



Your Guide to Making Applications

DISTINGUISH
YOURSELF

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For further information check our website
careerweb.leeds.ac.uk

What do you need to know?

Completing an application form is the most common way of applying for a graduate job or further study. Most employers and learning providers will have devised an application form that enables them to quickly and easily distinguish which candidates would be capable of doing the job/course and are therefore worth taking on to the next stage of the application process. This leaflet will help you understand what you may encounter in application forms and how to complete them.

Why do employers use application forms?

Employers use application forms as a method for helping them select the best candidates for their position. They use information on the application to find out if you have:

- **The ability to do the job.** They want to know if you have the right skills, qualifications and experience.
- **The desire to do the job.** They want to know if you are motivated and enthusiastic about the type of work.
- **A desire to work for their organisation.** They want to know that you understand what they do and how you would fit in with their ethos and values.

Employers also use applications to screen or filter out unsuitable applicants. This is particularly likely with online applications. They can use methods to exclude applicants without the right qualifications or those who haven't mentioned the skills they are looking for in the application.

Before you start

Preparation is the key to making good applications; many people fall at this first hurdle because they haven't taken enough time to think about how they will complete the application or done enough research. These are some of the things you should do to prepare before writing your application:

Research the job or course

If it is a job, you need to read through any job description and person specification. The job description will explain the duties that you will perform as part of the job. If there isn't a person specification you need to use this information to make a list of the skills, knowledge, qualifications and qualities that you think would be needed to carry out these duties. If there is also a person specification then you should use the job description to help you understand the context in which you will use the skills they are seeking so that you can tailor your examples to ones that most relate to the job activities. A person specification tells you exactly what skills, knowledge, qualifications, qualities and experience the employer is looking for. If you do not demonstrate that you have every essential aspect they are looking for, it is unlikely that you will progress to the next application stage.

If it is a course you are applying for, you need to find out what you will be studying, how you will study and what knowledge, skills and qualifications the course provider is looking for.

There are lots of methods for doing this research and you shouldn't just limit yourself to reading what the company or learning provider gives you. For advice on where to research, call into the Careers Centre.

Think about what you have to offer

Once you have found out everything about the job or course that you are applying for it is time to think about what skills and qualities you have which will make you a stand-out candidate. Make a list of what they are looking for and then write examples of the activities that you have done as part of your degree, previous or current work and extra-curricular activities that would demonstrate that you could do the job or be a success on your chosen course.

It is important that you think of examples which relate your skills and qualities most appropriately to the job or course to help distinguish you from other candidates.

Research the employer or learning provider

If it is a job that you are applying for, knowledge of the company is often referred to as commercial awareness. It is vital that you:

- Know what the company does and how they operate
- Know who their competitors are
- Understand the industry sector they work in
- Understand their ethos and working practices
- Demonstrate how you would fit in

If you are applying for further study, particularly postgraduate study, then you need to explain why you have chosen the institution and the department. They would expect you to:

- Have knowledge of the institutions reputation for your chosen course
- Know what expertise they have
- Know what research they have done and its conclusions

Once you have done all this preparation it is time to make a start on your application. Check out the STAR guide for writing examples and a checklist for completing applications. The next few pages will explain some of the common things that you might encounter on application forms and how to complete them.

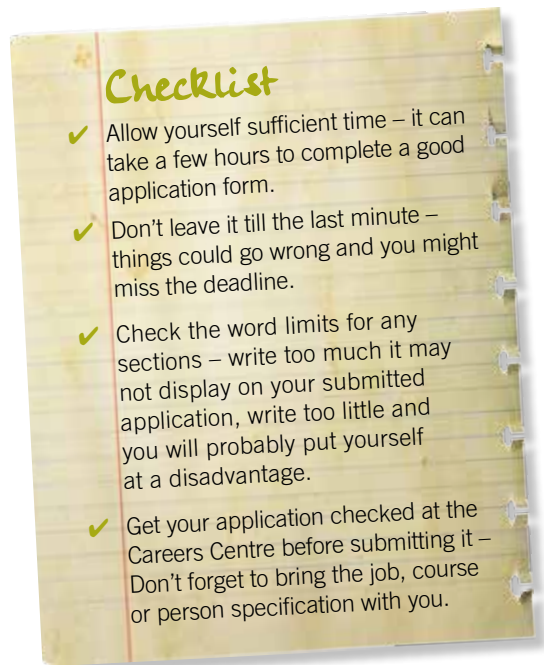
STAR guide to writing examples

Situation: Describe the situation such as a project you completed as part of your course.

Task: Describe a particular task that you had to complete as part of that project.

Action: Explain what action you took to complete the task. This should include why you took this action and any challenges you overcame.

Result: Explain the result of action you took and how your actions affected the result.



COMPLETING YOUR EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

Your employment history should be in reverse chronological order starting with your current or most recent job

Employment History		
Dates of employment	Employer	Job title and Duties
You should start with your most recent or current employment. Give the date as Month and Year i.e. June 2012	Add the name and address of your employer	<p>Make sure your job title is meaningful, sometimes you may not have had an official job title in which case you should use one that reflects what you did</p> <p>When explaining the duties of your job refer back to the person specification or description of what you are applying for. Then describe your duties in a way that helps you demonstrate what they are looking for. For example if the person specification asks for excellent IT skills particularly in using Microsoft Office, you could write:</p> <p>“Whilst working in a busy office environment I prepared reports and entered data using Microsoft Office Word and Excel”</p> <p>It is also important to mention the skills you used to carry out your duties so that you can show a potential employer or course provider that you have the skills they are looking for. For example:</p> <p>“I used my excellent organisational skills to draw up the staffing rota for the restaurant ensuring that there was always cover for absence or particularly busy periods”</p> <p>Unlike a CV it is not always possible to split your employment history into jobs that are more and less relevant to the position. You can still highlight prominent jobs you have done by including more relevant information in this section than you would for a job that isn't relevant.</p>

COMPLETING THE INTERESTS, ACHIEVEMENTS AND POSITIONS OF RESPONSIBILITIES SECTION

Interests, Achievements and Positions of responsibility
<p>Try to use examples here that demonstrate particular skills in relation to the job and do not be afraid to mention the skills in what you write. The most important thing in this section is that you choose things that are important to you and demonstrate something meaningful to a potential employer or course provider.</p> <p>For example: “Before starting my degree in History, I travelled throughout East Asia. I learned a lot about different cultures and being respectful of other customs. More importantly the experience helped to improve my resilience and independent organisational skills, which have enabled me to approach my studies with maturity and enthusiasm.”</p> <p>This section should also mention any societies that you are actively involved with or if you have had work published, this is particularly important for applications for further study such as PhDs.</p>

ANSWERING KEY QUESTIONS

Answering questions about the job

These are usually questions about the company, the type of work or the industry sector. Example questions include:

- **Why do you want to work for Company X?**
- **What inspires you about working in Marketing?**
- **What are the major challenges facing the family law sector over the next 5 years?**

Employers use these types of questions to measure a person's motivation and understanding of the job role. The important thing is to be prepared, do your research and be honest. Try to make sure that you relate the answer to yourself; too many people talk about the company or the opportunity without explaining why they are applying.

Try to be unique, there is a good chance the employer will read a lot of very similar answers, they'll take more notice of an answer that stands out for the right reason.

These questions often have a word limit and this is usually to test your communication skills. The best communicators can cover all the relevant points without using too many unnecessary words or phrases.

Answering questions about your skills and competencies

These are usually questions that prompt you for a particular example. Questions might include:

Tell us about a time when you have worked as a member of a team, what did you contribute, what challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?

Most importantly you need to read the whole question and make sure that you think of an example that explains all of the things they are looking for. Employers are looking for particular skills in their selection criteria and these questions will help them measure your experiences against them. In the question above they are clearly looking for teamwork skills but the mention of challenges means they are probably also looking for skills such as: conflict resolution, communication, problem solving and negotiation. Therefore it is important that any teamwork example is one that demonstrated how you overcame challenges.

When answering questions of this nature, it is important to use the STAR approach as mentioned earlier in the leaflet.

Some employers include questions that are more challenging and less specific but are still trying to gauge your level of certain skills. An example might be:

At Company Y we strive to deliver work that sets us apart from our competitors. Please describe how you set yourself apart from your peers.

Again it is important to use a STAR based example of something you have achieved which sets you apart. This is also a good opportunity for you to also mention skills that you might have used.

COMPLETING PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Personal statement for a job application

This is normally a large and unrestricted box where you are expected to outline your reasons for applying for the job and why they should appoint you.

This type of application form is normally used when the employer has included a person specification. It is important to structure this section effectively so that the employer can see how you meet every aspect of the person specification. To write the most effective personal statement, you should always keep the job description in mind and show how your skills can be linked to the role that you are applying for.

It is vital to cover all the essential criteria. If there are any aspects of the desirable criteria that you do not meet it is advisable to address it. You can do this by mentioning relevant transferable skills or by showing how you might gain the knowledge, skill or experience once you are doing the job.

Whilst these boxes are not necessarily restricted in terms of word counts, it is important to be succinct, one A4 page is usually a good indication of the amount of text you should aim for.

Personal statement for a postgraduate course

There are two main considerations when writing a personal statement for a postgraduate course, the content and the structure.

The content should include:

- **Why the subject interests you.** This should include information on particular areas of the course that appeal to you and why. Try to link the reasons to your current course, any relevant work or extra-curricular activities and any reading of the subject you do in addition to your studies.
- **What makes you a good candidate?** You should include key skills that will help you learn independently such as research, communication and time-management. You should also list any relevant technical skills and your current degree grade.
- **You can also explain what you hope to gain from the course.** This could include the chance to work on particular research programmes, with certain staff or use particular equipment but should also include information of where you expect the course to lead.

The structure is also important as you will no doubt be producing a substantial amount of high quality written work as part of the course. Admissions tutors will expect to see that you have allocated sufficient space to each point you are trying to get across and that your sections flow into each other. Again be succinct, where there isn't a word count try to stick to around one side of A4.

You should also make sure you write your statement starting with the most important aspects first, try to write in a way that grabs the reader's attention and end on a positive note.

FAQs

Q. How far back can I go when using examples?

A. There are no set rules on how recent your examples should be but generally anything over 5 years will probably be considered out of date. It is important to try and use the most up to date examples you can think of otherwise employers and learning providers will think you have not achieved anything notable recently. All too often students apply for graduate schemes but do not use examples from their degree studies. It is vital that you demonstrate to these type of employers how your degree studies have equipped you with the skills and qualities they are seeking.

Q. Can I use the same example more than once?

A. You can use an example more than once but, employers do like to see that you have developed skills and qualities from a range of experiences. Try to think of the skills your experience best demonstrates and use a different example for other skills. You should look to use a range of experiences including your studies, employment, work experience and extra-curricular activities.

Q. I was told some employers use software to look for key words. What are the best ones to use?

A. There could be lots of key words that employers are looking for and different employers might look for different words. The most important thing is to use good examples that demonstrate a wide range of skills but, positive and proactive words are particularly important. Some examples could include: Succeed, Achieved, Coordinated, Negotiated, Organised, Promoted, Delivered, Managed, Initiated, Evaluated, and Established. Of course these words must be used in a positive context, which is relevant to both the job role and the examples you are using.

Q. How do I deal with negative things in my application?

A. Sometimes life does not go according to plan and you may have found that this has affected things like your grades. It is important not to dwell on things that you think do not reflect positively on you. However if it cannot be avoided try put a positive spin on it. Difficult times and adversity can demonstrate good resilience and problem solving skills. Failure can help you to appreciate the best route to success and so enhance your evaluation and analysis skills.

Q. What should I put in the additional information box on the application form?

A. If you have not yet explained your reasons for applying for the job or course or answered any skills questions this is probably the place to put that information. See the section on completing personal statements for more information. If you have answered questions about the job role or course this is an opportunity for you to list any other achievements or experiences that you are proud of or are relevant to the role for which you are applying. In addition to this, you can also use this section to give details of any negative aspects of your application that you feel need further explanation.

Q. Is there anything else I should include in a personal statement for further study if the course leads to a specific qualification for a job role?

A. Some postgraduate courses such as the PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate of Education) lead to potential professional employment. It is important with these courses that you also include a section in your personal statement that explains why you want to go into that particular career area and what skills qualities and experience you could bring to the career.

Q. Should I disclose information about a disability or health issue?

A. Under the Equalities Act (2010) it is illegal for an organisation or employer to discriminate against a person on the basis of disability, though there are some exceptions. Most application forms will include a confidential section for you to declare any disabilities so that appropriate adjustments can be made. You can make reference to any disabilities in your application, particularly if you are explaining how you overcame a challenge or showed resilience, but you should not feel inclined to explain it as a matter of course.

Q. How can I find out if there is a standard expectation in completing forms for a particular industry sector?

A. Some professional bodies and institutions produce guides to making applications for particular industry sectors and details can normally be found on their websites.

Any further questions can be answered by using our drop-in service at the Careers Centre 9am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Or if you are no longer living in Leeds or away on a placement you can use our e-guidance service at careerweb.leeds.ac.uk

Top Tips for Success

1. Set enough time aside to research the job or course and complete the application. A rushed application rarely makes it pass the first stage.
2. ALWAYS check your spelling and grammar.
3. Use the Careers Centre drop-in to get your application form checked.
4. Use the STAR method to explain how you have developed and used key skills and qualities.
5. Read all the information carefully, including the person specification and job description, before starting your application.
6. Pay attention to closing dates. Apply early and don't leave it to the last minute.
7. Where possible save an online application and recheck it the next day before sending it off.
8. Check out our website careerweb.leeds.ac.uk for more helpful advice.

Further information

For further information visit the Careers Centre website
careerweb.leeds.ac.uk



The University of Leeds Careers Centre

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University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT

(we're around the corner
from the Students' Union)

Opening hours: 9.00am – 5.00pm
Monday to Friday

T: 0113 343 5295

W: careerweb.leeds.ac.uk



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