

Completing job application forms

An application is the first impression that the recruiter will have of you. It is your opportunity to sell your skills and experience to convince them of your ability and motivation for the role.

Follow these tips to increase your chances of being selected for the next stage.

Leave plenty of time

An application form is a bit like an essay; it will require planning and research, and take time to do properly. Think of it as a sample of your work and as an example of your written communication skills and attention to detail. Your answers will also reveal how much you know about the industry and have found out about the organisation.

Read the instructions and questions

Applicants often fall down by not answering the questions being asked. If you are given 750 words to write about yourself, pasting in text from your CV or using the answer you wrote for another application is not going to impress the reader.

Each application form will be different, so answer their questions as precisely as you can and keep to their word limit. Remember you won't need to introduce yourself with your name and course, as this will be included in the personal details section of your form.

Be aware of the deadline and submit your application in plenty of time. Keep a copy of the form, as you'll want to review it if invited to interview.

Understand what they are looking for

In order to sell your skills effectively, your answers will need to match the requirements of the job. Read the job description and highlight the skills the employer is looking for.

Once you know what they want, you can provide examples of your skills and experience to show you meet their requirements. Also look at the language they use to describe the role. If they use phrases like "team player" and "results focused", think about how you can build these phrases into your response to show that you'll fit in.

Remember, each application will be different, so it is important to show how your skills relate to this particular role and organisation. Keep this in mind when you are answering the questions, so you can relate your responses to the job, the organisation and the kind of person they are looking for.

Be specific and back it up with evidence

Make it easy for employers to find the evidence of how you meet their requirements and your relevant skills, knowledge and experience. If you just make general statements about yourself, it can be difficult for the reader to work out how accurate these statements are.

Anyone can say they're highly motivated and an effective team player. It is more persuasive to back up your points with examples as these support your statement and prove that you have the skills you say you have.

Employers value candidates who have had a range of experiences, so you don't just have to include work experience that is related to the role you are applying for. Include examples from any other work related and extracurricular activities you have been involved with.

Know who you are applying to

To gain a competitive edge in your application, show the depth of your knowledge about who you are applying to.

Start with their company website, LinkedIn and Twitter feed to find out more about them and what makes them different to their competitors. Using these details in your answers will show you are motivated to work for that particular employer, and allow you to provide informed responses that demonstrate your knowledge of the sector (commercial awareness).

When asking questions such as "Why are you applying to us?" employers are looking for answers that show what it is about their business that stands out for you. Whatever your reasons are, they want to know why it is important to you.

Avoid generic statements such as "you are a reputable firm, deal with top clients and offer excellent training prospects", as this is vague and can be said about a lot of companies. Any research you do now will also be useful should you be invited for interview.

Check your spelling, grammar and accuracy

One mistake can be all it takes for an application to be rejected. Don't rely on your computer's spellchecker! Read through your application carefully and ask someone else to check it for any errors you've overlooked.

Pay particular attention to the name of the organisation and the role you are applying for. Employers often mention how applicants commonly misspell the company name or even cite the wrong company in applications.

Keep your writing simple and professional

You might think that using long words from the thesaurus will make your language sound impressive, but this often results in answers that sound awkward and are difficult to read.

Employers are impressed by written communication that is clear, concise and professional. Keep your sentences short and write simply, but avoid informal language and colloquial phrases.

Use positive, active phrases that put you at the centre of the action and demonstrate what you achieved. Avoid phrases such as "I believe", "I hope" or "I imagine" as they suggest that you doubt your own ability.

Be enthusiastic but avoid clichés

While it is important to get across your motivation for the role and organisation, avoid language which sounds like you're just trying to flatter the company or is vague and clichéd such as "I relish the chance to hone my business skills" or "I would be immensely grateful for the opportunity to work for your illustrious and truly exemplary company."

Instead, be precise and specific about what attracts you to the role and the organisation. Highlight their accomplishments and show that you care enough to have done some research about them.

A stronger answer would be "Your organisation appeals to me because of its team-based culture, which was highlighted to me when I spoke to a graduate trainee at your open day."