

Job Application forms: Standard Questions & Answer guide

Personal & Education Details

Completing the personal details is the easiest part on the form. It includes basic details such as your name, address, email, phone numbers, age and date of birth.

It may be simple but take your time completing it.

Typos are easily done especially on mobile numbers. Make sure you use an email address with a professional tone and check it regularly.

The education section should also be straightforward.

What does the employer ask for? Do they want your most recent education listed first? Follow their guidelines.

- You'll be expected to list the names and addresses of schools or colleges attended and to give your academic grades for qualifications gained from secondary school through to and including university.
- First year grades are taken into consideration even though these will not necessarily count towards your final degree classification.
- This information will be used by the employer as part of the first sift, so it is very important that you check carefully that you at least meet or exceed the minimum academic requirements.
- Some employers, particularly those recruiting for financial roles receive thousands of applications for a few hundred jobs and will disregard those that do not meet their stringent criteria.

Academic grades that fall short of employers criteria

If you have a very strong case as to why your grades are not up to their standards e.g. due to a serious illness, bereavement or other circumstances and this can be supported by evidence e.g. from your school, then contact the firm's HR Team to check whether you will be considered.

Similarly, if there's a dip in your university grades and marks are not consistent, then you must give an explanation. It is also important to include your evidence on the application form itself. Use the additional information section for this purpose.

Focus your attention where you will have most success

There are employers in the public, non governmental and commercial sectors who do not place as much emphasis on secondary education and focus instead on what you have achieved throughout university and the rest of your personal and work experience.

Alternative/equivalent qualifications

Sometimes employers will give an indication of the alternative acceptable qualifications. However this is a complex area with an array of vocational and academic qualifications, not to mention international qualifications.

Contact the employer direct before spending time completing the application form

Employment History

Pay attention to detail and accuracy in this part of the form.

- Read any guidelines carefully to make sure you're filling it in exactly as the employer requests.
- You will be asked to give details of employment including vacation work and internships, usually most recent first.
- Include details of holiday or part-time jobs, temporary work, unpaid or voluntary work experience.

Gap Years

It is important to state:

- What exactly you did
- Where this took place
- How you organised/funded your experience
- Skills gained from the experience

Also include in this section any time taken to raise a family and/or other activities involved in time out from education or paid work.

Health Issues

You may be asked to give details of any current health issues or relevant medical history. Some forms ask if you have a disability as defined by the Disability Discrimination Act.

If, for example, you have dyslexia and are allowed extra time in exams, then by telling the employer they will usually make the same allowances in psychometric tests. If you have access needs then it is important to inform the employer to make sure that there are appropriate facilities to meet your needs if you get invited to interview.

Guidance on how and when to approach these issues is available in the Careers Resource Centre e.g. AGCAS publication 'A Level Playing Field', SKILL leaflet 'Looking for Work – Disclosing Disability' and from your local job centre.

Referees

You will normally be asked for the names of two referees.

- Try to get at least one referee who has seen you working in for example work experience placements or part time jobs.
- An academic referee will usually be your personal tutor but you could choose another academic if they know you better through your course work.
- Make sure you get their permission before including their details on your application form.
- A job offer is usually subject to references.

Activities & Interests

Often the employer initially scores the number of positions of responsibility, so ideally you need at least three examples.

Remember they must be:

- Recent – don't go back too far in time, ideally within the last three years
- Relevant – give evidence of the skills the employer is seeking
- Robust – stand up to further questioning at interview

Reasons for applying

Also called 'relevant experience' or 'personal statement' on application forms, this is the section that allows you to impress the employer by matching your skills, qualities and experience to what they're looking for. If you do well here, it can secure you an interview.

But, as it usually begins along these intimidating lines...

- 'Summarise why you are suitable for this post. Highlight personal achievements and other information that is relevant. Continue on a separate sheet if necessary'
- ...it's easy to see why you feel like giving up before you've started. But, by breaking down what you need to get across into smaller chunks, it's much more manageable.

Let them know:

- What attracted you to this job.
- How your qualifications and experience are relevant.
- How your skills match the job's requirements.
- What you're willing to do to upgrade your skills or qualifications - especially if there's something in the job description you don't have.
- Which aspects of your personality show how you will fit in.
- How activities you are involved in demonstrate those personality traits.
- Why this is a logical move forward for you and how it fits in with your long-term career aims.

This is your opportunity to make a good impression - but be honest and don't forget to sell yourself.

When answering questions such as 'Why have you applied for this role?' and 'Why are you applying to us?' it's important for you to focus on what you can contribute and what distinguishes the company from its competitors.

- This can be challenging, but include here any contacts you've had with the firm's people through careers fairs, presentations, work experience and the impressions they've left with you.
- Research the firm's position in the market, consider the culture they promote, structure, training, technology, staff retention etc. Sometimes you are asked to say what else you have considered or are considering. Don't reveal, as one candidate did, that you always wanted to be a Dentist but didn't get the grades so now you are considering this job.

Competence or Skills Questions

Listed below are examples of some of the competencies you may be asked to demonstrate:

Critical Thinking

Definition:

- Breaking down complex information into smaller units for thorough analysis.
- Spotting patterns, trends or discrepancies and drawing insights and conclusions that are not obvious to others.

Keywords: Logic, reasoning, recognising, liking, insight, perceiving, integrating, critical thinking, relating

Problem solving

Definition:

- Analysing problematic situations, seeking relevant data, diagnosing possible causes.
- Generating alternative solutions to find the best solution.

Keywords: Problem solving, analysing, identifying, evaluation

Definition:

- Discovering, creating and envisioning, imagination and unique ideas.
- Looking at situations from multiple perspectives to create radically new concepts.

Keywords: Creating, imagining, investigating, inventing, visioning, connecting, generating, brainstorming

Decision Making

Definition:

- Willingness to make decisions and take action after considering all the facts and alternatives.
- Analysing and anticipating possible consequences of potential decisions.

Keywords: Evaluating, considering, reasoning, reflecting, concluding, selecting

Planning and organising

Definition:

- Establishing a systematic course of action to achieve a task or objective effectively and efficiently.
- Involving planning, prioritising, scheduling, co-ordinating and the monitoring of performance against objectives.

Keywords: Organising, prioritising, scheduling, planning, monitoring, co-ordinating, controlling, tracking

Other skills you may be asked to demonstrate include – language skills, judgement, IT, negotiating, persuading, decision-making, team working, communication, time management, project management and self-motivation.

If you are asked to give evidence of these skills on your application then think of the definition of that skill and which tasks or skills are needed – hence the keywords that you might include in your answer.

The skills you need to be good at a job come from any aspect of your life to date, not just from education and work experience. You should use answers based on evidence from volunteering, travel and gap years, clubs and societies, interests and your life history if you are a mature student.

Employers are genuinely interested in all of your experience and how you relate it to the questions on their forms.

Your skills audit should help you here.

To give a structure to your answers and give evidence of your skills think CAR:

Sometimes there is a 4th element to this structure -

- Evaluation – this is your preparation for the interview.

Some questions ask if there is anything you would have done differently, if not, be prepared to answer this if necessary at interview.

Competency based questions

These examples, from real application forms, are typical:

- Think of a time when you were doing something as part of a team. Describe the situation and show how the team worked together. Explain the part you played.
- You will often have to explain things quickly and clearly. Describe a time when you explained something complicated to a group or individual and show how you helped them understand.
- Describe recent changes in your life that have meant you had to do something new or different. Say what you did and how you felt about those changes.
- In this job you have to be able to relate to the public in circumstances that are often stressful and difficult. Think of a time when you had to deal with someone who was upset, threatening or uncooperative. Describe the situation, the reasons for the problem, how you dealt with it and what the outcome was.

Example Questions and Answers

Q. “Why do you want to apply to x company”?

A. I have been interested in x company since being first introduced to the company via its sponsorship of the Christie Championship (Sporting competition between Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester Universities). At the ensuing presentation I was impressed with the openness and enthusiasm of the people and particularly their candid answers to difficult questions.

Subsequent research and experience with X company, from a University presentation to contacting Liverpool University alumni working for X company, has reinforced this original impression of openness, energy, enthusiasm and motivation and that overall it is a good place to work and leads to a very satisfying and challenging career.

Q. Describe a situation where your leadership was tested and explain what was eventually achieved.

A. I was given the responsibility of head waitress in Pizza Hut, where I had worked for approximately twelve months, and successfully held this position for over one year. This gave me a sense of achievement since it was my first experience of work and I was seventeen years old at the time. Being head waitress in a busy city centre restaurant meant I was required to adopt a supervisory role and it was necessary to juggle many different tasks at once. This involved giving instructions to members of staff but I also made the time to listen and this improved communication within the team. By communicating effectively I helped generate team morale and this motivated me and the other waitresses.

Through good organisation and Communication, I ensured efficient functioning of the restaurant. This work experience was important to me as it encouraged me to be decisive and I developed skills, such as management of people and problem solving.

Q. Think of a time when you were doing something as part of a team. Describe the situation and explain the part you played.

A. I currently work for a large retail company that adopts a strong team based culture. Recently, the store in which I work introduced a new clothing department and this meant the entire shop floor needed to be rearranged to create space. Our store has eight weeks in which to complete the “space swap”, during which time the store was to remain open to the public, and so I was required to work under pressure to a high level of accuracy, while maintaining good customer relations. As a member of the Availability team, I was responsible for updating the product database (adding new lines and deleting discontinued ones) and ensuring the stock balances remained accurate. Not only did I work closely with customers and colleagues at store level but I also interacted with colleagues based at the head office. To be an effective team member, I kept myself up to date on developments and I always completed tasks that were assigned to me on time. This experience of working within a team-based culture required me to use skills such as planning, organisation and co-ordination whilst remaining committed and results focused. The space swap was completed within time and with the minimum disruption to customers.

Q. What is your greatest achievement and why?

A. I am an active member of the Bangladeshi Women’s associations and last year I was elected Chairperson of a committee who undertook the challenge of organising and implementing, and overseeing the annual charity ball. As a leader of a committee of about eight people, each with different ideas and agendas, I found that good communication between each member of the group and working as a team was imperative, With the ball being the focal point of the Bangladeshi Women’s Association calendar this was an event that took months of organisation from choosing the venue to raising sponsorship, of which we managed £2,500. As chair of the committee I had to lead the team and make each person feel as though they had an important role to play. There were some conflicts within the group but as chair it was my responsibility to make sure that, taking into account other people’s ideas and advice, any disagreements were sorted out. This was a project that was close to my heart and it was a success. As a team we overcame problems, both logistical and financial, and raised over £3,000 for charity as well as providing a fantastic evening.

Q. Please tell us what you perceive to be your most challenging/fulfilling work experience.

A. As the front of house receptionist and switchboard operator I was sometimes faced with irate customers both face to face and on the phone. As the first port of call my responsibility was to ensure that they felt understood and that they were being taken seriously. I enjoyed this sometimes challenging aspect of my work as it allowed me to demonstrate my communication and interpersonal skills. I enjoyed feeling as though I could help diffuse a situation through listening to customer needs. In one job, as I proved my abilities, I was given the responsibility of marketing assistant where I had to ensure mail shots were sent out correctly, contact with customers was followed up and I wrote templates for any future correspondence. It gave me a sense of satisfaction to know that my role has been expanded due to my hard work and competence even though I was only a temporary member of staff. I was asked to work for them again.

Q. Tell us about a time when, despite setbacks, you persevered in order to achieve a goal.

A. During a Business Game I attended at the Careers & Employability Service an exercise was set in which I became a dot.com entrepreneur. As the finance department it was necessary to calculate sales figures and budget projections to deliver a presentation to a set time. The first setback was in not having sufficient data to calculate the figures. This problem was simply rectified by communicating with other departments to find the necessary information. Setbacks were also invented, such as law suits being launched, to distract us from the task. So as not to waste time, tasks were prioritised and work was delegated to ensure resources were utilised efficiently and repetition of work did not occur. Perseverance resulted in a successful presentation.

Application Forms Final Checklist

Before sending your form, ensure you've done the following:

- Read the job advertisement in-depth and made sure that you're clear about what skills are needed
- Researched both the job and the company
- Photocopied the form so that you can practise filling it in
- Followed any guidelines given on the form
- Confirmed who your referees are
- Filled in every section - even if it means putting 'not applicable'
- Checked and double-checked for spelling mistakes and errors
- Clearly communicated your skills, qualities and experience
- Made yourself sound positive and enthusiastic
- Been honest - can you back up your claims in an interview?
- Taken a copy of the form to refer to before an interview
- Returned the form before the closing date

