

# Completing job application forms

Recruiters will decide if you have the necessary abilities to perform well in a job by assessing your skills and competencies.

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## Preparation and research

Preparation and research are the gateways to an impressive job application. Find out as much as you can about the job you are applying for and the kind of person likely to fit it best. Sometimes the employer will provide you with this information in the form of a person specification. Other times you may have to research similar jobs and employers. Once you know what they are looking for review all of your experience from university, previous employment, interests and volunteering. Identify the strongest examples for the key skills and experience the job requires.

## Advice for completing application forms

- > Read the form through carefully and note any specific instructions. Recruiters have often put a lot of time and effort into designing their application process and it will look bad if you don't follow their directions.
- > Draft answers in rough first. If the application form is online, it can be useful to write your answers in a Word document first and then paste them in to the form. This way you don't have to worry about the web page timing out and not saving your work.
- > 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 a particular question. What do they want to know?
- > If a question is not applicable, say so. Don't leave empty boxes.
- > Use positive and specific words to describe your activities and interests, rather than vague terms and clichés. See suggestions below.
- > Check for spelling mistakes and grammatical errors.
- > Avoid beginning too many sentences with 'I'.
- > Use different examples for different questions.
- > Stick to word limits.
- > Ideally give yourself enough time. Don't wait until the deadline, it's easy to make mistakes under pressure.
- > Keep a copy of the form so that you can remember what you wrote. Also keep a copy of the job details (job description and person specification) as these are often no longer available online after the closing date. These will be very useful if you are invited to interview.

## Stand out from the crowd

Recruiters often read hundreds of applications for a job so you need to stand out through:

- > Clearly and efficiently articulating your skills and experience.
- > An engaging writing style.
- > Very relevant experience.

## Answering questions

Many questions on job application forms are competency-based questions.

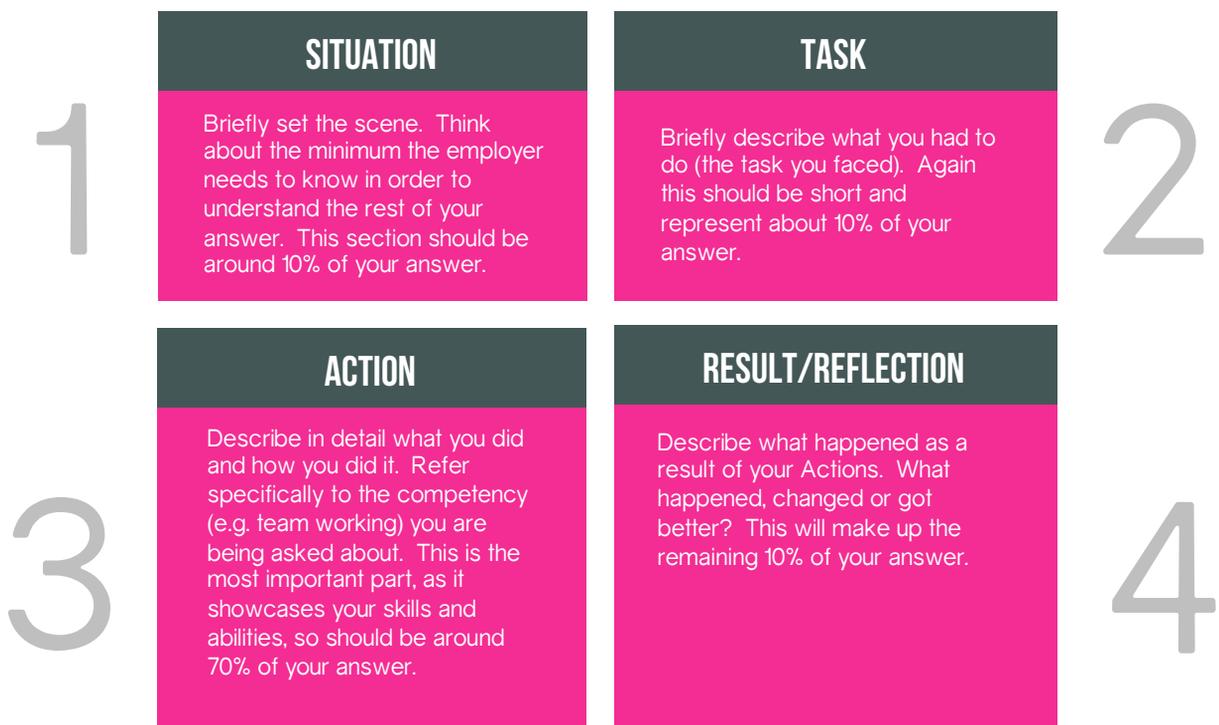
'Competency' here is a skill or attribute that the organisation wishes its employees to have. You need to answer this type of question by referring to a specific example from your past. This is also a very common type of question in interviews.

An example of a competency-based question is:

'Give an example where you have worked with a team to achieve a specific outcome'.

## The STAR approach

A useful way to structure your answers is to use the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) method. It guides you step-by-step, helping you give well-structured answers that effectively communicate your abilities.



## Which example should I use for competency-based questions?

As a general rule, more recent examples are usually more interesting to employers.

Examples from settings closely related to the role you are applying for (i.e. from previous office work if you are applying for an office job) are desirable, but not essential. Examples from seemingly unrelated settings can still prove competencies very effectively. For example, the competency 'working under pressure' could be proven through a range of examples such as handling a heavy workload at university, dealing with a busy period in your part-time job or managing a busy event for a society you are a member of.

It is acceptable to use the same example more than once, but make sure you focus on different perspectives. For example, you might talk about a presentation you made at university from the perspective of how you planned it, or your effective communication to a group, or your use of technology and visual aids. Beware though, as using the same example too often can give the recruiter the impression of a lack of experience.

## Stuck for words? Here are some ideas

### STRONG VERBS

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.

## Personal Statements

Some application forms ask for a personal or supporting statement. Sometimes they will specify the type of information they want but if there are no clear directions, include:

- > Why you would like to work in that particular role in that organisation.
- > Evidence that you have the skills, knowledge and experience required for the role (as detailed in the person specification or through your research).
- > See the information sheet on 'Covering letters and supporting statements' for more information.

## Example answer using the STAR method

	GOOD EXAMPLE	BAD EXAMPLE
<b>SITUATION</b>	<p>“While working as a holiday rep at JKN Holidays, a group of non-English speakers arrived.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Describes a specific example of a specific occasion.</li><li>✓ Keeps the description short and tells us only what we need to know.</li></ul>	<p>“During my summer holidays I needed to earn extra money to fund my studies. I took a role at JKN Holidays. The company runs a leading seaside resort with a range of activities on offer, such as water-skiing and snorkelling. It was recently awarded Best UK Resort in the South by a prestigious national newspaper.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✗ Provides information that is irrelevant as it doesn't help explain the situation.</li></ul>
<b>TASK</b>	<p>“I had to communicate to all visitors the sign-in procedure and room allocation process.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Links the competency being asked about (communication) to the Task faced.</li><li>✓ Description is brief.</li></ul>	<p>“We regularly had groups of people from across the world visiting us, that we needed to deal with.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✗ Uses ‘We’ rather than ‘I’. Recruiters are interested in <b>your</b> skills.</li><li>✗ A generalised statement, not referring to a specific occasion.</li></ul>
<b>ACTION</b>	<p>“I found the tour leader and established that she could speak a little English. She agreed to translate. I stood on a box so that the whole group could see me. I smiled and made eye contact with the group. I kept my language very simple and gave regular pauses for the tour guide to translate. I checked often that the tour guide had understood what I was saying. I used props to aid understanding. For example, I indicated where visitors should sign the forms by holding up the form and pointing. I also showed visitors how the locker key system worked through a practical demonstration.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Writes in a punchy, succinct manner.</li><li>✓ Provides fine detail of what they did and how they did it.</li><li>✓ Sticks to the specific example and makes no generalisations.</li><li>✓ Links their actions to the competency being asked about (communication).</li></ul>	<p>“When this happened I would always do my best to communicate clearly with them. Having worked with people from around the world on a regular basis I was used to the challenges that sometimes arose. It is important to speak slowly and clearly in such situations.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✗ Makes generalised statements. Doesn't explain what they did or how they did it.</li></ul>
<b>RESULT</b>	<p>“All visitors successfully completed the sign-in procedure and were allocated rooms within our normal sign-in target time.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Describes a positive result which shows the Task was successfully completed.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✗ Many applicants leave out this section, missing the opportunity to end on a positive note and demonstrate to the employer that they can deliver good results.</li></ul>