ATS-FRIENDLY CVs

A short guide for job applicants

What is an ATS?

ATS means Applicant Tracking System. Employers use this software to collect, organise and search job applications. An ATS may help identify information such as work experience, education and skills. Systems are different, so an ATS-friendly CV should be clear and easy for both software and people to read.

5 tips for an ATS-friendly CV

- **Keep the layout simple.** Use one column, clear spacing and simple bullet points. Avoid complicated tables, text boxes and decorative graphics.
- **Use standard headings.** Choose headings such as Contact Information, Work Experience, Education and Skills.
- **Include relevant keywords.** Read the job advertisement. Include skills and terms that genuinely match your experience.
- **Give specific examples.** Instead of "good with computers," write "Used Microsoft Excel to organise data," if this is true for you.
- **Save and check your CV.** Follow the employer's file instructions. A text-based PDF or .docx is often suitable. Check that the text appears in the correct order.

Example: applying for an accounting job

Job advert keywords: accounting, Microsoft Excel, invoice processing, attention to detail.

Weak: "I am good with numbers and computers."

Stronger: "Used Microsoft Excel to organise financial data and check calculations."

Important: Only include skills and experience that are true for you.

Remember

An ATS-friendly CV does not guarantee an interview. It helps present your information clearly. Your CV should be relevant to the job, honest and professional.

Quick check

☐ My CV has clear headings and a simple layout.

☐ My contact details are easy to find.

☐ I included relevant skills from the job advert.

☐ I gave specific examples where possible.

☐ I checked spelling, dates and file format.

More guidelines:

Key Principles of ATS-Friendly CVs

1. Simple, Clean Formatting

ATS software reads text line-by-line, top-to-bottom. Complex layouts confuse the parser.

- **Use standard fonts:** Arial, Calibri, Helvetica, Times New Roman, or Georgia (size 10–12 pt).
- **Single-column layout:** Avoid multi-column layouts, sidebars, or text split into graphic boxes.
- **No tables, charts, or images:** ATS software cannot read text inside images, graphs, or skill-rating bars (e.g., "English: 4/5 stars").
- **Standard margins:** Keep margins between 0.5 inches and 1 inch.

2. Standard Section Headings

Use universal, predictable headings so the system knows where to categorize information:

- ✅ **Use:** *Work Experience*, *Education*, *Skills*, *Summary*, *Languages*.
- ❌ **Avoid creative titles:** *Where I've Been*, *My Journey*, *Things I Can Do*.

3. Smart Keyword Matching

ATS matches applicant CVs against the job advertisement.

- **Mirror the job description:** If the job advert asks for *"Invoicing"* and *"Office Administration"*, use those exact terms rather than synonyms like *"Billing"* or *"Desk Work"*.
- **Include both acronyms and full terms:** For example, write *"Applicant Tracking System (ATS)"* or *"Certified Public Accountant (CPA)"*.

4. Correct File Format

- **PDF vs. DOCX: .docx (Microsoft Word)** is universally safe for all ATS software. While modern ATS can parse **.pdf**, some older systems struggle with PDFs. If in doubt, use .docx unless specified otherwise by the employer.
- **File Naming:** Save the file clearly, e.g., FirstName_LastName_CV.pdf (avoid names like CV_final_v2.docx).

Quick Comparison

Feature	❌ ATS Non-Friendly	✅ ATS Friendly
Format	Multi-column, text boxes, graphics	Single-column, linear text
Fonts	Decorative/Custom fonts	Standard system fonts (Calibri, Arial)
Headings	My Profile & Superpowers	Summary / Skills
Skill Rating	Progress bars / Star ratings	Bulleted text list (e.g., Intermediate Excel)
Work Dates	2020-Present	MM/YYYY – Present (e.g., 03/2021 – Present)