



Completing Application Forms

The Guide - 'Applications' and the handout 'Example Application Form Answers' should be read in conjunction with this handout.

General Information

- Application forms vary, but the points made in this handout are intended to help you complete any application form.
- Before starting to write, ensure that you do sufficient research on the company, the job role and the sector. Pay particular attention to what the company says it is looking for in documents such as the job description, job specification, competencies required etc. Write the application in relation to these.
- Always keep in mind the person reading it. Think about what they are looking for. Make it easy for them to put your application on the 'invite to interview pile'! If you have difficulty doing this, imagine it is you five or ten years on running your own department or business, what would you expect to see in an application?
- Application forms can be paper-based, but more usually, they are required to be completed on-line.
- If you are completing a paper-based application form by hand then use black ink, as this helps if it is required to be photocopied. Write legibly and if your handwriting is very poor then use block capitals throughout.
- Read all the instructions carefully and follow them exactly, also answer the questions directly.
- Complete ALL sections of the form, using N/A (not applicable) if appropriate.
- Unless instructed otherwise, list all information in reverse chronological order (the most recent activity first).
- 'Sell' yourself to the employer. It isn't time for false modesty but make sure that you don't go too far and tip over into arrogance.
- Ensure that you use good English language throughout and check all spelling, grammar and punctuation. This is vitally important as many applications are rejected on this basis alone.
- Don't be tempted to 'cut and paste' information and answers across from previous applications. Employers can always tell when this is done and sometimes people leave the previous employer's name in the new application! You can use a previous application as a prompt but write a new one for each job.
- Take plenty of time over the application. A good application takes a long while to complete and rushing an application will simply be a waste of your time. It is better to apply well to a few jobs than badly to many.

Sections of the Application Form

Education and Qualifications

- List all the information that is asked for (such as dates, education institutions, qualifications, grades etc.) in the format specified.
- Where appropriate prioritise subjects/modules/projects/extended essays/dissertations etc. that have relevance to the company and the job role.

Employment and Work Experience

- Give brief details of each period of employment and work experience and include voluntary and unpaid work.
- If you have extensive experience, outline the significant jobs and summarise the others.
- If you wish, you can list them under 2 headings:- 'Related Jobs' and 'Other Jobs'.
- Make good use of the 'responsibilities' and 'achievements' sections to get across the skills and qualities you gained, developed and demonstrated in each role. Wherever possible focus on the skills and qualities that relate to the ones the organisation you are applying to, is looking for.
- Don't leave out what you may perceive to be 'low- grade' jobs. Bar or restaurant work for example, gives experience of dealing with the public, working under pressure, handling money etc. Think about each employment and analyse it for the skills and qualities it gave you the chance to develop.

Personal Interests and Achievements

- Employers are looking for clues to your personality and want to develop a view of you which is more rounded than simply based on your academic and work-related achievements.
- Give details of your extra-curricula activities and interests explaining what skills you developed as a result of doing it and why you do it (your motivation).
- Activities that demonstrate skills such leadership, team working, organisation, creativity are particularly relevant and likely to be of interest to the employer.
- If you have a lot of interests and achievements select those that relate to the skills which that employer seeks.

Geographical Location

Be as flexible as you can but do not include locations that you would not be prepared to move to. If you have a preferred location, give details.

Skills Questions (often called competency-based questions)

- These, and those in the section below, are usually the most important questions on the application form and will require thought and reflection. They are not designed to be easy to answer and are a real opportunity for you to make yourself 'stand out from the crowd'.
- They will take the most time to write and each answer should be carefully crafted.
- They are often called 'competency based questions' as they relate to the competencies the employer is looking for. The employer will ask you to give an example of a time when you have demonstrated a particular skill. The thinking behind this approach is that if you could demonstrate it in the past then you are likely to be able to demonstrate it in the future when working for the employer.
- Examples of such questions are:-
 - *Describe a difficult problem you have solved. How did you analyse and solve it? What did you learn from the experience? (Problem solving)*
 - *Give an example of when you have worked in a team. What was your role and what did you contribute to the team performance? (Team working)*
 - *Describe a challenging project, activity or event which you have planned and taken through to a conclusion. Include your objective, what you did, any changes you made to your plan and state how you measured your success. (Planning)*
- Answer the question directly and answer all parts of the question. Consider what skill the question is asking about, as it isn't always totally obvious. Never leave a skills question unanswered as it will mean your application will be instantly rejected.

-Usually there is a word limit. Write as close to this as possible without going over it. However don't include repetitious or irrelevant material just to reach the word count - it all has to be meaningful content.

-Use examples from your education, work experience, voluntary work, and spare-time activities. Examples that are recent, (within the last two or three years), are best. It may be acceptable to use an example from school but try to make most of them more recent. Try to choose examples from a variety of parts of your life to illustrate that you are a well-rounded person. Don't use the same example over and over again as it implies that you don't have much life experience to offer. Employers know that most people will not have climbed Everest, captained a winning cup team, or delivered a talk at the United Nations! They expect examples that are appropriate to your age, level of experience and opportunities open to you. Sometimes an excellent example can be obtained from a very ordinary situation.

-Use **'STAR'** to help you structure your answer

- **Situation** – Provide some **brief** details about the situation so that the reader can understand the context of the example
- **Task** – What was the objective/purpose?
- **Action** – What did **you** do and how?
- **Result** – What was the outcome? Were the objectives met? What did you learn/gain?

Questions on why you are Applying /Suitable for the Sector/Organisation /Role

-Again, this is a very important section and will take time and thought to complete.

-Examples of such questions are:-

- *Please indicate how your interests, skills and abilities demonstrate your suitability for this sector*
- *What attracts you to this job and what makes you suitable?*
- *Why have you chosen to apply to our firm?*
- *Please tell us about a current topic under discussion in our industry that interests you and what impact it might have on our organisation?*

-These questions are assessing your knowledge of the sector and current developments within it, the job role, and the individual company and also your motivation for applying, which is very important. Put simply this question is 'Why do you want the job and what makes you think you can do it?' They are also looking at whether you can make a connection and a match between who you are, (your skills, qualities, experiences and motivations), and what they are (their needs, requirements and opportunities).

-You will obviously need to thoroughly research the sector, job role and the organisation to be able to answer it properly.

-Employers value motivation very highly so work hard at getting this across.

Personal Statement/Additional Information

-Some applications don't have a Skills section or questions on why you are applying / suitable. Instead they have a 'blank page' section which will be called 'Personal Statement' or 'Additional Information' section. It is the **key** section on this type of application form and will take the most amount of time to complete. There will be clear instructions about the content required and these should be followed exactly.

- It is very important to write and structure the statement by **relating it to the Person Specification**. If there isn't a formal job specification available, then write it against the competencies that they say they are looking for.

- A good structure is to have:-

- An opening paragraph which explains why you are attracted to the job and the organisation.
- Then use **headings** derived from those in the person specification (e.g. Qualifications, Communication skills, I.T. etc.). If, for example, there are four points on the person specification under I.T., then cover each of these four points, in the same order, under your section headed I.T.

- Then end with a closing paragraph

-It is important that the employer doesn't have to infer, or hunt around for your skills / qualifications / experiences. Make it easy for them to see that you have what they are looking for.

-Also do not miss things out. If, for example, they say that the applicant should be able to use a particular computer program, then tell them that you can and give an example of when you have used it.

-Don't make the statement too long with superfluous detail, but neither should it be too short. There is no perfect length because it will depend on the job; there should be enough to 'sell' you to the employer. without boring them. You don't have to include everything you have ever done; the skill in writing a good application is selecting the relevant things for that particular employer/job. Also the purpose of the application is to get you an interview and you can expand on points at the interview.

Further sources of help

On the Careers Service website there is a section on completing application forms which has a range of further resources to help you. These include On-line talks, DVDs, Examples (good and bad) of answers to typical questions on application forms and many others resources.

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/applications>

Finally -Review your Application

Always proof read your application and check spelling, grammar and punctuation. If your application contains no errors then it is already better than many of the others. But if your application does contain mistakes then it gives the employer the message - 'If they don't check their own work then they aren't going to check my Company's work'. So proof read it carefully and ask a friend to read it. Also don't forget you can book an appointment to have it reviewed at the Careers Service. Print off the key sections and bring it in as a paper copy. We will be happy to help.