



JOB SEARCH TOOLKIT

HOW TO CRAFT AN ATS-FRIENDLY CV THAT ACTUALLY GETS YOU INTERVIEWS

A practical, step-by-step guide to writing, formatting, and optimizing your CV so it passes automated screening software and impresses the human reader on the other side.



For Job Hunters &
Career Changers



Practical
Guide

— Contents

1. Introduction: Why ATS Matters	1
2. Key Terms & Concepts	2
3. How ATS Actually Works	3
4. Structuring Your CV for ATS + Humans	4
5. Formatting Rules That Matter	5
6. Keyword Optimization, Step by Step	6
7. Writing Bullet Points That Get Noticed	7
8. Ready-to-Use CV Template	8
9. Common Mistakes to Avoid	9
10. Final Checklist	10

1. Introduction: Why ATS Matters

Before a human ever reads your CV, software probably already has. Understanding how that software works — and writing for it deliberately — is one of the highest-leverage things you can do in your job search.

An **Applicant Tracking System (ATS)** is software that companies use to collect, sort, filter, and rank job applications. Over 97% of Fortune 500 companies use one, and the majority of mid-size and large employers now do too. If your CV isn't structured in a way the system can read correctly, it may never reach a recruiter's desk — regardless of how qualified you are.

This matters because ATS software doesn't reject candidates for lacking skills nearly as often as it "loses" qualified candidates due to **formatting errors, missing keywords, or file types it can't parse**. A strong CV that's invisible to the system is functionally the same as no CV at all.

QUICK TAKEAWAY

Your CV has two audiences: the ATS that filters applications first, and the human recruiter who reads what survives. A good CV is written for both — clear enough for software to parse, compelling enough for a person to want to interview you.

This guide walks through exactly how ATS software works, how to structure and format your CV around it, how to select the right keywords, and how to avoid the mistakes that quietly sink otherwise strong applications.

2. Key Terms & Concepts

These terms come up throughout this guide and throughout job postings themselves. Understanding them will help you make better decisions as you write.

Term	Definition
ATS (Applicant Tracking System)	Software used by employers to collect applications, scan CVs for relevant information, and rank or filter candidates before a human reviews them.
Parsing	The process by which an ATS reads a CV and extracts data (name, job titles, dates, skills) into structured fields in its database.
Keyword Match	The degree to which the words and phrases in your CV overlap with the words and phrases in the job description. Most ATS ranking is keyword-driven.
Hard Skills	Specific, teachable, and measurable abilities such as "Google Analytics," "Python," or "financial modeling." These are the primary keywords ATS software looks for.
Soft Skills	Interpersonal or behavioral traits such as "communication" or "leadership." Important for humans, but weighted far less by ATS keyword matching.
Header/Footer Content	Text placed in a document's header or footer area (e.g., contact details). Many ATS platforms cannot read this content at all.
CV Parsing Error	When an ATS misreads or fails to extract information because of tables, columns, images, or unusual fonts — often resulting in blank or scrambled fields.
Reverse-Chronological Format	A CV structure listing work experience from most recent to oldest. It's the format ATS software is best built to read.

3. How ATS Actually Works

Understanding the mechanics helps you make smarter formatting decisions later in this guide. Most ATS platforms follow the same basic process:

Step 1: Upload & Parsing

When you submit your CV, the ATS software scans the document and attempts to extract data into predefined fields: name, contact details, work history, education, and skills. It does this using pattern recognition, not human judgment — it looks for structural cues like headings, dates, and bullet points.

Step 2: Keyword Matching & Scoring

The system compares the words in your CV against the words in the job description (and sometimes a broader internal database of role-related terms). Many systems generate a match score or rank candidates based on how closely their CV aligns with the listed requirements.

Step 3: Recruiter Review

Recruiters typically see a shortlist of top-ranked candidates first, or they search the ATS database using their own keyword filters (e.g., "CVs containing 'SQL' AND 'stakeholder management'"). CVs that parsed poorly or matched few keywords may never surface in these searches.

⚠️ IMPORTANT REALITY CHECK

ATS software rarely "rejects" a CV outright based on content quality. Far more often, it simply fails to parse the document correctly — meaning a recruiter searching for your exact skill set never finds you, even though you're qualified.

4. Structuring Your CV for ATS + Humans

Use a standard, predictable structure. ATS software — and busy recruiters — both reward clarity over creativity here.

Recommended Section Order

1. **Contact Information** — name, phone, email, city/region, LinkedIn URL (in the body of the document, not the header)
2. **Professional Summary** — 2–3 sentences positioning you for the specific role
3. **Core Skills / Key Competencies** — a short list of hard skills relevant to the target job
4. **Work Experience** — reverse-chronological, with quantified bullet points
5. **Education**
6. **Certifications** (if relevant)

Use Standard Section Headings

ATS software is trained to recognize conventional headings. Creative alternatives can cause information to be miscategorized or dropped entirely.

✓ Use	⚠ Avoid
Work Experience / Professional Experience	"My Journey," "Where I've Been"
Education	"Learning Adventures"
Skills	"What I Bring to the Table"
Professional Summary	"About Me"

QUICK TAKEAWAY

Save creativity for your bullet points and achievements — not your section headings or document structure. Predictability here is what keeps your information intact.

5. Formatting Rules That Matter

Formatting is where most technically-qualified candidates lose points without realizing it. Follow these rules closely.

File Type

- **.docx** is the safest universal choice unless the job posting specifically requests a PDF.
- If submitting a **PDF**, make sure it's a text-based PDF (created from Word or Google Docs) — not a scanned image, which most ATS systems cannot read at all.
- Avoid .pages, .odt, or other uncommon formats.

Layout

- **Single column only.** Multi-column layouts and text boxes are frequently read out of order or skipped entirely.
- Avoid tables for laying out content (a small comparison table on this page is fine to read — but don't build your CV's skills section as a table).
- No headers or footers for contact information — many systems don't scan them.
- Avoid images, icons, graphics, charts, or headshots. They add no ATS value and can break parsing.

Fonts & Text

- Use standard fonts: Arial, Calibri, Georgia, Helvetica, or Times New Roman.
- Font size 10–12pt for body text, 14–16pt for your name/headings.
- Avoid special characters, unusual bullet symbols, or text effects (WordArt, shadows, outlines).
- Spell out abbreviations at least once (e.g., "Search Engine Optimization (SEO)") since some systems match exact phrasing only.

File Naming

```
FirstName_LastName_CV.docx  
e.g., Thandiwe_Nkosi_CV.docx
```

Avoid generic names like "Resume_Final_v3.docx" — some ATS platforms surface the file name to recruiters, and a professional name creates a small but real positive impression.

6. Keyword Optimization, Step by Step

Keyword matching is the single biggest factor in ATS ranking. Here's a practical process to follow for every application.

Step 1: Extract Keywords From the Job Posting

Copy the job description into a document and highlight every hard skill, tool, certification, and repeated phrase. Pay close attention to the "Requirements" and "Qualifications" sections — these are typically weighted most heavily.

Step 2: Mirror Exact Phrasing

If the posting says "project management," don't write "managing projects." ATS keyword matching is often literal. Use the exact phrase where it's true to your experience.

Step 3: Place Keywords Naturally in Context

Weave keywords into your summary, skills list, and bullet points — not just a hidden list at the bottom. Recruiters read the same document, so keywords need to make grammatical sense.

Example

Before (weak match)	After (strong match)
"Responsible for team communication and reporting"	"Led cross-functional stakeholder communication and monthly performance reporting for a 12-person team"

Step 4: Include a Core Skills Section

List 8–12 relevant hard skills as short phrases. This gives the ATS a concentrated block of exact-match terms, separate from prose.

CORE SKILLS

Financial Modeling · Stakeholder Management · SQL · Power BI
Budget Forecasting · Vendor Negotiation · Agile Project Management

⚠ AVOID KEYWORD STUFFING

Don't paste an invisible list of keywords in white text or repeat terms unnaturally. Modern ATS platforms and recruiters both can detect this, and it damages credibility rather than helping you.

7. Writing Bullet Points That Get Noticed

Once your CV is parseable and keyword-optimized, the quality of your bullet points determines whether a human recruiter is actually persuaded.

The Formula: Action + Task + Result

[Action Verb] + [What you did / tool used] + [Quantified result]

Examples

- "Streamlined the monthly invoicing process using Excel macros, **cutting processing time by 35%**"
- "Managed a R2.4 million marketing budget across four campaigns, **delivering a 22% increase in lead volume**"
- "Trained and onboarded 6 new sales reps, **reducing ramp-up time from 8 weeks to 5**"

Strong Action Verbs by Category

Leadership	Analysis	Improvement
Led, Directed, Mentored	Analyzed, Evaluated, Audited	Streamlined, Reduced, Optimized
Coordinated, Delegated	Forecasted, Modeled	Automated, Restructured

QUICK TAKEAWAY

Wherever possible, quantify: percentages, amounts, time saved, team size, or scale. Numbers are scannable by humans in seconds and make otherwise generic bullet points memorable.

8. Ready-to-Use CV Template

Copy this structure directly into a blank document as your starting point. Replace bracketed content with your own details.

```
[FULL NAME]
[City, Country] | [Phone Number] | [Email Address] | [LinkedIn URL]

PROFESSIONAL SUMMARY
[Job title] with [X years] of experience in [industry/function]. Skilled in
[key skill 1], [key skill 2], and [key skill 3]. Proven record of
[one measurable achievement relevant to target role].

CORE SKILLS
[Skill 1] · [Skill 2] · [Skill 3] · [Skill 4]
[Skill 5] · [Skill 6] · [Skill 7] · [Skill 8]

WORK EXPERIENCE

[Job Title] | [Company Name] | [City] | [Start Date] - [End Date]
- [Action verb] + [what you did] + [quantified result]
- [Action verb] + [what you did] + [quantified result]
- [Action verb] + [what you did] + [quantified result]

[Job Title] | [Company Name] | [City] | [Start Date] - [End Date]
- [Action verb] + [what you did] + [quantified result]
- [Action verb] + [what you did] + [quantified result]

EDUCATION
[Degree] in [Field] | [Institution Name] | [Graduation Year]

CERTIFICATIONS
[Certification Name] | [Issuing Body] | [Year]
```

9. Common Mistakes to Avoid

✗ Mistake: Using a creative, multi-column, or graphic-heavy template.

→ **Fix:** Use a clean, single-column layout. Save visual creativity for a portfolio or LinkedIn banner instead.

✗ Mistake: Submitting the exact same CV to every job.

→ **Fix:** Tailor your skills section and summary to each posting's specific keywords — even a 10-minute pass makes a measurable difference.

✗ Mistake: Putting contact details inside a header or footer.

→ **Fix:** Place your name and contact information in the main body at the top of the document.

✗ Mistake: Listing only soft skills ("team player," "hard worker") with no hard skills.

→ **Fix:** Prioritize specific tools, technical skills, and certifications — these are what ATS systems and recruiters actually search for.

✗ Mistake: Vague, duty-based bullet points ("Responsible for social media").

→ **Fix:** Rewrite as an achievement with a measurable result ("Grew Instagram engagement by 40% over 6 months").

✗ Mistake: Saving the file as an image, scanned PDF, or unusual format.

→ **Fix:** Save and submit as a text-based .docx or PDF exported directly from a word processor.

✗ Mistake: Keyword stuffing or hiding keywords in white text.

→ **Fix:** Integrate keywords naturally into your summary, skills, and bullet points only.

10. Final Checklist

Run through this list before submitting any application.

- ✓ Single-column layout with no tables, text boxes, headers, or footers used for content
- ✓ Standard section headings (Work Experience, Education, Skills, Professional Summary)
- ✓ Standard, readable font at 10–12pt body size
- ✓ File saved as .docx or a text-based PDF, named FirstName_LastName_CV
- ✓ Job description keywords identified and mirrored in exact phrasing where accurate
- ✓ Dedicated Core Skills section with 8–12 relevant hard skills
- ✓ Every bullet point follows Action + Task + Quantified Result
- ✓ No images, headshots, graphics, or unusual symbols
- ✓ Contact details placed in the main body, not a header/footer
- ✓ CV tailored to this specific job posting, not a generic copy
- ✓ Proofread for spelling and consistent date formatting

✓ **BOTTOM LINE**

An ATS-friendly CV isn't about gaming a system — it's about removing avoidable barriers between your genuine qualifications and the person who has the power to interview you. Structure for clarity, write for relevance, and tailor every application.