Completing application forms

This leaflet provides advice on the types of questions asked and how to answer them. We have included example questions for each type.

The application form is a sophisticated selection tool for employers, and many large organisations spend a great deal of time and thought in designing application forms to suit their needs. Ignoring them and sending off your CV instead will result in a polite request to use their form or no response at all, which you should take as a rejection for not following their instructions.

**Preparation**
- Allow enough time to complete each application; they are labour intensive.
- Investigate the employer and the sector you are applying to - you can do this on the web in most cases.
- Focus on what you have to offer, and why you are interested in a particular role/company.
- Write down some key experiences where you can demonstrate the skills required and consider how to best present evidence of your suitability.
- Recent experiences will provide more useful evidence of your current abilities.
- Check that you have all the information you will need to complete the form e.g. examination dates/gap year details.
- Follow the instructions on the form.

**Types of questions**
Application forms usually begin with the familiar boxes asking you to tell them your personal details and where you are studying. This is called biographical information. After that it gets a bit more challenging.

Most application forms ask you to complete a series of questions to assess:
- your motivation for applying
- the skills/competencies you have to offer

**Competency-based questions**
Most application forms are designed around the key competencies and attitudes required to perform a particular role effectively within an organisation. If you are applying for a job, you need to demonstrate how your experience relates to the required competencies.

**Examples of competency-based questions**:
- Describe a situation where you worked as part of a team.
- Describe a situation where you had to adapt to changing circumstances.
- Describe a situation where you had to complete a task to a deadline. Explain how you overcame any problems.

Translated into more straightforward language, the three questions above are simply asking:

Can you work effectively with other people? Do you stay calm when the pressure is on? Are you flexible enough to accept that most things can be unpredictable? Do you tackle problems in a practical way?

The other point to take on board is that your evidence can come from any part of your life to date – work experience, academic work, volunteering, travel and gap years, clubs and societies, interests, previous work (plus life history if you are a mature student). Most employers when asked are genuinely interested in all of your experience. The key to it is to reflect on these experiences and relate them to the question.
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Example of competency-based questions
The questions shown below are typical of what you will encounter on application forms. The examples do not have perfect answers – because there is no such thing as a perfect answer – but they will give you an idea of what employers expect.

Q. Describe a situation where you have demonstrated motivation and initiative.
A. At the end of my second year I planned to spend the vacation in a marketing department of an industrial company. My objective was to learn about industrial marketing and gain some new skills. I began in a very haphazard way, writing to a few companies I had heard of and addressing my letter to the ‘Personnel Manager’. This was unsuccessful and so I re-evaluated my approach.

I visited the University’s Careers and Employability Service and discovered a network of alumni willing to give careers advice to current students. Searching revealed three people from my course working in my home city. None of them worked in marketing but they gave me some contacts to try within their companies. This helped me focus my letter and explain how I arrived at their name. I was successful in getting a six-week paid placement at Pockitt and Jingle and my line manager said that my approach had persuaded her of my motivation.

Q. Explain a situation where you have been following a specific course of action until something unexpected happened. Describe what you did to manage the situation.
A. I am the captain of the University’s badminton second team, and last year we decided to hold a knockout competition with other badminton teams from the local community. We took a team approach to organising the event by allocating tasks such as venue booking, liaising with other clubs, drawing up the match timetable, negotiating with sponsors and planning the post-tournament celebration. I took the role of project co-ordinator; drawing up a time plan; chairing meetings; agreeing points of action. The whole event took two months to plan and this was down to a great team effort.

Three days before the event, a water pipe in the sports hall sprang a leak. I called an urgent meeting of the team to draw up a plan of action to save the tournament. It was difficult to find another sports hall willing to offer the facilities at such short notice but I rang the local radio station who were interested in giving the story some publicity. I was interviewed and a local community school came to the rescue. I then worked with the team to ring around the participating teams to let them know of the change. The tournament was a great success.

Motivation questions
Whilst competency questions assess if you can do the job, motivation questions look at your enthusiasm to do the job and whether this is based on a real understanding of what the role entails.

Examples of motivation questions:
1. Why do you want to work for us?
2. What do you expect to be doing during your first year?
3. Where do you see yourself in five years’ time?

To answer the first question you may want to mention:
- any relevant work experience
- relevant modules from your degree
- employer events attended
- conversations with employees from the company
- the influence of other people you know e.g. academic staff

The second question is looking for knowledge of the main tasks and responsibility of the role. Some jobs, such as accountancy, also require you to take exams, and you should show you are prepared to combine studying and working. The third question allows you to show your knowledge of career progression for that role.

Strengths-based questions
These questions are used to find out your motivation, your values and who you are i.e.:
- Can you do the job?
- Do you want the job?
- Will you fit in?

Typical questions might include:
- What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?
- Are you a starter or a finisher?
- What are you passionate about?
- Are you a big picture or a detail person?

How to answer strengths-based questions
Honesty is the best policy when answering these questions. By describing what you enjoy doing and what you are good at means your enthusiasm and the real you will come across in your application.
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Technical questions
Some applications for jobs that require specific technical knowledge e.g. engineering, science, IT and sometimes finance, may ask technical questions. These may be questions about any projects you have done or technical questions about a hypothetical situation.

How to answer technical questions
Try to show your knowledge but make sure that you can talk about it in more detail if you get to interview.

Common pitfalls:
• Spelling and grammar matter – hugely! Don’t send anything without checking through it at least twice.
• Cutting and pasting from one application to another carries hazards – the main howler is leaving in the name of another employer.

Further resources
Pick up a copy or download our leaflet:
‘Writing a CV and covering letter’

Online resources
There are a range of resources on our website that can help you with your job applications including two videos.
www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students

After using these resources, make an appointment and bring a draft copy of your first application form to us for feedback.

You will need to select a couple of sections which you find the most challenging as we may not be able to check the whole form during the appointment.

To book an appointment log on to our website at
www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/login