

THE CV TEARDOWN

A template for North African students applying abroad — and the reasoning behind every section.

By Rissal · withrssl.com

PAGE 1 — COVER + WHY THIS EXISTS

The CV that took me 14 versions to get right.

I went through 100+ rejections before I landed a fully funded master's at TU Hamburg. Most of those rejections weren't about my profile. They were about one document.

This is the CV template I built **after** I figured out what was wrong with mine. It's the structure I now use when I review CVs for students applying to scholarships, master's programs, and AI roles abroad.

It's not magic. It's a frame. The frame matters because most CVs from North African students aren't bad — they're just **organized in a way that hides the strongest parts**.

This PDF walks through the template section by section. For each one, I explain:

- **What** the section is
- **Why** it's there (and why in this order)
- **Where** students get it wrong
- **What to cut**

Read it once with your CV open beside it. By the end you'll know exactly what to change.

— Rissal

One thing before you start: A CV is not a biography. It's a sales document for one specific opportunity. The same CV does not work for a scholarship to LAU and a job at a Berlin startup. You will need to adapt this template for each application. The structure stays. The content shifts.

PAGE 2 — THE HEADER

The template

John Doe
City, Country | +123456789 | email@gmail.com | LinkedIn

What it is

The five things a reviewer sees before reading a single word of substance.

Why this order

Name first, large. Location second because admissions officers and recruiters filter by it. Phone is third (and increasingly unused for international apps — keep it for now). Email is fourth and **must be** (firstname.lastname@gmail.com), not (coolkid2003@hotmail.com). LinkedIn last because it's the click-through, not the headline.

Where students get it wrong

- **Missing GitHub.** If you're applying to anything technical — AI, software, data, engineering research — a GitHub link is non-negotiable. Add it next to LinkedIn. If your GitHub is empty, fix that before you send the CV.
- **Personal photo.** Don't include one. European and American CVs don't use them. Some German CVs still do, but for scholarships and international roles, leave it off.
- **Date of birth, nationality, marital status.** Cut all three. These belong on a French CV from 2009, not on anything you send abroad in 2026.

- **Phone number format.** Use the international format ((+213 ...)). A local format makes you look like you've never sent a CV outside your country.

Cut this

Date of birth. Marital status. Religion. Photo. Anything that lets someone discriminate against you without you knowing.

PAGE 3 — THE SUMMARY

The template

[Target Job Title / Professional Identity] [Broad Profession/Speciality] specializing in [Key Area 1], [Key Area 2], and [Key Area 3].
Leverages hands-on experience building [Type of Systems] to assist [Target Industry] with [Main Value Proposition]. Strong background in bridging [Core Strength 1] with [Core Strength 2].

What it is

The 30 seconds someone spends deciding whether to read the rest. If this section fails, the rest doesn't get read.

Why it's here

Reviewers read 50–200 CVs per opening. They're not reading yours top-to-bottom — they're scanning. The summary tells them, in one paragraph, **who you are, what you do, and why they should care.**

Why this exact structure

- **First sentence: identity.** "AI Engineer specializing in NLP, RAG systems, and applied research." Not "passionate student looking for opportunities." Identity is concrete. Passion is filler.
- **Second sentence: proof of value.** What have you actually built, and for whom?
- **Third sentence: differentiation.** What's the thing about you that other candidates don't have? For me: "bridging applied research with production-grade systems." For you, it might be something else entirely.

Where students get it wrong

- **Writing it like a personal statement.** "I am a motivated and hardworking student passionate about..." — this is for your grandma, not for a CV. Cut every adjective that describes *how you feel about yourself*. Replace with what you've done.
- **Trying to be everything.** "I work on AI, web dev, mobile dev, and design." Pick one direction per CV. The summary is not a buffet.
- **Buzzword soup.** "Synergistic, results-driven, innovative thinker." Reviewers physically wince. Use specific nouns and verbs.

Constraints

- **Max 3 sentences. Max 50 words.** If yours is longer, you're not summarizing, you're rambling.
- **Read it out loud.** If it sounds like a robot or a LinkedIn influencer, rewrite.

Example (rewritten from a real student CV I reviewed)

Before: "I am a passionate and motivated computer science student with strong interests in artificial intelligence and machine learning, eager to contribute to innovative projects and learn from experienced professionals in cutting-edge environments."

After: "AI engineering student specializing in NLP and retrieval systems. Built a multilingual RAG pipeline for Arabic legal documents now used by 3 firms in Algiers. Strong bridge between research papers and shipped products."

The "after" is one rejection away from being good. The "before" is one rejection away from being read.

PAGE 4 — CORE EXPERTISE

The template

- [Skill Category 1]: [Specific Skill 1], [Specific Skill 2], [Specific Skill 3], [Specific Skill 4].
- [Skill Category 2]: ...
- [Skill Category 3]: ...
- [Skill Category 4]: ...

What it is

A scannable map of what you can actually do, organized by category so it's readable in 5 seconds.

Why it's here (and before experience)

Most students put skills at the bottom. That's wrong for technical fields. A reviewer scanning your CV needs to know **within 10 seconds** if you have the tools the role requires. If skills are buried, you lose that window.

Why 4 categories

Four is the magic number. Three feels light. Five feels desperate. Four signals "I have depth across the dimensions of my field."

How to pick your categories

Look at the job description or scholarship requirements. Mirror them. If the program is in "Machine Learning Engineering," your categories should look like:

- **Applied ML & Modeling:** Transformers, fine-tuning, evaluation
- **Systems & Infra:** Docker, AWS, MLOps, CI/CD
- **Languages & Frameworks:** Python, PyTorch, TensorFlow, FastAPI
- **Research Methods:** Paper reproduction, ablation studies, dataset curation

If the program is in "Data Science for Public Policy," the categories shift. Same template. Different content.

Where students get it wrong

- **Listing every tool they've ever opened.** Photoshop next to PyTorch next to Microsoft Word. Cut everything that doesn't directly support the role.
- **Generic categories.** "Programming Languages, Soft Skills, Other Tools" — these are filler. Categories should reveal expertise, not catalog tools.
- **Listing certifications here.** Certifications belong in their own section or in education. Skills are what you can *do*, not what you have a badge for.
- **No version numbers / scale.** "PyTorch" is fine. "PyTorch (fine-tuned 7B+ models)" is better when you have the receipts.

Cut this

- Microsoft Office. (It's 2026. Assume it.)
 - "Internet research."
 - "Teamwork, leadership, communication." Show it through your experience, don't claim it as a skill.
 - Anything you'd struggle to answer a basic interview question about.
-

PAGE 5 — RESEARCH EXPERIENCE (*optional but powerful*)

The template

[Job Title / Role] – [Institution] | [Month, Year] – [Month, Year]
Context: [Optional brief context, e.g., "As part of my thesis work: Project Name"]

- [Action Verb] a [Type of Pipeline/System] for [Core Function], designing [Specific Component] to improve [Specific Outcome].
- Evaluated [Type of Architecture] against [Baseline], formulating [Custom Methodology] to [Solve a Specific Problem].
- Bridged [Theoretical Concept] with [Practical Application], resulting in [Outcome].

What it is

Where you signal that you can do scholarship-grade work — even if your title was "intern" or "student researcher."

Why it's here (and when to include it)

Include it if: you're applying to a master's, PhD, scholarship, or research role. **Skip it if:** you're applying for industry jobs in pure engineering or product roles. In that case, fold research into the projects section.

This section exists because admissions committees specifically look for it. A student with research experience — even unpublished, even small — signals "I know what a research process looks like, I won't drown."

Why "Context" matters

One line of context turns "I worked on a thing" into "I worked on a thing that was part of a larger goal." Reviewers can't evaluate work in a vacuum. Give them the frame.

The bullet pattern: Action + What + Why

Every research bullet should answer three questions:

1. **What did you do?** (Built, evaluated, designed, formulated, reproduced)
2. **What was it for?** (The system, the task, the dataset)
3. **What was the outcome?** (Metric, finding, downstream use, publication)

Bad: *"Worked on machine learning models."* Good: *"Designed an evaluation pipeline for Arabic transformers, comparing 4 fine-tuning strategies on a 12K-row legal corpus and surfacing a 7-point F1 gain from instruction tuning over LoRA."*

Where students get it wrong

- **Listing courses as research.** "Took Deep Learning at university" is not research experience.
- **Hiding the outcome.** If your work led to a paper, a thesis defense, a published dataset, or even an internal report — name it.
- **Using "helped with" or "assisted in."** Be specific about your contribution. If you only helped, lead with what you specifically did *within* that help.

Cut this

Anything where you can't name a specific deliverable. If you can't finish the sentence "...which produced ___" or "...which led to ___", the bullet isn't ready.

PAGE 6 — PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

The template

[Job Title] – [Company Name] | [Month, Year] – [Present / Month, Year]
• [Action Verb] and deployed scalable [Type of Technology] for

[Stakeholders],
transitioning [Old State] into [New Improved State].

- Designed [Type of Framework] to automate [Complex Operation], integrating [Core Tech] with [Secondary Tech] while ensuring [Compliance/Security].
- Bridged technical capability with commercial strategy, securing [Business Outcome]
by translating [Technical Concept] into quantifiable operational ROI.

What it is

The proof that you've shipped real work, not just studied. The most-read section after the summary.

Why this bullet structure

The pattern is **Action → Object → Outcome**. Every bullet does all three. The reason it works: it forces you to think in transformations, not tasks.

"Maintained the website" is a task. "Migrated the company website from WordPress to Next.js, cutting load times by 60% and freeing the team from monthly plugin patches" is a transformation.

Reviewers don't hire people who do tasks. They hire people who change states. Even if your role was small, frame the work as a state change.

Why "transitioning [Old State] into [New Improved State]"

This is the most important phrase in the template. If you can't fit your work into this pattern, the work probably isn't strong enough to put on a CV — or you haven't thought hard enough about what it actually achieved.

Where students get it wrong

- **Listing responsibilities, not outcomes.** "Was responsible for managing client data." So what? What changed because you were there?
- **No numbers.** Numbers don't have to be big. They have to be real. "Reduced manual data entry by ~5 hours per week" is more credible than "drastically improved efficiency."
- **Mixing past and present tense.** Current role: present tense. Past roles: past tense. Don't mix within a single role.
- **Forgetting context.** A reviewer in Hamburg doesn't know what "Sonatrach" or "BNA" is. If the company isn't internationally recognizable, add a 4-word descriptor: "BNA — national retail bank, 4M+ customers."

Cut this

- Internships from before university unless they're directly relevant.
- High school anything (yes, even the impressive thing).
- Roles where you can't write three real bullets. Two-bullet roles look thin. Cut to one strong sentence or drop the role entirely.

PAGE 7 — SELECTED PROJECTS

The template

[Project Name / System Title]:
Built an adaptive [Type of Framework] utilizing [Core Technology] to parse [Data Type] and extract [Key Insight]. Designed with a [Specific Feature] to dynamically adjust to [Domain-Specific Challenge]. Containerized via [Tool] for seamless cross-platform deployment.

What it is

Where students without much work experience win or lose the application.

Why it matters more than most students realize

If you're applying for a master's or your first AI role, **projects are the most important section after the summary**. They are how you compensate for not having 5 years of experience.

A good project section can carry an entire CV.

How many projects

Two to three. Not one (looks thin). Not five (looks unfocused). Pick the projects that best match what you're applying for.

How to write each project

Each project gets:

1. **A name** — not "Final Year Project" or "Personal Project 2." A real name. "AraRAG: Arabic Retrieval for Legal Documents."
2. **A one-line description** of what it does.
3. **A specific technical detail** that signals depth. (Why you chose tool X over Y, what hard problem you solved, what the architecture looks like.)
4. **A link to the code or demo** if it exists. **This is the single highest-leverage line in the section**. A working GitHub repo with a README beats two paragraphs of description.

Pick projects that show range

If you have three projects, ideally they show three different things:

- **One that shows depth** — a research-style project with proper methodology
- **One that shows shipping** — something deployed, used by someone, in production
- **One that shows curiosity** — a side project on a problem you cared about, even if scrappy

This mix signals to a reviewer: *"This person can do rigorous work, can ship, and is genuinely interested in the field."*

Where students get it wrong

- **University assignments as projects**. Unless the assignment was substantial and you went beyond the brief, it doesn't count. Reviewers can smell a class project from a mile away.
- **No link**. A project with no code, no demo, and no screenshot is just a claim. Add the link or cut the project.
- **Copy-paste from a tutorial**. "Built a chatbot using OpenAI API following [tutorial]" doesn't help. What did *you* add?
- **Vague tech stack**. "Built using Python and AI" is meaningless. Name the specific libraries, models, infrastructure.

Cut this

Any project you couldn't defend in a 5-minute conversation. If a reviewer asked "why did you choose that architecture?", could you answer? If no, cut.

PAGE 8 — EDUCATION + LANGUAGES

The template

- [Degree, e.g., M.Sc. Field] — [University Name]
[Optional: Thesis: Title of Thesis] · [Optional: CGPA: X.XX/Y.YY]
 - [Degree, e.g., B.Sc. Field] — [University Name]
[Optional: CGPA: X.XX/Y.YY]

LANGUAGES SPOKEN
[Language 1] ([Proficiency Level]) · [Language 2] ([Proficiency Level])

What it is

The credentials box. Important but should be brief.

Why it's near the bottom

For students with internships, projects, or research, education matters less than what you've actually done. The exception: if you're applying directly out of undergrad with no work experience, move education *above* professional experience.

CGPA — include it or not?

Include it if it's above 14/20 (or ~3.3/4.0 equivalent). **Cut it** if it's below that. There is no rule that says you must include your CGPA. A missing CGPA is read as "average." A low CGPA is read as "below average." Average is better than below average.

Languages — use the CEFR scale

Not "fluent," not "good," not "intermediate." Use:

- **A1, A2** — basic
- **B1, B2** — intermediate to upper-intermediate
- **C1, C2** — advanced to native-level

For Arabic, specify if it's Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or your dialect. For Algerian students applying to Germany or France specifically, this matters more than you'd think — those countries care about linguistic precision.

Example:

┆ Arabic (C2, native) · French (C1) · English (C1) · German (A2, learning)

What about online courses, certifications, MOOCs?

Optional dedicated section if you have 2+ that are recognized in your field:

- DeepLearning.AI specializations
- Hugging Face courses
- AWS / Google Cloud certifications
- fast.ai

Skip it if:

- You have only one
- They're generic ("Introduction to Python")
- They're from platforms reviewers won't recognize

Put it between Education and Languages, or fold the strongest one into your Summary.

Cut this

- High school name.
- Baccalauréat score (unless you're applying within 1 year of finishing it).
- Workshops, webinars, "attended" anything — these aren't credentials.

PAGE 9 — THE 7 MISTAKES I SEE MOST

Pattern recognition from reviewing CVs from North African students applying abroad.

1. The wall of text

A CV without white space is a CV that doesn't get read. Two pages, generous spacing, clear hierarchy. If your CV is one dense page, it's hiding from the reviewer, not helping them.

2. Listing tasks instead of transformations

"Managed the social media." Reviewers don't care what you managed. They care what changed because you were there. Every bullet should answer: *what was different by the time I left?*

3. Including a low CGPA out of obligation

Nobody is forcing you to include it. If it hurts you, leave it off. Same goes for a graduation year that reveals a gap you don't want to explain — name the gap year as something else (freelance, self-study, research assistant) if it was substantive.

4. Skills section that reads like a Coursera receipt

"Python, R, SQL, Java, C++, JavaScript, HTML, CSS, MATLAB, Excel, Photoshop..." Pick the 8-12 skills you'd actually use in interviews. Cut the rest. A long skills list signals "I'm hoping one of these matches" rather than "I'm strong here."

5. No GitHub, no portfolio, no link

For any technical role or AI scholarship, the link is doing 30% of the work. Empty GitHub? Push a project this weekend. The fastest CV upgrade is putting one strong, well-documented repo at the top of your profile.

6. Same CV for every application

The structure stays. The summary shifts. The skill categories shift. The project order shifts. You should have a base CV and 3-5 tailored versions, not one generic file.

7. Letting the CV stand alone

A CV is one document in a stack. Your motivation letter, recommendation letters, transcripts, and any portfolio are reading each other. They should reinforce the same story — not contradict each other or repeat each other word-for-word.

PAGE 10 — A FINAL CHECKLIST

Before you send any application, run your CV through this list. If any answer is no, fix it before sending.

Header

- ☐ Name is large, readable, and the first thing visible
- ☐ Email is (firstname.lastname@gmail.com) (or equivalent), not a nickname
- ☐ LinkedIn is included and the profile actually matches the CV
- ☐ GitHub is included if you're applying for anything technical
- ☐ No photo, no DOB, no marital status

Summary

- ☐ Max 50 words, 3 sentences
- ☐ Names a specific identity, not a vague aspiration
- ☐ Contains at least one concrete proof point
- ☐ Does not contain the words "passionate," "motivated," "hardworking," or "results-driven"

Skills / Core Expertise

- ☐ Organized into 3-4 named categories
- ☐ Every skill listed is something you'd be confident discussing in an interview
- ☐ Mirrors language from the job description or scholarship requirements

Experience (Research + Professional)

- ☐ Every bullet follows Action → Object → Outcome
- ☐ At least 60% of bullets contain a number
- ☐ No bullets start with "Responsible for" or "Helped with"
- ☐ Roles older than 5 years are cut or shortened

Projects

- ☐ 2-3 projects, each with a name (not "Project 1")
- ☐ Each has a link to code, demo, or write-up
- ☐ Each demonstrates a specific technical choice you could defend in 5 minutes

Education

- ☐ CGPA included only if it helps you
- ☐ No high school
- ☐ Thesis title included if you're applying to a master's or PhD

Languages

- ☐ CEFR levels (A1-C2), not "fluent" or "good"

Format

- ☐ Two pages maximum
 - ☐ One font family, max two weights
 - ☐ PDF, not Word
 - ☐ Filename is `FirstName_LastName_CV.pdf` — not `cv_final_v3_real_FINAL.pdf`
-

PAGE 11 — WHAT TO DO NEXT

You now have a better CV than 80% of the students you're competing with.

But here's the honest part: **a better CV applied to the wrong scholarships is still a no.**

Most students lose 6 months applying to programs they were never going to get. They apply to too many, to the wrong ones, with the wrong documents in the wrong order. The CV is the easy part. Choosing where to send it is the hard one.

That's what I run a workshop on every other Saturday. **Study Abroad Funding — scholarships, loans, grants for North African students.** Two hours live, 25 seats, €10. You leave with:

- A list of scholarships matched to your specific profile
- A 30-day application plan, sequenced by deadline
- The full version of every document I used (CV, motivation letter, recommendation request templates)

Next session: Saturday 23 May, 12:00 CEST → withrssle.com/workshop/study-abroad-funding/register

If you can't make it live, the recording goes out within 48 hours.

Replied to this email and told me what clicked? That's how I make the next version of this PDF better. I read everything.

— Rissal rissal@withrssle.com Algiers / Hamburg