

# Job Application Forms for PhD grads

An online application form may be used in addition to, or instead of a CV and cover letter. Use these tips to ensure that your applications stand the best chance of getting results.

An application form is likely to have some sections which gather simple details (address, contact information, qualifications and so on), but others where you can type fuller answers which can really set you apart from your competition.

## Follow their rules

Each application form will be different, some have a series of short answer questions and others may ask you for a single longer statement on why you are right for the role. Some will ask you to list your education or employment history using a series of limited fields, others will give a text box for you to describe/explain each experience. Whatever the format, follow the rubric and keep to any word limit.

## Write to the mark scheme

In order to sell your skills effectively, your answers will need to address the selection criteria for the opportunity. Highlight the abilities and skills the employer is looking for as mentioned in the selection criteria or person specification so you can make sure that your responses get you the marks you need to get through to the next round. Remember that they may mark on a scale: to get higher marks for a criterion see if you can show them the quality of your experience: adding factual details of results, scale, scope or complexity.

Look at the language used in the list of criteria and use those keywords in your answers so that it's easy for an assessor to find what they need to give you the marks. For example, if they use phrases like 'able to prioritise' or 'willing to collaborate', think about how you can build the verbs 'prioritise' and 'collaborate' into your answers.

## Avoid assertion, subjectivity, 'essay mode'

If you just make general statements, it can be difficult for the assessor to award you the marks that take you through to the next round of consideration.

Things to avoid:

- Phrases about your **enjoyment or belief** in your ability instead of evidence of it, such as 'I believe I have the potential to be a great manager' or 'I enjoy working collaboratively as well as alone.'
- Phrases that use **subjective opinion** instead of objective fact, such as 'My PhD broke new ground.' Far more impressive is to state factually 'My PhD examined a previously undiscovered artefact resulting in a publication and an invitation to present at...'
- Phrases **in essay mode** (unless you're answering a section to describe your research interests or proposal). Otherwise, phrases should have a pronoun referring to you or to them/the opportunity: without this it's just a general statement rather than an argument for your candidacy.

## Competency questions

If asked for an example of a competency or skill (perhaps in a short answer question), think through your experiences carefully and find the best example to highlight each skill required. Your doctorate, employment history, volunteering, part-time work, extra-curricular activities, and your studies can all be useful sources of examples. Even where the context is very different to what you're applying for, they can still be great evidence of a skill in action.

**STARR** (Situation, Task, Actions, Result/Reflection) is a handy acronym to use to structure examples of how you have demonstrated a particular skill.

<b>Situation</b>	Briefly outline the circumstances that led to your action.
<b>Task</b>	Explain exactly what the task, problem or goal was.
<b>Actions</b>	Give a step-by-step explanation of what you did (to show the skills you're giving evidence of)
<b>Result &amp; Reflection</b>	Outline what happened as a result. Be specific, this will show your effectiveness in using that skill.

As a rough guideline, 10% of your answer should be background information (Situation and Task), 80% explaining what you did (Actions), and 10% for the final Result. Sometimes you might want to add Reflection to your answer, e.g., what you learned from the situation and what you would do differently.

### 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.

A good place to start your research is their own website, and social media, looking for insights into the sector, the organisation and the role.

When answering questions such as 'Why are you applying to us?' the assessors are looking for answers that show a depth of research displaying your genuine motivation. Avoid generic statements that can be said about a lot of companies. If your answer still applies with a different organisation's name it isn't specific enough. Avoid language which sounds like you're just trying to flatter the company such as 'I relish the chance to work for an organisation with such illustrious trustees as Sir/Dame...'

Be precise, specific, and genuine about what attracts you to the role and the organisation. Have they published annual results, a strategy for the future, their organisational values or mission statement? What have they recently highlighted in press releases or on social media? What are some of the industry trends affecting their work? Illustrate what you could contribute to and how.

### Clear communication for non-academic audiences

Even for some academic roles, the first sift of applications may be conducted by an administrator rather than an academic. Your arguments need to be clear and require no inference. Keep your sentences short and write professionally and simply, but without informal language and colloquial phrases.

For opportunities outside of academia, consider the understanding of the typical reader: if your thesis title requires them to look up terms, it might alienate the reader and give them an impression of a mismatch. Instead, give an accessible paraphrase, going on to talk about relevant aspects and transferable skills.

Use positive, active phrases that put you at the centre of the action and demonstrate what you achieved, for example, 'I managed my time to deliver an independent 80,000-word research project within my three-year time frame.'

### Final tips

- Don't rely on your computer's spellchecker! Read through your application and ask someone else to check it for any errors you've overlooked.
- Draft longer text answers in Word or similar (with autosaving) and then cut and paste into the form in case of window time outs.
- Make sure you've addressed all the essential sections as gaps may mean your form is rejected.
- Be aware of the deadline and submit your application in plenty of time if you can.
- Keep a copy of the form saved as you'll want to review it if invited to interview.
- If options on the form don't apply to you or don't work, you could get in touch to ask for clarification. If not possible, do the best you can, and use an open text field to explain.