

University of Surrey

Careers Service

<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers>

Application forms

How to maximise your chance of an interview

It is vital to create high quality written applications, because more applications are rejected at the application form stage than at any other point of the selection process. What you write must be accurate, relevant and of a high standard so the employer says, "Yes, I think this person could work for us." 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 point of view. 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 skills and abilities you have. You are revising your life, just like an exam topic. 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 come in handy at interviews.

As well as thinking about what you have to offer, you need to discover what the job requires. There are often clues in the questions on the forms. Try to gather together 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 the positions available - check their web site thoroughly
- information about this kind of job: www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations provides information on about 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 find evidence that you can do the things that are important to them. Remember that everything you do can show lots of different strengths, but try to use a variety of examples.

How to make your form stand out

An employer may receive very 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 Careers Service leaflet *Effective writing* for a list of active words
- 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 mention what you took responsibility for.

Applying online

Most large companies now have their application forms online and you may be obliged to apply in that way. This is usually cheaper and more efficient for the company and speeds up the process, but can also present problems. Here are some issues to beware 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 process seems less formal so you may fall into the trap of using inappropriate language and txt spk or just thinking up answers as you go along.
- The options in drop-down menus may not always offer the choice you want.
- There may not be a spellchecker.
- It's very tempting to leave it until the last minute to start filling in the form. It's also important to treat each application you make separately. Even if questions seem similar, pasting answers from previous applications leads to mistakes.

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 or get a friend to look it over word by word.
- Allow plenty of time not only to think about and enter your answers, but also in case of technical problems like server failure.
- Check everything carefully before you submit. You can usually only submit one application form per company.
- 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.

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; and always be sure to meet the deadline.

Presentation:

Use good quality, white, A4 paper and a reliable printer. Word-process your work, unless you are instructed to hand write the application, and choose a font that's easy to read, like this (Arial) or 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 keep it neat. You should also consider using bullet points, as they are easy to read and help you 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 bring success for the kind of work you want. If you want to recycle answers you have already written for a different application, make sure you amend them carefully to fit. Remember also 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 keen you are to get the job and whether you pay attention to detail. Double check everything and get help if you're not sure.

Competency questions

Many application forms will ask you to explain how you demonstrate the required competencies 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 did you set out to do?
- **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. Keep the 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 a great answer, if you show what you learned from the experience.

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 an example in our leaflet about CVs.

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 and 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 response. 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.