



University of
Salford
MANCHESTER

Writing successful job applications

Careers & Enterprise,
The Library, Peel Park Campus,
University of Salford, M5 4WT



 0161 295 0023
 careers&enterprise@salford.ac.uk
 salford.ac.uk/careers

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Introduction

The application form is often your first contact with recruiters. The forms are used to standardise the information a recruiter receives. This makes it easier for them to select the best candidates for the next stage in the selection process. Whether you are applying online, sending the application form by e-mail or posting a paper form, the same thought and preparation is needed.

Before you write anything

Preparation is one of the most neglected yet important areas of application form filling. Before you start writing, review the information provided about the job and the organisation. Read through the person specification and job description if provided and ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this the type of work I really want?
- Is this the type of organisation that I want to work for?
- What are the responsibilities/objectives of the post?
- What skills, knowledge and experience are required in order to undertake this job?
- What relevant experience, skills and personal qualities can I offer?
- How well do I meet the requirements for this role and do I have the evidence to prove it?
- Does the advertisement/job description provide me with sufficient information to apply for the post? If not, what else do I need to know and how can I find out more?

Now you can start

Draft your answers in rough. It is not feasible for most people to complete an application at one sitting. Well thought out, prepared answers take time but will usually be better answers.

Decide which examples will fit into each of the sections from your various experiences at university, in a workplace and from your extra-curricular activities. Try to vary the examples used as this will make your form more interesting to the reader. Be specific - give focused examples that really answer the question rather than being vague and talking generally. (*See next page for examples of different sorts of questions.*) Try to use most examples from the last two years if possible as many employers value recent experience.

Key points

- **Follow instructions** and **stay within specified word counts**. If recruiters ask for 200 words, they want 200 words or less. Some online application systems delete extra words when they are downloaded at the other end.
- **Draft your application** so that you can fit it into the boxes provided. Use bullet points or headings to break up longer responses and leave a whole line of space between paragraphs if possible. Some sections will not give you enough space to write down everything you want to include. You may need to summarise or condense some information, and this takes time and effort.
- **Complete all sections**. Do not leave gaps, as the reader may think you have missed completing the section. If a section is not relevant write "Not Applicable".

- **Check your form for spelling mistakes and grammatical errors.** It is vital that the finished product is completed to as high a standard as possible. Unintentional errors could mean your application is rejected, especially when applying for jobs where attention to detail is a major requirement. Get someone to read through your form. If English is not your first language, ask a friend to check for appropriate word usage and general grammar. Do not rely just on the spell check function to spot all mistakes. If you've used the wrong word in a sentence e.g. if you've written "form" instead of "from", "licence" when it should be "license" or even confused 'flower' and 'flour, spell check won't highlight them if they're spelled correctly but used incorrectly in the context of the sentence. If you use an autocorrect function which can spot word use errors, don't automatically accept the first suggestion for a replacement or correction without checking that word is appropriate for a job application.
- **If asked for, include details of referees** on application forms - one academic (for example your course or personal tutor) and one work related is usually enough, although some employers ask for three referees. It may be acceptable to use two academic references, especially as an overseas student without work experience in the UK. Make sure you have checked with them that they will act as a referee and, if possible, discuss what sort of job you are interested in and why. If you do not have a work referee, try to find a personal referee (but not a member of your family) who can give a good character reference.
- **Consider getting the content of your form checked by a Careers Advisor from the Careers and Enterprise Team** to ensure that you are making the best application possible. You should not need to do this each time but it is certainly useful when making your first application.

Types of questions

As well as factual sections asking about your education and work experience, most application forms have additional questions. These questions are the most important ones on any application form. Even if you meet the other criteria for the job (e.g. educational requirements), it is the answers to these questions that will determine whether or not you get an interview. These questions tend to fall into a number of categories including:

- **Skills-based questions** - sometimes called competency-based questions.
- **Job-based/technical questions** - e.g. interest in the job, knowledge of the company / sector.
- **Supporting statements** - usually presented as a blank page/section for you to write about your suitability for the job.

Skills-based questions

Many graduate recruiters ask skills-based questions. These questions are aimed at drawing out information on the core transferable skills/competencies that recruiters are looking for. These typically focus on key transferable skills such as teamwork, communication skills or problem-solving skills that can be transferred from one situation to another.

Typical skills-based questions include:

Describe a situation when you had to persuade someone to your point of view – how did you approach this?

Describe a problem that you had to face and the solution you implemented.

With the above questions, you should give *specific* evidence to illustrate the points you are making.

In the problem-solving question, concentrate on the process through which you worked to solve the problem rather than giving a lengthy account of the problem itself. Try to highlight examples of other skills e.g. using your initiative or creativity, which you used in solving the problem. Give that little bit extra by demonstrating “business (or commercial) awareness” by showing results in terms of objectives set and quantifiable improvements.

A good structure to use with skills-based questions is the STAR technique

- **Situation / Task** - Set the scene. Where did this take place? What was your task? When was it? How did it come about? Keep this concise - if you talk about a project that took several months to complete, focus on the actual part that answers the question.
- **Action** - This is the important part and should take up most of your answer. What did you do, and more importantly, why? What led you to making the decisions you did? Recruiters want to know you went through a logical process, rather than made a lucky guess. This will prove whether this skill really can be transferred into a different situation.
- **Result** - Did you achieve your objectives? Quantify any results with figures if possible so they can be compared to other candidates. Identify what you learned from the experience.

If space permits, how have you applied this learning to more recent situations?

Key points:

- **Be succinct** – do not spend 80% of your answer describing the situation. Focus on what you did. (Ideally the **Action** and the **Results**, which should account for about 75%).
- **STAR is also known as CAR** in some organisations where the situation and task is replaced by **Context**. This can help to ensure you spend less time on the introduction than the actions and results.
- **Use a range of examples to answer questions.** Unless you are asked about a specific situation, you can use examples from your course, work experience or extra/co- curricular activities. Try and use examples from the last two years where possible.
- **Focus your answer on your personal contribution to achieving the team’s objectives.** Don't fall into the "we" trap when writing about group/team activities. The recruiter wants to know how well YOU work in a team.
- **Stick to word limits on your answers** – Be concise as recruiters have many applications to sift. You will not have much opportunity to expand upon your answer to any great length, but you will often get the chance to do so at interview.

Job-based questions

Here, the recruiter is looking to find evidence of your interest in the job, and your knowledge of the company/sector. The recruiter is looking to test your motivation for applying.

Typical questions include:

What has made you apply for this role?

What are the major challenges facing [this industry] in the next five years of its development?

What factors have influenced your career choice, and why do you wish to join us?

Questions like this require you to do some research but it is not simply a case of listing facts and figures. You should ensure you do not miss something obvious, but recruiters also look for reasoned argument and the candidate's ability to consider the "bigger picture".

Key points:

- **Start researching the sector you'd like to apply to** as soon as you can. Keep an eye on the news and business pages in national papers or their websites such as *The Guardian*; *The Times*; *Independent*; *Financial Times* and *Daily Telegraph*. Check trade journals and *LinkedIn* for current issues. Check out news and business websites. Use some of the key business databases available in the University library to keep updated.
- **Demonstrate that you have been through a logical process of decision-making.** When did you first start thinking about this as a career? What have you done to clarify your thinking?
- **Avoid saying you have always had an interest in a career if you have taken no active steps to explore it recently.** Recruiters may question your motivation. If you have only recently thought of this as a career, this is acceptable - as long as, from the point of making that decision, you started to take action to find out more about it.
- **Cite evidence.** Recruiters want people who can demonstrate their interest clearly. As always, actions speak louder than words: it will be taken for granted you have looked at their website, but what struck you about the company after reading it? Use the *News* and *About Us* sections on websites as a starting point to help.
- **If you have met representatives from the recruiter before say so** (e.g. at a fair or presentation), but also describe what impact this had on your decision making.
- **Be honest.** These questions are often followed up at interview - you should be able to look them in the eye, say it all again and mean it. Being caught out with dishonesty can be embarrassing and is unlikely to lead of a job offer!

Supporting Statement/Additional Information sections

- **Applications to many posts** (particularly those in the public sector such as the NHS and local councils) will usually require a supporting or personal statement. They can also be referred to as "additional information". They are typically presented as an open-ended space at the end of the form.
- **Jobs will typically have person specification** which will detail all the skills and experience they are looking for in a candidate. This will often be laid out in the style of bullet points for you to address.

- **Use the person specification to structure your supporting statement.** You will be expected to address all these points during your application in order to get through to the interview stage. Make sure you cover every point they mention.

Typical statements include:

- *Please use this space to explain in detail how you meet all of the requirements of the Person Specification, and why you consider yourself suitable for the post:* this should include all aspects of your education and experience, including paid or voluntary work, study or training that is relevant to this position.
- *Please supply additional information to support your application:* e.g. practical experience, voluntary activities, reasons for applying and any other relevant details.

Key points:

- **Recruiters will only shortlist candidates who demonstrate a strong match to the job requirements as listed in the person specification.** Analyse the person specification carefully to determine what they are looking for. Identify what is essential and what is desirable. You may find it useful to draw up a list of examples to support each element.
- **Use specific examples to show how you match a skill, not general descriptions of situations.** Relate each piece of evidence back to the job to demonstrate your understanding of a specific skill or quality. Many applicants fail to do this effectively. Focus on highlighting your personal contribution. Remember the **STAR** technique from above.
- **Motivation is crucial.** You may have the ability to do the job, but are you really interested in pursuing a career in this area? Address your motivation for the position by using words used in the Job Description to reflect and emphasise your interest in the job. *Simply listing facts and figures as evidence of your skills is rarely enough.*
- **Structure your answer into sections** rather than writing one long piece of prose. Where possible use subheadings to draw attention to key information. A useful approach is to structure your answer around the Person Specification in order to ensure that you address all the key points. Considering numbering the criteria in your statement or highlighting in bold to match those on the person specifications if possible as this makes it easier for a recruiter/person shortlisting to follow whilst ensuring you have covered everything.
- **Do not attach your CV in place of answering open-ended questions.** Your CV will rarely match the person specification in enough detail. Some applications will ask you to specifically **NOT** to include a CV. Even if the application does also request a copy of your CV, this does not replace the need to write an effective personal statement.

Online applications

Most organisations use online application forms and it is rare to be asked to complete a paper form unless an alternative format is specifically asked for by the candidate.

Key points:

- **You will usually need to register your details and be asked to provide a password.** *Make sure you make a note of this.* Some large organisations, such as the NHS, carry out all parts of the application procedure online, including telling you about any potential interview date, so you do need to make sure that you have your log-in details to hand.
- It is not only important that you check your e-mail regularly, but that you **use an appropriate email address** as most (if not all) communication will be via e-mail. Think about the image you want to convey to the recruiter.
- **Follow instructions carefully:** online systems work differently from each other - some allow you to save the form and return back later, but some do not. Some do not allow you to cut and paste and some have word limits whereas others don't. Check these things out before you start.
- **Consider preparing all answers in draft form in Word** if you can't save the form and/or the online system does not have a spell check facility. Also, make sure you have saved a version so you have something to refer back to when you are called for interview.
- **Try to use keywords in your application** as some employers will use forms that automatically scan forms using software which is programmed to pick up key words. Make sure you are using words used in the job description/ person specification or job advert to reflect back and emphasise important key skills that the recruiter is looking for.
- Even after spell-checking, make sure you **proofread the information you have prepared carefully**. Better still, get a friend to read it through for you, as a fresh pair of eyes can often spot mistakes that you have missed.
- **Don't leave it until the last minute to submit your application.** Internet connections may fail or a server may crash if hundreds of applicants are trying to submit applications at the last minute. Online applications are often not accepted after the deadline, even if there were last minute technical issues.
- **Back up/ make a copy your application in case of technical problems.**

Your CV online

When applying for a job you may be asked to send your CV. *Remember: do not attach your CV in place of answering open-ended questions on an application form.*

Here are some guidelines to follow if submitting your CV online:

- **Check with the recruiter in what format they would like your CV** – Word and PDF are the most common formats accepted. Sending in PDF format tends to ensure the layout and formatting of the document are protected in the way you want them to be seen.
- **ALWAYS check your files are virus-free before sending them.** Install a virus checker and check all your documents before attaching them to messages. Sending a virus to a recruiter is not a good way of making a positive first impression or highlighting your PC skills!
- **Make sure you have an appropriate e-mail address that sounds professional.** This helps to

create a positive first impression. An inappropriate e-mail address may be off-putting to recruiters. Your university email address is appropriate whilst you are a student.

- **Make sure you use a relevant file name for your CV.** Your name followed by CV will usually suffice. Avoid calling the document “CV.doc” as it may get lost amongst all the other attachments sent in using that name. If you include your name in the file name, this helps you stand out more easily to the recruiter.
- Some recruiters use Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) which can read your application and will pick up key words so **make sure your CV is targeted to the role for which you are applying by using words used in the job description/ person specification or job advert** to reflect back and emphasise important key skills that the recruiter is looking for.

Further help

To ensure that you are making the most effective application possible, it is useful to get the content of your form checked by a Careers Adviser in a [Careers Advice Appointment](#).

You can contact the Careers and Enterprise Team via email careers&enterprise@salford.ac.uk or phone 0161 295 0023 (option 5 than 3).