

'Telling Tales' – How to use stories in your CV to highlight your skills and achievements

By Samantha Pearce

Do you know someone who can tell a great story? Who can captivate their audience with the plot line, the characters, the 'what happened next' element, the ending? The ability to tell a good story or small anecdote is an important communication skill to have, because story telling is a means of communication, it's a way of getting your message across and leaving a lasting impression.

"What does all this have to do with CV writing?" I hear you ask! Well the use of storytelling is the basis of most interviews, being asked to provide examples of when you have demonstrated a particular skill in the workplace is really just a request to tell a story. And so it makes sense to include stories on your CV too. Stories or evidence of your skills and achievements can be included in your Personal Profile, ensuring that the reader is captivated as soon as they start to read your CV. The skills and achievements highlighted in your stories can then be reiterated throughout the CV – reinforcing your abilities. And just think, by preparing strong, demonstrable stories for your CV you'll be preparing a lot of highly memorable material to use in your interview too!

So what type of story will highlight your skills and achievements? What level of detail is appropriate for your CV? To answer these two important questions, let's compare extracts from two different CVs.

Candidate 1

"I am really good at customer service. I think that customer service is really important. It is important that customers are served well and their needs are met. I have done customer service training and want to continue to keep my skills up in this important area. If customers don't get service they don't come back. In my current role we always put the customer first."¹

Candidate 2

"I am really good at customer service. This is because I always go the extra mile to understand the customers' needs and I try my hardest to meet their expectations. For instance, two weeks ago I had a customer come into our store who was complaining that her appliance had slipped. I decided quickly that my task was to understand whether or not the customer had received our on-site training in how to stop the appliance vibrating at the wrong time. It turned out that she was unaware of this training service, but indicated that she was willing to try the training before returning the appliance. So I organised for our trainers to visit her later the very same day. The result was her appliance stopped slipping and she wrote in praise of our helpful and prompt service. This is a good illustration of my commitment to outstanding customer service."¹

Which candidate convinced you that they were good at customer service and provided evidence in support of their claim? The answer is Candidate 2, and despite the fact that both candidates state that they possess the same skill, Candidate 2 is much more likely to get shortlisted for interview than Candidate 1. Why? Because Candidate 2 presented their claim clearly and logically, and they used a story to practically demonstrate how they possess good customer service. The story will be remembered, the ramblings of Candidate 1 won't.

There are four important parts to the stories you should tell in your CV. Taking Candidate 2's story as an illustrative example, these parts are;

POINT I am really good at customer service

REASON This is because I always go the extra mile...

EVIDENCE For instance, two weeks ago I had a customer come into our store...

POINT This is a good illustration of my commitment to outstanding customer service

Reinforcing the point you are trying to make at the end of your story as well as at the beginning helps focus the readers mind. Candidate 2 could then go on and include 'customer service' in their responsibilities and achievements further down their CV, therefore constantly reminding the reader that they have evidenced their attainment in this specific skill.

CV's are ultimately a summary of your skills and achievements in the workplace. They need to remain short (2-3 pages for most candidates is normal), but the content needs to be correct. Don't include too many stories in the Personal Profile element of your CV; this will use up valuable space. But do look at the key skill set required for the job you are applying for, and then choose one or two stories that demonstrate your ability to fulfil this skill set, using the PREP formula above.



Samantha Pearce is the owner of Words Worth Reading – an editorial service for Job Seekers, Students, Writers and Businesses.

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