when you are referring to a part of the body, the lower end of an object, or a unit of measurement.
Find Fined	Use 'find,' a verb or noun, when you mean 'to locate,' 'to detect,' or 'a discovery.' Use 'fined,' a verb, when you mean having been required to pay an amount of money.
Flare Flair	Use 'flare,' a verb or noun, when you mean 'to flame up' or 'a blaze of light.' Use 'flair,' a noun, when you mean 'talent' — for example, 'He has a flair for decorating.'
Flea Flee	Use 'flea,' a noun, when you are referring to the insect. Use 'flee,' a verb, when you mean 'to run away.'
Forebear Forbear	Use 'forbear,' a verb or noun, when you mean 'to resist,' 'to stop,' or 'an ancestor.' Use 'forebear' only as a noun when you mean 'an ancestor.'
Gong Going	Use 'gong,' a noun or verb, when you are referring to a type of musical instrument or to playing that instrument. Use 'going,' a verb, when you mean 'leaving,' 'proceeding,' or 'working.'
Grate Great	Use 'grate,' a verb or noun, when you mean 'to shred,' 'to irritate,' or 'a structure made of metal bars.' Use 'great,' an adjective, when you mean 'big,' 'important,' or 'outstanding.'
Grater Greater	Use 'grater,' a noun, when you mean a tool. Use 'greater,' an adjective, when you mean 'bigger' or 'more important.'
Herd Heard	Use 'herd,' a noun or verb, when you mean 'to flock' or 'to assemble.' Use 'heard,' a verb, when you mean perceiving sound or 'listening.'
Hew Hue	Use 'hew,' a verb, when you mean 'to cut' — for example, 'The workers will hew a new trail to the waterfall.' Use 'hue,' a noun, when you are referring to colour or appearance — for example, 'The hue of the silk dress was a delicate blue.'
Hoard Horde	Use 'hoard,' a noun or verb, when you mean 'riches' or 'to accumulate.' Use 'horde,' a noun, when you mean 'a large crowd.'
Hostel Hostile	Use 'hostel,' a noun, when you mean a type of lodging. Use 'hostile,' an adjective or noun, when you mean 'unfriendly' or 'one who is unfriendly.'
Incite Insight	Use 'incite,' a verb, when you mean 'to urge' or 'to stimulate' — for example, 'Her speech will incite them into action.' Use 'insight,' a noun, when you mean 'perceptiveness' or 'understanding' — for example, 'Their insight into the situation was very useful.'

Word Pair	Definitions
Indoor Indoors	Use 'indoor,' an adjective, to modify a noun or pronoun, as in 'indoor pool.' Use 'indoors,' an adverb, to modify a verb, an adjective, or another adverb, as in 'walked indoors.'
Inquire Enquire	Use 'inquire,' a verb, when you mean to seek information or to investigate and 'enquire' in the more general sense of 'to ask'. 'Enquire' tends to be the British usage and 'inquire' the American, but there is little actual distinction between the two usages.
Inward Inwards	Use 'inward,' an adjective, to modify a noun or pronoun, as in 'inward chamber.' Use 'inwards,' an adverb, to modify an adjective, verb, or other adverb, as in 'go inwards.'
Its It's	Use 'its,' a pronoun, when you are indicating possession, as in 'its branches.' Use 'it's,' a contraction, when you mean 'it is' — for example, 'It's a long way to the station.'
Laps Lapse	Use 'laps,' a noun or verb, when you mean 'to drink,' 'the motions of waves,' or 'to overlap.' Use 'lapse,' a noun or verb, when you mean 'to decline' or 'to revert.'
Led/ Lead	Verb meaning to conduct or to take someone somewhere. Lead is the present tense: he will lead us to the door. Led is the past tense: he led us out. There are lots of other meanings, but the most common is 'lead' as a noun, meaning a leash, the first of something, a clue, a heavy metal.
Lessens Lessons	Use 'lessens,' a verb, when you mean 'decreases.' Generally, use 'lessons,' a noun, when you mean 'instructions.'
Let's Lets	Use 'let's,' a contraction, when you mean 'let us.' Use 'lets,' a verb, when you mean 'allows' or 'rents.'
Loath Loathe	Use 'loath,' an adjective, when you mean 'unwilling' or 'afraid' — for example, 'Although he was loath to apologize, he did so.' Use 'loathe,' a verb, when you mean 'to dislike' — for example, 'The only vegetable they loathe is okra.'
Mane Main	Use 'mane' when you are referring to a part of a horse or other animal. Use 'main,' an adjective or noun, when you mean 'most important' or 'most important point.'
Maybe May be	Maybe as one word means perhaps. As two words, it's a verb meaning 'might be.'
Mind Mined	Use 'mind,' a noun or verb, when you mean 'intellect,' 'sense,' or 'to obey.' Use 'mined,' a verb, when you mean 'tunnelled' or 'excavated.'
Miner Minor	Use 'miner,' a noun, when you mean a type of worker. Generally, use 'minor,' an adjective or noun, when you mean 'lesser' or 'a child.'

Word Pair	Definitions
Mite Might	Use 'mite,' a noun, when you mean the insect or an amount of money. Use 'might,' a noun or a verb, when you mean 'strength' or 'a sense of possibility.'
Moral Morale	Use 'moral,' an adjective or noun, when you mean 'virtuous,' or 'a kind of truth.' Use 'morale,' a noun, when you mean 'a group's attitude.'
Morn Mourn	Use 'morn,' a noun, when you mean the morning. Use 'mourn,' a verb, when you mean 'to express sorrow.'
No Know	Use 'no,' an adjective or adverb, when you mean a denial or 'not any.' Use 'know,' a verb, when you mean 'to recognize,' 'to understand,' or 'to experience.'
Of Have	Use 'of' as a preposition — for example, 'The scarves were made of silk.' Use 'have' as a verb — for example, 'The silk scarves have embroidered flowers on them.'
Outdoor Outdoors	Use 'outdoor,' an adjective, to modify a noun. Use 'outdoors,' an adverb, to modify a verb, an adjective, or another adverb.
Outwards Outward	Use 'outward,' an adjective or adverb, when you mean 'outer.' Use 'outwards' only as an adverb when you mean 'outer' or 'toward the outside.'
Peddle Pedal	Use 'peddle,' a verb, when you mean 'to sell.' Use 'pedal,' a noun or verb, when you mean a part of an instrument or machine or to operate with pedals — for example, 'The pedal on the bicycle broke.'
Populace Populous	Use 'populace,' a noun, when you are referring to people. Use 'populous,' an adjective, when you mean 'numerous' or 'crowded.'
Pray Prey	Use 'pray,' a verb, when you mean 'to ask' or 'to plead.' Use 'prey,' a noun, when you mean a hunted animal or a victim.
Pride Pried	Generally, use 'pride,' a noun or verb, when you mean 'self-respect' or 'to be proud.' Use 'prided,' a verb, when you mean 'to inquire too closely' or 'to force open.'
Principal Principle	Use 'principal,' an adjective or noun, when you mean 'main,' 'the main participant,' or 'the head of a school.' Use 'principle,' a noun, when you mean a rule or a standard.
Prophecy Prophecy	Use 'prophecy,' a verb, when you mean 'to predict' — for example, 'He says he can prophecy the future.' Use 'prophecy,' a noun, when you mean 'prediction' — for example, 'The prophecy came true.'

Word Pair	Definitions
Proscribe Prescribe	Use 'proscribe' if you mean to forbid, prohibit or condemn. Use 'prescribe' if you mean to order for or give a direction to be followed.
Prostate Prostrate	Use 'prostate,' a noun, when you are referring to the gland. Use 'prostrate,' a verb or adjective, when you mean 'to bow down' or 'lying down.'
Rote Wrote	Use 'rote,' a noun, when you are referring to a type of speaking. Use 'wrote,' a verb, when you mean 'having formed letters or words.'
Stationary Stationery	Use 'stationary,' an adjective, when you mean 'not moving' — for example, 'The weather front was stationary.' Use 'stationery,' a noun, when you mean 'writing paper.'
Team Teem	Use 'team,' a noun or verb, when you mean 'group' or 'to form a team.' Use 'teem,' a verb, when you mean 'to overflow' or 'to swarm.'
That's Thats	Use 'that's,' a contraction, when you mean 'that is.' 'Thats' is always incorrect.
Their There They're	Use 'their,' an adjective, when you are indicating possession, as in 'their house.' Use 'there,' an adverb, when you are referring to a particular location, time, or action — for example, 'Sit over there.' Use 'they're,' a contraction, when you mean 'they are' — for example, 'They're coming home tomorrow.'
Theirs Their's There's	Use 'theirs,' a pronoun, when you are indicating possession. 'Their's' is always incorrect. 'There's' is short for 'there is.'
Tide Tied	Use 'tide,' a noun, when you are referring to the rise and fall of the ocean. Use 'tied,' a verb, when you mean 'bound' or 'connected.'
Undo Undue	Use 'undo,' a verb, when you mean 'to reverse' or 'to open.' Use 'undue,' an adjective, when you mean 'excessive' or 'not proper.'
Upwards Upward	Use 'upward,' an adjective or adverb, when you mean 'overhead,' 'above,' or 'toward a higher place' — for example, 'There was an upward trend in the stock market today.' Use 'upwards' only as an adverb when you mean 'toward a higher place' — for example, 'She looked upwards.'
Urn Earn	Use 'urn,' a noun, when you mean 'vase.' Use 'earn,' a verb, when you mean 'to acquire' or 'to gain.'
Vein Vain	Use 'vein,' a noun, when you are referring to a blood vessel, a fissure, or a mood. Use 'vain,' an adjective, when you mean 'fruitless' or 'proud.'

Word Pair	Definitions
Who's Whose	Use 'who's,' a contraction, when you mean 'who is.' Use 'whose,' a pronoun, to indicate possession — for example, 'Whose books are these?'
Weather Whether Wether	Use 'weather' if you're talking about rain or sun. Use 'whether' if you're discussing alternative possibilities. Use 'wether' if you mean a castrated ram.
Wile While	Use 'wile,' a noun or verb, when you mean 'trick' or 'to trick.' Generally, use 'while,' a noun or verb, when you are referring to time or an interval of time.
Wither Whither	Use 'wither,' a verb, when you mean 'to shrivel up' or 'to fade.' Use 'whither,' an adverb, when you mean 'to what place or condition.'
Won't Wont	Use 'won't,' a contraction, when you mean 'will not.' Generally, use 'wont,' an adjective, when you mean 'accustomed to' or 'likely' — for example, 'He is wont to do these things.'
Yolk Yoke	Use 'yolk,' a noun, when you are referring to a part of an egg. Use 'yoke,' a noun or verb, when you mean a type of harness or 'to harness.'
You're Your	Use 'you're,' a contraction, when you mean 'you are.' Use 'your' when you are indicating possession, as in 'your garden.'