

Applying for a Job: Your Curriculum Vitae and Cover Letter



Statisticians typically apply for jobs by sending a curriculum vitae (C.V. or vita) and a cover letter. Supporting materials may also include statements on teaching and research interests and academic transcripts. After reviewing the materials for only a few minutes, the search committee members quickly decide where a candidate will be placed: (A) good fit for the job, (B) potential fit, or (F) do not consider further. In far too many cases, applicants are rejected largely because their vitae and cover letters are poorly prepared. Some of these candidates might actually be A fits, but if their application materials fail to make a good impression, the search committee will focus on others.

There is no algorithm or format for producing a successful C.V. I modeled my first vita after my dissertation chairman's. He took the time to help me craft it, and, in time, I came to do the same thing for my own students. Students should expect such guidance, and professors should take

the initiative to give it, and give it well. If none of your professors are able to help, then go to your university's placement center or to a professional service (see "Resume Service" in the Yellow Pages).

It will help you to spend an hour or two at your local major bookstore examining what has been written on preparing resumes and cover letters. Being a statistician, you can ignore the majority of these books—they have titles like *Resumes that Mean Business* and *Resume Writing for Nurses*. Fortunately, I found a few books that have helpful sections describing what

goes into the type of vita that is common for academia and research. Three of these books are (alphabetically)

Complete Idiot's Guide to the Perfect Resume, 2nd Edition, by Susan Ireland, Alpha Books, 2000.

Designing the Perfect Resume, 2nd Edition, by Pat Criscito, Barron's, 2000.

Resumes for Dummies, 3rd Edition, by Joyce Lain Kennedy, IDG Books Worldwide, 1998.

Do not be turned off by the "idiot" and "dummy" labels; these authors give sound information and advice. Also, the

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“Dummies” book recommends two intriguing titles that I was not able to examine:

- *Academic Job Search Handbook*, by Mary Morris Heiberger and Julia Miller Vick, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

- *Curriculum Vitae Handbook: How to Present and Promote Your Academic Career*, by Rebecca Anthony and Gerald Roe, Rudi Publishing, 2000.

All of these books cost under \$16 and are available from www.Amazon.com, www.BN.com (Barnes & Noble), and www.Borders.com. Make sure you get the latest editions. Whereas the standard resume (French [résumé]: “to summarize”) is customarily limited to listing only placement objective, education, work experience, and special skills/certifications, the curriculum vitae (Latin: “life’s course”) chronicles just about anything else you think is relevant. This often includes all publications and noteworthy presentations; awards, including fellowships, teaching and research assistantships; memberships in professional associations, including offices held; journal and grant reviewing; computing skills; courses taken, grades earned, and overall grade point average (for a recent or current student); and courses taught. It is impossible in the space available here to delineate what the content and format should be for all this. There are many good styles. A sample C.V. is shown on the following pages. You may download this as a Word document (Windows or Mac) or Acrobat file from the Web site of the ASA’s Section on Teaching Statistics in the Health Sciences, www.bio.ri.ccf.org/ASA_TSHS.

Let me also offer some specific advice:

- Work hard to develop a good base cover letter that you can easily customize to create a specific cover letter for each position you seek. Keeping this to a single page, sketch your general training and experience and your current professional goals and interests. Summarize what you are including in your mailing and tell whether letters of reference are being sent. Tell when you will be available. Avoid sounding too narrowly focused in your skills or in the kind of position you are seeking. However, if you know that your particular interests and skills are well suited for a certain position, then mention this in your cover letter. Make sure that all of your letter’s content is appropriate for the position. For example, even if you love to teach and have proven skills here, you should not stress this if you are applying for a nonteaching position. Rather, you might

say something like, “I have received excellent evaluations for my teaching. This ability will help me in collaborating and communicating with the researchers at [name of organization].”

The best statisticians write effectively, and your letter and C.V. give the first piece of evidence on this. Errors in word choice, spelling, grammar, and punctuation can wreck your chances. Young statisticians for whom English is a second language are given some leeway, but every error hurts nevertheless.

- Make sure that everything stated is true and supportable. People will probe at the interview stage, and they may see mere exaggerations to be outright lies. An impressive cover letter and C.V. will help you get interviewed, but your main goal is to eventually get offered a good position that fits your skills and goals. Candidates discovered to have stretched the truth usually do not get job offers. In all matters, be honest and “be yourself” in what you write and say.

- Avoid a garish visual style, including having “fun with fonts.” The sample C.V. shown here uses only two fonts and reflects what layout design and typography author Robin Williams teaches in her enlightening *Non-Designer’s Design Book* (1994, Peachpit Press). I used a san serif font for titles and headings and a serif font for the body text. Helvetica (sans serif) and Times Roman (serif) are ubiquitous, and they work satisfactorily. You may substitute others, as I have done here, but do not do anything radical. Most 12-point fonts are a bit large and 10-point is too small for some people, so I use 11-point font. Good use of white space will give a clean look and will display how the sections are organized. An old trick is to tape a paper copy of a document to a wall and step back a few feet. It should look uncrowded and well organized.

- *How do you send it?* Do not send an ordinary Word™ or WordPerfect™ or LaTeX document unless you are sure that the receiver will have the right computing platform, word processing software, and the identical collection of fonts. The receiver must also have the expertise and time to handle this. It is simply rude to assume so. Do not prepare a straight-text (ASCII) version that you will send using regular email. This format greatly limits your layout style, and how it is viewed and printed depends on various parameter values set by the recipient, such as whether their email font is fixed-space (e.g., Courier) or proportional (e.g., Times). Some resume experts now recommend using HTML, but this can be troublesome also. Getting HTML Web

pages to look and print satisfactorily is still a timely and tricky affair, especially for most statisticians. And even the best HTML programmers run into problems with inconsistencies between Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer, and with problems caused by the receiver’s browser settings. Here again, what you think you are sending will not necessarily be what is received.

I do recommend creating and sending a single PDF (Acrobat) file containing both the cover letter and the vita. Make sure you are using Type I Postscript fonts (not TrueType), and embed all fonts into the file. When you produce your PDF file correctly, recipients will view and print perfectly using any computer (not just PCs) having Acrobat Reader, which is downloadable free at www.adobe.com. It is still generally recommended that you first save the file of the PostScript code associated with your printing and then convert this to PDF. This requires Adobe Acrobat software (regularly \$230 for a single user, or \$100 educational price, say, at www.JourneyEd.com). Or you can take a PostScript file to a Kinkos-type copy center and they will convert it to PDF for about \$5/file.

You can send PDF files as email attachments, but attachments of all types have their own set of compatibility issues and some recipients just hate getting them. Thus, if you can, I would also make your PDF files available for downloading from a Web site. Whatever you do, some recipients will be unwilling or unable to process PDF files. Accordingly, in all cases, also send a paper version of the application using regular mail or FedEx-type delivery.

- In either your cover letter or C.V., list the names of your references, giving their addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses, assuming they have agreed to this. I also advise having letters of recommendation sent immediately, rather than waiting for the search committee to request this. The same can be said of sending academic transcripts.

- You can reject any of this advice as long as you are convinced that your application still looks good, is complete, and will be received just as you intended.

With a little care, you can produce a C.V. and cover letter that induces search committee members to say, “There is evidence of quality here. We need to focus on this person.” ■

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Education

December 2000	PhD (expected), Dept of Statistics, Gauss University, Fisher, Colorado <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GPA: 3.8/4.0; full transcript attached • Dissertation: "Power analysis for Jamkat's test using Bayesian scenarios;" abstract attached; Advisor: Guy Wellknown, PhD
1998	MStat, Dept of Statistics, Gauss University
1992	BA (magna cum laude), Libarts College, Charmingtown, MA <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double major: Mathematics and History • GPA: 3.5/4.0 overall, 3.7 Mathematics, 3.5 History

Experience

1998–present	Graduate Assistant, Technical Support Group, Gauss U. Data Services Center <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answers users' questions regarding SPSS, SAS, Minitab, and other software, teaches shortcourses, consults on data analysis. Supervisor: Will Ingtohelp, MS
1996-1998	Teaching Assistant, Gauss U. Dept of Statistics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intro. to Statistics, recitation session instructor (1997-98) • Statistical Modeling, one-on-one tutoring and grading (1996-1997)
1992-1996	Statistical programmer, Hytek Bioinformatics, Hytek, NJ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performed data analyses under the direction of experienced masters and doctoral-level biostatisticians • Programmed, validated, and documented SAS macros and Splus functions for in-house use

Technical Skills

- General skills in statistics and computing. Specific expertise and interests in:
- Statistics: models for categorical longitudinal data; bringing Bayesian thinking and methods into mainstream data analysis.
 - Computing platforms: UNIX, Windows 2000/NT; some Macintosh.
 - Programming languages: C and using SAS as a programming language—its data step, PROC IML, macro language; a little C++, FORTRAN, and HTML.
 - Statistical software: SAS, including some PROC SQL. Extensive experience with Splus; moderate experience with BUGS (Bayesian inference Using Gibbs Sampling); a little experience with Minitab, SPSS, and Stata.
 - Text formatting and office computing: LaTeX, Word, FrameMaker, Illustrator, Excel, PowerPoint.

Honors and Awards

2000	Graduate student travel award and \$500 prize. (See "Presentations" below.)
1998	"Extreme Value" award for top performance on MStat comprehensive exam (plaque, plus dinner for two at The Greasy Spoon)

30 May 2000

- continued -

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(A) A bold-faced **sans serif font**. *Sans* means *without* in French, so this font (**Formata**) lacks little feet and other stylish attributes found in serif fonts. Sans serif fonts are stark and blocky, which makes them good for headings when a serif font is used for the body. A common sans serif font, **Helvetica**, is used in the Word version of this CV, downloadable from www.bio.ri.ccf.org/ASA_TSHS.

(B) A **serif font** (here, Kepler) has a fancier style with little feet and varying line thicknesses. This makes the characters more distinct from each other, so text is more readable. Thus, serif fonts are typically used for the body of a document. A common serif font, Times Roman, is used in the Word version.

(C) Most experts on resume style recommend using **reverse chronological order**, that is, the most recent item is listed first.

(D) Note that this graduate student is including a **transcript** and a **dissertation abstract**.

(E) Limit this to **career related experience**. However, if time gaps are evident, then consider whether to account for them here.

(F) Deciding which **technical skills** to tout is difficult. It is fine to report a few skills and interests that are narrow in focus, but make sure you cover a range of general ones as well. Do not exaggerate, but avoid modesty also. As Mohammed Ali said, "It ain't braggin' if you can do it."

(G) Limit **honors and awards** to professional matters, but list everything that is relevant. Giving the restaurant's name here is unnecessary, but this particular one ("The Greasy Spoon") injects some humility and levity into the matter—a good thing to do, when possible.

Presentations and Invited Lectures

Using Bayesian thinking when performing power analyses for classical hypothesis testing. Society of Bayesians, Posterior, FL, May 2000.

Getting technical support from GU's Data Services Center. Psychology Department "brownbag lunch" research seminar, Gauss University, January 2000.

Performing power analyses for Jamkat's test. Statistics Department Seminar Series, Gauss University, November 1999.

Publications

Wellknown G, Neustatishan BW, Tribephan IM (in press). An Akaike-type index for modeling categorical longitudinal data. *Journal of the World Statistical Society*.

Haeyvor B, Neustatishan BW. (1999). Serbian children's perception of war and peace. *Children and Society* 94, 19-49.

Papers Under Review

Neustatishan BW, Wellknown G. A method to compute power for Jamkat's test. Submitted to *Developments in Statistical Theory and Practice*.

Haeyvor B, Neustatishan BW. Treating children for post-traumatic stress syndrome. Being revised for resubmission to *Adolescent Mental Health*.

Committees

1999-2000 Search committee for department head, Dept of Statistics, Gauss University

1997-1998 Graduate Student Council, College of Arts and Sciences, Gauss University

Professional Memberships

American Statistical Association, Society of Bayesians

Non-Work Special Interests

Competitive swimmer (now U.S. Masters) and triathlete. All-American, 1650Y freestyle, 1991 and 1992. Now training for 2001 Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii. Other special interests include playing piano in a local jazz trio and watching movies produced by independent and foreign filmmakers.

References

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N

H Graduate students should list almost all professional **presentations** done outside the classroom, but more senior statisticians should limit this to the most important and/or the most recent talks.

I List all **publications**, including non-refereed papers published in convention proceedings. Use a bibliographic style similar to ones used in books and articles, being sure to list all authors' names in their proper order. Include articles that are truly "in press," that is, they have been definitely accepted for publication.

J List all **articles in the review process**. This includes those actually under review, as well as those that have been revised in accord with specific instructions from an encouraging journal editor. Listing 1-3 papers as "work in progress" is not harmful, but it rarely helps either. More senior statisticians can omit this entire section altogether.

K List any **committee work** that demonstrates how your peers and superiors value your judgment and leadership. If you chaired a committee, note that, too.

L Because membership costs are so reasonable for graduate students, they should already belong to some **associations**.

M Giving **non-work interests** is an arguable practice, but used wisely, it can round out a CV and give the candidate some personality. But do not overdo it and do not supply information about your stands on political and social issues.

N Make sure that all **references** have agreed to enthusiastically support your candidacy and that it is acceptable to state their phone numbers and email addresses.