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- [March 2008](#)
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- [September 2007](#)
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Vita vs. Resume: Get Unstuck through Knowing the Difference

Published by [rachel](#) at 11:01 am under [Job Hunting](#)

Jun
30
2008

by [Susan M. Frey](#)

During the course of your career, you will often be asked to provide a prospective employer with a vita or resume. In cases where you're specifically asked to provide one over the other, it can be daunting not to know the difference. Being savvy about these two important documents could be critical in landing the type of job you want! The following sections briefly review resumes and vitae, and offer guidelines on when to use each.

What's the difference?

Resumes, or one- to three-page documents that describe your work history and accomplishments, are used when seeking positions in public, school, and corporate libraries. In most instances, prospective employers are only willing to spend about 10 minutes looking at a candidate's resume, so yours should be well-organized and succinct. Often your resume will be screened by a busy professional, perhaps an HR expert or a department manager. On your resume, include contact information, and usually a statement of your professional goals targeted to the specific job you are applying for. List your work experience first, organized in reverse chronological order or by job skills, and put your education last. There are hundreds of books available on resume writing that will help you craft an effective snapshot of your professional credentials.

If you are seeking employment as an academic librarian, or wish to teach library science, then a vita is the document to use. In the academic environment, a committee of librarians is formed to review a candidate's application. Such a committee is likely to spend more time reviewing and discussing your job application than an HR professional, so longer, more detailed applications are better tolerated here than in the business world. A vita is meant to be written cleanly and get to the point, but makes no promises about being brief in the way a resume does. Since a vita is the complete history of your professional experience and activities to date, a librarian with decades of experience might have a vita as long as 15 pages. In addition to your contact information, the vita contains — usually in this order — your education, work experience, publications, presentations at conferences, service to the profession or community, and any special projects, such as grant writing or consulting. Unlike with resumes, you will not find many good books on how to construct the vita. The best advice I've found for academic librarians is [at the University of Colorado at Boulder](#).

When to use each

Let's say you are a newly minted MLS with a bachelor's degree in biology. You'd like to work as a reference librarian specializing in the sciences. Your educational credentials open up a world of possibilities: You may be interested in working in the library of a multinational pharmaceutical company, but working in the science library of a large university seems equally appealing. You decide to apply for both positions. The multinational corporation is more likely to ask for a resume, but the university will probably expect a vita from you. Knowing this, and knowing how to prepare each type of document, allows you to make the best impression on both prospective employers, giving you the freedom to choose the job you want.

- [September 2006](#)
- [July 2006](#)
- [May 2006](#)
- [March 2006](#)
- [January 2006](#)
- [November 2005](#)
- [September 2005](#)
- [July 2005](#)
- [May 2005](#)
- [March 2005](#)
- [January 2005](#)
- [November 2004](#)
- [September 2004](#)
- [July 2004](#)
- [May 2004](#)
- [March 2004](#)
- [January 2004](#)
- [November 2003](#)
- [September 2003](#)
- [July 2003](#)
- [May 2003](#)
- [March 2003](#)
- [January 2003](#)
- [November 2002](#)
- [September 2002](#)
- [July 2002](#)
- [May 2002](#)
- [March 2002](#)
- [January 2002](#)
- [November 2001](#)
- [September 2001](#)
- [July 2001](#)
- [May 2001](#)
- [March 2001](#)
- [January 2001](#)
- [November 2000](#)
- [September 2000](#)

CATEGORIES

- [alternative careers](#) (33)
- [announcements](#) (2)
- [associations](#) (35)
- [balance](#) (33)
- [book reviews](#) (89)
- [careerqa](#) (38)
- [careers](#) (105)
- [change](#) (34)
- [communication](#) (13)
- [diversity](#) (8)
- [Editor's Notes](#) (53)
- [education](#) (52)

But what if you have already been working as a librarian in a large corporation for a number of years? Would you ever need to worry about writing a vita? Possibly! What if you'd like to moonlight by teaching a graduate class as an adjunct professor at your local library school? Submitting your vita to the college would be more appropriate than submitting a resume. When in doubt as to which type of document to submit, it's best to just ask the prospective employer which they'd prefer to see.

Trade Secret

Once some librarians learn that the vita is used primarily in academia, they say, "Oh well, I'm not an academic, so I'll never need to write a vita." However, many librarians who never apply for academic positions still keep an updated vita on their hard drive. Why? Because being prepared is being professional! Since your vita contains the complete history of your professional accomplishments and activities, it's a gold mine of information. If you periodically update your vita, it will grow with you, year by year.

If you suddenly find yourself unemployed and need to write a resume; if you're asked to quickly pull together a paragraph of your qualifications for a school board or nomination committee; if you need to review your work history with your employer, having an up-to-date vita gives you the power to painlessly draft a killer resume — or convince your boss to give you that promotion. Anyone who has not kept track of professional experiences and accomplishments and finds herself in the excruciating position of having to quickly reconstruct many years worth of career activities knows how prudent this advice is. Ever try to chase down the details of a half-forgotten project you did seven years ago? Yikes! Forewarned is forearmed.

What's in a Name?

There are different ways of talking about these documents, and many people are needlessly frustrated by the terminology. The word *resume*, which is French for summary, is standardized in the US. However, the word *vita* goes by several variations. A *vita*, which is Latin for "life," is sometimes called a *CV*. *CV* is short for the Latin phrase *curriculum vitae*, which can be loosely translated into English as "course of life." So, *CV*, *curriculum vitae*, and *vita* all refer to the same document!

Having three ways to describe this type of document becomes further confused by the rules of Latin grammar; the Latin singular *vita* becomes the plural *vitae*. Recently, however, some have begun to reject this and write the plural as *vitae*. To further confuse matters, the phrase *curriculum vitae* always ends in an "ae", whether singular or plural, because of the genitive case. However, even though it is not accurate to do so, I have seen people spell it as *curriculum vita*. While purists rankle at changing Latin spellings, others find this modern and refreshing — while others use variant spellings out of ignorance. My advice is to do whatever makes you comfortable, and accept the fact that you cannot please everyone. However you decide to spell the terms, it is helpful to know of the variations.

It's also important to know that the distinction between a vita and a resume applies in the US; in many countries the terms CV and resume are often used interchangeably.

Get Unstuck!

This essay provides you with guidelines, not hard-and-fast rules. There might come a time when you want to submit a hybrid document - something between a resume and vita - to land a specific job. Go for it! As an experienced librarian, I can tell you that your career will take you down paths you would never have anticipated. I write this not to scare you, but to make you aware of how exciting and varied your career can be!

Remember: if you ever feel stuck in your career, you can get yourself unstuck. Being flexible and having the knowledge of how to present yourself in different types of work environments is one proven method of achieving professional success.

- [education](#) (52)
- [funding](#) (6)
- [future](#) (7)
- [generations](#) (13)
- [getting started](#) (21)
- [instruction](#) (1)
- [Job Hunting](#) (54)
- [keeping up](#) (34)
- [leadership](#) (16)
- [LIS](#) (2)
- [management](#) (26)
- [marketing](#) (5)
- [mentoring](#) (17)
- [meta](#) (6)
- [multitasking](#) (7)
- [negotiation](#) (7)
- [networking](#) (43)
- [prioritization](#) (14)
- [profdev](#) (47)
- [professionalism](#) (7)
- [promotion](#) (21)
- [publishing](#) (29)
- [rethinking](#) (7)
- [sah](#) (3)
- [school](#) (1)
- [skills](#) (17)
- [speaking](#) (11)
- [telecommuting](#) (2)
- [time management](#) (8)
- [training](#) (1)
- [Uncategorized](#) (6)
- [work environment](#) (12)
- [writing](#) (8)

Susan M. Frey is a reference librarian at Indiana State University. During her twenty-two year career she has worked in special, public, and academic libraries. Every six months, Susan updates her vita.

Tags: [frey](#), [resume](#), [vita](#), [vitae](#)

2 Responses to “Vita vs. Resume: Get Unstuck through Knowing the Difference”

Bob Raz on 07 Aug 2008 at 11:45 am

Thanks, Susan, for a succinct and informative discussion of resume and vitae (or perhaps I should say vita?)

I am making a presentation in October about the need for more library directors and getting professional librarians more interested in considering a top position. I found your writing very timely. I especially like and will use your advice about the importance of keeping a good record of activities, accomplishments, promotions, etc.

Now retired and working as a consultant I cannot tell you how often I had to dig back into the crevices of my mind to remember a number of professional activities I had been involved in. How nice a good diary would have been!

Certainly good advice for those at the beginning or even in the middle of their careers.

Susan Frey on 10 Jan 2009 at 9:31 am

Bob,

Thanks for the feedback. I haven't looked at this article for a while. I've just read your response. I am currently reviewing my publications because (guess?) I was updating my vita!

😊 Susan

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