

Vita Voyeur

By Roddy Roediger
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I like to look at other people's vitas. There. My little secret is out in the open. Vitas are so delicious, so much fun to read. They tell so much about a person. Academics live for them.

"You are your vita," Charles Lord writes in the first chapter of *The Compleat Academic*. Vitas are the record of our accomplishments great and (much more likely) small. Ambitious corporate executives strive for wealth and toys - the person who dies with the most money and cars and gadgets wins the game. In academia we don't play for money, by and large, but for other rewards - publications, citations, awards, editorships, and other hallmarks of success. Our vitas record our winnings, our small shots at immortality. But, like any publication, there are many decisions in creating our vitas: What to put on a vita? How many categories should there be? In what order should things go? How often should we update our vitas? How many vitas should we have? (I've discovered many people have three or four; more on this, anon). Vitas are an endless source of fascination. This article is about their construction.

Like many people with mild social perversions, I have found a socially acceptable way to satisfy my voyeuristic craving: I am a department chair. All my faculty members give me an updated vita once a year, as do the adjunct faculty, research associates, and postdoctoral fellows in my department. This gives me a once-a-year fix. But an even bigger jolt comes during job searches. We have hired some 16 people in the seven years I have been chair, a process that involved a huge numbers of vitas. A full professor search might bring in 30-50 vitas, depending on the area, but an assistant professor search can bring in 150-200. However, there is a trade-off, because (as the name *full* professor implies) vitas of senior candidates tend to be fuller and more pleasing to the eye. Assistant professor vitas are often thin and scraggly by comparison.

In order to prepare to write this column, I wrote off for what may be the Mother of All Vitas in contemporary psychology. That's right: I wrote to Bob Sternberg, president of the American Psychological Association, a good friend of mine, and owner of one impressive vita. He sent it to me right away; he's not shy. And even if I had to wait, it would have been worth it. Sixty-three pages! My printer chugged along as if it would never stop. I also printed out my own vita for this column and it didn't take nearly as long - only 25 pages. (And to think - Bob was an undergraduate at Yale when I was a graduate student there, so I had the jump on him.) I'll consider choices academics need to make in constructing their vitas and I'll use Bob's and my vitas as reference points.

The first items are personal information: affiliation, address and other contact information, educational history, and professional experience (positions held). It used to be common to put all sorts of personal information on the vita - birth date, spouse, children, their names and birthdays,

one's social security number, etc. This is no longer accepted practice both due to identity theft (so no SSNs) and fear of discrimination. People differ in putting one's birth date on the vita; I do it and so does Bob, but others don't. Of course, as chair, I tend to want to know ages of the candidates in searches, and age can generally be estimated by assuming the person was about 22 or 23 when receiving the bachelor's degree.

You should put your educational and occupational history on the first page of your vita and try to make it complete enough to explain any gaps. If you worked in industry for four years between the bachelor's degree and your graduate education, list your work experiences here, along with other experiences, in chronological order. Don't let the reader guess what you might have been doing, as readers might assume the worst. (Were those the drug rehab years?)

After these categories of personal information, many people have a section to list *Honors and Awards*. Be selective here. The fact that you were elected to the psychology club as an undergraduate might be OK to include when you are applying to graduate school, but prune it from your vita a few years later. Similarly, seeing "Honorable Mention - National Science Foundation Fellowship" on the vita of a junior job candidate is all right, but it looks silly to list it on a full professor's vita. (After all, Honorable Mention means you didn't get it, but the committee felt a bit bad about it so gave you Honorable Mention). In short, make sure honors are honors. Ask someone, or several people, if in doubt.

Also towards the beginning of your vita you may have a category of *Organizations and Societies* to which you belong. I find this section revealing. Is the person only in highly specialized societies, or does she or he belong to more general organizations, too? A department chair once told me that he belonged to neither APS nor APA, and he seemed proud of the fact. "How does he know what's going on in psychology?" I thought to myself. The rest of our conversation indicated that he didn't. The societies and organizations to which you belong provide information about your professional identity - you may be in the field of developmental neuroscience, say, but do you also consider yourself a psychologist by belonging to and identifying with general psychological organizations? If not, you might be typecast as someone of narrow intellectual horizons.

Editorial Activity is another category of experiences that should be listed, if relevant. List journals for which you are a consulting editor (your name is listed on the editorial board) or associate editor or editor. When you are a junior faculty member, it is all right to list journals (and perhaps book publishers) for which you have served as an occasional reviewer. That might be all you have for this category. However, as you become more senior in the field, drop this category as you would drop the psychology club as an honor.

Administrative Experience is another category for a section near the beginning of your vita. For new academics, the first activities are likely to be oriented towards the department and perhaps a few others (such as serving on the program committee for a regional psychology meeting).

However, more senior faculty might use subcategories here. I use three: National administrative experience (e.g., chair, APS publications committee, 1998-2001), university experience (e.g., academic planning committee, Washington University, 1999-present), and departmental experience (e.g., director of graduate studies, Purdue University, 1975-76). Your service in these categories also tells prospective employers something about you - are you the kind of person who is willing to do service work? Do others value and trust your judgment by asking you to perform service work?

Another critical item on the vita is *Grants and Contracts*. Have you achieved external funding for your research? List the names of grants or contracts, the funding agency, and your role (principal investigator, co-PI, consultant). Also list the amount of the grant (the direct cost or the total cost of each award is typical). However, if there is a huge grant on your vita in terms of dollars, but your part as a consultant is very small, indicate what part of the effort is yours. Bob Sternberg has received 43 awards during his career and, just during 2003, he has nine active awards for his work and that of his collaborators. Most of us feel fortunate to have one or two awards at a time.

Somewhere on your vita you should list *Teaching Interests and Courses Taught*. I would keep this section short - list the titles of the courses you feel qualified to teach and note the ones you have taught. However, you need not provide teacher ratings, student comments, syllabi, and other course information. If you have won a teaching award, list that under Honors and Awards. If you are applying for a job, provide separate statements on teaching and research that would provide all the details that might be of interest to the prospective employer.

Many people provide a brief section of *Research Interests*, often either before or after Teaching Interests. Again, keep this section short. You could either have a bulleted list of your research topics or three to four well chosen sentences providing the briefest descriptions of the areas and problems on which you do research.

I have already listed several categories of information to be placed on the vita and have not yet even come to the most important part - *Publications*. This section would seem to be straightforward - the record of one's scholarly activity - but actually it is not. There are many choices here and many judgment calls. Some people provide the list of publications in anti-chronological order, from the most recent papers first and the oldest ones last. Although defensible (this lets the reader know first what you have been up to lately), I think it is the wrong way to do it. Sternberg agrees. His vita lists years in bold as a heading and then lists the items published in that year under that heading, from 1972 forward. For example, he published one item in 1972 and in 1973, 25 in 1982, 40 in 1988, and so on, up through some 900 (or more - I estimated rather than counted) in total! He has already published four items in 2004, even though I write this column in the fall of 2003. Oh, Sternberg also has 43 items in press!

Many psychologists have several categories of publication rather than putting them all together

in one long list. These can include: *Books, Chapters, Refereed Journal Articles, Invited Articles, Nonrefereed Articles, Book Reviews*, and maybe more. It is probably a good practice for relatively junior psychologists to use categories to highlight the mother lode of academic publishing in the sciences: the refereed journal article. I divided my vita into various categories for many years, but it finally got too unwieldy. It was hard to figure out what I had done without reading the whole vita, with my recent work spread over four categories on different pages. So, I now use strict chronological order like Sternberg, starting with the oldest work, with the exception of one category of publication. A chronological ordering lets a reader see how the topics you study has changed (or perhaps failed to change) over time. The exception in my case is that I reserve a separate category for books. The reason is that I have textbooks that go through multiple revisions and I wasn't sure how to list them. I have three texts, one that has gone through four editions, another seven, and a third, eight. Do I list each edition separately in its appropriate chronological slot? That's what Sternberg does and the practice is certainly defensible. After all, each revision is a lot of work and the result is a (somewhat) new book. However, I have opted to list these textbooks once, with other books, in a separate section, rather than having many extra entries on my vita. There is no right answer here, as with many of these decisions.

Many researchers list their works chronologically and then mark refereed articles with an asterisk. A real question is what other kinds of contributions to include. Books, book chapters, and nonrefereed papers in good (or pretty good) journals are always included. However, what about other items such as technical reports produced for granting agencies? Some place these in a separate category, others don't include them at all. (I don't and neither does Sternberg.) What about conference proceedings? Sometimes these are refereed, in a sense, because a conference selection committee picked the contribution to be presented at the conference. Yet the review process for many conferences is cursory and only god-awful contributions are rejected. I don't list conference proceedings as publications; neither does Sternberg. I write some pieces for newsletters of various organizations and don't include them on my vita; however, Sternberg does. For that matter, what about Presidential Columns in the *Observer*? I don't include them on my vita, but I could. (Do I really want an article entitled "Vita Voyeur" on my vita?).

In short, there are many perplexing choices in what to list in your vita under *Published Work* and the predicament grows over the years for many academics, as they age and are asked to write for many different outlets. What are the boundaries? Clearly, you shouldn't list your high school and college term papers, well-crafted e-mail messages, or reviews of manuscripts. At the other extreme, you must list refereed journal articles, books, and chapters. However, in between these categories there are many contributions (e.g., an article in an alumni magazine) that fall in gray areas. Ask for advice from senior faculty members if you are unsure whether you should list something, but often you can only be given guidelines and not firm answers. Your university or college may have firm rules about what to list when you present your case for tenure or promotion, but for other purposes it is up to you. Remember: you are your vita. What you put on

there is how you present yourself to the world.

A final category on many vitas is *Addresses, Talks, and Posters*. This can be a very long list for older academics and, frankly, no one bothers to read them. Sternberg does not put this category on his vita at all, but only lists some major invited addresses he has given. His vita might be 100 pages if he included all his talks as well as all his publications. I have two categories on my vita (Invited Addresses for keynote presentations and the like; Talks and Posters for more typical conference presentations). However, I am thinking of dropping the latter category. Does anyone care what talk I gave at the meetings of the Midwestern Psychological Association in 1974?

One solution to some of these problems is to have several versions of your vita. One would be quite inclusive, with practically everything listed. A second version would strip off the talks, the secondary papers, and other marginalia, and therefore have more intellectual oomph. The National Institutes of Health require a biosketch version of the vita (which used to be two pages long but now can be four pages), so this represents a third type of vita listing only a person's most significant work. Finally, one can also create a brief narrative biography (one paragraph to maybe one page) for use in certain occasions (e.g., when someone will need to introduce you for a talk).

A final point. Your vita should be considered one of your major publications. I continue to be amazed at how sloppily some people put together their vitas and how they fail to proofread them. Give your vita to several colleagues for their comments, just as you would a journal article. Read it carefully yourself at least once a year. (I recently discovered, thanks to an observant research assistant, that I had omitted two recent refereed articles and a book chapter from my vita). Revise your vita over the years, omitting some items as your career matures. When you are young, having a long list of in preparation papers is all right, but remove this category later. If you are not a vita voyeur in general, you should at least be with regard to your own.

In keeping with the "Vita Voyeur" spirit of his column, APS President Roddy Roediger, as well as APS Past President Susan T. Fiske and Robert Sternberg have kindly agreed to share their CVs with *Observer* readers.

Susan T. Fiske: <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/vita/FiskeVita.pdf>

Roddy Roediger: <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/vita/RoedigerVita.pdf>

Robert Sternberg: <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/vita/SternbergVita.pdf>