

Employability & Careers Centre

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Application Forms

How to maximise your chance of an interview

It is vital to create high quality written applications, because more candidates are rejected at the application form stage than at any other point in the selection process. What you write must be accurate, relevant and create an impact. The purpose of filling in the form is to gain an interview.

Most application forms include difficult questions which you may find challenging to answer. The point of some questions may not be immediately obvious, so it is useful to think from the employer's perspective. They have identified the skills and personal attributes needed for the job and they choose questions which encourage you to provide evidence of possessing them.

Before you start completing application forms, spend some time thinking about the things you have done, and the skills and abilities you have. Think about study, work, leisure or community activities and what they show about you as a person. Your work experience, for example, may have taught you to work under pressure and meet deadlines, and your final year project may have developed your problem-solving skills. Make a list of them all. You should end up with quite a long list – information that will also be useful when preparing for interviews.

As well as thinking about what you have to offer, you need to be clear about the requirements of the job role. There are often clues in the questions on the forms. Try to gather as much information about the job you're applying for as you can. You could use:

- the job description, person specification and advert
- information produced by the company that describes the organisation, its values and ethos – check their website thoroughly
- information about this kind of job – www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations provides information on around 400 different jobs.

With these two sets of information you are now ready to start filling in the form. In your answers you should focus on demonstrating to the employer that you match their requirements. Think of all the questions as opportunities to prove yourself. Use the list of your skills and experiences to provide evidence, and try to use a variety of examples.

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How to make your form stand out

An employer may receive many applications. Well-known employers with vacancies in popular types of work sometimes receive thousands. It is your task to make sure that your form is both interesting and easy to read.

- In your descriptions of what you have done use *active* words. These are words like 'organised', 'planned', 'negotiated', 'created', 'trained' or 'improved'. Avoid non-specific words like 'helped'. Please see the Employability & Careers Centre leaflet *Effective Writing* for a list of active words, also available via: www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/leaflets.
- Create a structure for your ideas before you start to type. Treat longer answers like mini-essays, with an introduction, main body and conclusion. Using signposting language like 'firstly' or 'the main achievements were...' will help readers know what to expect.
- Keep your sentences short and to the point. Long sentences with long words in them are hard to understand, but it is good to have variety in the length of your sentences because this increases readability.
- Make sure you answer the question. If they ask, 'Why would you be suitable for a career in Marketing?' tell them about your skills, abilities and personal qualities. Don't write an essay on 'What is Marketing.'
- If the question is in several parts, asking you perhaps to describe three aspects of something you've done, then write about all three and give them roughly equal space.
- Don't be afraid to use 'I'. They are interested in the personal contributions you have made. Use specific examples and explain what you did. Instead of writing, 'The Committee organised...' you should focus on the areas that you took responsibility for.

Applying online

The majority of employers now use online application forms. This is usually cheaper and more efficient for the company, but can also present problems. Here are some issues to be aware of:

- You may not be able to see the full form before you start to complete it, making it difficult to know how much detail is needed and how best to use your examples.
- Some companies require you to complete the form in one go and don't allow you to stop and save it partly finished.
- You may be timed out of a page you're working on or the software may crash, so you lose what you've written.
- The options in drop-down menus may not always offer the choice you want.
- There may not be a spellchecker.
- It is very tempting to leave it until the last minute to start filling in the form.
- It is also important to treat each application you make separately. Even if questions seem similar, pasting answers from previous applications leads to mistakes.

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Making online applications easier

- Read the whole form before you start if you can. Print it or copy and paste the questions into a new document so you can start planning what to include where.
- Prepare what you are going to write and make notes or a draft, then copy-type or paste in your responses.
- Always save a copy as you go along. If the company's set-up doesn't allow this, you can still select all of the text, copy it and paste it into a separate document.
- Spellcheck your draft or, even better, check it yourself and get a friend to look over it word by word.
- Allow plenty of time to think about and enter your answers.
- Double-check everything carefully before you submit.
- Keep a note of when you submitted your application and any registration or contact details you are given.

Hints and tips

There are many common mistakes found in applications, so if you can avoid these your application will already stand out from the crowd. This is usually the first contact you make with an employer and first impressions really do count. Remember it is important to set aside dedicated time for completing application forms – better to do fewer applications of a high quality.

Special instructions:

Many websites or forms include notes for guidance. Pay close attention to these and any additional instructions, which you should follow carefully. For example, these could include: 'Write in BLOCK CAPITALS'; 'stick to word limits'; 'include the attachments requested and nothing more'; 'sign and date the form'. Always be sure to meet the application deadline.

Presentation:

Although increasingly uncommon, if you are required to fill in a paper application form, use good quality, white, A4 paper and a reliable printer. Unless you are instructed to handwrite the application, word process your work. Choose a font that is easy to read, like Arial, Verdana or Times New Roman. Keep your writing to a reasonable font size, like 10 or 12. If you are completing the application by hand, take care to write neatly. You should also consider using bullet points, as they are easy to read and help you to write more concisely.

Content:

Always target what you write to the needs of that employer or job. If you only have limited information, use your imagination to work out what skills and abilities would make you successful in the role. It also helps to be clear about your motivations for applying. Explain in detail your specific interest in the company – what are the unique selling points of the role and why are you attracted to it? Employers will be impressed if you are able to articulate your motivations and demonstrate enthusiasm. Also, remember that the details really are important. Correct spelling and grammar is essential. Not only does it demonstrate your level of written communication skills, it also suggests how much you want to secure the job and whether you pay attention to detail.

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Competency questions

Many application forms will ask you to explain how you can demonstrate a required competency by giving an example. Skills employers commonly look for include high-level communication and interpersonal skills, confidence in leadership, analytical and intellectual abilities and commercial awareness. The STAR acronym provides a good structure which you can use whatever the word limit:

- **Situation** – what was the setting?
- **Task** – what were you trying to achieve?
- **Action** – how did you go about it?
- **Result** – what was the final outcome and what did you learn?

Firstly, state the facts about the situation and the task briefly, e.g. 'At University, I joined a team of four students to set up a mentoring scheme for Freshers.' Next, be as specific as you can about your actions, explaining how you approached things and how you made your decisions. Focus on the part you played, even when describing a group activity. Finally, mention what happened in the end, as positively as you can and using figures if appropriate, to show clearly how successful you were. Even an example where the outcome was not as you hoped can be successful if you show what you learned from the experience. For further detail, please see the Employability & Careers Centre leaflet *Presenting your Skills to an Employer: Be Guided by the Stars*, also available via: www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/leaflets.

Motivational questions

Motivational questions are designed to establish whether candidates have a clear understanding of the organisation and the job role, why they want it and how they would fit in. Typical questions include 'Why do you wish to apply for this role?' and 'What is your motivation to work in this location?' As mentioned, employers will always be impressed by applicants with clear and convincing motivations. If you are not sure about why you want to work for the company, or why you are interested in that particular role, then you are not ready to start your application.

Situational Judgement questions

These questions examine your ability to understand scenarios from the workplace and consider what actions might be more or less appropriate. You might have to tick or rank answers and justify your reasoning, or explain what you think is the best course of action. The employer could be looking at your ethics, common sense, decision making, analytical and teamwork skills. Some employers have complex and lengthy (e.g. 500 word) situational judgement questions on their application forms.

The Statement approach

This is when you are presented with a blank sheet/space on the application form. You may be asked to 'give a statement in support of your application,' or 'tell us why you are suitable for this job.' You will be expected to use the job description and person specification to identify and address the requirements of the role yourself. Consider **SAKE** – **S**kills, **A**ptitude, **K**nowledge and **E**xperience. It is important to think of the best examples to give. It is also an opportunity to include any useful evidence that hasn't

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been addressed in your previous answers. Try to convey your enthusiasm and personal motivation. Mirror the language/vocabulary used in the employer's materials (only key words and short phrases). Decide on a clear structure to your answer and, of course, draft, re-draft and proofread!

Do I need a covering letter?

With postal applications, it is a good idea to include a covering letter, unless instructed otherwise. It should be formal and professional, laid out like a piece of business correspondence and using the same paper and style as any other documents you are submitting. You should state what role you are applying for, when and where you saw the job advertised and that you are enclosing your completed application. Close the letter by thanking the reader for considering your application. You will find guidelines in our leaflet about CVs, *Writing Effective CVs & Covering Letters*, available via: www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/leaflets.

If you are applying online, you should usually just complete the sections the company's system offers. It may not be possible to include anything extra. If you need to mention a particular point, you should find space within the main application form. There is often an 'additional information' section and you could use part of this space to provide any special details or circumstances relating to your application.

And finally...

Keep a copy of your application. Make sure you know what you have written and use it in preparation for the interview, as it may be used to form questions.

Unfortunately, even after all your efforts, the recruitment process can take a long time and some employers will not give you any feedback. You can phone or email a little while after the closing date to check the progress of your application, or to ask for feedback if you receive notification that you have been unsuccessful.

For further information on writing application forms, view the careers video on our website via www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/career_videos.htm or visit <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/applying-for-jobs/write-a-successful-job-application>.