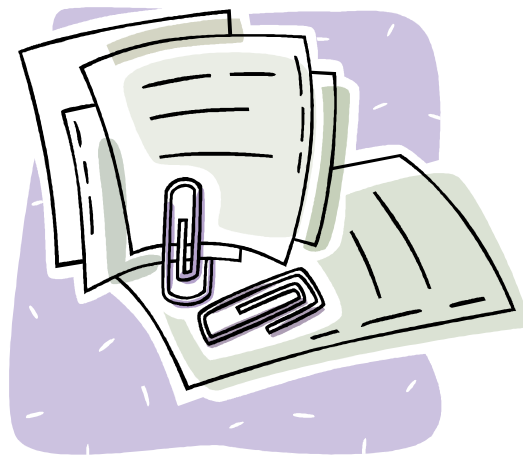


# A Guide to Making Successful Applications



# MAKING SUCCESSFUL APPLICATIONS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Application Form workshop covers a lot of information in a short space of time. Because many students find it difficult to attend longer workshops due to academic or other commitments, we have developed this booklet in order to support your continued learning after you have attended the workshop.

By providing guidance on how to select appropriate evidence, structure your answer and focus on your skills you will develop answers which:

- reflect your own skills, experience, knowledge and personality
- are tailored towards the requirements of the company and role

Through the workshops and this booklet, we aim to enable you to become skilled at producing effective application form answers supported by evidence which is relevant to you, and to the organisation you are applying to.

Should you require additional support with completing application forms, please visit the Careers and Employability Centre where we have a range of further resources such as information booklets, reference books and DVDs to assist you in your job search, as well as the opportunity to meet a Careers Adviser for a short appointment on our Advice Desk.

## 2. GETTING STARTED

You've seen your ideal job. You've sent off for the application form, or found the form online. It's daunting, and you might be having second thoughts about completing it at all. Don't be put off!

Read it through slowly and carefully – the chances are it's not as bad as you first thought. Follow the steps below to write an application form that will help you secure that all-important interview.

### Preparation

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- Take a photocopy of the form, or save it to disk, so that you have copies to practice your answers on.
- Read it through to ensure that you are clear about the kind of information that the employer requires, and any special instructions.
- Collect together all the information you can about the employer - job description, person specification, brochure, web site etc. - and identify what they are looking for (skills, experience, qualifications etc.)
- Put together any evidence you have to show that you meet the employer's requirements. Don't ignore any part of your experience that you could bring in, for example, your course, work experience, voluntary activities and interests.
- Pay particular attention to the questions about specific skills or where you are asked to describe your suitability for the job. These are looked at very carefully by employers, and may carry the most weight in the final decision.
- If you need to supply referees details, talk to your referees before submitting your application form. This is courteous, and will also help them to provide a more considered and comprehensive view of your suitability for the role.
- Check the closing date carefully - make sure that you give yourself plenty of time to complete the form and are not hurrying through it at the last minute.

### Filling in the form

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- **Be concise**  
Having thought about what you have to offer the employer, you need to spend time finding the right words to describe your experiences. Not only that, but you may be limited to the amount of words you can use or the amount of space available on the form. Be concise - don't cram the box so full that it is hard work to read. As a rule do not attach additional sheets - the whole point here is communicating your key points succinctly.
- **Describe your experiences**  
Most application forms will want personal details, information about your academic achievements, work experience, university activities and interests. Some of these questions will ask you to describe what you have got out of all these different

experiences - the more detailed, the more interesting. Don't shy away from putting yourself centre stage.

- **Focus on what the employer is looking for**

Then there will always be the 'difficult' questions - why do you want to work for this company, in this job? Here you need to have researched in detail the company, the job, the current trends. Poor research will result in a poor application form or one that sounds like you could be applying for any job with any company.

Once you are familiar with what the employer is looking for, it is easier to demonstrate how your experiences suit the job/scheme/company you are applying to.

- **Always give examples**

Always back up your statements with an example. For example, it is easy to write 'I am hardworking, enthusiastic, motivated, able to work independently or as part of a team'. It is harder to come up with examples and evidence which will support your claim. However, it is this evidence which will make your application form different from the next, and more interesting to the reader.

- **Check and check again**

Ensure that there are no spelling mistakes or grammatical errors. Keep a dictionary to hand, or use spell check for on-line applications. A carefully completed form shows the employer that you have given time and attention to completing it; a poorly completed form may demonstrate carelessness and lack of attention to detail, and is likely to end up in the 'reject' box.

### 3. PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Follow any instructions e.g. to use black ink, word limits.
2. If the text box is movable check how far it expands and whether you can change the font size.
3. Don't add extra sheets unless you are invited to. The space provided for each answer indicates how long your answer should be (where no word limit is given).
4. Check carefully for mistakes in grammar, spelling and punctuation. Attention to detail gives employers an important message about your professionalism.
5. Complete all sections of the form, writing N/A (not applicable) if appropriate.
6. Don't attach your CV to a form (unless requested) and say 'see my CV for full details'-it looks lazy.
7. Save or photocopy the form before sending it so you can use it for interview preparation. If you can't print an online form make a note of your answers to important questions.
8. Give yourself plenty of time to complete application forms. They take longer than you think especially the first one(s) or for a new type of job.

9. Closing date is final date - being early can be an advantage.

10. Each application is individual, even for similar jobs at similar employers. Don't cut and paste answers between forms unless you then adapt the answer as needed. Every employer has seen application forms which have other employers' names on them.

### Practical points for online forms

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1. Check to see if there are any online help and guidance notes. There are usually FAQs (frequently asked questions) or a helpline number you can call.

2. If you are given a username and password make sure you keep a record of it.

3. Check if you can save it and go back. If not, download or print off the questions and write your answers in Word or on paper first.

4. Save as you go to avoid risk of losing hours of work.

5. Do not use symbols such as & or % - they can sometimes cause technical problems.

6. As all communication will be by email make sure you use an appropriate email address and check it often.

7. Scanning software may be used to search for keywords in areas such as job skills, job titles and educational achievement. Think carefully about the way you describe experiences and activities and use them to evidence key skills. Use words and phrases from job descriptions, person specifications and application form questions in your answers. For example, if you are asked to demonstrate organisational skills make sure you use the word 'organise' in your answer.

### Answering questions

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1. You can use examples and evidence from any part of your life: education, work, voluntary activity, leisure interests etc.

2. Use clear, concrete examples. If the reader can visualise the event, it's a good indicator that your example is on the right scale.

3. Answer the question directly without going off the point. Many questions will have more than one part, so make sure you answer all parts.

4. Remember CAR (Context, Action, Result) when answering competency questions.

5. Active writing style creates a more effective and dynamic e.g. *I organised sponsorship* not *sponsorship was organised*.

6. Concise writing: cut out anything that does not show the point you want to make about yourself e.g. *every term on my course we had to take a seminar. My seminars have included...* can be cut to *I led a seminar every term on...*

7. Don't use clichés like 'team player' 'I like a challenge' 'I'm a people person'.

## Reasons for applying (or relevant experience/personal statement)

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A big theme: how do you try to summarise it concisely and logically on an application form?

1. Break it down into smaller topics:

- ❖ What attracted you to the job?
- ❖ How do your qualifications and experience match the job's requirements?
- ❖ How do your skills match the job's requirements?
- ❖ What are you willing to do to upgrade your skills or qualifications, especially if there's something in the job description you don't have?
- ❖ Which aspects of your personality show how you will fit in?
- ❖ How do the activities you are involved in demonstrate those personality traits?
- ❖ Why is this a logical move for you and how does it fit in with your long-term career aims?

2. Explain your interest in and attraction to the employer. This can be based on your knowledge of the organisation from personal contact, as a customer or from meeting its people at careers fairs, presentations etc and the impressions they gave you. Research the employer: its market position, main activities, who its competitors are, the geographical and sector spread of its activities, its culture, training, and staff development.

## Competency questions - definitions and keywords you could include

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### **Critical Thinking**

Breaking down complex information into smaller units for thorough analysis. Spotting patterns, trends or discrepancies and drawing insights and conclusions that are not obvious to others. Keywords: Logic, recognising, insight, perceiving, integrating, critical thinking, relating

### **Problem Solving**

Analysing problematic situations, seeking relevant data, diagnosing possible causes. Generating alternative solutions to find the best solution. Keywords: Problem solving, analysing, identifying, evaluation, defining.

### **Creativity**

Discovering, creating and envisioning, imagination and unique ideas. Looking at situations from multiple perspectives to create radically new concepts. Keywords: Creating, imagining, investigating, inventing, visioning, connecting, generating.

### **Decision Making**

Willingness to take decisions and take action after considering all the facts and alternatives. Analysing and anticipating possible consequences of potential decisions. Keywords: Evaluating, considering, reasoning, reflecting, concluding, selecting.

### **Planning and Organising**

Establishing a systematic course of action to achieve a task or objective effectively and efficiently. Involving planning, prioritising, scheduling, co-ordinating and the monitoring of performance against objectives. Keywords: Organising, prioritising, scheduling, planning, monitoring, coordinating, controlling, tracking

## Things you'd rather not mention

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1. You may be asked to describe a negative period in your life and then say how you overcame the problems it posed.
2. You may want to explain a difficult time if it affected your performance in exams and is shown in your educational record.
3. Explaining these situations is an opportunity to show that you can overcome difficulties. Try to do this in a positive way and highlight any useful lessons you have learned.
4. Even if something you describe was 'your fault'-for example disappointing exam results because you had not worked hard enough-you could show how you have adopted a new positive approach since then.
5. Remember that recruiters understand that people experience difficult times, and that illness, bereavements and family problems are part of life. They are human too!

## 4. SOME EXAMPLE ANSWERS

The examples below are typical of the type of questions you will encounter on an application form. The answers will give you an idea of what employers expect. Remember that it is not possible to give a 'perfect' sample answer – how strongly answers are rated will depend on the employers' requirements, the relevance of the experiences and the quality of other applications received.

Explain how you managed to resolve a difficult problem. What solution did you reach?  
(max 250 words)

*For my MSc project I worked with a local building company to design a computer system that would keep track of projects, clients and accounts. Before I could begin to set this up it was necessary for me to develop an understanding of the company and its existing procedures. Although the managing director was keen for the project to be carried out, he always seemed too busy to meet me and discuss the company and the project, and three appointments I had made with him were cancelled at short notice. At this stage, I could have abandoned the project altogether, or asked my supervisor to intervene, but I tried another tactic and suggested to the MD that I should work-shadow him for a few days. This allowed me to form an idea of the company and its work, ask questions as they arose and hold numerous informal discussions with him on the way to meetings, sites and clients. This approach gave me the background I needed to begin the project and also allowed me to form a good working relationship with the MD who was able to see that I was not just a "techie" computer student, but somebody who was interested in all aspects of the business. The system I designed has now been successfully implemented at the company.*

When have you risen to a challenge? Describe your role and any outcomes (max. 250 words)

*The greatest challenge I have undertaken was my year out teaching and travelling in Africa. I knew that I did not just want to travel, but to share in the life of a country and its people. Teaching gave me such an opportunity to put down roots in a community. As this was a voluntary programme, I needed to raise £500 in order to take part in this project. I did this by working very long hours in a factory over the summer in order to pay off my student debts and to raise the funds that I needed. I planned my year by reading a great deal about Africa and Tanzania, using websites to research the country and speaking to Tanzanian students at the university. I also asked TESSA, the organisation that arranged the placement, to put me in touch with previous volunteers so that I could pick up tips from them as to the life in Tanzania, the schools and what I should take with me. Despite all this planning I still found that I needed to be very flexible and to adapt to teaching a class of 60 lively ten-year olds with few text books, and even less in the way of scientific equipment. I had to adapt to this lack of resources and to bear in mind that the pupils were learning English at the same time as they were learning science. This experience was the most satisfying of my life, and helped me develop invaluable skills.*

Please highlight any positions of responsibility held in your spare time activities, and describe any skills you have developed which would be relevant to your application (max. 200 words)

*I decided to set up a rock band with three musician friends and elected to play the drums. Getting the band started took a lot of determination, persistence and hard work. The hardest part was finding the cash to buy my drum kit, which I did through taking on additional hours in my part time job for a short while and analysing my spending to cut out any unnecessary expenses. It was my role to manage the band, find the venues in which to play and make sure we got there, well rehearsed, and on time. For a band to work it requires discipline and teamwork; I encouraged others to demonstrate these skills by acting as a role model. We had to bring together people's differing skills, talents and ideas to get everyone working towards a common goal; not easy when writing your own numbers. I learned when it was appropriate to fight my corner and when to compromise; skills which I am sure are needed when working in a team at the Bank.*

### **ANY COMMENTS?**

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Notice how the candidates have highlighted relevant skills in their answers. They have backed up their demonstration of skills with specific examples and evidence. The answers are concise, clearly structured and well thought out.

## 5. ACTION WORDS

This list provides examples of direct, positive and appropriate language you may wish to use in your applications.

Accelerated	Demonstrated	Introduced	Reported
Accomplished	Designed	Invented	Resolved
Achieved	Determined	Invested	Restricted
Activated	Developed	Investigated	Reviewed
Acquired	Devised	Launched	Revised
Addressed	Directed	Led	Revitalised
Administered	Discharged	Lightened	Saved
Advised	Disposed	Managed	Scheduled
Amplified	Distributed	Maintained	Selected
Analysed	Diversified	Measured	Set Up
Anticipated	Documented	Merged	Shaped
Applied	Doubled	Minimised	Simplified
Appraised	Edited	Modernised	Solved
Appropriate	Effected	Monitored	Specified
Approved	Eliminated	Observed	Staffed
Arranged	Enacted	Obtained	Standardised
Assessed	Enforced	Operated	Started
Assimilated	Engaged	Organised	Stimulated
Augmented	Enlarged	Originated	Streamlined
Authorised	Established	Performed	Strengthened
Averted	Estimated	Persuaded	Strengthened
Avoided	Evaluated	Pioneered	Structured
Bought	Executed	Planned	Studied
Built	Expanded	Positioned	Succeeded
Centralised	Expedited	Predicted	Surpassed
Collaborated	Extracted	Prepared	Supported
Combined	Familiarised	Presented	Superseded
Compiled	Forecasted	Prevented	Supervised
Completed	Formed	Processed	Surveyed
Composed	Formulated	Procured	Taught
Computed	Generated	Produced	Terminated
Conceived	Guided	Programmed	Tested
Concluded	Implemented	Promoted	Tightened
Conducted	Improved	Proposed	Trained
Consolidated	Improvised	Proved	Translated
Controlled	Inaugurated	Published	Treated
Converted	Increased	Purchased	Trimmed
Corrected	Initiated	Recommend	Tripled
Counselled	Inspired	Redesigned	Uncovered
Created	Installed	Reduced	Unified
Cultivated	Instigated	Recruited	Unravalled
Decentralised	Instructed	Regulated	Utilised
Decreased	Integrated	Rejected	Unified
Defined	Interpreted	Renegotiated	Wrote
Delivered	Intervened	Reorganised	

## 6. WHAT NOT TO WRITE!

### Remember to think carefully about what you say on your application form:

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*"I am someone who knows my own destiny, but I have no definite long term plans"*

*"I was closely involved in every aspect of my former company, right up to its bankruptcy"*

*"I have a 100% attendance at work, except for the seven days I have taken off sick"*

*"If called to interview I would like to discuss salary, pension and sickness benefits"*

*"I do not have any major achievements that I would consider to be of interest to this application"*

*"My life-long love of chocolate biscuits, is the main reason for my interest in the company"  
(United Biscuits)*

*"I am a recently departed graduate"*

### And don't forget to check your spelling in every application you make:

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*"I received a plague for salesman of the year"*

*"I'm an accurate and rabid typist"*

*"I hope hear from you shorty"*

*"I am a conscious individual"*

*"I have good writen comunication skills"*

*"In my spare time, I enjoy hiding my horse"*

For more examples of what not to write, you can visit the Doctor Job website at [www.doctorjob.com](http://www.doctorjob.com), click on 'Advice' and 'Job Hunting Essentials'. Also, for further Job Application Advice go to [www.prospects.ac.uk/job\\_application\\_advice.htm](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/job_application_advice.htm)

### Further Help

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Visit Advice Desk at Careers and Employability Centre and talk to a Careers Adviser for help with applications and any career issue. Contact Careers reception on **(0121) 414 6120** to book your appointment.

