

Job Applications

If you have already seen a few graduate job application forms, you will know how challenging they can be. Most are designed to make candidates think hard about themselves and their suitability for the opportunities on offer, putting off the fainthearted. However, the more difficult forms, while daunting, usually give you ample scope to put yourself across effectively. Conversely, short, undemanding forms can frustrate your efforts to do so.

It is important to apply for jobs to which you are suited. Many applications fail because candidates have not read job descriptions carefully enough and in so doing, have not checked that they match the criteria. Be realistic and choose opportunities wisely - it will stop you from wasting time and feeling frustrated.

Employers continue to receive large numbers of applications that are inappropriate or badly completed. If you take pains to present yourself well on paper, your chances of getting an interview will be much better. Additionally, the chances of getting an interview are likely to improve if you include less well-known employers on your target list.

HANDY HINTS FOR FILLING IN APPLICATION FORMS

- Read the form through carefully and note any specific instructions. If they ask you to write in block capitals or black ink, do just that.
- Draft answers in rough first. It may help to take a photocopy of the form so that you can work on the layout of your answers.
- Tailor your answers to relate to what you have discovered about the job and the kind of person best suited to fill it.
- Think about why an employer may be asking this question. What do they want to know?
- If a question is not applicable, say so. Do not leave empty boxes.
- Use positive and specific words to describe your activities and interests, rather than vague terms and clichés.
- Check for spelling mistakes and grammatical errors before sending the final version.
- Avoid beginning too many sentences with 'I'.
- Use different examples for different questions.
- Stick to word limits.
- If you have to hand-write the form, then make sure that it is legible.
- Always keep a copy of the form so that you can remember what you wrote.
- Keep an eye on the closing dates.

Making your case

Making an application is not simply a matter of providing information. Unless you are among the fortunate few with a record so outstanding and relevant to what you want to do that it speaks convincingly for itself, you will need to be persuasive. Essentially, it is a matter of

presenting a rationale for your application - of making a case. A well thought-out case can carry you a long way through selection procedures. It can help you make an effective application, perform well at first interview and come across convincingly at the final stage. Constructing a good case and presenting it clearly on paper can take a lot of time and effort, but the procedure is, in principle, straightforward.

Matching up to requirements

Find out as much as you can about the job you are applying for and the kind of person likely to fit it best. Some employers provide a lot of helpful information, but often you will have to do a bit of research. General information is available in the careers service to supplement any that you can obtain directly from the employer. Sum up what you learn in terms of the knowledge, skills and motivation that the employer is likely to be looking for in candidates and relate these to evidence in your history. Take note that any examples you use will need to stand up to discussion at interview.

Evidencing skills

Skills such as communication, teamwork and decision making are often top of employers' agendas when seeking new staff. To decide where the best evidence for having such skills comes from, reflect on all your achievements, both in and out of university. Include work experience (full-time or part-time work, internships, vacation schemes, volunteering), hobbies and interests, sports and travel. Once you have identified the strongest examples think beyond 'I worked well in the netball team at university' by filling in detail. Which netball team? How often did you play? Is it a current interest? How many of you play in the team? What does 'worked well' really mean? Once you can answer questions like these you will be well on the way to giving a good case. Most importantly, be very specific about **your** contribution to the team. What did **you** do to help the team to work well together.

Inevitably, sometimes there will be weaknesses, but if there is a good reason, try to explain this somewhere on the form. If you find nothing to support your case at all, you are probably applying for the wrong job! Do what you can to make the evidence hang together in a way that creates a word picture of the kind of person you are, what you are good at and what you like doing.

Try to create a distinctive impression

Evidence that you meet all the employer's requirements might not be enough to get you an interview. Faced with a lot of good applications, the employer will tend to select those which are distinctive in some way. This can arise from one or more of the following:

- especially relevant experience
- a record of outstanding or unusual achievement
- strength of argument
- an attractive and effective style
- precision and overall visual effect.

A note on Personal Statements

Some application forms ask for a personal statement. Employers often specify the type of information they expect to be covered in this section but where no direction is offered you need to give:

- reasons for your interest in the career area/role
- reasons for your interest in the organisation
- evidence that you have the skills required for the role.

See the separate leaflet in this series on *Personal Statements* for more information.

CONSTRUCTING AN ANSWER IN 5 STEPS

Imagine you are asked to answer the question below:

In 250 words, explain why you have applied for X job function(s). Offer evidence of your suitability (eg courses undertaken, work shadowing, skills, strengths and experiences). Emphasise why you consider yourself to be a strong candidate.

1. Decide what you want the answer to achieve

It is worth working out first, on a separate piece of paper, precisely what you want to achieve with your answer. For example, you might set out to convince them that you:

- have a long-standing interest in the field of work concerned
- possess the key skills that the job calls for
- have a good insight into the nature of the job.

These points could then provide the basis for three short paragraphs. Focusing on three or four key points is a good way of shaping your answer.

2. Organise the evidence

Working again on a separate piece of paper, you might:

- assemble the facts that support the three points
- choose the evidence that seems to be most appropriate
- think out how you can use the chosen material in the three paragraphs.

3. Write about 100 words on each point

If the main points you have decided to make are of equal weight, you could then use your chosen material to produce three 100-word paragraphs. Remember to use positive and specific words.

4. Edit the three paragraphs down to about 250 words

You will almost certainly need to revise the draft to ensure that it hangs together as a whole, relates appropriately to other answers on the form and will fit comfortably in the space provided. You can try out the answer in the appropriate space on a photocopy or downloaded version of the form.

5. Copy the final draft onto the form

When you are satisfied with the answer, write on the form itself, taking great care to achieve a high standard of presentation.

APPLYING ONLINE

Many employers and recruitment agencies ask you to apply for jobs by completing an on-screen form. You should make as much effort with these as with paper application forms. It is best to print off the form so that you can go away and think about it.

Employers and agencies may use standard searches to find candidates. These often rely on finding specific key words in the descriptions of your various activities, so think carefully about the language you use. Try to make use of positive, active words that are appropriate to the type of work for which you are applying. To get a better understanding of online applications and have a practice, go to www.selectsimulator.com.

STUCK FOR WORDS? HERE ARE SOME IDEAS

Strong verbs to describe what you have done:

Achieved, analysed, assessed, budgeted, chose, completed, contributed, co-ordinated, created, decided, demonstrated, developed, devised, directed, elected, enjoyed, evaluated, expressed, gained, handled, increased, initiated, implemented, improved, interpreted, investigated, led, measured, organised, planned, prepared, presented, produced, raised (money), ran, researched, selected, set up, started, supervised, tested, understood, wrote.

Adjectives to describe yourself:

Accurate, adaptable, calm, commercially minded, conscientious, determined, hard-working, impartial, logical, methodical, patient, persistent, persuasive, precise, reliable, resilient, resourceful, responsible, self-reliant, sensitive, systematic, tactful, tolerant.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- www.careers.lon.ac.uk/sortit a collection of interactive modules designed to increase your ability to manage your career. Look at the self-awareness section to analyse your skills and the implementation section to help you complete application forms.
- www.selectsimulator.com AGCAS, information and advice on online applications and practise applications
- *How to Complete an Application Form*, The Careers Group, University of London, 2008
- *Making Applications*, AGCAS Booklet, 2003
- *Looking Good on Paper*, AGCAS DVD, 2000

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