



Learning pack

Application form advice

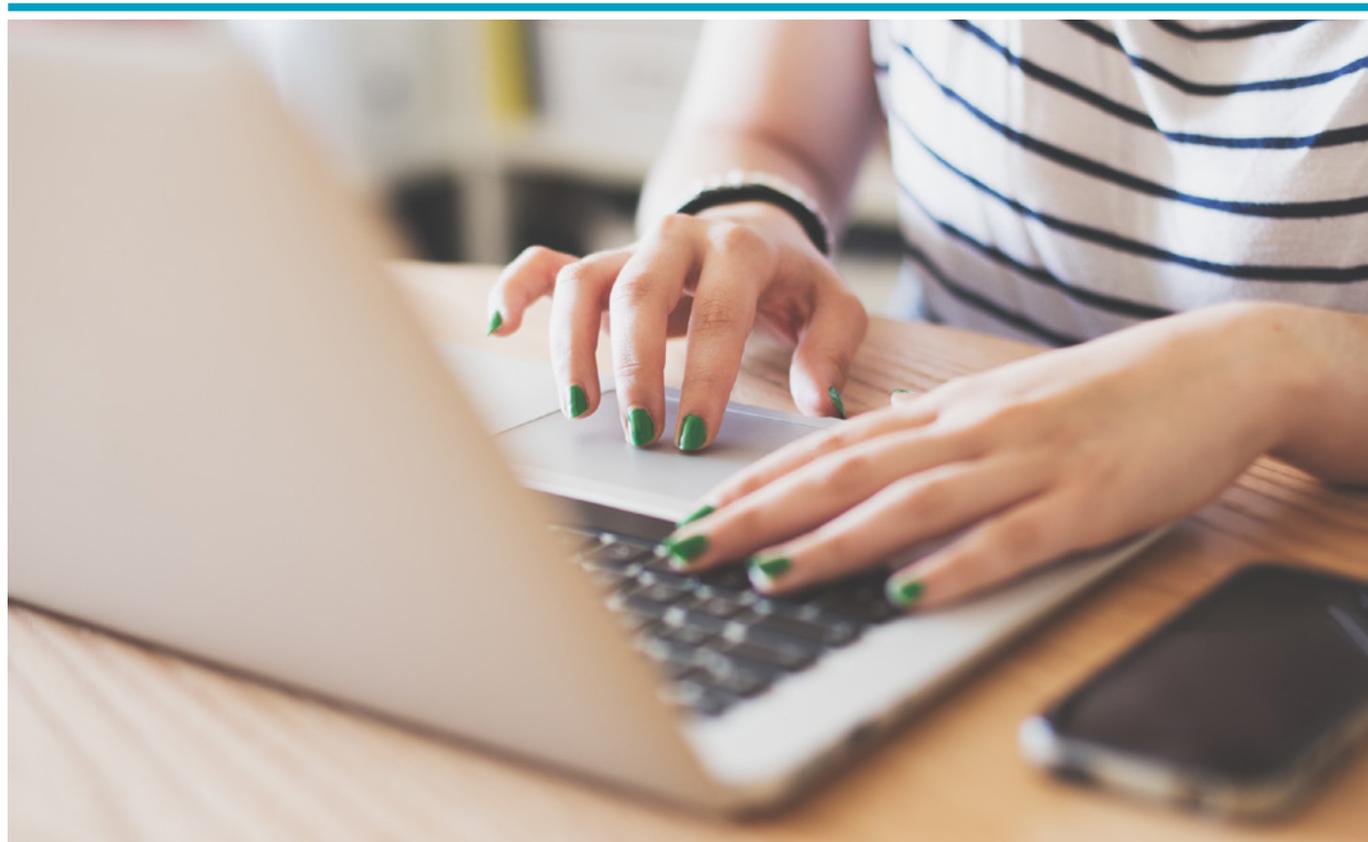
This careers learning pack looks at completing application forms as effectively as possible. A well written application form is one of the first steps to gaining an interview.

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 your Careers Service 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 the skills and qualities required for the role.
- 3** Match your skills and qualities to the role.
- 4** Research the job and employer to gain insights.
- 5** Ensure you have recorded all your evidence 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.

What do employers look for?

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

In order to make your application form effective, you first need to find out which attributes are the most important ones for your target employer. A number of sources will give you this information (i.e. the job advert, job description, person specification and/or the company's website).

Sometimes an employer could use an expression which relates to several attributes on the list. An example would be "an enthusiastic and confident personality". You need to define the meaning of such a term. Most employers would mean a "can do" approach involving a number of attributes in the list of 25 such as self-motivation, drive/energy and initiative.

Occasionally, an employer will be seeking an attribute not on the list. No list is absolutely definitive.

In your application form, how do you demonstrate that you have the attributes you know the employer is looking for? You provide evidence from your life experience. Often the question will allow you to select from any area of life (e.g. your degree course, holiday work, voluntary work, career history or other professional training).

Key attribute table

Here are the 25 attributes which employers of graduates typically look for in candidates:

1	Willingness to learn	2	Commitment	3	Dependability	4	Self-motivation	5	Teamwork
6	Communication skills (oral)	7	Co-operation	8	Communication skills (written)	9	Drive/energy	10	Creative thinking
11	Self-management	12	Desire to achieve	13	Problem-solving	14	Analytical ability	15	Flexibility
16	Initiative	17	Ability to summarise key issues	18	Logical argument	19	Adaptability (intellectual)	20	Numeracy
21	Adaptability (organisational)	22	Commercial awareness	23	Time management	24	Self-confidence	25	Ability to influence others

Key preparation

Research the organisation, role and industry

- Are you the right person for this company and are they 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?
- 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

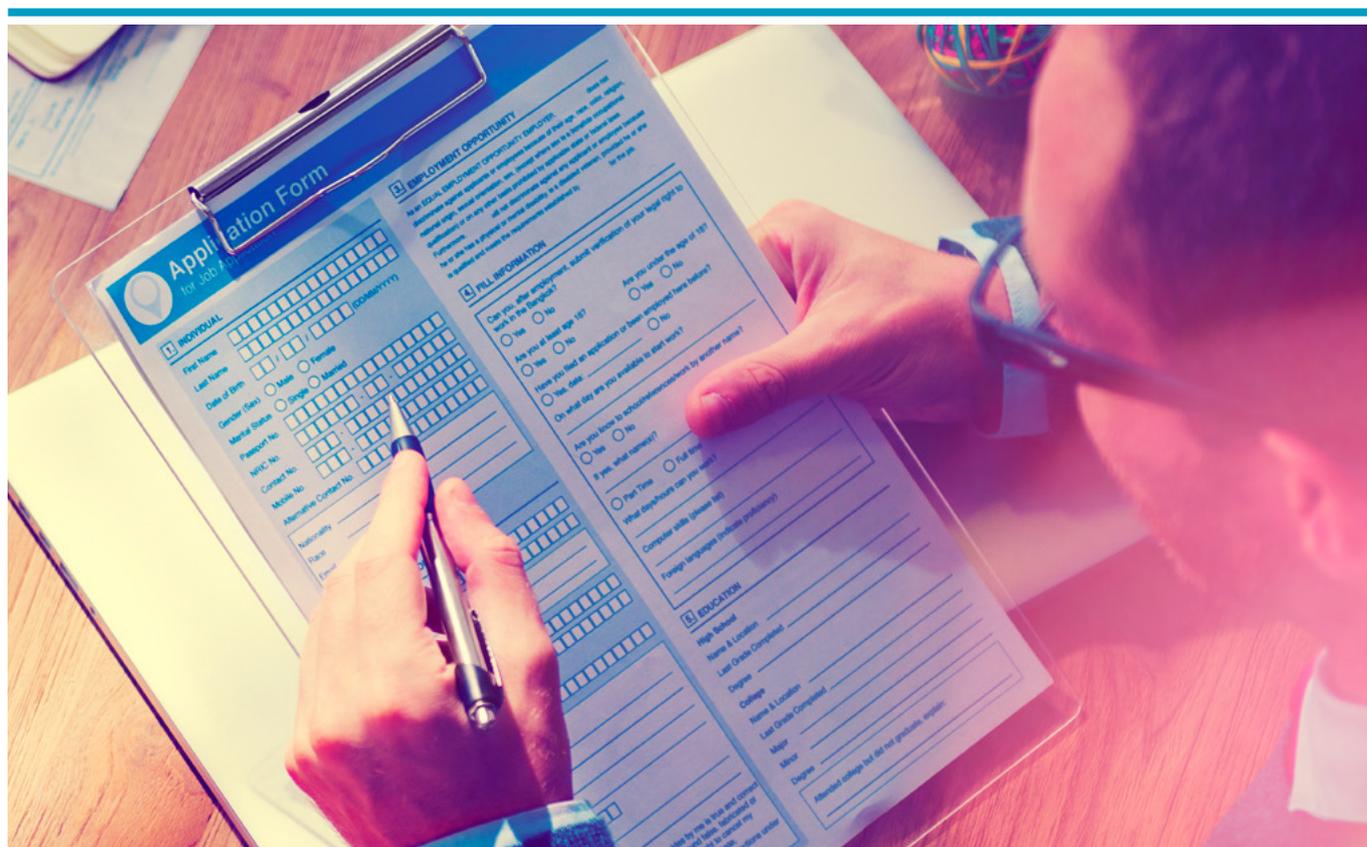
- Find out the application form submission deadline, and work backwards from there.
- Consider how long it will take to complete the form and when the closing date is.
- Can you complete sections one at a time? Or must it all be completed at once?
- Will you have to undertake psychometric tests or assessments?

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 (up to key stage three) 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 (as numbered in the key attribute table shown on page four).

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



Assessing your suitability

Once you've established which attributes are being sought (from the job advert or similar employer information) you should then identify where you meet these criteria. You can assess your suitability against each employer requirement by listing your best evidence against it. This approach is mapped out in the table below which relates to the Trainee Financial Analyst advert.

Fill in the table, first by transferring information from the advert where you identified the skills being sought. Is there a top five set of attributes which the employer is seeking? Are there any other essential or desirable criteria? Consider whether you meet these criteria: tick each one if you believe you meet it, then make a brief note of the best evidence you could use to support this:

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 very important to recognise the skills and attributes being sought by employers. You can gain the most clues from the job description and person specification. With some practice, it is possible to quickly identify the skills that many different questions are targeting.

When you understand which skills are targeted, you must then ensure that you talk about those skills and how you developed them. If you don't do this, your answer will be off-target, and perhaps irrelevant. Also these questions are about you - your past or present behaviour. You are not being asked to explain what something means. For instance, if you are asked about when you demonstrated leadership, you must show this from how you behaved in a situation and the strategies you followed. You are not being asked to say what you think good leadership is. You need therefore to give examples from your life experience.

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 bare bones of the challenge.

Task - Describe your objectives in handling the situation, what were you trying to achieve?

Action - What was the key thing you did to turn the situation around? Link to the competency areas.

Result - Describe the results you achieved, be specific, use numbers and percentages and/or feedback.

These four sections should not be of equal size or focus in your answers. 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?



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 explicit.

Self-management, problem-solving, analytical ability

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

Other useful resources

www.prospects.ac.uk

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

www.targetjobs.co.uk

General advice section is also worth a read.

Looking good, online and on paper

The basic rules

Who will be reading your application form? It will be someone who doesn't know you but is deciding whether they want to employ you! The recruiter has read many, many forms so yours needs to stand out for being well presented, detailed and concise. Avoiding typing errors and grammatical mistakes is crucial. Try to avoid careless cut and pastes from other documents. Many application forms get rejected because the applicant cut and pasted from another form and forgot to change the employer's name and the title of the role they were applying for.

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 & 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 & 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 Service 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 download the form. When you print it out, you can work on your draft copy. You will also often be able to register and create a password so you can save what you write and return to your online draft later. It is important to take your time and to be thorough.

Read and understand

It is important to read through all of the questions before you start answering any of them. Work out from each question the skills it is asking you to demonstrate. These will often be in our list of top 25 but sometimes will be in addition to those. You also need to read through the whole sequence of questions to understand the overall context and to decide which evidence to use for different questions. If you are not able to scroll down to view questions in advance, save or download into a Word document.

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. 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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