



Application Forms/Personal Statements – top tips to get you shortlisted

This Hot Tips briefing gives advice on how best to complete application forms and personal statements for job applications (**not** personal statements for postgraduate study, for which there is a separate Hot Tips). To construct successful applications you will normally need to consider both sections 1 and 2 below.

Section 1: General advice on how to complete a job application form successfully - the Do's and Don'ts.

DO:

1. **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. If it's an on-line application try to download and save it first so you can review all sections, and understand what is being asked of you, before completing it.
2. **Use the “job spec” (person specification/selection criteria), as your guide, where available.** The “job spec” is there for a reason, and tells you exactly what skills, experience and attitude the employer is looking for in their “ideal” applicant. Look at both the essential and the desirable criteria, where these are stated, and try to provide evidence for everything the employer wants. It is particularly important to demonstrate evidence of meeting any ‘essential criteria’. You can draw widely upon experience from university, part-time or voluntary work and all of your extra-curricular activities/hobbies.
3. **Pay close attention to detail** as this is expected by ALL employers, so check your final draft for ‘typos’, misspellings and poor grammar. These are a BIG turn off which can result in all your hard work being destined for the bin! Be aware that automated Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) which scan applications for key words and formatting may rapidly reject poorly completed forms.
4. **Research the company thoroughly. You need to understand the organisation, what they do,** as well as the qualifications, experience and personal qualities they want. Without this background research it's impossible to explain how you can contribute, and your motivation.
5. **Research the role & sector thoroughly.** Unless you have a clear idea of both you can't tailor your application effectively. Also, ask yourself why would you bother applying for something you know very little about?
6. **Sound motivated & enthusiastic.** You need to be asking yourself: why THIS company and THIS role and offer some convincing arguments. Employers want to employ someone who wants to work for them! Obvious, really! Check out section 2 below – **Positive language for personal statements & sentence starters.**
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 ‘Skills and Attributes – what are employers looking for’ Hot Tips sheet’.
8. **Keep a copy of the completed application.** When it comes to the interview stage, it is useful to remember what you have told the employer!
9. **Follow the CAR E (or STAR E) method.** See below for how to provide evidence for competency based questions using these simple but effective techniques to structure your answers.

DON'T:

1. **Leave whole sections empty.** The recruiter wants information in a structured way and expects all sections to be completed. If you are not sure about the content of any section check with a Careers Consultant. Do not write see CV! – see below.

DON'T:

2. **Complete the application form 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 checked first and tailored. Remember every employer has slightly different requirements, which may be in a very different context. Sadly, 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, for you may come across as lacking motivation, or even lazy! If they wanted a CV they would have asked you for one in the first place!
5. **Use too many words... or too few.** It's a fine art to get the balance of providing enough detail without being too verbose. You need to give employers a focused, evidence based, account of your relevant experience without overloading the form with lots of unnecessary words and phrases. Remember, employers may be reading 100s of applications! So, comply with any word limits. As a rule, you should aim to be near at least 90% of any maximum word limit, or you may not have provided enough evidence.

Important note: application forms with a CV upload option: On occasion you may be given the option to upload your up-to-date CV as part of your application. Despite this, the recruiter will usually be **focussing mainly on the contents of your application form**, in particular any personal statement section, so do focus on this as your CV is only secondary supporting information in this instance.

Competency-based questions?

What are they? The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) define competencies as "... the behaviours (and technical attributes where appropriate) that individuals must have or acquire to perform effectively at work". Usually such questions begin with 'Describe a time when you ...' or 'Give an example of ...' **and** ask for examples of specific skills such as teamwork, leadership, communication, etc. Thus, '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 the CAR (E) technique

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?

EVALUATE Include if possible - what did you learn? What might you do differently next time? Afterwards, particularly if you were unsuccessful, review your answers, to see how you might improve your future applications.

EXAMPLE - using CAR to demonstrate 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 *'As a result, I then had a captive audience and everyone listened. The teacher thanked me, apologised for their behaviour & said I managed the situation & group extremely well.'*

Evaluation afterwards – *reflecting on this gave me confidence, as I realised that the teacher's objective feedback aligned with how I felt I had dealt with the group. Encouraging!*

STAR - E (Situation Task Action Result - Evaluate) 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.

Section 2: Completing the 'Personal Statement' section of a job application form

1. What is a job/employment personal statement?

Many application forms include a large blank space for you to “promote yourself” in terms of your suitability for the job. Instructions vary and it is important that you always follow them very carefully. However, a typical example of what you may be asked to provide is: *“In this space, please give your reasons for applying for this job and additional information showing how you meet the person specification, including relevant skills and experience.”*

Alternatively, employers may ask you to complete a set of specific questions, with word limits, as an alternative to providing a free text personal statement. These may include questions such as:

Tell us why you are interested in this scheme? (150 words)

Give an example of when you have contributed effectively to a team, what was your role? (200 words)

Explain how any work experience you have is relevant to this role, citing specific examples (200 words)

- 2. The personal statement/ responses to specific questions, is the critical part of your employment application** – what you write here is often the deciding factor in shortlisting you for interview. This is where you need to convince the employer that you have the right motivations, enough experience, the potential, and the skills required to be successful in the job. As personal statements usually occur as part of applications for advertised vacancies, you should have information about what the employer is looking for - usually in a person specification, but clues may also be found in the advert, job description or on enquiry to the employer. It is essential that you are explicit in providing concrete examples of evidence against the stated criteria for the job. Many employers, especially in the public sector, use a shortlisting grid to tick off, or score, each criterion and then compare candidates' scores. So, the more closely you match their requirements, the more chance you have of getting to interview.

3. Basic rules for application forms:

- Usually around one side of A4 in length (unless specified otherwise)
- Adhere to any stated word limits – this is a deliberate ploy by the employer to see if you can write succinctly and clearly
- Structure and paragraph your writing i.e. it should not be solid text, short paragraphs are best
- Sometimes sub-headings can be used (e.g. use section headings from the person specification to structure the personal statement following the given order of the specification) but as a general rule avoid bullets and write in full but concise sentences – not long paragraphs!

4. Preparing to write your personal statement:

Writing a good personal statement may take much longer than you think, especially if the list of essential and desirable criteria is long (not uncommon with employers such as the NHS). Employers are looking to see how seriously you take the job application, as this is a strong indication of your motivation.

- Make sure you fully understand the nature of the role by reading through all the particulars
- Conduct some employer research so you can demonstrate your interest in the organisation - this may include using websites or phoning for more information if invited, or even arranging an informal visit where offered.
- Identify and select your best pieces of evidence for each skill, experience or personal quality on the person specification. Employers are looking for concrete, recent and relevant examples – relevant work experience is always useful, but persuasive examples can also come from voluntary, extra-curricular, academic, gap year or sporting experience - as long as you can show their relevance to the job you are applying for.
- At this point, you need to be honest with yourself – do you meet the criteria sufficiently to make a credible application? If so, you're ready to start writing!

- 5. Writing out your personal statement:** unless there are any specific instructions about structuring your statement, or specific questions are asked, you will need to find the most efficient way of grouping your own particular examples into paragraphs. A useful structure is:

- **Opening Section** – Start with a strong opening paragraph to grab the reader's attention – often why you are interested in the job, with evidence of strong employer research. Are there particular elements of the job – its duties or clients that enthuse you or that you have done before and especially enjoyed?

- **Middle Section** – This is the main substance of your statement, where you outline your key relevant experience and present your evidence expressly against each of the essential and desirable criteria. Ensure you follow the order of the points on the specification when doing this!
- **End Section** – Finish by tying together the various issues / strengths you've raised and reiterate your interest and suitability for the job.

It's best to avoid structuring your content too much along the lines of a biographical narrative – "I first became interested in business when I was 14 and after my A levels decided to undertake a business degree". Too much scope for waffle! Address the key criteria in the order given in the specification.

6. Positive language for personal statements

Think of the large numbers of application forms a recruiter has to read. To stand out you need to write in a way that is engaging, positive and purposeful.

- Use good active language and try to describe your experience in terms of relevant, quantifiable achievements where possible (See Hot Tips: Action Words for help with this)
- Choose strong positive language – and never draw attention to perceived negative aspects of your application such as "Although I have no direct experience in..."
- Get the tone right – it's a 'personal' statement so it should convey your enthusiasm and personality without sounding too chatty; conversely, avoid an overly formal, wordy style full of 'Moreover's', 'Notwithstandings' and 'Furthermore's'....
- Avoid subjective, unsubstantiated claims "I feel I have excellent communication skills" "I believe I am hardworking and reliable" – back up your claims with concrete evidence
- Make your points clearly and succinctly – *tell them what you've got and where you got it* e.g. "I developed excellent communication skills in my role on the Service Desk at [company] through resolving, often complex, customer complaints ..."

7. Useful sentence starters

Try to vary your sentences so they don't all begin 'I have... I can... I am'. Here are some examples:

- "Whilst working as a [job title] at [company], I gained valuable experience in [activity relevant to the job]
- My [x,y,z] skills have been developed through [specific experience]
- In my role at ... I
- 'My ability to is demonstrated by my experience whilst working as [] where I was required to/regularly
- During my time at / as... I successfully [created / implemented / generated / designed ...ie. specific achievement], demonstrating my strength at []

8. Before sending your personal statement

- Proofread – get someone else to proofread the statement, particularly if English isn't your first language. You might ask a native speaker 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! Careers cannot provide a proofreading service (i.e. spelling and grammar) but we do provide professional guidance on structure and content to help you market and present yourself in the most effective way.
- Advice –Careers are able to act as the "recruiter" i.e. we will cross-reference your statement with the job details and provide you with an objective critique that might include improvements. We cannot proof read your statement for spelling or grammar errors though.
- Keep a copy of the application – you will need to remind yourself of what you have written if called for an interview.