

Tips on Creating an Academic Vita

An academic vita is a summary of your professional training and background; it serves much the same purpose as a résumé in the business world. In other words, a vita is an autobiographical account that provides the information on which a preliminary decision is made whether to admit you to a program or hire you for a job. Largely on the basis of your vita -- and the cover letter accompanying its submission -- your application will be rejected outright, put into a doubtful category, or considered worth exploring. If the latter occurs, your vita has succeeded.

The main thing to keep in mind when preparing a vita is that it will stand in for you during the initial phase of screening hundreds of applicants. It conveys who you are and what the graduate program or employer will get if you are chosen. You should not depict yourself as a good student or an outstanding research assistant, but as a promising professional.

Although your vita should follow a fairly standard format, it should also distinguish you from the other applicants whose materials float with yours in the Sea of Anonymity. Include all information that you honestly believe will help someone judge whether you are qualified, but keep your vita focused. It is better to develop several versions of your vita than to send an unfocused vita with every application.

Is the Correct Word *Vita* or *Vitae*?

The word *vitae* is the plural form of *vita*. Here is what Wikipedia has to say about terminology:

The term *curriculum vitae* means "course of life" in Latin. While it is appropriate to write either *curriculum vitae* or just *vita*, it is incorrect to use the phrase *curriculum vita*, the form *vitae* being the genitive of *vita*. The plural of *curriculum vitae* is *curricula vitae*.

Bottom line: The singular form is *curriculum vitae* (or *vita*), and the plural form is *curricula vitae* (or *vitae*).

Several DOs and DON'Ts in Vita Preparation

1. **DO** make your vita a clear and concise summary of your professional qualifications. Like any good writing, every word should count.
2. **DO** try to obtain copies of several vitae from individuals who are at your stage of professional development or slightly ahead. One of the best ways to construct a vita is by seeing how others have done it.
3. **DO** take the time to create an elegant and inviting format, and be sure to laser print the final product on high quality paper. Style matters, and your vita should appear professional, uncluttered, and friendly to the eye.
4. **DO** be sure to check the vita carefully for mistakes and typographical errors. Without exception, it must be absolutely error-free.
5. **DO** have your faculty adviser, colleagues, family, and friends look over your vita before you send it out. They will undoubtedly spot weaknesses you have overlooked and may be able to suggest ways of overcoming them.
6. **DON'T** give the appearance of padding your vita by including such things as extra-wide margins, high school accomplishments, or excessive detail about your research and teaching experience (e.g., details associated with running an experiment, such as "I contacted participants, scheduled them for sessions...").
7. **DON'T** list irrelevant personal information such as height, weight, health, or military status. Listing your age, marital status, or the number of children you have is optional (unfortunately, such information can invite discrimination, particularly against female applicants), and excessive details should be avoided (e.g., names and ages of children). Listing hobbies and outside interests is also optional and should only be done if you feel it will enhance your image as a well-rounded professional.
8. **DON'T** list categories that have only one item (with one exception: a section entitled "Publication" is acceptable for listing a single publication).
9. **DON'T** use category subheadings that are more ambitious than their content (e.g., "Articles, Publications, and Grant Proposals" followed by only one grant proposal). Later in your career, you can add some of these sections (for example, "Professional Activities" might include editorships, memberships in academic or grant-reviewing committees, consulting work, and so on).