Do's and Don'ts of Writing Successful Application Forms…

**DO:**

1. **Use the job spec as your guide.** It’s there for a reason, and tells you exactly what skills and experience the employer is looking for. Look at both the essential and the desirable criteria and try to provide evidence for everything the employer wants. You can draw upon experience from university, part-time or voluntary work and all of your extra curricular activities.

2. **Follow all instructions carefully.** Read the form carefully from start to finish and follow any specific instructions including word counts, which you must never go over. Writing succinctly is a skill – try deleting any unnecessary words or phrases which don’t add anything extra.

3. **Pay close attention to detail.** This is expected by ALL employers, so check the final form for ‘typos’, misspellings and poor grammar. These are a BIG turnoff which can result in all your hard work being destined for the bin!

4. **Research the company thoroughly.** You need to understand the organisation, what they do and the qualifications, experience and personal skills they want. Without this research it’s impossible to explain how you can contribute, and you will also sound more motivated.

5. **Research the role & sector thoroughly.** Unless you have a clear idea of both you can’t tailor your application. Also, why would you apply for something you know very little about?

6. **Sound motivated & enthusiastic.** You need to be asking yourself why THIS company and THIS role and have some convincing arguments. Employers want to employ someone who wants to work for them! Obvious really.

7. **Tailor your skills to the role.** You may not necessarily have relevant work experience but you are likely to have lots of relevant transferable skills. See ‘Transferable Skills Hot Tips Sheet’.

8. **Keep a copy.** When it comes to the interview stage, it is immeasurably useful to remember what you have told the employer!

9. **Follow the CAR (or STAR) method.** See over for providing evidence for competency questions using these techniques.

10. **Ask someone to read over your form.** If English isn’t your first language ask an English friend to look at your form for grammatical and spelling errors. It’s good to do this anyway as you may not pick up on mistakes after you have looked at it for the 50th time! We don’t check for typos in the Careers Service but we do provide guidance on structure & content during a same day appointment.

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**Other Hot Tips you may find useful:**

- CVs; Covering Letters; STAR (describing your skills)

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**Hot Tips Series**

www.brookes.ac.uk/careers

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**Careers**
DON’T:

1. Leave whole sections empty. Although very occasionally there may be a section that does not apply to you. Write ‘Not Applicable’ as it shows that you have read the form properly. If you are not sure about any section check with a Careers Consultant.

2. Don’t do the application in one sitting. Avoid application fatigue as you will start to get sloppy and make mistakes. It’s better to be fresh each time you tackle it as they can be difficult and will require your full attention.

3. Copy and paste large sections from other application forms. You might want to copy some small sections but they must be tailored, and remember every employer has slightly different requirements, which will be in a very different context. It is not unusual for students to leave in a previous employer’s name – DISASTER!

4. Say ‘See my CV’. Always follow the instructions exactly, and never ever take this short cut. If they wanted a CV they would have asked for one in the first place!

5. Be too wordy. It’s a fine art to get the balance of providing enough detail without being too verbose. You need to give employers a flavour of your experience without overloading the text with lots of unnecessary words and phrases. Remember employers may be reading through 100s!

Competency-based questions

Firstly - what are they? Usually questions beginning with ‘Describe a time when you …’ or ‘Give an example of …’ and asking for examples of specific skills such as teamwork, leadership, communication, etc. So, ‘describe a time when you have had to resolve a difficult problem’ or ‘give an example of when you have had to use leadership skills’.

How to demonstrate your skills using CAR

CONTEXT: Briefly explain the context of your example so the scenario makes sense to the employer.

ACTION: What specific actions did you take? Use the word ‘I’ where possible.

RESULT: What was the final result of your actions?

An example of good communication skills...

Context ‘I work as a Student Ambassador at Oxford Brookes University guiding groups of prospective students, and I was asked to guide a very rowdy group of sixth formers around campus.’

Action ‘I worked hard to develop a rapport with the students by being firm, but friendly. When a boy was rude I addressed this immediately and used humour to win respect from the rest of the group.’

Result ‘I had a captive audience and everyone listened. The teacher thanked me, apologised for their behaviour & said I managed the situation & group extremely well.’

NB

STAR (Situation Task Action Result) is another useful acronym to describe your skills. For more detailed information on using STAR see our Hot Tips: STAR – improve the way you describe your skills.