Application Forms

The majority of large employers ask you to complete an application form of their own devising. These are sometimes paper-based but are more often available on-line. Whatever the format, however, the principles behind successful completion of these forms remain the same and, once you know the rules, they are much more straightforward than they first appear!

⮡ Before you start

Large employers are inundated with applications, so, before you put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, make sure that you can answer the following questions:

- What kind of work are you actually applying for?
- Why are you interested in this type of work?
- Why are you interested in this particular opportunity?
- Why are you interested in this particular organisation?
- Why are you suitable for this position?

The job market is highly competitive and the application process is about convincing an employer that you are an ideal candidate. If you can't answer the above questions for yourself, you are unlikely to convince an employer - especially if it is an internship or graduate job that you are looking for.

It helps to understand that employers use application forms for a number of reasons:

- They discourage unfocused applicants
- They enable recruiters to ask exactly what they want to know - not just what applicants want to tell them
- They enable recruiters to ask a series of structured questions allowing easy comparison across a range of applicants
- On-line application systems, particularly, increase processing speed and efficiency.

⮡ Top tips - general

Once you are ready to start, follow these 20 top tips for both paper-based and on-line applications:

- Give yourself plenty of time - days not hours for your very first forms
- Closing dates are usually final - don't assume that an organisation will accept an application which is a day, or even an hour, late. Some deadlines will even close early when the employer receives enough applications
- Make sure you complete the form in a quiet place where you can think clearly
- Photocopy or download the form (or copy and paste the questions into a word processing package) so that you can practise your answers
- Make sure you have undertaken sufficient research into the job and the organisation before you start
- Equip yourself with all the information you need to complete the form - it helps if you have an up to date CV to hand
- Read all instructions carefully

This information can be made available in alternative formats.
Mae'r wybodaeth hon ar gael yn Gymraeg. This information is available in Welsh.
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- Go through the form and establish which examples and evidence you are going to use for each question
- Understand and answer all parts of every question - and make sure you have completed every section
- If a question is not applicable, say so - "N/A" will suffice
- Don't underestimate questions about your work experience and/or interests - they provide you with an opportunity to highlight your transferable skills and can say volumes about you as a person
- Adopt a professional tone for your answers - exclamation marks, humour, a chatty manner and bold/ underlined words are inappropriate
- Use active, rather than passive, words wherever possible. *"I took the opportunity to…"* is so much better than *"It allowed me to…"*. See our list of action verbs for more information
- Pay particular attention to spelling and grammar - mistakes are an easy route to the bin!
- Remember that each employer is different - they might ask *similar* questions but very rarely will you be able to simply cut and paste answers from one application to another
- Make sure you use the space available for each question - but stay within the box or word count provided
- Make good use of an 'any further information' section to include relevant items you haven't covered elsewhere
- Be honest…and always positive
- Keep a copy of your completed application form for reference
- Discuss your first application forms with a careers adviser.

⮂ Top tips - paper forms

- Remember that you can often download forms from an organisation's website and complete them on a computer - you don't have to print them out to handwrite
- Follow the instructions, however - if it says to handwrite or use black ink or BLOCK CAPITALS, do just that
- Make sure your writing is legible - type your answers if not
- Don't write outside the boxes - use a continuation sheet, unless instructed not to, mark it clearly with your name and the post for which you are applying and make it clear on the form itself that you have included an additional sheet
- If you make a mistake, start again - don't use Tippex unless the error is very small
- Attach a short covering letter indicating where you saw the vacancy and reiterating your interest in the position. Write more if the form hasn't provided you with sufficient opportunity to demonstrate your suitability for the position. See our leaflets 'CVs' and 'Covering Letters' for more information
- Some employers will not accept emailed application forms, so allow enough time for your application to reach its destination by post - send by recorded delivery if possible
- You want your application to look professional so, if you are posting your form, put it in an A4 or A5 envelope so that, at most, it only gets folded once.

⮂ Top tips - on-line systems

In principle, on-line application forms are no different than their paper counterparts - all of the advice below applies. There are a few things to bear in mind, however, which are specific to on-line forms:

- Understand the process before you start - find out whether you can save a partially completed form and return to it later or whether you must finish it in one sitting. In the latter case, copy and paste the questions into a word processing package from which you can then copy and paste your answers later
- Record any registration details and keep them secure so that you can access your application again easily
- Don't leave completing the form until the last minute - things can and do go wrong and on-line systems have been known to crash as a result of overuse just before the closing date

- Be aware that some employers have mandatory pre-screening processes (using on-line questionnaires or tests) which you must pass in order to access their application forms
- Some organisations use automated selection software which looks for key words in your application. By reading their recruitment literature carefully you can usually identify these 'buzz' words and incorporate them into your answers
- Be aware that some organisations will screen applications electronically to ensure that minimum criteria (eg UCAS points) are met. If you don't meet these criteria, it is unlikely that your other answers will be read - see the FAQ section for guidance
- Try to avoid typing straight into the answer boxes as on-line forms don't always have a spell checker. Compose your answers in a word processing programme such as MS Word (so that you can run spell and grammar checks) and then copy and paste into the form. Do, however, be aware of 'rogue characters' cropping up - apostrophes have been known to turn themselves into upside-down question marks!
- Be careful if you are copying and pasting between application forms - the questions might appear similar but often have a different slant, so always revise your text. Be particularly careful if you are re-using (or partly re-using) answers to motivational questions - make sure that you not only change the name of the employer but also include information specific to the new organisation!
- Don't be tempted to use email or text language just because you're on-line - this is a formal application
- Save your application regularly
- Print a copy of the completed form before you submit and proofread - spelling errors are common in typed text and can sometimes be more obvious when printed out.

➲ Answering the 'difficult' questions

As well as the 'standard' biographical questions (your name, education and qualification details and work history etc), most employers will ask a series of questions based around their selection criteria for the post(s) for which you've applied. These will be drawn largely from the competencies they deem necessary for successful performance in that role - and will require you to provide evidence of your suitability - but will also address your levels of occupational knowledge and motivation. Many students and graduates refer to these as the 'difficult' questions as they obviously take more thought than those asking for straightforward biographical data:

- Competency-based questions
- Motivational questions
- Open-ended questions
- Other questions

➲ Competency-based questions

The competency-based approach requires you to provide succinct answers which describe how you have demonstrated particular competencies (skills and aptitudes) across different areas of your life - and, in some cases, to reflect on what you have learnt or what you would do differently in another situation. This element of self reflection is important and you should find AberGrad useful - see our handout *What do employers really want?* for more information.

Although they can look daunting at first glance, these questions make the work of the applicant much more straightforward as it is obvious what the employer is looking for.

Compare these two questions - the first 'open-ended' and the second competency-based:

Q: *Please provide any information which you feel is relevant in support of your application and which demonstrates your suitability for the post.*

and

Q: *Using a non-work related example, consider your most significant achievement to date. Describe the achievement and explain in detail how you worked with others to achieve it.*

Which one helps you to provide a good answer?

If you were asked the first, open-ended, question (or if you were applying for a job with a CV and a covering letter), you would need to identify what competencies the employer is looking for in order to address them effectively in your answer.

If the employer asks you to complete competency-based questions, those competencies are being spelt out for you - and that makes it much easier to give them what they're looking for. Questions will sometimes have a heading (eg Decision Making) which identifies the competency in question, but sometimes you will have to determine this for yourself. The competency-based example above seeks to find two things out about you - how you measure achievement and how well you work with others (ie your teamwork skills).

To answer a competency-based question well, first of all read it through very carefully at least twice and make sure you understand *exactly* what the employer is asking for - don't assume you know and reel off a 'pat' answer. Very often the question itself will spell out the structure of your answer - and this makes them even easier to complete. As an example, look at this question which has three clear parts to it:

Q: *Write about an occasion on which you were required to take a decision - what alternatives did you consider and what was the result?*

The three parts are:

- Describe a time when you had to make a decision
- Describe the alternative solutions you thought about
- Explain what decision you took (and, implicitly, why)

Do ensure that you answer the question exactly as asked. In this instance, the employer is asking you to make reference to *one occasion* - not to write generally about decisions you have made or what makes a good decision.

Having said that, they do want to know *how* you go about decision making (as that is clearly one of the competencies they are looking for) and ultimately that is more important than *what* you did on this particular occasion. In other words, make sure that you write about a *single example* of decision making, but choose one which gives you the opportunity to demonstrate a range of good decision making *behaviours*.

If the structure has not been given to you, as above, use the mnemonic **STAR** to provide a framework for your answer:

- **Situation** - briefly describe the situation
- **Task** - outline the task or objective in relation to the situation
- **Action** - describe how you tackled the task, what your role was and what behaviours you used. *This should form the bulk of your answer as it addresses the competencies sought*
- **Results** - briefly describe the outcome - quantify if possible to give a sense of scale and achievement

Remember always that the employer sees what you have done in the past as a good indicator of what you might be capable of in the future, so make sure that your answers clearly emphasise your transferable skills and behaviours. Never forget that *you* are the applicant - if you use an example of something you did as part of a team, make sure that *your* contribution is clear.

These competency-based questions are very important - and it is good to provide answers and examples from as many different parts of your life as possible. If you don't think you can provide enough, or good enough, evidence, you may need to reconsider whether an application to the employer in question is a realistic proposition at this time. If in doubt, discuss your application with a careers adviser.

⮑ **An example**

Q: **"Describe a challenging project, activity or event which you have planned and taken through to a conclusion. Include your objective, what you did, any changes you made to your plan and the outcome." (200 words)**

A: As Secretary of Aberystwyth University's Drama Society in my second year, I co-organised a visit to the Globe Theatre in London for members and other Theatre, Film and TV students. My personal objectives were to encourage a high rate of participation and to arrange inexpensive travel and accommodation whilst making a small surplus for the society. I promoted the event with posters on each university campus, e-mailing all 250 people registered on the society's database and advertising it in the weekly email newsletter. I set a strict deadline for receipt of payments from people wishing to book and, based on a realistic estimate, I arranged appropriate travel facilities, in this case a mini-bus, and liaised with a small hotel for a discounted block booking. Owing to a late surge of interest in the visit, I negotiated a larger bus and arranged extra accommodation with the hotel by offering students the choice of 'doubling-up' for a reduced room rate. The visit was a great success measured by the higher than expected participation rate, 97% positive feedback received and the £150 revenue generated for the society.

How many parts are there to the question? Does the answer address each one? What competency is being sought? Is there just one? Is the tone appropriate? Has the applicant used action words - if so, what are they? What else have you learned about the applicant from this answer? It's good, but how could you improve this answer?

⮑ **Motivational questions**

Most application forms will seek to establish why you are interested in the job, the organisation and/or the sector in which it operates. This may be as straightforward as *"What are your reasons for wishing to join ABC Ltd?"* but may be more challenging and subtle, such as *"What challenges do you foresee for the construction sector - and what impact do you think they will have on your career?"*

Whilst the second question requires a little more research, both questions have the same aims in mind - they want to find out whether you understand what you're applying for, whether you really want a   career in this area and, indirectly, whether you have the characteristics they're looking for. They want to know whether your attitude and approach are likely to 'fit in' with the prevailing ethos and values of the   organisation.

Research the organisation carefully - go on to its website and run a news search on Nexis www.aber.ac.uk/en/is/elecinfo/eiaz/#N. Find out what you can about the sector in which it operates as well - the more you know, the more convincing your answer will be. Try, if you can, to make at least one link between your experience and/or interests and those of the organisation.

The key to answering these questions well is originality - if your answer is true but predictable, it won't stand out from those of other applicants.

➲ **An example**

Q: "From your research, please outline your understanding of, and any key reasons for applying to, your chosen career preference(s). What are your reasons for wishing to join EY?" (200 word limit)

A1: *Following my experience of managing a restaurant, I have decided to pursue a career at management level. Being a big professional firm, EY gives good training and a good foundation to build a career on. EY is a multinational firm so there will be opportunities all over the world. I think I would be able to grow with such a big company.*

What do you think of this answer? How well does the candidate demonstrate his/her research into the organisation? How convincing are the reasons given for the applicant's career choice? Has good use been made of the word count? How appropriate is the evidence of the applicant's suitability and 'fit'?

It's rather naïve, isn't it? This is a better, but not perfect, answer. How could you improve it further?

A2: *I have chosen a career in accountancy as a result of my work experience and attendance at recruitment events run by accountancy firms. This has provided me with an insight into the profession and I believe that focusing initially on audit would present me with an ideal opportunity to gain a good all round understanding of business. I have chosen to apply to EY because the opportunities both during and post qualification are diverse - as is the client base. I enjoy working as a part of a team and believe that I would respond well to the support provided by the mentoring system in place for new graduates and the challenge of studying towards professional qualifications. Having managed a restaurant during my gap year, I am interested in commercial issues and feel that the holistic approach taken by EY would be stimulating throughout my career. As I speak Spanish, I am particularly attracted to the possibility of an overseas secondment to Europe or South America.*

➲ **Open-ended questions**

Some employers still use open-ended questions (sometimes called personal statements) on their application forms - whatever you do, do not see them as 'easy' questions or as an excuse not to address the competencies they are looking for.

If you are asked an open-ended question (just as if you are applying for a job with a CV and a covering letter), you will need to identify what competencies the employer is looking for in order to address them effectively in your answer. If you have been given a job description and a person specification, the competencies should be obvious, but if this information isn't available you will need to research an organisation's recruitment literature and/or website quite carefully to identify the selection criteria against which you will be scored. You might also find it helpful to look at the comprehensive occupational and sector information available on www.prospects.ac.uk. Read case studies of recent graduates who have joined the organisation for clues about why they were chosen - and read between the lines if necessary.

Use the job description and person specification - or your research - to match yourself to the job, providing evidence from your experience to meet the requirements point by point - use headings (best taken from the person specification) if they focus your answer more clearly. If a motivational question hasn't been asked elsewhere on the form, include a paragraph which emphasises your interest in the job and in the organisation. In terms of length, you should aim for about a page of A4 for a typical graduate job.

➲ **Other questions**

Whilst many questions, especially those which are competency-based, are fairly predictable, some of them may initially seem unrelated to the selection criteria:

Q1: *"Of your interests and activities, which do you find the most enjoyable and why?"* (150 words)

Q2: *"At Accenture we strive to deliver work that sets us apart from our competitors. Please describe how you set yourself apart from your peers."*

Don't be discouraged by these kinds of questions - if you read them carefully you will see that they are very similar to the motivational questions you looked at earlier. Both of them are trying to elicit information about you as a person - what makes you tick. The nature and quality of the activities and achievements you cite are not necessarily the most important issues at stake - these employers want to find out about your core values and see how well you express things that are important to you. If you are clever, you will use your answers to say things that are key to their requirements.

If a candidate likes horses and enjoys show jumping, and his research tells him that the organisation to which he is applying is looking for candidates with initiative and ambition, he might answer the first question as follows:

"I take part in a number of competitive sports, including rugby and tennis, but the one I enjoy most is show jumping. I started riding when I was 11 and I have taken every opportunity to develop my skills, becoming a member of the British Show Jumping Association (BSJA) and taking advantage of training provided through its Junior Academy based in Surrey. I get a very tangible feeling of achievement when I win a class and this motivates me to review what I have done and set myself new challenges. In order to improve still further, but unable to afford a better horse whilst still a student, I successfully sought sponsorship from a local feed merchant and have since gone on to be selected for the University squad."

As requested, this answer is about the applicant's major interest, show jumping. In explaining why he enjoys the sport, it is clear that he is motivated by doing well and that he is ambitious to progress further - showing initiative in raising money to 'upgrade' to a better horse. This is exactly what the employer is looking for! Whilst the answer concerns his favourite interest, note that two other competitive sports are mentioned almost in passing - these references cleverly strengthen the positive impression the recruiter will form of him. Again, it's a good answer - but how could it be further improved?

If the employer also emphasises teamworking skills in its selection criteria, the answer could be amended to read:

*"I take part in a number of competitive **team** sports, including rugby, but the one I enjoy most is show jumping. I started riding when I was 11 and I have taken every opportunity to develop my skills, becoming a member of the British Show Jumping Association (BSJA) and taking advantage of **team-based** training provided through its Junior Academy based in Surrey. I **enjoy the camaraderie and feedback that comes from working and training with like-minded people and** get a very tangible feeling of achievement when I win a class **or contribute to group successes**. In order to improve still further, but unable to afford a better horse whilst still a student, I successfully sought sponsorship from a local feed merchant and have since gone on to **compete with** the University squad."*

The answer refers fundamentally to the same experiences but draws upon *aspects* of those experiences which are particularly relevant to an employer looking for teamworking skills. Again - how could it be further improved?

FAQs

How should I answer questions about preferred locations?
Be honest if your preferred locations are limited, but be aware that being flexible will maximise your chances of actually being offered a job. Employers will not appreciate being told late in the process that you have only one genuine preference, however, so decide early on what you want most - the job or to be in a particular location. Remember that you will probably be able to re-locate as your career progresses - some employers positively encourage such movement.

How far back should I go to draw on experience?
It is perfectly reasonable to draw on experience as far back as your sixth form (or equivalent), but it is important to cite more recent experience as well. Employers will not be impressed if all your evidence is drawn from your pre-university days - especially as it can suggest that, rather than being due to your self motivation, your previous achievements were the result of your being 'pushed' by your school or family.

If, however, you have been involved in an activity, say gymnastics, from a very early age and have progressed over the years, do say when you first started - this will be taken as positive evidence of your commitment and personal drive.

Do I have to write in full sentences?

Use whatever is your preferred style to write your answers - but only if it conveys what you want to say clearly and effectively. You may find that bullet points are perfectly adequate for some answers, but that others demand a more descriptive and explanatory style.

Looking for more help?

It is always a good idea to have at least your first applications checked over by a career adviser - just to make sure you understand the 'rules of the game'. See box below for details.

You may also wish to look at the following resources:

Careers Service handouts (available to take away from our office in the Students' Union)

- CVs
- Covering Letters
- What do employers really want?
- International student guide: how to present yourself in the UK job market

Careers Service website -
www.aber.ac.uk/careers

Graduate Prospects website
https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/applying-for-jobs

Location and Contact Details

⮑ **Careers Service**
Students' Union (next to the Union Shop)
Open Monday - Thursday 9 am to 5 pm
and Friday 9 am to 4 pm
Closed 1 - 2 pm
Tel: 01970 622378
E-mail: careers@aber.ac.uk

Careers Sessions

Experienced careers consultants are available in our office in the Students' Union - you can 'drop in' for quick queries or you can book, or be referred on to, longer careers discussions to discuss things in more depth.

Drop in sessions are available daily on a first come, first served basis:

- **For details of drop in times, phone the number below**

To book a longer appointment, come and see our friendly receptionists or 'phone them on 01970 622378.