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# Preparing for your Profession

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**I**n your search for employment or other opportunities, there are ways to present what you have to offer in the best possible light. Your resume or curriculum vitae (CV) is your written smile and handshake—but you’ll need the other kind of smile and handshake, too! Much of this information is available in the abundant supply of job search handbooks in bookstores everywhere. What may not be covered in other resources is the kind of advising that is not only technical, but supportive and thought-provoking in the psychosocial sense—the kind of coaching you would get from a good mentor who wants you to succeed. This is what I hope to provide here. First I’ll cover your job search documents. Then I’ll offer some ideas about the interviewing process.

As a former academic adviser, I have met in “interviews” with thousands of college students and have seen hundreds of resumes and vitae. In my experience I’ve seen two “gotchas” that can “get you” in the process. The two most avoidable problems are:

- 1) writing a resume/vitae that’s too long, boring or with too many errors, and
- 2) having something too peculiar or distracting in your interpersonal approach.

But first, let’s start with the basics.

## **What is the difference between a resume and a curriculum vitae?**

A resume is a short summary of your professional life. It’s primarily a list of positions you have held, your schooling, and your related credentialing. It is usually one or two pages. A curriculum vitae is as its Latin meaning translates: it’s the course of your life. A CV is longer, and it lists every achievement in your academic life. Sometimes, in an effort to list everything—but to stick to two pages—resume writers will try to shoehorn in all the information they can, with densely-packed copy in a smaller font. Don’t. Less is more. You are more likely to engage your reader if your resume is readable and interesting. Wherever possible, stick to the active rather than passive voice in your narrations, except for a sprinkling to vary your sentence structure. It’s human nature to be drawn to printed pages that have clear headings and pleasing open spaces. No one likes to wade through dense text. Sometimes exacting detail and “too much information” can leave its own impression too! In contrast, a CV is a comprehensive inventory of just about every employment experience, every publication, every membership in an association, every grant you’ve been awarded, every award you’ve received and, of course, your academic degrees and any credentialing, certifications or licensures. For full professors or established researchers, a CV can be several pages long.

Why does a resume have to be short and a CV can be long? Why can’t I have a five-page resume if a CV is typically longer? Because that’s just the way it is. Whether it’s arbitrary, historical accident, or tradition, the customary format of the resume is well-worn, and there’s not much you can do about it. Unless you’re applying for something related to academia or research—where a CV is the norm—a resume is shorter.

## When do I use which?

Sometimes the application instructions will specify which to send. Don't automatically assume that a CV is the best. For corporate or non-academic positions, a CV may be "overkill" or give the impression that you are "overqualified." Employers may set it aside, thinking that they can't afford to pay you!

If you are applying for a position in academia, a CV is always appropriate and usually requested. For a research appointment, a teaching job at the college-level or a grant application, a CV is standard practice. Those procuring your services at these levels want all of this detail. Sample resumes and CVs are abundant on the internet.

Someone once said "the only person whose resume should be longer than one page is the President of the United States." While this is an exaggeration, it contains an important truth: a resume is supposed to be a calling card listing the highlights. Its function is to get you an interview! You want to pique the interest of your reader. Those who are fielding resumes will tell you that they frequently receive dozens for each opening. They need to sift through the pile and decide whom to call, and that can be a mind-numbing process. New college graduates should rarely have a resume longer than one page. Only those in established careers can use a two-pager and get away with it. For any supplementary information, you can place it in your cover letter or attach an addendum at the end. For example, my husband is an accomplished software engineer. His resume is two pages, but in his specific career, there is a list of software programs and computer languages that is extremely long and would be overwhelming on a resume. Employers in his field wish to know the exhaustive list of programs, databases and languages that he knows. But by the time he's listed his Pascals, Javas, and Pythons, he needs another page. In this case, on his resume he can write "accomplished in several programming languages (see addendum)." This enables him to have a two-page resume that is readable, but it also directs the employers to vital information that they need to know.

The typical resume is relatively short, but this said, don't say too little. If you give merely your title and the dates you held the position, it might give the impression that you didn't accomplish much there either. Under each job listed—or job category—you should have three or four sentences that highlight your accomplishments. Below are three examples from my own career. Each description is technically accurate, but note different impressions they leave.

### Position held: Academic Adviser

1. Advised college students on their major requirements for graduation. (Too little).
2. Advised and counseled college students in behavioral sciences, business, accounting, management and technology-related and information systems programs. Received recognition for individual advising enhancement models and career development programs, enabling forthcoming graduates to take advantage of the university's rich academic opportunities and prepare themselves in the most advantageous way for their entry into their professional endeavors. (Your eyes are beginning to glaze-over here, right?) Through a competitive process, and by recommendation of my immediate supervisor, the department director and the college Dean, I received the organization's Sustained Outstanding Service Award. (Are you still awake?)
3. Provided academic and career advising to college students in Liberal Arts, Management and Technology majors. Devised innovative advising tools and publications. Facilitated career information groups and job search coaching sessions. Received college-wide award for Sustained Outstanding Service Award. (Just right.)

The last description hits all the salient points. Nobody cares one bit that my award passed through three levels of management. From this description, they can tell that I've worked with different personalities (majors), that I can facilitate groups and teach, and that I've stood out among my peers.

Anything over two pages should have an addendum or be in curriculum vitae format and titled as such. Ironically, a CV can be almost as long as you like and *does* typically contain an extensive account of all of your accomplishments, education, awards and publications. But even a CV can be too foggy and ponderous. Use the active voice and good economy with your verbiage.

## Writing a Curriculum Vitae

First of all, refer to it in your cover letter as a "curriculum vitae." "Curricula Vitae" is plural.

A curriculum vitae is an important part of an application for an academic and research position or a grant proposal. CVs are also standard fare with your application for tenure, with a proposal for a speaking engagement and the like. Although more comprehensive, many of the same rules for writing a resume apply.

A CV begins as a resume does, with your name and contact information. Thereafter, list all of your achievements, usually in order of importance. Nobel Laureates, Rhodes or Fulbright Scholars, or MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" Fellows should note this straight off the bat. (Although if you hold any of these distinctions, quit reading. I have nothing to offer you!) If you are applying for a research position, you may wish to highlight your research first. For a faculty appointment, your academic positions should figure prominently, followed by any academic awards and honors.

Newly-graduated applicants usually list their academic degrees first, along with related information such as any postgraduate work, thesis/dissertation titles and any academic awards, undergraduate degrees, majors and minors, etc. List any professional licenses and certifications as well. Those applying for positions that involve teaching should consider placing teaching experience and any teaching awards toward the beginning of your CV. Also helpful are the titles of courses you have taught, any special teaching methods or innovations, and any positive teaching evaluations.

Sometimes in the teaching vs. research status wars, teaching skills get short shrift. This is changing. Don't be sheepish about being a good teacher! Depending on whether you are applying as an instructor in a large research university or at a small liberal arts college, teaching and research will take on different levels of importance based on the institutional missions. Even research universities are becoming more sensitive to customer service. Include skills such as fluencies in other languages or other competencies. If you are applying for a grant, your audience will be interested in seeing a list of other grants you've been awarded. These are usually listed in reverse chronological order.

On a CV, always list published, peer-reviewed research, scholarly articles, conference speeches, books, and then any writing you've done for a non-scientific audience. Be sure to include any works in progress. Toward the end, you can add community service, such as university committees, professional association participation, volunteer work and the like. Provide references if requested, although many times "available upon request" is most appropriate, especially since your choice as a reference may vary depending on the nature of your application.

Finally, when laying-out your CV, be sure to use consistent formatting: indent similar paragraphs the same way, etc. If there are standard ways of formatting in your field—many professionals in the social sciences use APA format—be sure to follow these rules when listing your publications. Bold or italicize the headings of your categories, and be sure to include open spaces for a pleasing, readable appearance.

Remember that the person reviewing your CV or resume initially may not be an expert in your field. Knowledge of "string theory" might sound like you're a violin virtuoso rather than a theoretical physicist. Knowing how to create a "clean room" can mean expertise in high-tech manufacturing or hotel housekeeping. Check for overuse of jargon, field-specific abbreviations and the like by asking someone outside of your discipline to look-it-over and point out anything that isn't clear. However, if you know your CV is going directly to a peer, the field-specific nomenclature is preferred.

## A Dozen Job Search Suggestions

### 1. Proofread carefully for typos or spelling/grammatical mistakes.

This point appears in all articles on resume tips for good reason: it is obvious, but often overlooked. In my experience, about two thirds of all the documents I've reviewed have at least one error. If grammar and spelling are not your strengths, find help from someone who writes well. Then always have it proofread by someone else. You can have an impressive list of accomplishments only to trash your chances at a job that specifically asks for "attention to detail." Don't just rely on you're spell Czech. As we can sea, it dozen find all foe paws.

### 2. No Fudging.

Tell the absolute truth. While you want to highlight everything good, and not accentuate the bad, make sure everything you say is truthful. Ethical conduct is crucial in all careers. Furthermore, hiring officials are fact-checking these things more often. Where you specify specialized knowledge, degrees, licensures or certifications, offer to provide proof. Fudging in interviews can be a disaster.

An acquaintance of mine was interviewing candidates for a computer programming job in the mid-1980s. About that time, computing went from mainframes to PCs to networked work stations within just a couple of years. Middle-aged programmers who didn't have the foresight to keep up their skills were laid-off by the zillion. They all had to develop PC savvy fast—or claim that they had—to get an interview.

My friend interviewed a guy who claimed that he had "30 years' experience with 'US-CD' Pascal," a programming language. This wasn't just a typo on his resume, which would be forgivable. He said it multiple times in the interview. First of all, it's *UC-SD* Pascal, named for the University of California—San Diego. Secondly, UC-SD Pascal had been developed just a few years before the interview. There's no way he had 30 years of experience, because it hadn't been invented yet! Interview is over.

### 3. Watch for red flags.

Stay away from facts that might work against you. For example, let's say you've owned your own business and you've been selected as "Entrepreneur of the Year" with the local business community. Now you've applied for an Executive Director position in a non-profit organization with a governing board that makes the major decisions.

Entrepreneurship demonstrates achievement and energy, but it also may be scary to an organization that functions on group consensus. Those hiring for this position will be looking for evidence that you are not a loose cannon. In addition to describing these successes, make sure to highlight evidence that you can work effectively on teams and within an existing organization's structure. You may wish to emphasize this in your cover letter.

Avoid revealing religious, political or any other involvement in activities that might alienate your reader. It may be something you are very proud of, but you cannot be sure that your reader will not have prejudices. Unless you're applying for a chaplaincy, a Congressional staff position, or seeking a goal that is closely aligned with these values, it's safer to withhold this, at least in the resume phase.

If asked for your salary expectations, always write “negotiable,” even if you believe the position pays less than you can handle. You never know what's possible. There may be another pot of money available that you don't know about. If they interview you and decide they can't live without you, they may combine the salary with the salary of an unfilled position they can eliminate.

#### **4. Break the “rules” ... a little.**

You don't have to list the exact dates of employment down to the minute. It's not a police blotter. Let's say that you quit a job before landing the next one, and there is a three-month gap. There are plenty of life circumstances that can bring on legitimate reasons for short gaps in employment—a death in the family or layoff are two examples. Back in my early career, a layoff carried some stigma with it—many assumed it was an employer's way of firing someone politely. This has changed. Layoffs are now so commonplace; we all know a friend, a neighbor or a relative who's experienced one. If one of your jobs ran from August 2000 through February 2002 and your current job began in May 2002, leave off the missing months and just write:

Position 1: 2000 – 2002, and

Position 2: 2002 – present.

It's not inaccurate. If you are asked for exact dates, you will of course provide them. But there's a good chance you will never be asked!

Regarding this point, one—or even two—lengthy gaps in employment are no longer the red flag they used to be. In fact, a long gap can be less of a concern than numerous short ones. There is now widespread recognition that many people stop-out to care for their families. And since asking about your family is an illegal question, they will probably just assume this is the case. Employers know that families are a part of almost everyone's life and that employees with families are a strong part of our stable workforce.

Most people list their previous jobs in reverse chronological order, but this is not sacrosanct. You can list the one that is more important or most closely-related first. You do not have to list every job you've ever held. For example, let's consider someone who's been a Certified Public Accountant at a major firm, left to raise a family, and did bookkeeping for a gift shop on the side while parenting. She can list the large firm—and leave-off the gift shop. If you're concerned with age-bias, omit your graduation dates and include only the years of job history that are most related. Sometimes a volunteer position speaks louder than paid employment. If you have a choice between listing your work with Habitat for Humanity or Big Brothers/Big Sisters and a summer job mowing greens at a golf course, choose your volunteer position.

You don't have to use the same resume for every job you apply for. In fact, each resume should be “tweaked” slightly with each application to speak to the exact qualifications requested on the job posting or ad. Read the position description carefully and be sure to tailor it to *their* requested needs—not what *you* need in a job. That comes after the offer!

#### **5. Control your Message.**

A few jobs will give you the option of applying via resume or by filling out the organization's pre-fabricated application. Choose the resume! Sometimes writing a resume can be intimidating, and it's tempting to take the path of least resistance. But applying by resume makes you look motivated. And it gives you more control over the message. Typically, company applications ask for things—such as exact dates of employment—that can be irrelevant red flags. If you apply by resume, it is quite possible that you could be hired first—and then asked to fill out the generic application as a formality thereafter.

#### **6. Use Standard Fonts, Formatting and Paper.**

Use a standard font such as Times or another font in common usage and modest-looking paper. Stick to standard appearances, nothing too slick or elaborate. The one exception to standard-looking resumes applies to those seeking creative work, such as design, commercial art and the like. These applicants can venture a bit into avant-garde territory.

#### **7. Have a “Cover Story” Ready.**

Your resume is drafted! Now have a knowledgeable friend read it to look for anything that might look off-putting or that might elicit questions. For example, if it took you seven years to finish your master's or if you have a 10-year gap in employment, have a prepared answer. If you're comfortable with your answer, they will be too.

#### **8. Regarding advice: Listen to all of it, but implement it carefully.**

When recruiting friends or relatives for resume preparation or interviewing advice, you may be referred to Uncle George who “once worked in HR.” Use caution. Your friend who is a great talker in your book club might be a pompous bore at work. Your cousin might be a great mid-level retail manager, but he will not be much help if you are applying for a tenure-track professor-

ship at a university. The person in your circle who is more reserved might be the one with the best interviewing skills. The one who looks like a space cadet might be the one whose resumes are a slam-dunk and who gets every job she applies for. Uncle George might have worked in personnel, but it was back when resumes still listed your height and weight. You get the idea. Parents—and spouses—are the worst. Bless their hearts, but most of them can't be objective. Back in my advising days, if I had a nickel for every bad resume I'd seen co-written by a parent, I'd be in Nassau right now, sipping fruit drinks festooned with miniature umbrellas.

There's another important consideration in "networking." When we list references or find an employer via personal contacts, we are essentially tapping the social capital that others have accumulated. Excellent references are career gold. Someone I know recently served as a professional (and personal) reference for a colleague who ultimately got the job despite considerable competition. The woman who acted as reference had worked with this man for 10 years. He was so competent and trustworthy, she was able to tell the employer to "hire him before he gets away!" After she told the employer about his work that she had seen, she said, "You know, I worked with this guy for 10 years. Nobody can hide bad character for that length of time. If there were any problems, I would have seen them. There are only 3 or 4 people in my whole career whom I would endorse with my own reputation—he is one of them." When this happens, it is magic.

However, using personal contacts carries its risks when the referral comes from someone who is not credible or someone whose reputation in that organization is iffy. Let's say you're applying for a job that you heard about from a friend of your cousin. "Drop my name in the interview," he says, "Tell them I sent you." If he's a star performer, you have a real edge. If he's a problem employee, that's a connection you don't need. Discerning who is a good reference and whom you should bypass isn't easy. Unless you know your reference very well, proceed with caution.

### **9. Write a good cover letter.**

Every application needs a cover letter to introduce your resume or CV. Again, less is more. One page with four or five paragraphs is probably enough; two pages is the max. Make sure your cover letter does not rehash everything that's already on the resume—the cover letter should enhance your resume. There are entire books written on letter writing that can help you. In the cover letter, you can explain anything that is not apparent on the resume and help them draw any conclusions that they may not think about unless you point it out. For example: let's say the job ad asks for the "ability to multitask." This is your chance to point out that you managed to complete graduate school while serving as the lead teaching assistant in your department and handling an advising load of undergraduates—at the same time.

Your cover letter serves another purpose: *It's a writing sample!* While your resume or CV is a basic list, your cover letter is your chance to demonstrate your writing ability. When I read long paragraphs of bulky text, passive voice and unnecessary "50-dollar words," I wonder if the person is more interested in getting their information across than in learning about the organization's needs.

### **10. Now that your resume is done, get ready to interview!**

Your library or local bookstore will have scores of "how to interview" books to coach you through those difficult interview questions. They can provide guidance on many special issues, such as negotiating your salary, disclosing disabilities or addressing an unusual situation. All of this expertise will not be duplicated here. However, one preparation tip is not usually available in a book, but it's an important one: make sure your appearance and demeanor make a good impression! Yes, it's shallow and shouldn't matter. But it often does.

Obviously, there are individual differences affecting appearance that are unchangeable or due to disability and the like. This is *not* what I'm referring to. Any employer who would evaluate someone negatively based on these criteria isn't worthy of you anyway. But there are many distractions that can be fixed with shoe polish or a dandruff shampoo!

When you're ready, practice with a few mock interviews. Ask a few people you respect for some feedback on your personal style and presentation. Non-family help is best. Sometimes you can ask a friend of a friend, which might make the process less awkward. If you have lots of extra cash, there are "image consultants" and career coaches you can hire who do this. People are reluctant to say unflattering things to people they like, so you will have to give them permission to be ruthless! Tell them they will be doing you a great service if they would take a few minutes and be your mirror. One person's opinion might just be a fluke. But if two or three tell you the same thing—listen. You can't change everything—and you may not change anything—but awareness never hurts.

This preparation takes great maturity on your part. Resolve in advance to be grateful for even painful and embarrassing input. Those who can listen and integrate this information are almost always glad they did. Questions you might ask to prime the pump and put them at ease are:

- **Do I have any strange mannerisms?**

One of my advisees pushed up her glasses every 30 seconds. This doesn't reveal a character flaw; it's just distracting. After about three minutes, I felt an unbearable urge to reach over and push them up for her. You want the

interviewer to be paying attention to *you*—not your glasses! A simple adjustment at an optometrist could solve it. Do I laugh like a horse? This is what I was told. Now when I interview, I leave Seabiscuit at home!

- **Jewelry, make-up or ornamentation: Do I have too much?**

Few career books address this issue in depth, because it's uncomfortable to discuss. Body piercings, tattoos, unusual clothing, hair colors that do not occur naturally in the human populations and such are personal choices that make fashion statements, establish your individuality or communicate your value system. If your appearance reflects some ethnic, religious or cultural message that is central to your identity—well, then you must hold fast to your values. I admire your integrity. But be aware that there may be some conservative workplaces and some hiring personnel who may pass you by. In many educational, non-profit and creative workplaces, individuality is the norm. A good way to conduct some reconnaissance is to visit the workplace if you can do so with anonymity—or check out their website. In a busy public reception area, it's easy to pick up some organizational brochures and glance at the workers. What are they wearing? A rule of thumb for interview dress: wear an outfit that is one notch more formal than daily office dress.

But if shelving your personal style means “selling-out” or if some aspect of your appearance is terribly important to you—and you'd refuse to work for a place that had a problem with it—it might work as an asset in another way. It will act as a good filter, identifying only those places that can accept your appearance.

- **Is my wardrobe, hairstyle or eyewear unflattering or 15 years out of date?**

For older applicants who are worried about age-bias, this is especially important. Sometimes your hairdo or your outfit will date-you in spite of a resume carefully checked to be vague in this area. Update your look, but look authentic. For help, ask a fashionable friend or a dapper dresser for recommendations.

- **How's my grooming?**

Nails? Stray hairs? Breath? Use adequate anti-perspirant, but no colognes. What smells great to you might smell like mosquito repellent to someone else. With asthma increasing in prevalence, this is especially important as scents can trigger an asthma attack. On your way into the interview site, stop by the restroom to remove the spinach from your teeth. Even if you haven't eaten spinach in months, the evidence always reappears just before an interview. Make sure your clothing is neat and that your shoes are polished. I used to work with someone whose wardrobe was magazine-worthy perfection. However, I don't think she ever polished her shoes. They were always scuffed and, on the back of the accelerator-pedal shoe, the heel always looked as if it had tangled with a belt sander.

- **How are my table manners?**

Interviews are occasionally conducted over meals. Do I know which fork to use? One tip: let your interviewer order first. You can say, “Please go first, I'm just about ready.” Then make your choice comparable. If your interviewer orders a chef salad, don't get the filet mignon. Leave the impression, an accurate one, that you can be responsible with an expense account. Table manners are obvious, but not everyone remembers the importance of treating waiters as politely as the interviewer. Don't order alcohol, even if your interviewer imbibes. Unless you are applying for a job as a taste-tester in a winery, it will work against you. You don't know how the interviewer will perceive it, and it could cloud your thinking.

- **Are any of my behaviors out of the ordinary?**

Am I a blabbermouth? Do I interrupt people?

Do I look nervous? Do I bite my nails or say “um” too often?

How is my grammar? Is my speaking voice too soft?

Do I make good eye-contact?

Is my handshake OK? The “limp fish” is bad. The Chuck Norris grip is painful.

In most of the United States (U.S.) culture, there still seems to be a bias toward conversational eye-contact and moderate extroversion. Some people are soft-spoken and reserved. Others are extroverted and engaging. If you tend to gravitate toward either extreme, adjust accordingly—the meek may inherit the earth, but embarking on a job in sales would be challenging. Extroversion is great, as long as it's not boisterous.

This input from others is not easy to listen to, but it is a great gift to yourself. I have tried to console people who have gone on interview after interview and couldn't figure out why no offers were forthcoming. They had one of the attributes listed above—or one like it—and the problem was obvious to me. But without assurance that the person wanted and could handle this feedback, I wouldn't risk making matters worse.

People have lost-out on job offers due to something simple that could have easily been changed. Don't let pride cost you a job! After your friends have been kind enough to be honest, be sure to thank them and adopt any recommendations you agree with. Then congratulate yourself. It takes a strong, confident person to listen to critique and make changes where necessary.

However, allow me to add a special note here to those who would find this feedback exercise too frightening. If you feel too fragile, you can skip this step if you think it may dash your self-confidence just when you need it most. Situational anxiety is very common and almost universal in job interviews. It's an oft-cited maxim that people are more afraid of public speaking than death! However, if the thought of interviewing is truly terrifying, you may have a medical disability: Social Anxiety. Please see your doctor right away. According to the National Institutes of Mental Health, 16% of the U.S. population (1 in 6!) suffers from an anxiety disorder.

Social Anxiety is a tragedy for our national productivity. I have no statistics to prove it, but it's my experience that anxiety sufferers can be the most thoughtful, hard-working, productive, and enjoyable colleagues of all. Who knows how many "good catches" are passed-over by employers who hire an over-confident personality by mistake? It's also a tragedy because it's usually correctable.

I recall one college student I worked with who was so fearful, that I advised him by phone for some time before he could manage an in-person meeting. As my advisee found out, anxiety disorders are remarkably treatable. With a good doctor and intervention, he responded very, very well. In a matter of weeks, he went from a guy who couldn't face a supportive adviser to a confident, young man who was able to explain his disability to his professors, ask for incompletes, and negotiate a timetable to complete his classes. He knew I was willing to advocate for him if needed, but he did it himself! It was amazing! Many clinically-anxious people are reluctant to seek help. But if you suspect this may be an issue, I urge you to see your doctor. If you are able to interview comfortably and talk about your qualifications confidently, you may not only get hired sooner, you might be offered more money!

Now here's a quick note about interview structure. Back when I started out, it seemed that every interview was basically the same—they had the traditional questions and answers were pretty predictable and preparing was much easier. There are still many interviews that follow this format. However, since then, a new interview style has emerged called the "behavioral interview." These are the interviews that "throw you a curve ball" and ask a question that is truly bizarre. For example, they could show you a Swiss Army Knife and ask: "if you could be one of these tools, which would you be?" (Swiss Army Knives are those multi-purpose pocket implements that look like a jackknife, only it has a scissors, a file, a fork, a corkscrew, or the like.) These questions are agonizing, because you have no idea what's coming. There are examples of behavioral interview questions on the internet, so type "behavioral interview" into your favorite search engine. The most important thing to remember here is that they are probably not looking for a specific answer as much as they are trying to see how you can handle the unexpected. Take a breath, smile, and remain calm—choose an answer that makes sense to you. For the aforementioned, if you were a human services advocate, you might say "I would be a scissors, because clients need an advocate to cut through 'red tape'." Have a generic answer ready in case you become just totally bewildered. You might smile and say, "I presume that with this question, you are probably trying to find out how I would handle the unexpected. I will be honest. I can't think of a response at this moment, but maybe that is because I am not impulsive. When I am faced with a choice, I prefer not to go with my knee-jerk response. I would be likely to consult with a colleague or my manager." This is my favorite because, for me, it's not evasive—it's true. Get some sample questions and practice!

### **11. Do due diligence.**

No single source of advice or information is enough. Some people buy one job search manual and follow everything to the letter—big mistake. I have provided some suggested readings at the end of this article, but I encourage you to look for information from a broad array of sources. Implement what best fits you. Use the internet to find resume and CV writing tips and interviewing advice. For information on the institution, firm or organization that interests you, always make sure to read their website and do an internet search to find out about the mission, culture and well-being of the organization. This information can help you ask intelligent questions and let your interviewer know that you've done your homework.

Always use your home computer for email and writing your resume. Sometimes you will be applying for jobs and you don't want your current employer to know. If you will be leaving work to go directly to an interview in dressier attire than is customary on your current job, leave your interview clothes in the car and change at a fast food restroom on the way. (It's been done. You want fries with that?)

Lastly, to anyone who interviews you or helps you in the process, be sure to send a note of thanks. This is so obvious but, in my experience, the majority of job seekers don't do this. When I review a resume for a new professional, I typically get a thank you only 10% of the time!

### **12. Special tips for family professionals.**

This article is being written with family professionals, particularly family life educators, as the audience. Jobs in the human services field tend to be very competitive—there were 85 applicants for the position I hold now. During economic downturns, it's particularly gloomy. I graduated with my bachelor's degree in 1982 during one of the worst recessions in years—I started as a receptionist in a human services setting and there were over 60 applicants for that job. You might have to start at a pre-entry level. However, as we used to say on the farm, "cream always rises to the top." If you are a diligent worker, you can move up by promotion.

For family life educators, there is another challenge—explaining to employers who you are and what you can offer their organization. Family life educators have been around throughout history—but we’ve been called different things. One hundred years ago, families received instruction on marriage, parenting, eldercare and the like, but it came from clergy, midwives, family and neighbors. I have an old book on etiquette from the 1880s, and it is full of parenting advice in the form of teaching manners to children. Our profession—Family Life Education—in the formal sense, is not yet the household word that the fields of nursing or accounting are. Often, when you see a job advertisement or announcement, employers will ask for a social worker or a therapist when what would serve them best is a family life educator. In these instances, apply for these positions! Use your cover letter to explain that while you are not a social worker or counselor, you believe your training as a family life educator may be ideal for their needs. The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) offers a certification in our field called the Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE). Check NCFR’s website for more information at [www.ncfr.org](http://www.ncfr.org).

The positive aspect of working in human services, however, is that by definition, these jobs are not going to be among those that can be “off-shored” to global competition. Working with families usually means being there in person. There is place for you in the workforce in a job that’s a good fit for you. But it may be three or four jobs and several years into the future. I went back for my master’s and took some time out for motherhood—both took several years. Keep at it. I finally got my dream job, but I was 43.

Finally, I’d like to say a few words about mentoring. If you can find some colleagues along the way who can help you develop your potential, they can save you time and even heartache. There may be some who come into your life via formal mentoring programs, but for me, they just appeared. How do you spot them? Look around you for older, smart people who are a little farther down the pike and whose personality meshes well with yours. Then:

- Listen for those who can admit mistakes and who can talk about their course corrections.
- Look for people who have the respect of their peers.
- Look around you for people who know their strengths yet laugh at their weaknesses.
- Look for someone who can speak the truth, even if it’s not pleasant.
- Look around you for people who care in general, whom you might be able to coax into caring about you.
- And finally, once you’ve found them, tell them you want their shaping even if it hurts.

Being a mentor isn’t easy and there is little motivation for anyone to do it. Influencing the future of another human being is a serious responsibility. It requires risk, and who needs that? But it’s one way in which altruistic people find meaning in their own lives; Erik Erikson called it “generativity.” I’ve had many people who have helped me here and there, but I have had two mentors in adulthood and one in adolescence without whom I would not be where I am today. Two of them shared all of their wisdom with me through much active coaching. The other one spoke fewer words but instead acted as a mirror that helped me discover wisdom within myself that I didn’t know I had. Mentors are one of life’s greatest gifts. There is a catch, however. If you accept mentoring, you have a duty to give back someday. Once you’re an established professional, the universe will send you a mentee who needs *your* help.

Now that you have some tips from me, and you have consulted many other people and resources, sift through them all and use only what makes sense to you. Never substitute anyone else’s judgment for your own, including mine. You’re the only one who knows where you’ve been and where you’re going. Thank you for allowing me the privilege to be a part of your journey!

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### Suggested Readings

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- Bolles, R. N. (2008). *What color is your parachute? 2008: A practical manual for job-hunters and career-changers*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Kennedy, J. L. (2007). *Resumes for dummies* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Wiley Publishing.
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- Pink, D. H. (2006). *A whole new mind: Why right-brainers will rule the future*. NY: Berkeley Publishing.
- Yate, M. (2006). *Knock 'em dead 2008: The ultimate job search guide*. Avon, MA: Adams Media.

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### About the Author

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