



# Effective application forms

An effective application form shows an employer that you are right for the job in question and improve your chance of being shortlisted for interview. Employers often receive hundreds of applications for just one vacancy, so it is essential that you spend time on your application to ensure that you stand out from the crowd. Some people are complacent about application forms and do not put the necessary effort into completing them, thinking that they will have another opportunity to impress the employer in the interview. However, it is unlikely that people who make this assumption and who complete the application form in a half hearted way will even be offered an interview. This handout describes how you can write a winning application form to help you stand out from the competition.

## Before you start

Candidates who complete the best application forms tailor the content towards the role and organisation that they are applying to. Developing your knowledge of the organisation's business activities, the issues that it is facing and the sector in which it operates is a crucial first step when writing a good application. It is possible to conduct research in a variety of ways such as:

- analysing any particulars that the employer has sent you (such as the job description and specification)
- visiting the organisation's website
- speaking to current staff members
- going to career fairs that the organisation is attending
- reading articles in the trade press, local papers or national newspapers that directly feature the organisation or that provide information about the issues that it is facing
- using careers websites such as [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk) to investigate the sector that the organisation belongs to. (On the prospects site select 'communities' for general sector information)

After researching the organisation and analysing the job description, it is worth considering whether you still *want* the job being advertised. Remember that you will need to

invest time and energy in writing a winning application form and, if you don't really want the job, your time may be better spent by continuing with your job hunt. It is far better to complete a smaller number of application forms which you have put a great deal of effort into than a larger amount of forms which you have completed in a half hearted way.

It is also worthwhile to conduct some initial self analysis to consider whether you meet the requirements or not. Writing, or reviewing, your CV can really help you in this exercise as it will encourage you to recall your experiences and to analyse your skills and qualities. For help in writing CVs please refer to the guide **Your CV** which can be found on our website at [www.wlv.ac.uk/careers](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/careers) (select careers essentials and online publications).

If you simply do not have the qualifications or experience that the employer is asking for or if you are struggling to think of examples for the analytical questions, it is possible that you haven't yet got the right experience. Of course, there is nothing stopping you from having a go at completing the form, but you may choose to instead focus your energy on working out how you are going to get the necessary experience. If you choose the latter course of action, file the application details away as they will contain useful information to assist your career progression.

Before you start also make sure that you carefully read through the instructions for completing the form. You may, for example, be asked to:

- stick to specified word counts
- use black ink
- write in block capitals
- attach extra sheets or your CV (some forms, however will tell you not to attach extra sheets)

It is important that you follow the instructions carefully. Remember that your application form may be in competition with hundreds of others and employers often look for quick ways to reduce the amount of forms to a manageable amount. Applicants who have not followed the

given instructions are likely to be sifted out immediately.

## Types of Application Form

### Paper based

Traditional paper based forms require you to fill in the application form by hand. Before completing the form, it is essential to make a photocopy so that you can practise completing the form neatly in the given spaces. Ensure that you keep the original form straight, clean and tidy and that your handwriting is legible (it is acceptable to use block capitals if you are unhappy with your handwriting). Some people try to maximise the space given by using tiny handwriting or by writing in between the lines provided, however this is a mistake as your writing needs to be fully legible and easy to read. If the employer has to struggle to read your application it is likely that your form will be dismissed. In addition, when designing the application form, the employer has decided how much information they want applicants to share. If you try to include more information through tiny writing it is likely that the employer will view your application negatively as you are not being as concise as the employer wishes.

Before posting, make a copy of the finished form as you will need it to prepare for your interview.

### Electronic word documents

Some online forms are simply word documents which are available for download. Copy the form onto your work area and when completed, print and post to the employer or email as an attachment. Remember to keep a copy of your completed form because you will need this when preparing for your interview.

### Interactive forms

Other online forms are more interactive, including drop down menus and fields for typed information. Online forms are often structured into stages, with more advanced forms allowing you to:

- view the whole form before completing
- move backwards and forwards between stages at your leisure
- save the progress that you've made and return to complete the form after a break
- view your completed form in its entirety before sending

Less advanced forms will only allow you to move through the form sequentially, and it may not be possible to save your progress or to view

the whole form before sending. As you complete the form, it is therefore important that you check each section thoroughly before moving onto the next stage. It is also sensible to copy your responses into a word document so that you don't lose your work if the page that you're working on 'times out' or if the system crashes.

Some online forms contain tests which may have to be completed in a certain amount of time. Tests usually measure candidates' literacy, numeracy and logical reasoning skills and, whilst these are not tests that you can revise for, many students benefit from completing practice tests. For more details see <http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/tests> or speak to one of the Careers Advisers. Whilst it may be tempting to ask someone else to complete the test on your behalf, you will be asked to validate your results if you are invited to an interview by completing similar tests on the assessment day.

Some employers use computer programmes to screen applications. Forms can be screened to check that applicants have the qualifications and grades requested, or that they meet the requirements listed in the job description or job specification. For example, an employer may have specified that they are looking for 'candidates with excellent organisational skills.' Applicants who have actually used the words 'excellent organisational skills' on their form are more likely to be identified as candidates which meet the requirements than those who haven't *directly* used the language of the job description. (For example, writing something like 'proven ability to plan ahead.')

Some online forms are screened by computer programmes as you complete each section of the form and may not allow you to progress if you haven't met the requirements. For example, some students are blocked from completing forms because they don't have the specified number of UCAS points.

Other forms are screened immediately after you submit the entire form and you therefore may be told immediately if your form has got through to the next round or not.

If your application passes the initial computer screening it will then be read by the person or team responsible for recruitment.

## Quick tips for filling in the form

### Do

- Make a copy of the form to practise on.
- Follow the instructions precisely.
- Complete all sections. Write N/A in sections that don't apply to you rather than leaving them blank.
- Start to complete the form well before the submission deadline.
- Check your form thoroughly for mistakes and ask another person to double check it.

### Don't

- Submit a half completed application with a CV and covering letter in the hope that these will make up for the blanks on your application.
- Go over the specified word limits or waffle.

## Sections of an Application Form

Sections usually include:

- personal details
- educational history
- employment history
- supporting statement/open questions
- referees
- equal opportunities monitoring

This handout will provide more detail about each section in turn.

## Personal Details

You will be asked to fill in sections asking for your name, address, email, phone number and national insurance number. You will also be asked to state the title of the post that you are applying for and sometimes the job reference number; this can usually be found on the job advert, description or specification.

Ensure that your email conveys an impression of professionalism: [sexyboy@hotmail.com](mailto:sexyboy@hotmail.com) is unlikely to be viewed positively by employers! Your university email address is very suitable for use on application forms, as are email addresses that simply use your name.

Also, when adding your date of birth, ensure that you state *the year that you were born* rather than the *current year*.

## Education

This section requires you to provide details of:

- the institutions you have attended with dates
- courses titles
- qualifications gained with grades (or predicted grades)
- awarding bodies (for example NEAB or AQA)

You will usually be required to complete this section in reverse chronological order and it is important to ensure that dates are correct. It is acceptable to only state the *year* that you started and completed each qualification, rather than citing the *day, month and year*.

It is important that you tell the truth when giving information about your qualifications and grades because you will be asked to show your certificates later on in the recruitment process.

A separate section may be provided for details of professional training courses or qualifications that you have gained. Again list these in reverse chronological order with dates.

## Employment

As with the education section, you will be asked for details of your employment in reverse chronological order. You will be asked for:

- the start and end dates of your employment
- the names (and sometimes the addresses) of the organisation that you worked for
- your job title (and sometimes a description of your duties)
- the salary that you were on

You may also be asked to give your reason for leaving each job.

It is acceptable to only state the *month and year* that you started and completed each job, rather than citing the *day, month and year*.

Forms usually ask for more detail about the nature of your most recent job, including the period of notice you have to give (if applicable).

## Open Questions

There may be a section where you are asked open questions (sometimes referred to as analytical or competency based questions) which require longer, essay style answers. Questions often centre on skills such as problem solving, team work, organisation and leadership, and the section is used by employers as a way of assessing whether you have the proficiencies that are required for the job. Questions often start by asking you to 'describe a time when...' or to 'give an example of...' and it is important that you give *concrete* examples to prove that you possess the skill or expertise in question.

It is a good idea to practise answering your open questions in a word document before transferring these onto your application form. This way you can check for spelling and grammatical errors more easily. However, before you begin your first draft, be clear about the space allocated on the form: it would be frustrating to spend time constructing a lengthy answer before realising that you will have to totally rewrite your answer because you only have a space of six lines.

When answering open questions, remember that examples can come from all areas of your life including: work, your university course, your personal life, leisure activities and participation in student societies. **Don't dismiss anything as irrelevant** without careful thought. Students often assume that working as a waiter or shop assistant is irrelevant to graduate level jobs but this is not so. Experiences such as these can show qualities that employers value highly such as: commitment, communication skills, team work, customer care skills, attention to detail, problem solving skills and much more.

Some students make the mistake of describing the situation in great detail, but then brushing over the action that they took and the outcome of the situation. It is *vital* that the bulk of your answer describes *what you did* to remedy the situation or to create a positive result. When describing the action that you took, highlight the tasks that you completed and the skills that you employed through careful analysis.

A useful structure when answering open questions is the CARA model and this is described below:

1) Set the **context**. Firstly describe the situation that you were facing. This should account for 20% of your total answer.

2) Describe the **action** that you took to deal with the situation. Remember to focus on your personal contribution and to include the skills that you employed to resolve the problem. This section should account for 50% of your total answer.

3) Outline the positive **results** of your action and, if possible, quantify your results. For example, saying that '90% of students felt that the presentation you delivered was informative' is better than saying that 'the presentation that you delivered seemed to be received well by the audience.' This section should account for 20% of your total answer.

4) Describe your reflections **after** the event. This is your opportunity to state what you have learnt from the experience, and how you would apply your learning in the role that you have applied for. This should account for 10% of your total answer.

## Personal Statements

A space on the form is sometimes provided for candidates to outline why they are applying for the job in question and why they are suitable for the role. This is known as the personal statement or the supporting statement.

If you are completing a paper application form it is acceptable to type your personal statement onto a separate sheet. If you do this, ensure that you put your name on your personal statement and draw attention to the separate sheet on the paper application.

### How long should my statement be?

There will be instructions telling you how long to make your statement. Some statements are required to be very short (those for PGCE applications are only 47 lines), whereas other forms may encourage you to fill two sides of A4. However, it is uncommon for a statement to be longer than two sides of A4 and if yours is becoming lengthy, check that you are not waffling and that you are remaining concise.

As with open questions, it is a good idea to write your personal statement in a word document before transferring onto your application form. However, be clear about how long your statement should be to avoid

spending time constructing a lengthy answer and then having to rewrite it when you realise that you only have half as much space as you originally thought.

### **What should I include?**

When generating content for the supporting statement, it is crucial that you *refer directly* to the criteria listed on the job description and job specification. This is best achieved by following the step by step process outlined below.

Begin by analysing the job description and the job specification, together with any other information that you have found out about the organisation or the role.

Then make a list of the main things that the employer requires; for example 'ability to work in a team' may be listed as an essential requirement on the specification, which signals that you need to refer to this on your statement.

Then note down *examples* that *prove* that you possess the knowledge and skills that the employer is looking for. For example, you may decide that a group presentation at University shows your ability to work in a team because you: attended meetings where you generated ideas, helped to divide up tasks, completed the task that you were responsible for by the agreed deadline, shared your findings with the group and designed and delivered the presentation alongside your colleagues. Remember that examples can come from all areas of your life including university, work, leisure activities and family responsibilities.

You will also need to give your reasons for applying for the particular job in question and explain why you would like to work for the organisation. The reasons that you give need to show that you have thoroughly researched the organisation, that you have a full understanding of the role and that you have properly considered whether the job and organisation are right for you. Some students list the benefits of working for the company as the reason that they have applied (for example, they may cite the organisation's excellent training scheme for new graduate employees). However, the employer will be far more impressed by you describing what *you can offer* the organisation rather than *what the organisation can do for you*. For example, you could say that the role will enable you to build on skills that you already possess, or that it will enable you to work with particular clients or customers that you already have experience of dealing with.

### **How should I structure my statement?**

Your statement should be broken up into sections with clear headings that mirror the requirements listed in the job specification and the duties outlined in the job description. Under each heading you should provide *evidence* that you are what they require. Your evidence could be arranged into short, sharp bullets, or into paragraphs for evidence that requires more description and analysis. The entire statement should have three sections:

1. The introduction where you state why you have applied for the position
2. The main section where you prove that you possess the requirements that they are looking for
3. The conclusion where you recap the main points and reiterate your enthusiasm for the position

### **The use of language in personal statements**

Your personal statement should be peppered with action words/ verbs which convey a feeling of positivity, dynamism and proactivity such as:

- Achieved
- Arranged
- Collaborated
- Completed
- Contributed
- Controlled
- Co-ordinated
- Created
- Decided
- Designed
- Developed
- Enabled
- Established
- Improved
- Initiated
- Introduced
- Lead
- Liaised
- Managed
- Negotiated
- Organised
- Participated
- Planned
- Produced
- Provided
- Solved
- Succeeded in

Effective statements also refer to the positive qualities of the applicant by using words and phrases such as:

- Able
- Ambitious
- Assertive
- Co-operative
- Creative
- Dedicated
- Diplomatic
- Efficient
- Energetic
- Enthusiastic
- Excelling in...
- Experienced in...
- Familiar with...
- Flexible
- Hardworking
- Healthy
- Keen
- Mature
- Methodical
- Organised
- Proficient at...
- Qualified to...
- Quick thinking
- Reliable
- Responsible
- Skilful/ skilled
- Successful
- Willing to

Adverbs which describe HOW you completed the task can also enhance your application form such as: successfully, effectively, efficiently, resourcefully, economically, proficiently and competently.

If you are using bullets in your personal statements it is effective to use verbs or adverbs as the first word in your bullet point as this immediately creates a positive impression.

For example, compare the two bullet points below. Whilst they are both communicating the same information, the second bullet does so in a more direct and positive way because it starts with the word 'successfully.'

- I was responsible for resolving customer complaints whilst working as a waitress which makes me feel that I am a good communicator.
- Successfully resolved customer complaints whilst working as a waitress using effective

negotiation, persuasion and communication skills.

There are also expressions to avoid when writing personal statements such as phrases which imply that you only did something because you were told to or that someone else was the main instigator, such as:

- I had to...
- I helped to...
- I was given the responsibility of...

Also avoid phrases which imply that your qualities are just a matter of opinion such as:

- I think I'm good at...
- I believe I'm good at...
- I feel I'm good at...

In the earlier examples you can see that the first bullet uses the phrase 'I feel....' and I was responsible for...' which is another reason for the second bullet being more direct, effective and positive.

## References

Forms usually ask for two referees and their contact details. Avoid using family or friends as referees and instead choose people who know you well in a *professional* capacity, such as an academic tutor or employer. Make sure you check that the people you nominate are happy to act as referees for you and keep them informed about the jobs that you are applying for so that they are adequately prepared to give you a reference if asked.

When writing the names of your referees on the form also add their relationship to you, for example 'personal tutor' or 'line manager.' This will fully confirm to the employer that your referees know you in a professional capacity. You will need to write down their address, email and telephone number and it is important that you enter their details correctly on the form.

## Disclosing disabilities

Some people who have a disability debate the pros and cons of disclosing their disability on application forms because they fear the possibility of disclosure affecting their chance of being shortlisted for an interview.

However, it is important to note that many employers are positive about developing a

diverse workforce and actively try to recruit people with disabilities.

In addition, the Disability Discrimination Act states that 'employers should make reasonable adjustments in all aspects of employment, working conditions or the workplace to enable or assist you to do a job', and this also applies to the recruitment process.

Whilst some people choose not to, disclosing your disability on an application form can therefore ensure that you get the support you need at the interview stage and/or if you are appointed to the post.

There are several sections of the application form where you can (or must) disclose your disability. These include:

- medical questionnaires (see the next section entitled 'other sections'.)
- the equal opportunities monitoring form (again see the next section)
- in your answers to open ended questions
- in the personal statement

Unless asked direct medical questions, it is your choice as to whether you disclose your disability on application forms. A more detailed debate about the pros and cons of disclosing disabilities on application forms and at interviews can be found on the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities website at <http://www.skill.org.uk/> (select 'information > information for students > careers and work > view get that job').

### **Disclosing disabilities in open ended questions or in the personal statement**

You may be able to describe skills that you have learnt or positive attitudes that you have developed as a result of your disability. For example, you may be asked 'to describe a time when you faced a difficult challenge and succeeded'. To answer this question, you could describe how your disability made something that was already difficult that little bit harder. Describing how you coped with this challenge by proactively taking action to ensure your success with determination and positivity could really impress an employer. Adopting this approach can also help the employer to see that, with the right support your disability does not hold you back and that instead, it has helped you to gain tenacity, assertiveness, determination and problem solving skills (all qualities that make you highly employable). As such, analysis in your personal statement can

be a very positive way of disclosing your disability.

## **Other sections**

### **Eligibility to work in the UK**

You may also be asked to state your nationality and whether you require a permit to work in the UK. If you *do* need a permit, you will usually be asked whether you possess one and for your permit number.

It is essential that you give accurate information about your right to work in the UK and your permit situation as employers have legal obligations when employing people from overseas. Usually you will need permission to work in the UK before an employer will offer you a job and an employer should ask to see your permit or passport to confirm this before offering you a contract of employment. However, in some special circumstances an employer will apply for a permit on your behalf.

For more information about visas and working in the UK visit <http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/>

### **Criminal convictions**

A separate section may also ask you to disclose any criminal convictions. It is important to tell the truth as the employer is legally entitled to dismiss you if they find out about you having a criminal conviction that you did not disclose at the application stage. Some jobs (such as occupations which involve working with children) legally require employers to check your past for criminal convictions. Some convictions, once spent, will not show on your record, whereas more serious convictions will remain on your record for life. If you have a criminal record this may stop you from doing certain types of work; for more information see <http://careersadvice.direct.gov.uk> (select help and advice > help and advice for ex-offenders).

### **Equal opportunities monitoring**

A separate section may ask you to select your ethnic origin from a range of options. You may also be asked to state whether you have a disability or a health related condition that the employer should be aware of.

Equal opportunities monitoring forms are optional and not used to judge your application. They are separated from the main part of the form before they reach the people who will decide whether you will be shortlisted. Equal opportunities legislation requires employers to attract applicants from different groups and, as

such, the form helps employers to measure their success in recruiting a diverse workforce.

On the equal opportunities monitoring form you may also be asked whether there are any specialist requirements or aids that you would like the employer to provide in the interview. This section is optional, but remember that under the Disability Discrimination Act, employers are required to ensure that people are not discriminated against on the grounds of disability during the recruitment process. If you have a disability, this could therefore be a good opportunity to get the support you need to perform at your best in the interview.

### **Medical questionnaires**

Some professions have their own fitness to practice regulations which are designed to ensure that employees can cope with the physical demands of the job and that public health and safety requirements are met.

Some employers will therefore ask candidates to complete a medical questionnaire which asks direct questions about disability and health. It is important that you answer these questions accurately to help the employer ascertain whether, by employing you, they are upholding regulations. If you give false information and

you are appointed, you may be liable for dismissal.

Under the DDA, employers have a responsibility to make reasonable adjustments and to provide support to help employees succeed in their job. Therefore those with health conditions or disabilities shouldn't make the assumption that they can't enter an occupation that has fitness to practice regulations. Disclosing a condition on a health questionnaire may result in the employer considering ways to make reasonable adjustments to support the potential employee if offered the job.

## **After submission**

Some organisations will confirm that they have received your application via post or email whereas others do not. If you are anxious, a polite call to the HR department should confirm whether they have received it or not. If your application is unsuccessful it is acceptable to ask for feedback, however some organisations may decide not to give feedback as a matter of policy. The Careers Centre is happy to give you suggestions for improvement and our contact details are overleaf.

## Further information and help

### Websites

[www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk) > jobs and work > applications, CVs and interviews  
<http://targetjobs.co.uk> > general advice  
[www.selectsimulator.com](http://www.selectsimulator.com)  
<http://jobs.guardian.co.uk/careers> > covering letters and application forms

### Reference books

We have a range of books in the Careers Centre including:

David Williams et al *How to get the best graduate job*, Pearson, Harlow, 2006

Rebecca Corfield, *Preparing the Perfect Job Application*, Kogan Page, London, 2007

### Workshops

We run workshops on completing application forms. Check our latest events programme on [www.wlv.ac.uk/careers](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/careers) and book a place online. If you are one of a group of students who would all like help with application forms, then why not contact us to arrange a session just for you, or ask your tutor to arrange it with us for you?

## Help with your application form

Why not get an expert and unbiased opinion on your application form before you send it off? You are encouraged to bring a draft of your form along to show one of the Careers Advisers, who will give you useful feedback and advice. Advisers are available in the Careers Centre on MD Concourse from Monday to Friday, 11:00 am – 4:00. Special arrangements operate at Walsall. Visit our website or ring 321414 for details.

## Titles in the *Employability Skills* series

- Job Seeking
- Your CV
- Interview Skills
- **Effective Application Forms**
- Presentations
- Assessment Centres
- Psychometric Tests
- Getting the most from Volunteering
- Personal Branding
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