



Building Your Counselling CV

So, it's time to apply for a student placement or a qualified role (whether voluntary or paid) in the world of counselling and psychotherapy. And by the way, don't talk yourself out of success by being negative about your chances of finding a placement or getting paid counselling work: there are both out there and someone has to get them – so why not you?

Applying for placements or jobs is an exciting time, but can feel very daunting too – and so naturally triggers anxiety. Remember that the reason you are feeling that way is because you really care about your training/career, which is a good thing, and a great first step to building your counselling CV.

Remember too that even if you don't wish to pursue a career in counselling, counselling skills are potentially portable to other areas of work in the UK, for example nursing and teaching. Indeed, counselling qualifications at any level are 'CV gold', given that they demonstrate a range of aptitudes and attitudes:

- interpersonal skills
- understanding of standards and ethics
- self-awareness
- commitment to learning, and to personal and professional development
- mental toughness and perseverance.

You can then choose to send your CV (either speculatively or in response to an advert that asks you to submit a CV) to agencies where you might be interested in working. Or – if the agency requires applications to be on a specific form – having an up-to-date CV prepared will make completing this much less onerous and time-consuming. You can use the information and wording you will have pulled together on your CV as the basis for what you write in each section.

In this guide, we talk you through the four main stages of producing your counselling CV:

1. planning the content
2. structuring your CV
3. adding a covering letter
4. checking and getting feedback.



Planning the Content

The most important part of good writing is always to put yourself in the reader's shoes. So the first question to ask is not 'What do I want to tell them?' but 'What will they want to know about me?'

So make a start by looking at any materials you have from the counselling agency. The ideal document to work from is a person specification for the role you are after (as this describes exactly what the organisation is looking for in a successful applicant).

If there isn't one of those, then a job description is good – or even just the general information available through any leaflets or website text, which may well describe the organisation's history, values, client group, purpose, services offered and staff.

This research will also come in handy again at interview stage, helping you prepare for it and have some questions ready to ask at the end. Again, this can really help you stand out from other candidates.



List your possible content

The format you use to pull together your ideas at this stage will depend on what works best for you – for example, you could write a list, draw a mind-map or audio-record your spoken ideas.

Whichever medium you choose, use the agency information to produce a list of what the agency seems to be looking for in its counsellors. If you have a person specification with its own headings, then use these as the categories in which to record your ideas. If not, you might like to use a series of general headings, such as:

- qualifications
- work experience
- CPD training
- skills
- knowledge.

Next, look at how well you fit this list. Against the entries under each heading, tick off what you've got and jot down a few notes of where, when and how you gained this.

Don't forget to include things from other areas of your life than just counselling. Many counsellors have had previous careers – or continue to work – in other fields, and this could be really valuable to the agency alongside your counselling ability.

Your activities outside work can also be used. For example, if the agency needs you to be a good team-player, you might tick this one off and jot down: 'I work in a team in my shop job, and I also play in a darts team.'

Try to do this 'matching' process with a balance of confidence and realism. It would be a shame not to apply to an agency you would love to work for just because you are doubting yourself – but if the agency clearly requires a qualification or experience that you haven't got (or aren't working towards), then it may be better to invest your time and energy in more suitable applications instead.

Remember too that many agencies look less at academic qualifications than at the person and their work experience.

For example, if you have experience of working with the relevant client group, a good understanding of quality and diversity, and a real passion to help clients and belong to that organisation, you may well stand out above others who are technically more highly qualified. So try to find the confidence to go for it if the opportunity feels exciting and right for you.

When listing your CPD, don't forget – if you're a member of the Counselling Study Resource or Counsellor CPD – to use the log that is automatically kept as one of your membership benefits there. This is also a great piece of evidence to print off and take along to interviews.

You might take some of your abilities for granted and hardly think of them as anything special, but try to list everything you can do.

For example, do you speak another language? Do you have a driving licence? Have you won an award, prize or other commendation for something that you are proud of? Or is your other work flexible, meaning you can fit around the agency's needs?

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Bring in your own self

Counselling is a very different type of work from many others that people might write CVs to apply for. For example, some employers in other sectors might primarily want to know about an applicant's technical skills and qualifications.

But in counselling, the self you bring to your work is absolutely key. Of course, your qualifications and experience matter too, but are by no means the only thing that will persuade the agency to choose you.

So spend some time looking at the agency's values. These may be stated explicitly in its information, or you may need to work these out from how its services are described. For example, an agency's website may say directly that it is committed to equality – or it may instead describe its services as being accessible to all, regardless of means.

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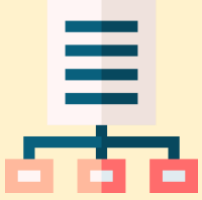
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If yes, then you have some good additional material to use in your application. And if no, then perhaps this isn't a good place to apply after all. It's important not just to find any placement or job, but to find the right placement or job for you.

Each counsellor comes to their counselling career with the modality that they have chosen to train in – but what made you choose your modality? And what attracted you to counselling in the first place? How does your modality and your own individual way of working within it reflect who you are – your experiences, values and philosophy? What made you choose person-centred over psychodynamic, integrative over CBT, or vice versa? Record a few thoughts that sum this up.

Do you have any hobbies or interests that you feel particularly enhance your counselling practice? Agencies want counsellors who practise good self-care – partly because modelling this to clients is helpful and partly as it makes you a more resilient and reliable member of staff. So think about what you enjoy, how you relax and what makes you you outside of work.



Structuring Your CV

Right, so you now have some kind of list of all kinds of qualifications, skills, experience and knowledge that you have – along with some words on your personal qualities and how they link in with the way you work (or would like to work) with clients.

At this stage, it might seem like you have a lot of bits and bobs, but in fact your headings already provide a great beginning for your CV, through giving you a ready-made structure.

There's no one 'right' way to structure a CV, so do trust in your own instinct to do this in the way that feels best for you. However, we provide here one possible way to do so, in case this helps give you some useful ideas.

All you need to add to what you've already pulled together in step 1 is a few factual things that don't need preparation because you'll be easily familiar with them already.

You're ready to get writing!

Your headings already provide a great beginning for your CV, through giving you a ready-made structure.

[Your name]

About me

[A paragraph about yourself, using the ideas gathered in step 1]

Contact details

[So the agency can contact you using your preferred methods]

Qualifications

[Your counselling certificates, diploma etc., as relevant, plus any other qualifications from previous work etc.]

Work experience

[A list of previous and current roles with dates and a sentence on responsibilities within each – don't forget to include voluntary roles as well as paid ones: both are work!]

CPD training

[Any relevant courses you've done through your counselling training/work – e.g. extra lectures you've watched on the Counselling Study Resource or Counsellor CPD or in other contexts (e.g. if your other work has included training in IT or customer service)]

Professional membership

[Any professional bodies that you belong to – counselling-related (e.g. BACP or NCS) and/or otherwise – and what category of membership you have]

Hobbies and interests

[A summary of these, especially those that contribute to your self-care]

Other

[Any other achievements or special offerings you've not already listed – like driving, languages, awards, flexibility etc.]



Adding a Cover Letter

You might be wondering where you'll bring in the lists you compiled (in step 1) of knowledge and skills. Well, some bits of those lists might have come naturally into your CV – but for those that haven't, these form perfect material for the covering letter or email that you'll write to send with your CV.

Your CV should ideally be something that doesn't need many changes when you want to send it to more than one counselling agency – it's quite a factual summary really of who you are and what you've done so far.

You might want to tweak it just a little to better fit the individual agency's requirements – say by re-ordering the list of CPD training courses so that the ones that are likely to be of most interest to that particular agency are at the top of the list and so are most noticeable.

In contrast, the idea of a covering letter is that it explains in a much more specific way how the knowledge and skills that you have developed through the qualifications, experience and training listed on your CV fit with what the agency is looking for. This might sound like a lot of work, but it's best kept short and simple (no more than one side of A4 at the very most, including addresses, date and sign-off – and less is fine).

It's really helpful to make sure you have the name of a person at the agency to address the letter to; this creates a more personal feel, and shows that you've made the effort to research this and that you're not just sending a standard letter to lots of different agencies. You might find this on the website. If not, you could telephone the agency or email the general email address and ask who would be the best person to address your CV to.

Here's a possible structure for a covering letter (again, just an idea – you might have a different idea that feels more right for you):

Your address

Name of recipient

Agency's address

Date

Dear [recipient's name]

[If you are applying for a specific placement/job that has been advertised] I attach my CV in application for the post of [name of post].

[Or, if you are approaching the agency speculatively] I would very much like the opportunity to become involved in the work of [name of organisation – again, this shows you're not just sending the same letter to everyone], and attach my CV for your consideration.

In my CV, I explain a little about myself, and list my qualifications, work experience, CPD training and interests. I believe that these have given me a range of skills and knowledge that would enable me to contribute to your client work. For example:

[list skills and knowledge]

I would be happy to discuss my suitability to work with [name of organisation] at interview or via any of the contact methods provided in my CV.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

[Your name]



Checking and Getting Feedback

Once you've got your draft CV and covering letter together, save it safely then step away from it for a while. It's notoriously difficult to see your own writing objectively when you've been staring at it for some time. So you need to try to create the space to see it more as an outsider. Even a few hours can make all the difference here – but if you can afford the time, leave it for a day or two before revisiting it.



Check it yourself

When you do go back to what you have written, it can help to check it through a few times, with a specific goal each time:

- First, read it straight through once for content – does it contain all the information you want to tell the reader? It's easy sometimes to forget some quite big achievement when initially writing, so you might suddenly get additional inspiration at this stage, and want to adjust it.
- Once the content seems OK, then read through again for flow – does it sound like you (being yourself is definitely the way to go), and does it flow well enough?
- Last, read it for detailed spelling and grammar, looking at each word carefully to check there are no obvious typos etc.

If the last step there fills you with horror – say if you have dyslexia or just don't like or feel confident with written language – then don't panic! Remember the following:

- The agency won't be employing you for your writing or proofreading skills, but for your interpersonal skills with clients. So long as you show yourself as able to write clearly enough to record brief notes on clients, then that is likely to be plenty good enough.
- Consider using automated checks for spelling and grammar – they're not perfect, but can be helpful. But don't assume they always know better than you. Do trust your own instinct: as a human, you will often know better than a piece of software!

Above all, don't keep going over and over your writing: proofreading definitely follows the law of diminishing returns, and it's easy to get stuck in repetitive checking that gets you nowhere.



Ask for feedback

Getting a different pair of eyes to look at your work can be really helpful. Do you have a family member, friend or colleague who likes writing/reading? If so, then ask them if they'd mind running their eyes over your work – but be specific about what you want from them, or they might start commenting on things that you don't want help with. For example, if you're happy with the content, then say that and ask them to tell you only if they spot any spelling or grammar slips. You own your work.

Even if you are a confident writer, getting feedback from others can be really valuable and add a useful perspective, especially if the person has relevant experience. For example, your clinical supervisor might be willing to give you feedback – but don't assume they will have the time to do this (or be willing to do so for free).

Another option is to make an agreement with a peer, or even a small group of you, to look through each other's CVs and covering letters. They might be a spelling whizz, while you might have a talent at spotting content that could be added, removed or otherwise improved. And anyway, it's always easier to spot things that could be improved in another's person's work than in your own. Together, you could well make the perfect CV-smashing team!

Last but not least, once you've sent your CV and covering letter on their merry way, don't agonise over what you sent: it's gone now, and there is no such thing as perfect – good enough is absolutely fine!

If you spot a typo etc. too late, then the chances are nobody else will notice – but even if they do, so what? You are more than your spelling, to err is human, and your time and energy are better spent looking forward.

In summary, be thorough and be confident. You CAN do it, and if you choose to ask others for help, you DO have different skills to give back to them.

So don't procrastinate – as tempting as that might be. The early bird catches the worm – so get started today, and start looking forward to the next step in your counselling career!