



# Learning pack

## **Application form advice**

**This careers learning pack looks at completing application forms as effectively as possible. A well written application form is one of the first steps to gaining an interview.**

Some employers prefer you to complete an application form, so they can compare candidates on a like-for-like basis. Larger companies and popular graduate schemes, often have a lengthy application process, but if you dedicate some time and thought to completing your application form, you can use it to sell your skills. Once you have read this pack, if you feel that you need further advice please book an appointment on Symplicity for a one-to-one session with a Career Development Manager.

**“...if you dedicate some time and thought to completing your application form, you can use it to sell your skills.”**

This learning pack will help you address the three key issues, helping you to send forms that will give you the best chance of getting through to the next stage of the recruitment process:

- **Identifying employer requirements.**
- **Considering what skills and experience you can offer.**
- **Producing informative and detailed application forms that demonstrate through evidence your suitability for the job.**



# Why do employers use application forms?

**Employers use application forms as a pre-selection tool or a first stage filter, using a set number of criteria.**

At this stage, applicants are competing against a set of company and job-related standards, known as the 'sift criteria'. This will include aspects such as qualifications, key competencies, abilities and previous work experience. Each application gets scored according to the employer's requirements, and those that meet the standard get through to the next stage.

Application forms are an effective way of employers gaining information about the suitability of a candidate; as they require evidence-based responses and examples. This helps the employer determine whether the applicant is a 'good fit' and whether they have a good understanding of the role.

## Constructing effective answers

**Before you begin to construct answers to application form questions, you need to work through several stages of preparation. These different stages are:**

- 1** Read the application form instructions carefully.
- 2** Identify your skills and match these to the description of the role.
- 3** Research the job and employer to gain insights.
- 4** Make sure you have recorded all your evidence and proof read the application form for spelling and grammar before final submission.

Many of the application form questions will be "competency based". These questions are designed to check your relevant skills and abilities. The questions are asking you to provide evidence from your life and work experience to show that you have these skills.



# Application forms – questions that are typically asked

## Personal Information

- Name.
- Address.
- Work eligibility (do you have the correct work visa?).
- Driving licence (state only if it is required for the role).

## Education

Qualifications (degree level onwards).

## Career History

A summary of each of your previous job roles. You may be asked for the following details for every individual job:

- Company name
- Job title
- The start and end date of your employment
- A description of what the role involved and the responsibilities you had

## Other experiences

- Volunteering
- Clubs/societies

## References

A recruiter may ask for the contact details of your previous employers, such as your line manager contact details. This may be to confirm:

- The dates you were employed
- Your attendance records
- A brief personality or character reference from your previous manager

## Expected salary

The recruiter may wish to know what annual salary you wish to gain from the job. Use the figures that are listed in the job description. If not mentioned, research the average salary through Glassdoor or other internet resources.

## Availability

What date are you available to start the job?

## Motivational questions

Recruiters want to understand what motivates you, what you are passionate about and why you want to succeed.

Questions you may be asked:

- What has motivated you to apply to 'company name'?
- Why should we hire you for this position?
- What is your greatest achievement?
- Why do you consider yourself to be a strong candidate for the position for which you have applied?
- Tell us why you have applied to this organisation rather than some of our major competitors?

## Competency based questions

Recruiters need to know that you have the skillset required to perform the job well. Questions you may be asked:

- "Describe a time when you were working under pressure and had to meet multiple deadlines."
- "Tell me about a time when you worked as part of a team with conflicting opinions."
- "Give me an example of a time when you have had to organise a project or an event."



# What do employers look for?

**Employers typically look for 25 key attributes. However, each employer will only be looking for some of these and they will want some attributes more than others.**

To ensure that your application is successful, you first need to identify what experience and skills the job role requires.

Your task is to provide evidence from your education and career history that prove you have the skills and experience that the recruiter is looking for. Find this information on the job advert by looking at the following sections:

- Job role description.
- Person specification.
- Desirable and essential candidate requirements.
- Company website.

Identify the type of candidate the recruiter is looking for. If the job description mentions the need for a candidate with “an enthusiastic and confident personality”, then use similar key words within your application. Below is a table of other common key attributes you may identify within a job advert.

# Key attributes

**Here are the attributes which employers of graduates typically look for in candidates:**

1	Communication	2	Teamwork	3	Leadership	4	Time management
5	Commercial awareness	6	Adaptability/ flexibility	7	Initiative	8	Analytical ability
9	Creative thinking	10	Numeracy	11	IT proficiency		

The importance of each attribute relies on the job role itself. Each job role and industry will value different skills. For example, the role of a Team Manager would likely emphasise the importance of strong leadership and teamwork skills within the job description.

Please review the Competency Learning Pack and also our Competency based interview Learning Pack for more key attributes that recruiters look for.

# Key preparation

## Assessing your suitability for the job role

- Are you the right person for this company and are they the right company for you?
- Can they offer you the right career path?
- Do you meet the the essential selection criteria?
- Do you have the current, correct visa or citizenship status for this location and role?
- For visa queries or to book a 1:1 appointment, please review the Cranfield Visa and Immigration Service webpage.
- Is it in a suitable accessible location within a commutable distance?
- Are there any travel requirements with the role and how will you accommodate these?

## Read any frequently asked questions (FAQ) and instructions

- Find out the application form submission deadline, and work backwards from there.
- Consider how long it will take to complete the form and when the closing date is.
- Can you complete sections one at a time? Or must it all be completed at once?
- Will you have to undertake psychometric tests or assessments?

## Check deadlines

- Before submitting your application form, ensure you have proof read, spelling and grammar checked the document.
- Aim to complete the form at least two days before the deadline.
- Have all material to hand.

## Materials required

- Person specification and job description.
- Your CV for reference.
- Have the company website open.





# What if I don't have a lot of work experience?

Don't worry. Many students don't have a lot of work experience to include on application forms. Fortunately, you can still record an excellent range of skills by drawing on other types of evidence which can be just as relevant to the employer.

Here is an example of a self-assessment template - a procedure you can follow in order to gather together your pool of evidence:

Self-assessment skills template		
Example	Role	Skills learned/used
Work experience	Part-time sales assistant at Ted Baker	Handling customer queries swiftly and effectively. Resolved customer complaints face-to-face. Followed direction from the Store Manager to reach weekly sales targets. Worked collaboratively in a team of ten. Maintained a tidy store appearance by tidying shelves and displays; following rules set in place by Visual Merchandising department. Made myself available to work at short notice over holiday and sales periods. Learned how to use the store computerised till system to complete purchases and refunds.
Volunteering	Maths Mentor – Primary school in Brazil (TEFL)	During my gap year I mentored groups of six to ten year olds with their maths skills in an underprivileged area of Brazil. I also assisted with a large marketing project to raise the profile of the school and gain more volunteers.
Societies	Treasurer of the International Female Students Society	In charge of all accounts relating to this active society of over 200 members; calculating costs, setting budgets and reporting to others on the Board.
	Staff/Student Liaison Committee	I was part of a student team that collaborated with University staff in order to share news, communicate issues and come up with ideas to resolve shared problems.
Clubs	Badminton (county team)	Active member of my county team in my home country; played frequently in teams of two and as a single player. Entered many competitions.
Interests/hobbies	Alto singer for the University choir	Meeting on a weekly basis to sing with a mixed voice choir, often performing at events across campus. Introduced an initiative of 'Valentine-gram' (song dedications to students and staff) to raise money for our charity.

# Practice applying for a job

Use the table on the page opposite to add the top attributes you think this employer is looking for.

### Baileys Investment Services - Trainee Financial Analyst

Baileys Investment Services is a leading provider of financial and economic information to financial investment companies and our services are used by the top ten global investment banks. Due to continuing growth, we are looking for highly-skilled and motivated graduates to join our Glasgow team. You will be involved in working on large projects, answering day-to-day queries from clients, visiting clients to provide on-site support and training, training clients both individuals and groups, managing a group of client accounts to ensure client satisfaction.

You will have a bachelor's degree (2:1 or above), a postgraduate qualification related to Finance, have strong numeric, analytical and problem solving skills and excellent communication skills.

You must also be adaptable and an enthusiastic team member with a proven ability to take the initiative and find creative solutions. Baileys Investment Services will consider graduates from any discipline. Industry experience and experience in a client facing role desirable.

Apply online at [www.baileysinvest.com](http://www.baileysinvest.com)



# Assessing your suitability

Once you have identified what key attributes and experience the recruiter is looking for in potential candidates, you will then need to decide on what examples you can provide to prove you have the skills and experience the company has asked for. To practice this process, use the below table and instructions:

- 1. Review the Trainee Financial Analyst advert on the previous page.
- 2. Underline any attribute or experience that is mentioned.
- 3. Next, write this attribute, skill or experience in the table below in the 'Top Five Attributes for this job' column.
- 4. Then you will need to identify if you have the attribute or experience in the "Do I meet these criteria?" column.
- 5. Lastly, select your evidence. Pick your strongest examples from academic, work experience, internships or volunteering that prove you have the required skill or experience.

Trainee Financial Analyst	Top five attributes for this job	Do I meet these criteria?		Evidence you could use to support this:	
	1.				
	2.				
	3.				
	4.				
	5.				
Other essentials					
Other desirables					
Am I a suitable applicant?	YES		NO		

# How to answer competency based questions

It is important to identify the experience and the skills (otherwise known as 'competencies') that the recruiter is looking for. You will need to prove that you have the skills and experience through examples from your academic, career and other experiences.

One of the best ways to identify the skills being targeted in competency based questions is to first underline the key words in the question. Then think about each key word. What are the most relevant skills?

# Structuring your answers

The way to give a structured and in-depth answer is to use the STAR technique, and it goes like this:

**Situation** - Keep this part brief, the employer only needs to know the outline of the challenge.  
**Task** - Describe what your objectives were. What were you trying to achieve? Were there any challenges you had to overcome to reach your goal?  
**Action** - What actions did you take to overcome the challenges and reach your aim? Talk the recruiter through your actions step-by-step, mentioning how you used your skills to resolve challenges that occurred. Insert the key attributes / competencies from the job description here.  
**Result** - Describe the results you achieved, be specific, use numbers and percentages and/or feedback.

The situation should be explicit but it should also be brief, as all it does is introduce the narrative and says what type of example this is. The task section should be where you explain your personal or team objectives and clarify what you were trying to achieve. The action section is the main section. Here you focus on your personal contribution in detail, even if the example is about what you did within a group or team. Lastly, you need a results section, also brief. What was the successful outcome for you personally, for the group or the company?

## Top Tips when using STAR:

- 1. Add details about the context or environment. For example, were you in a time-sensitive situation? What were all the challenges you had to overcome?
- 2. The 'A' in STAR is where the recruiter will be looking for the desired key attributes and will be awarding the most marks. Use the job description to identify what skills the recruiter will be looking for.
- 3. The 'R' in STAR focuses on the outcome. Don't be too generic such as "and the result was we achieved the aim." Can you quantify the results? Were there further benefits to your achievement? For example "Our team received the best grade of 98% in the cohort and our work and also used as a good example to guide other students."
- 4. Use "I" not "We" so the recruiter can identify the specific actions you took. It is difficult for a recruiter to give good marks when "we" is used.
- 5. Read our Competency Learning Pack and Competency Based Interview Learning Pack for further information.

# Examples of competency based questions

Here are five example competency based questions and answers. Each example also gives you the skills being asked for. Remember that as well as analysing the question, you also need to research the company and the job to identify the most important skills being sought.

Please note that you would never write “situation”, “task”, “action” or “result”. These terms are just used here to make the structure more clear.

## Self-management, problem-solving, analytical ability

Describe how your personal planning and organisational skills resulted in the successful achievement of a personal or group task.

Situation	Whilst employed at Ted Baker last summer I was given the task of rationalising the stock control system.
Task	I did an initial assessment and realised the paperwork was in a mess, which had led to incorrect stock ordering. I aimed to achieve a 10% reduction in stock levels within two months.
Action	I looked at factors such as when the stock was last ordered, what it was used for and how often it was used. I worked out a method of streamlining the paperwork involved in this process and redesigned the relevant forms, which I then submitted to my manager.
Result	My ideas were implemented and I exceeded my objectives by making a 15% reduction in stock levels.

## Communication skills (oral), can summarise key issues, logical argument

Describe a situation where you were successful in putting your ideas across.

Situation	During my gap year in Brazil with EFL, I was volunteering with six to ten year olds to improve their maths skills.
Task	The existing teachers were very understaffed and didn’t have any formal teaching in place for this subject. My objective was to put into place a learning strategy that would cover a mixed-ability and mixed-age class.
Action	I organised a series of 30 lessons, which took the children step-by-step through the Key Stage three to five maths skills. I implemented ‘stretch’ and ‘consolidation’ plans for those who either excelled or struggled with the concepts. I also adjusted my teaching methods to meet the needs of the children in the class. I ensured the teaching methods could be delivered by people with no formal qualifications in maths (as was the situation at this school).
Result	I presented this initiative to the existing teachers, who decided to put the learning strategy into place as they could see how the plan could work for their school.

## Self-motivation, drive/energy, initiative

What is your greatest achievement and why?

Situation	I was a member of the International Female Student Society and offered my financial skills to take over the Treasurer position.
Task	The task was to organise and oversee the annual charity ball to raise £2,000. There were eight committee members, all with their own ideas and agendas and the challenge was to bring these ideas together to form a plan of action.
Action	I found that good communication between members of the group and working as a team was essential. I had to lead the team and make each person feel as though they had an important role to play. I identified the main duties and delegated responsibility to those most interested and skilled in particular areas and followed their progress closely. There were some conflicts within the group, but using my collaborative and persuasive skills, I ensured disagreements were resolved.
Result	This was an event that took months of organisation from choosing the venue to raising sponsorship, of which we managed to raise £1,560. Our hard work was worth it as we overcame problems, both logistical and financial and raised over £3,000 for charity, which was £1,000 over the target.

## Influencing, communication and teamwork

Describe how you have achieved a goal through influencing the actions or opinions of others. What were the circumstances? What did you do to make a difference? How do you know the result was satisfactory?

Situation	As part of my volunteering trip to Brazil, I had to undertake a piece of research into how the school might improve its marketing strategy with TEFL and increase numbers of volunteers. I was assigned to a senior manager at TEFL and liaised closely with the teachers and staff at the school.
Task	My manager was fluent in both English and Brazilian, which was vital as he was helping me to liaise with the school’s contacts across South America. Unfortunately after one week he fell ill and I was left to contact companies myself. I quickly realised that my Brazilian was not of a sufficient standard for me to gain all the information I required and I had eight weeks to complete the research.
Action	I got in touch with some of the TEFL contacts in the region, but unfortunately due lack of staff, they were unable to assist greatly. Consequently, I managed to persuade a fellow student at my University (Brazilian) to carry out the telephone research for me from the UK, whilst I offered to help word process her project.
Result	This resulted in the successful completion of my project within the eight week timeframe. With hindsight, I could have tried to improve my Brazilian, but this would have taken too much time. I also could have relied more heavily on secondary research, but this could have devalued my results.



# Application forms - language focus

**Application forms are formal documents so your language should also be formal, clear and professional. You should never lapse into text speak or be too chatty. It is advisable to use “I” and “my”.**

The words and phrases below should be useful. Remember only to use expressions which you fully understand and can provide evidence of in an interview. For example, don't say you have 'diverse experience of the retail trade' if you have only worked in one shop!

Choose the best language to accurately describe **your** experience and background. Use action words to describe what you did in different situations and to convey your capability and enthusiasm. Here are some examples for describing your recent or current employment/work experience:

Roles	Experience	Responsibilities	Ability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Established...</li><li>Planned...</li><li>Negotiated...</li><li>Created...</li><li>Designed...</li><li>Formulated...</li><li>Initiated...</li><li>Implemented...</li><li>Managed...</li><li>Organised...</li><li>Presented...</li><li>Worked closely with...</li><li>Collaborated with...</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>More than 'x' years' extensive and diverse experience in...</li><li>Demonstrated skills in...</li><li>Extensive academic...</li><li>Practical background in...</li><li>Experienced in all aspects of...</li><li>Knowledge of...</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>In charge of... (who/what?)</li><li>Supervised...</li><li>Responsible for...</li><li>Delegated...</li><li>Co-ordinated...</li><li>Employed to handle...</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Extensive training/ involvement in...</li><li>Proficient at...</li><li>Competent in...</li><li>Familiar with...</li><li>The ability to...</li></ul>

## Other useful resources

[www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

Contains additional helpful advice about making effective applications. Type 'application forms' into their search box.

[www.targetjobs.co.uk](http://www.targetjobs.co.uk)

General advice section is also worth a read.

### Top tips for a successful application

#### Attention to detail

Correct spelling and grammar is important. Many Cover Letters are rejected due to small mistakes, especially if the job role requires candidates to prove they have excellent attention to detail.

#### Avoid generic terms

Also avoid using bland phrases by themselves such as "I am a good organiser". You always need to provide evidence for your claims such as your level of responsibility in a specific situation. For example, if you are a good organiser, you can state this but demonstrate your abilities by adding "whilst working at Camp America I effectively organised daily activities for a group of 16 children, whilst communicating the schedule to my team".

#### Make your hobbies and interests stand out

Give detail about your hobbies and interests. For example, rather than simply saying you did a sponsored run, you could also explain that you trained for it, you raised sponsorship money and so on. Relate this evidence to the job in terms of transferable skills which you know you developed through the activity, which might be skills sought by the employer.

#### Keep to the point and check accuracy

Watch the length of your responses. You need to stick to any word limits and state the most important points and facts first. Never leave a response blank and always use fluent sentences (not text speech) and answer with as much detail as possible.

Also remember to check your responses carefully. An electronic spellchecker is necessary but insufficient in itself. Ask a Careers Development Manager to check over your draft and give you some feedback.

### Completing application forms - more tips

#### Planning your time

If the closing date for applications is in the future, you don't need to submit the form right away or the day you start it. Plan ahead as any application for a graduate job will take a significant length of time to do well.

You will often be able to register and create an account on the company website when you start your application. This will allow you to save your progress.

#### Reference the job description

Save a screenshot of the job advert, as sometimes this can be deleted without notice by a company when too many applications are received.

#### Identify the key attributes in a job advert

Continuously make reference to the attributes, technical skills and experience mentioned within the job advert. Ensure your own skills and experience align with the role before deciding to apply.

#### Match yourself to the job description and person specification

Make sure you use appropriate keywords like "teamwork" and "communication" to describe your skills and achievements. During the sifting process, employers often search online applications for keywords and phrases important to them. Use keywords which you believe match the employer's needs i.e. that relate to the core skills and criteria the employer has identified as essential to the future job holder.

#### Keep a record

Remember to keep a copy of your completed application for future reference. You can copy and paste your application responses in a Word document and save it for future use. If you're invited for interview, it's vital to remember what you wrote. Also your responses can potentially be used again or adjusted for another application – but only if you're careful about cutting and pasting and take account of the different employer needs and preferences.




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