

# Applications and CVs for postgraduate study



## About this guide

Considering applying for further study after graduation? This guide will provide you with useful information and top tips on how to write good applications and a CV for postgraduate study.

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## Applying for postgraduate degrees

- Competition is intense but varies between subjects.
- Awards normally require a minimum 2:1 degree grade.
- Lists of Research Council-supported programmes are made available in early spring. For more information try this website:  
[http://www.prospects.ac.uk/funding\\_postgraduate\\_study\\_research\\_council\\_grants.htm](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/funding_postgraduate_study_research_council_grants.htm)
- There is no central admissions system for most postgraduate programmes - candidates submit an application directly to the institution.
- You can apply for as few or as many courses as you wish but we recommend you target your efforts to just a few so that you can put in really good quality applications.
- The method of application depends on the institution and course – most candidates are asked to complete an application form or personal statement. (You might also have to submit a CV and a research statement).
- You can research courses using findaphd.com, findamasters.com, departmental notice boards and academic tutors.
- Some universities now charge an application fee, and will not view the form until payment is made.
- In most cases there are no official closing dates for applications (with the exception of dentistry, medicine, law and teacher training). However, many popular courses fill up quickly so it is important to submit the application as early as possible.
- If you are applying for funding there are strict deadlines for applications so ideally begin researching your options 12 - 18 months in advance and start applying 6 – 12 months before the course begins.
- In some countries (especially the US) applicants are required to write a statement of purpose. Admissions departments will usually request that you send a number of supporting documents including a copy of your transcript, degree certificate, and references.
- Check exactly which documents are required and start organising your application as soon as possible - it can take a long time to gather all the correct paperwork together.

## Writing a personal statement for taught masters courses

Application forms for postgraduate courses will vary with the institution and may specify particular topics you should cover. You should read through all instructions carefully, but if it is vague, try to include comments on the following:

To support your application you will need to write a personal statement explaining:

- Your reasons for choosing the course.
- The particular topics you are interested in.
- Why that institution
- What you hope to achieve at the end of it.
- Why you feel you will make a good student.

This is your opportunity to demonstrate your enthusiasm and experience and tell the admissions tutors why they should consider you over other applicants with the same qualifications.

- Explain why you want to do the course and what led you to be interested in the topic enough to want to study it in more depth - where has your enthusiasm and passion for this masters programme developed from?
- Comment on why this particular institution's course appeals to you. Why have you chosen this masters programme? Be specific – modules, research groups, tutors, etc.
- Mention anything that attracts you about this particular institution – for example facilities, learning and teaching styles, tutors, guest lecture series, peer to peer support systems, industry links, etc.
- What are you currently doing? What are you studying? What skills or experiences have you got that would support your learning at this higher masters level and/or extra - curricular activities (i.e. organisation, time management, communication).
- If the course is not directly related to your first degree subject, give details of any experience you have that will show why you think you be able to cope with the course.
- Comment on your proven academic ability. Admissions tutors want people who can cope with the level of academic excellence required. Quote examples of good work from your previous courses.
- Comment on your motivation; tutors will be keen on those who will last the course and not drop out.

- Comment on how you think the course will help your longer term career aims / choices. E.g. as a base for further study (PhD) or as an entry route into a specific career field. This part of the statement will need more emphasis for a vocational course e.g. journalism, or surveying.
- If the institution interviews for taught masters courses, the statement is used as a base for the interview. Consequently, be prepared to discuss any comments you have made in more detail
- Include any extra-curricular activities you are involved in (within your department, sport, music, societies, community work or volunteering).
- Ensure you stick to any line, word or character limits. Work with any guidance or application instructions offered.

## Applying for PhDs

- Once you have a clear idea of what you want to investigate (see [www.findaphd.com](http://www.findaphd.com) for more information on how to do this) - you will either need to put together a research proposal or, in the case of applying for an advertised studentship, you will need to demonstrate in your application a clear understanding of the research to be undertaken and your suitability to undertake it.
- Applicants usually contact the department and/or academic as a first port of call to discuss this before taking their application further. Certain qualifications such as an upper second-class degree may be a minimum requirement. Speakers of English as a foreign language are also expected to achieve IELTS or TOEFL scores specified by the university.
- Personal qualities such as the ability to work independently and to have creative ideas are In science, good practical laboratory skills may be important.
- For all PhD's, resilience is an important quality as one's patience may be sorely tested when experiments or research does not work out as planned and has to be done again.
- Make sure that you check departments carefully. Try to talk to students and ex - students. A University should be happy to allow you to do this - if not, then you may have cause for concern. Check especially carefully on small or new departments where facilities may sometimes be rather basic.
- Try to find out about your supervisor and whether you get on with them on a personal level - if there is a personality clash it can make it very difficult, if not impossible to do your research effectively
- Keep focused on your research area.
- Be as specific as possible; clarify existing work you have done into your chosen topic.
- Highlight academic knowledge and relevant experience.

- More information is available at [http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/PhD\\_Courses\\_Tips\\_and\\_advice\\_for\\_making\\_your\\_application](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/PhD_Courses_Tips_and_advice_for_making_your_application)

## Creating a CV to apply for postgraduate degrees

- When applying for postgraduate degrees, an academic CV might sometimes be required if you are applying for a Master's degree or PhD – either instead of, or in addition to, an application form. Your academic achievements will be the most important section, but your work experience and extra-curricular activities should also be mentioned.
- Normally these CVs will be chronological, starting with your current degree course and working backwards. Detail all the courses you have studied during your degree by year and give grades (if they are good!). Projects, extended essays and dissertations are particularly important in applications for postgraduate study and should be noted individually.
- If you have any relevant interests, put them in. For example, if you are applying for a PhD in Space Science, you could mention that you are a member of the Astronomy Society and that you have your own telescope.
- Universities like to see students who have got involved in university life outside their studies, so other activities and interests are worth mentioning, especially if you have taken on any posts of responsibility.
- Use headings to emphasise technical content e.g. "relevant work experience", "areas of scientific interest", "laboratory skills and techniques".
- Your covering letter should be constructed along the same lines as a personal statement. Say why you want to go to the particular university (for example - excellent reputation in that field of research) and try to show real enthusiasm for the subject you will be studying (for example - evidence that you have read around the subject and know about recent developments).
- Clear, concise content together with an effective structure will help you to make an impression. There are many templates and layouts available and a CV could be one page or several pages long depending on your situation. Some styles are designed to place the spotlight on your relevant experience others focus on your academic attainments.
- Whatever format you choose it is likely to include some or all, of the following sections:

## Name and contact details

### Example

**JOE BLOGS**  
**81 Harold Grove, Birmingham B29 7ZZ. Tel: 0121 2866667 email:**  
[j.bloggs@bham.ac.uk](mailto:j.bloggs@bham.ac.uk)

Make your name the one they remember with bold capitals size 18

Your address, telephone number, e mail, can run across the page to save space. Include your LinkedIn profile if you have one. You don't need to include your date of birth, gender marital status or nationality as these are "protected characteristics" in UK Equality Law.

## Education

- Always use reverse chronological order, leading with your most recent and most impressive attainment.
- Include modules of specific relevance.
- Detail impressive marks - particularly in relevant subjects.
- Include a relevant dissertation topic. You could sell the skills you had gained here: ability to work independently, manage your time, solve problems and working in a team (for group projects).
- The amount of detail you include will vary, depending on whether you are applying for a taught postgraduate or a PhD.

### **University of Birmingham. B.A (Hons.) History 2006 - 2009. Class 2.1. (68%)**

#### **Modules included:**

Plague, Community and Conflict in Late Medieval England 66%

The Hundred Years War 63%

Popular Uprisings and the Making of Civil War 72%

Pre-Industrial England 64%

Intermediate Latin 70%

**Final-year dissertation:** Pestilence, Peasants and Prosperity: the agrarian labour market in East Kent in the aftermath of the Black Death. This involved research using primary sources in Kent County Archives and Canterbury Cathedral Archives. This dissertation was awarded a grade of 75% (First Class) and the Faculty History Prize.

## Work Experience

A generic work experience heading is fine but if you have specific experience that is relevant to the degree you are applying for, draw attention to it with a clear header e.g. '**Engineering related experience**'. Whether it's long term paid employment or a holiday insight experience, voluntary work or student society activity, from last month or last year, and front load it!

- Use a bullet point format. It's easy for your reader to scan and you can clearly illustrate different pieces of evidence.
- Use the following structure: **Verb, Action, Responsibility, Task, Skill, Result**
- Start with an active verb e.g. **Organised, Arranged, Created, Implemented** and then move into the responsibility or task, the action you took and the skill you utilised or developed. Finish with a result, this doesn't have to be quantifiable e.g. increased sales by 10% - it could be about the impact your contribution had on a project or team or something you personally achieved.

## Example

**Engineering Related Experience**

**July - Sept. 2014 Wheatstone Engineering (technician), Manchester.**

I worked on a mobile communications project and I was doing SMT Soldering and fault finding and manufacturing of prototype boards.

**Other experience**

**July 2011-September 2013 Tesco (Shop Assistant), Manchester**

Duties involved taking orders and stock control, generally dealing with customers

## Additional skills and achievements

Use those that demonstrate the competencies required for research e.g.

- Passion for your research.
- Organisational and time management.
- People and networking.
- Communication.



- Willingness to work long and flexible hours.
- Administrative skills.
- Self-motivation.
- Team working.

### Example

➤ Elected Vice- President of The University of Birmingham Rhythm and Blues Society.

➤ Awarded the “Student Volunteer of the Year” prize in recognition of my role planning and organising a charity fun run that attracted 160 participants and raised £748.

➤ Attained Duke of Edinburgh Silver Award.

### Interests

This can be a useful way to convey subliminal messages about your skills and competencies. (E.g. Participation in a regular Sunday league football team shows commitment, dedication, stamina and teamwork). They can also give an insight into your personality and passions.

### Example

**Active member of the University of Birmingham Women in Finance Society. I participate in networking events, promote the Society through social media and staff our information stand at Open Days.**

### References

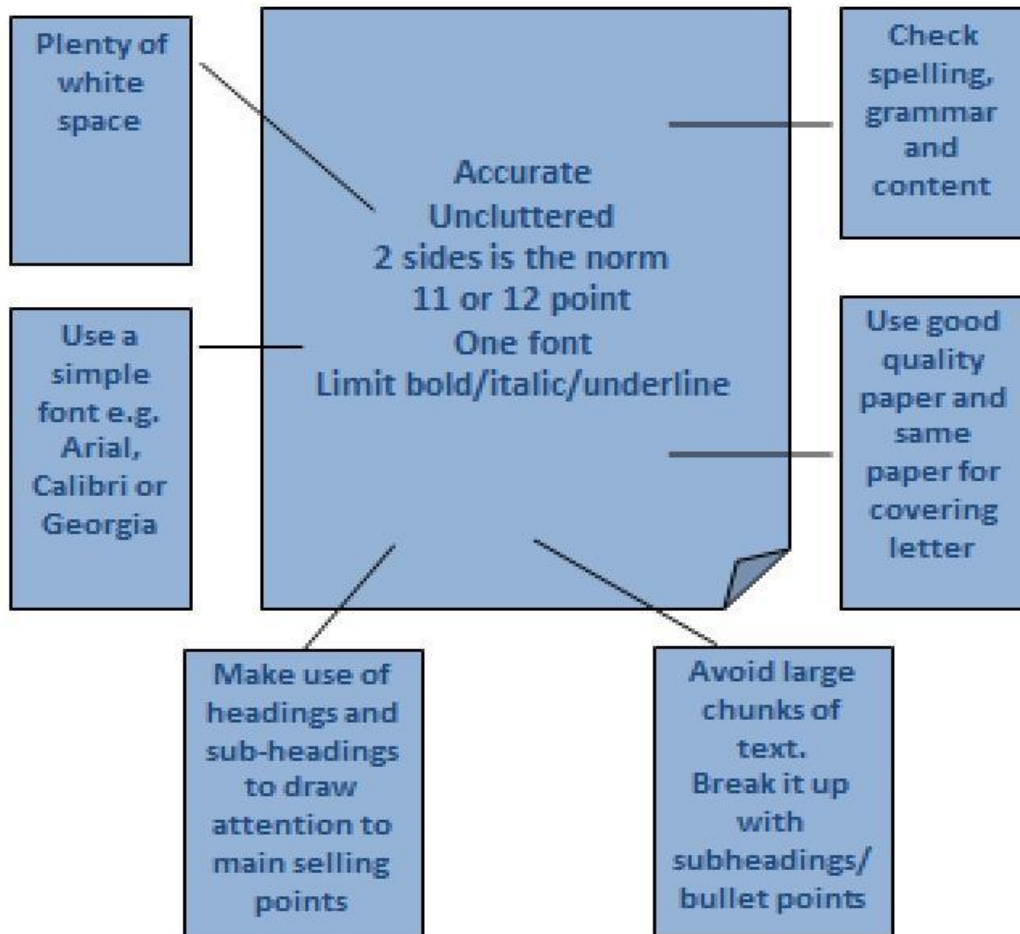
#### Academic referees

You will have to supply two references often from tutors who have supervised your work at undergraduate level, known as academic referees. If this isn't possible you can provide professional referees but they will still need to be as relevant as possible to the course you're applying to.

Make sure you tell your references that you are using them and that they are aware of the deadline they need to stick to. Many universities have a set form that they will need to fill in. Send your referees a copy of your application to help them write their reference.

## Have a good visual style

Your CV should be a maximum of 2 sides of A4. Pay particular attention to spelling and grammar.



## CV Checklist

### The basics

- Two sides of A4
  - Correct spelling and grammar
  - Name at the top (not Curriculum Vitae)
  - Education at the top in reverse chronological order
  - No unexplained long gaps in Education or Experience
  - GCSEs summarised not listed\*
- \* [number] GCSEs [grade] to [grade] including English [grade] and Maths [grade]

### Format and visual style

- All text neatly aligned according to set margins/tabs
- Bullet points used rather than paragraphs of text
- Font size 11 or 12 and one style
- One method of emphasis for headings (**Bold**, *Italics* or Underlining)
- Clear rather than crowded

### UK CV Norms

- No photo
- No “protected characteristics” i.e. date of birth, gender etc.

## Additional resources and advice

### Advice

- **CV advice appointments** are available most days during term. **Book an appointment via Careers Connect:** <https://bham.targetconnect.net/>
- **Interactive CV workshops** run regularly throughout term time, find detail on Events:  
<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/employability/careers/events/index.aspx>
- **E guidance** - If you are not able to come along to meet us, you can send a draft copy of your CV and receive advice by e mail – via [studenthelp.bham.ac.uk](mailto:studenthelp.bham.ac.uk)
- As a student you can self-enrol onto the **Further Study Canvas course:**  
[intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/careerscanvas/furtherstudy](https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/careerscanvas/furtherstudy)

### Canvas



5 Steps to Success in Recruitment- offers information, advice, quizzes and videos on CVs and every other aspect of the recruitment process. You can self- enrol [5 Steps to Success in Recruitment](https://canvas.bham.ac.uk/enroll/ADJFLB)  
<https://canvas.bham.ac.uk/enroll/ADJFLB>

### Websites

[www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

[www.skill.org.uk](http://www.skill.org.uk) (for students with disabilities)

[www.vitae.ac.uk](http://www.vitae.ac.uk) (for academic CVs)

[www.findaphd.com](http://www.findaphd.com)

[www.Findamasters.com](http://www.Findamasters.com) [http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/PhD\\_Courses -  
\\_Tips\\_and\\_advice\\_for\\_making\\_your\\_application](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/PhD_Courses_-_Tips_and_advice_for_making_your_application)

<http://www.studential.com/postgraduate/study/PhD/writing-a-personal-statement>

<http://www.studential.com/postgraduate/personal-statement/writing-a-masters-personal-statement>

