

University of Surrey

Careers Service

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Presenting your Skills to an Employer – Be Guided by the STARS

STAR is a technique for analysing experiences and articulating skills for use in applications. Employers express their job requirements in terms of skills and competencies. During interviews and on application forms they ask for an example of when you have used a specific competency. **Competencies** are skills or qualities that are needed for the successful performance of a job. They are often defined in terms of behaviours. Employers usually outline the competencies that they require in a 'Person Specification' for the job and then score the application forms according to the evidence candidates provide in the form of examples showing when they have used each skill.

Typical questions on an application form might read:

- *“The following questions are designed to encourage you to provide evidence of specific abilities. Your examples can be taken from your education, work experience, placements, spare-time or other voluntary activities but do not write solely about course-work.”*
- *“Give an example of a time when you successfully led a team?” (250 words)*
- *“Describe a recent problem you faced. What did you do? What alternatives did you consider? What was the outcome?” (150 words)*
- *“Tell us about an occasion when you dealt with conflict. How did you resolve it?” (100 words)*
- *“What is your proudest achievement and why?” (50 words)*

Notice that this last example does not specify a particular skill or quality, but questions like this would still be linked to a competency the employer has identified, such as drive or resilience. Always consider what the employer may be looking for by analysing how questions relate to the role and the person specification.

Questions can be phrased positively (tell us about something you've done well) or negatively (tell us about difficult situations and challenges). You might be able to use the same example however the question is put, since the biggest successes when you really achieved something worthwhile are often times you had to work hard to do it.

On application forms the employer is seeking **evidence**, so you need to choose your best example - which can be from any area of your life - and work it through. You will need to write about a situation where you used the competency, the key elements and facts of the situation, what your approach was and what actions you took and finally what was achieved or what the outcome was.

A really useful way to do this is by using the **STAR** acronym as your guide.

S = Situation: one of your experiences or activities you have been involved in

T= Task: What was your objective? Or what were you trying to achieve?

A =Actions: What did you do and how did you achieve the task? Use 'I'

R = Results: The outcome of your actions and how you measured your success.

Common causes for rejection include:

- Examples from the same part of your life;
- Not enough detail or too much;
- Vague or woolly answers - be specific; avoid irrelevant detail;
- Not following instructions (including word limit).

An Example:

Tell us about a time when you organised a project or event? (150 words exactly – 5 or 10 less would be fine for a 50 word limit)

(S) As a community service volunteer, (T) I planned the renovation of a flat occupied by an elderly couple. My objective was to carry out the work with the least disruption to the couple. (A) First I calculated and obtained the necessary materials. The next step was to organise a detailed work schedule, listing tasks and estimating time required. After obtaining advice on scheduling from a skilled tradesman, I then managed a team of students on an hour by hour basis, allocating tasks in the most efficient order and using skills in the team according to availability. I had originally intended to work round the couple, but that proved too difficult so I arranged for their temporary re-location to a nearby bed and breakfast to avoid any distress. (R) They were both really pleased with the renovation work, which was completed on time and within budget.

NB: Please don't actually write S, T, A and R in your answers!

Exercise: Showing your best side

- Choose your favourite or strongest skills
- Add it into the question below:
- *Give an example of a time when you successfully demonstrated*
_____.
- Write about it in no more than 200 words, being guided by the **STARs**
 - Situation
 - Task
 - Action
 - Result

Variations:

1. Try again, using different word limits.
2. Repeat this exercise for other strengths you possess.
3. Practise writing about other attributes which employers ask for.
Communication skills, analytical ability, initiative, problem-solving and teamwork are all very common requirements