

Application Forms



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Application Forms

Job application forms may be online or paper-based and are used as a way of selecting between applicants. Some jobs can be extremely competitive, with some graduate training schemes attracting thousands of applications per place and even retail and administrative jobs can attract hundreds of applicants per place. Application forms give employers a good way of sifting applications by comparing candidates quickly and easily.

Because of levels of competition, it is therefore really important that you allocate enough time to complete your form to give you the best possible chance. As a guide you should start your application form at least one week before the deadline for the job. You will then have a chance to draft and redraft your form and get feedback from other people.

This advice sheet will cover some essential tips for filling in an application form, before giving specific information about how to complete a very common kind of application form: the competency based form.

General Tips for Application Forms

- If you are applying with a paper-based form, make a photocopy or copies to practice on. If you are applying online make sure you regularly 'save' your form to prevent your work being lost if the system times out, or alternatively copy and paste the questions into a word processing package and work on your answers off-line.
- Read the instructions carefully – in particular make sure that you read any accompanying application notes, which often provide some advice on what information to include in the form. Instructions may also cover the basics such as where to use block capitals, what colour ink to use, and whether CVs are accepted. If you don't follow these basic instructions the employer may not even read your form.
- Proof read or spellcheck your form. Basic mistakes will often mean your form is discarded (especially if you spell the organisation's name or the job title incorrectly!).
- Where there is a 'qualifications' section, make sure you list all your qualifications. If you are currently studying for a qualification you can still list it but write 'due for completion in....' in place of the completion date. You should include qualifications back to standard grades, O grades or GCSEs or equivalent. If space is tight you may need to summarise some of your qualifications, for example 'eight standard grades at grades 1-3'.
- Where you are asked to list work experience you should list all your jobs since school or *at least* all



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your jobs for the last ten years. You may summarise sections of your work experience (especially if these were some years ago or included lots of low level jobs), for example '2001-3 Various short term and temporary contracts in the hospitality industry'.

- Make sure that you have a complete work or study history that covers at least the last ten years. If you had a break for whatever reason then mark this in your employment history but try to word this in a positive way '1998-2008 Career break to raise children' or '2007-8 Gap year spent travelling in Australia'.
- If you are asked for references, check if there are any guidelines as to who the employer wants as a referee (often one of them will need to be your most recent or current employer). If you have a choice of referee consider who is likely to give you the best reference, and also what kind of referee might be particularly relevant to this employer – for example if you're applying for a child care job and two years ago you had a job as a childcare assistant you might ask that employer if they would be a referee. Make sure your referees know that you have put their names on the form and are happy to give a reference.

Competency Based Applications

A very common kind of recruitment is 'competency based'. This is when an employer creates a list of 'competencies' or criteria that the employee will need to be effective in a job, and then measures candidates against this list. Typically if an employer is using a competency based approach they will help candidates by making the list of competencies or criteria they are using openly available. In many cases this list of criteria is given in a 'person specification' document which typically lists the experience, skills, attributes and knowledge that candidates need in terms of 'essential' and 'desirable' criteria.

The way that an employer assesses whether a candidate has all the competencies necessary for the job is by seeking *evidence* of these competencies from the application form. *Evidence* is normally found where a candidate describes their experience in a way that gives sufficient detail, and clearly demonstrates the skill, attribute or knowledge being sought. The way an employer gathers evidence of an applicant's competencies on an application form may be through:

- A series of competency based questions
- A personal statement

Competency Questions

Competency questions are questions on an application form which ask you to describe examples of when you have demonstrated particular skills or attributes, for example: 'Describe a situation where you demonstrated leadership and management skills in order to lead a team to a successful outcome'. You will typically have a series of questions like this and there may be a word limit for each answer.



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Sometimes rather than a series of questions, employers simply give you a series of boxes each with the heading of a different skill or attribute, for example: 'effective communication skills' 'appropriate customer service experience', and then ask you to use the space in the box to explain how you meet each criteria.

Some Pointers for Competency Questions:

- **Make sure you demonstrate what you are being asked to demonstrate:** this may seem obvious, but *carefully* read the question to ensure you understand what you are being asked before you try and think of an example. In particular:
 - Make sure you take account of *all* aspects of the question. So, for example: 'Describe a situation where you demonstrated leadership and management skills in order to lead a team to a successful outcome' – this question asks you to think of an example that does two things: demonstrates leadership and management *and* links this to a successful outcome. You *must* think of an example which does both.
 - When giving examples of skills, making sure you cover the full scope of the skill set can be important e.g. 'communication skills' try to think broadly and incorporate all aspects of this skill, for example, written communication, verbal communication, presentations etc.
 - If you are unsure exactly what the employer is asking you to demonstrate, then try thinking from the employer's perspective. Look at the job description for the job and think about the skill from that angle e.g. for a job as a sales manager, what kind of communication skills is the employer likely to want?
- **Choose your examples carefully:** make sure your examples demonstrate your skills most clearly and in a way that is relevant to the job:
 - You can select examples from work, voluntary work, study or your personal life, whatever is most relevant.
 - Try to select a good range of examples rather than using the same example each time.
 - Choose examples where the outcome was positive.
 - Choose specific examples – what the questions are *not* asking you to do is to make a general statement like 'I am confident and able to lead all manner of teams to a positive outcome'. Rather your answers should refer to specific things such as 'During my experience as an outdoors instructor I was responsible for leading small groups of children on outdoors expeditions.... In order to do this I... (planned / developed / designed / communicated)'.
 - Use the STAR approach to describing an example (see exercise below).
- **Overall:** keep your writing clear and concise.



Exercise 1: The STAR approach

The STAR approach is a way of describing experience concisely and effectively. It is particularly useful when filling in application forms and preparing for interviews.

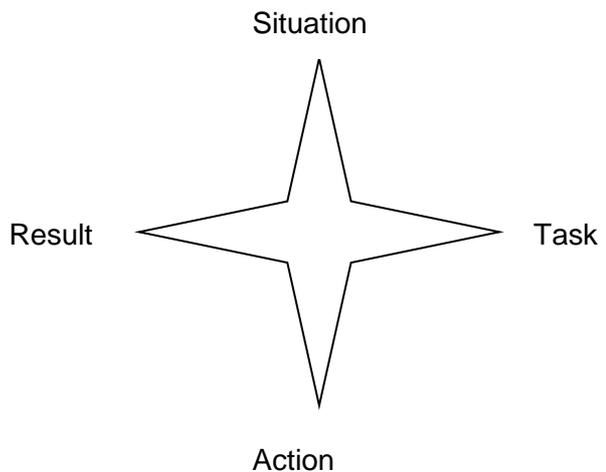
To get started, think of a time when you did something well, or something that you're proud of (this could be from work, study or another area of your life). Write a sentence or two on each of the following areas:

Situation: describe the situation: that is what you were doing, where you were working, who you were with.

Task: describe the nature of the task you faced, what was the problem or challenge you had to overcome

Actions: describe the actions you took to undertake the task. When describing your actions, it is important to make sure that you describe actions *you* took, not a whole team. So rather than saying something like 'the team worked together to develop an annual plan for the office' you should say something like 'I led my team in the development of an annual plan by....' You should also make sure that you properly address the skills you are demonstrating. So, although you may be demonstrating one main skill (e.g. management) the trick is to take the 'main' skill and break it down into other elements, skills or actions, to show that you know what the main skill actually involves. So, if you are demonstrating leadership skills by talking about developing an annual team plan, you could say how you demonstrated leadership by *consulting* with your team to develop a *project plan* and then *communicated* this plan to all members of the team.

Result: describe the outcome of your actions e.g. 'sales increased by ten percent', 'staff responded well and we held weekly meetings', 'the children gave excellent feedback on my presentation'





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Personal Statements

Rather than using competency questions, some competency based application forms use a 'supporting statement' section instead. Supporting statements are sometimes called 'personal statements' or 'case for employment' or something similar. Typically applicants are given up to a side of A4 to explain why they are suitable for the job, with the option to attach further sheets if necessary.

Forms with a 'personal statement' section are not *always* competency based – that is sometimes employers are not using this section to measure candidates against certain criteria. However, if an application pack contains a person specification with 'essential' and 'desirable' criteria it is probably safest to assume that the application *is* competency based. If you find a person specification in the application pack then the trick of the personal statement section of the application form is to write a coherent set of paragraphs covering your interest in the job and your relevant experience which *simultaneously* demonstrate *all* the criteria the employer has listed in the person specification.

Some pointers:

- Start with a sentence that explains why you *want* the job and summarising your skills and experience that make you perfect for the job.
- Then break into a series of paragraphs that provide evidence of all the criteria in the person specification. You *must* make sure that your statement demonstrates every essential criteria and as many desirable criteria as possible. Some tips are:
 - Decide on a structure for your statement. A common structure is to use a series of paragraphs covering key parts of your experience, e.g. two paragraphs on your current job, one paragraph on your studies, one paragraph on your voluntary work. Each paragraph would broadly describe your experience and then pick out key experiences that demonstrate the skills, attributes or knowledge listed in the person specification.
 - Be explicit and don't assume that an employer will be able to guess what you are good at. If the person specification asks for: 'experience in a retail role with a good understanding of customer service and an ability to deal with complaints', then it is not enough just to write 'I am currently working as a retail assistant...' you *must* give more details including giving concrete examples of your customer service and complaint-handling skills, such as 'my work involved frequent duties at the customer service desk where I was responsible for handling all nature of customer enquiries and dealing professionally with complaints'. If you have specific examples then these can help e.g. 'I prided myself on providing an excellent service and on one occasion my boss complimented me on my professional handling of a very difficult customer complaint'.
 - Make sure *every* criteria is included – including the 'obvious' ones. So, for example, do not assume that because you have an HNC, HND or Degree that the employer will know you have good communication skills – tell them about your communication skills, what kind of



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skills you have (written or verbal communications, report writing, essay writing, presentation) and examples of things you have done on your course (or elsewhere).

- As well as the person specification, you should refer to the job description. Your statement *has* to reference everything in the person specification, but describing any specific duties that you have had experience of and which are listed in the job description will allow your statement to stand out. Often where the specification describes the skills you need, the job description will describe the context in which you would need to use this skill. So, a good way to use the job description is to refer to it when you are trying to think of examples of the skills in the person specification. If you can think of times when you have done similar things to those described in the job description, these occasions are also likely to be ones where you have demonstrated relevant skills.
 - Aim to fill the space provided. Although you can often add additional sheets it is normally a good idea to try and avoid this if possible. If you do add an additional sheet keep the additional content short.
 - Keep the tone clear, concise, positive and professional.
 - It is essential that you cover all the criteria in the person specification. Once you have written a first draft, go back through your statement, pretend you are the employer and 'tick off' the criteria as you find them in your statement. Anything that isn't clear enough, go back and revise.
- End with a summary statement that expresses your wish for the employer to consider your application, or that reiterates why you want the job and why you feel you would be good at the job.

Further Help and Resources

Information on this and other careers and employability topics can be found on the Careers and Employability Centre website: www.uhi.ac.uk/careers. You can also follow the centre on Facebook: www.facebook.com/UHICareers, and on Twitter: twitter.com/UHICareers

Free confidential advice is available to all students on an HNC course or above via telephone, videoconference or email. Contact our advisers by clicking on 'speak to an adviser' on our website. This service is also available to graduates within two years of graduating from an HNC course or higher.

As well as general advice and guidance, our advisers can give you feedback on CVs, covering letters and application forms.