Application Form Guide

Including personal statements for postgraduate study

Version 4.17

Contents

Before you start

- Read the vacancy description carefully and have a print out with you when you come to completing your form.
- Allow yourself time – most students say it takes about three hours to complete a typical online form.
- Find a quiet place to work without distractions especially if you have to complete the form in one sitting.
- Do not leave it until the last minute things may go wrong such as their server being busy or an internet connection failing.
- In most cases applications will not be accepted after the deadline. If in doubt make enquiries first, don't waste time on applications that will not be considered.
- Not all systems will allow you to save and come back to your form, so you may have to do it in one sitting. You may not be able to cut & paste or print it out. Try to check these things out before starting the form for real.
- If the system allows, save your form and return to it a day later. Taking time to reflect on what you have written can be really beneficial.
- Check the word or character limit for each answer. If you write too much it may not count or even be displayed, don't pad your answers with unnecessary words, keep to the point. Be careful of writing too little, if you are well under the word count you are putting yourself at a disadvantage.

Application forms for jobs

The selection criteria

1. What employers want:

Employers recruit against specific selection criteria. These are usually set out in job descriptions or the job advert. Some employers require particular technical skills, but all require certain personal qualities. A typical job advert could read:

"We are looking to recruit bright, enthusiastic graduates to work as part of a growing organisation. The ideal candidate will be analytical, able to communicate effectively and have the ability to work well both individually and in a team."

To find more detail about what employers look for in a candidate:

- Check the employer's recruitment website to find out about the culture of the organisation, additional information about the role, training and career development opportunities.
- Go to employer led events, presentations and fairs to speak to company representatives to ask them questions. Search for events in CareersLink www.manchester.ac.uk/careerslink

Doing some research about the organisation and the job will help you to provide well-informed answers to questions such as, 'Why do you want to be a Project Manager with our company?'
www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/findjobs/graduatejobs/researchemployers

Having identified what the employer is looking for and acquired some feel for the culture of that organisation; you will be in a better position to match your skills to their needs.

2. What you have to offer: evidence

The employer is looking for evidence of your suitability for the post. This evidence will comprise of the skills, knowledge and experience you have built up over your life. They will have a checklist of what they are looking for. You need to provide strong evidence of your competence in as many of these areas as possible.

Spend a few minutes examining the last five years of your life under the headings, education, work experience, activities and interests. (Your CV can be a useful start here) Put absolutely everything down. Look at each item separately; break them into smaller pieces and extract from each the skills displayed and the lessons learnt. Remember, the employer is looking for specific skills make sure what you tell them matches what they are asking for.

You may believe that your work experience in a bar isn't important, but by breaking it down and looking at the tasks you have carried out you will see that you have developed tact, ability to handle people (often under pressure), work quickly and accurately and take responsibility. Volunteering as a Peer Mentor may demonstrate that you are good at influencing others, working in a team and problem solving. Your passion for chess demonstrates an ability to solve problems and think analytically.

Doing this basic preparation will really help you answer common application form questions such as, 'Describe an occasion when you have worked effectively under pressure' or 'What has been your greatest achievement to date?

Types of questions and how to answer them

If you can identify the type of application question you face you can work out what the employer wants to know, and how you should approach the answer.

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1. Questions about the job

The employer wants to know why you're interested in them, not one of their many competitors. You need to evaluate why they are different and why that makes you interested in them.

- Why do you want to work for ALDI?

Graduate recruitment costs a lot of money so employers want to be sure that the people they recruit really are motivated to do the work in hand. To evaluate your motivation, they will ask questions which probe your understanding of the role, knowledge of the organisation/industry and your medium to long term career objectives.

- Why are you interested in working in Tax Advisory?
- "What attracts you to the position you have applied for?"
- "How and why have you reached the decision to apply for this Career discipline?"

Think honestly about your motivation for applying:
- Is it the training programme, the chance of early responsibility, the opportunities for variety that attract you to this job?
- Are you attracted to the organisation because of their high reputation, the markets they are in, the products they make or services they offer?

If you have to rack your brains too hard is this really the job for you? Once you have decided the main elements to your answer, apply the originality test. If your answer is predictable even though it is true, it won't stand out so try to give it a unique spin.

2. Questions about you – skills, strengths and competencies

If you researched employer application forms you would probably find 100s of different questions, but all of them together are only addressing

about a dozen core skills that virtually all recruiters want. These skills include problem-solving, team
working, planning, leadership and influencing. Questions used to assess these skills are fairly predictable.

- "Please tell us about an occasion when you have worked as a member of a team or a group. Describe your personal contribution to the group and how the group functioned as a whole." NHS
- "Describe an occasion when you encountered a blockage or barrier to something you were trying to achieve. Describe how you identified the problem and plans you made to overcome it". Unigate

More difficult questions may seem unrelated to the selection criteria.

- "Of your interests and activities which did/do you find most enjoyable and why?" Boots
- "At Accenture we strive to deliver work that sets us apart from our competitors. Please describe how you set yourself apart from your peers."

Select key events or successes that firstly, mean something to you and secondly, show you demonstrating a set of desirable skills. The employer is interested in how well you describe the achievement and how cleverly you use it as a vehicle for saying things that you know to be key to the employer's requirements. The actual achievement may well be of secondary importance to the employer.

More examples of typical skills based questions:
www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/employable

CAR: Formula for answering competency questions

Context, Action, Result (CAR) is a formula that can be a really useful, especially when answering questions about skills which are commonplace.

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Let's use teamwork as an example:

1. Firstly, outline the **CONTEXT**, i.e. the team you were in, e.g., final year design project, team's purpose, number of people.

2. Then think about your **ACTION**, especially what your contribution to the team was, e.g. took responsibility for scheduling series of meetings and setting deadlines, or analysed all statistical data collected into an Excel report.

3. Then detail the **RESULT**, e.g. your team received a commendation for the final presentation of the design project, your team opted to work together on the next course project as you had worked so well together. A result can also be something you learned, an insight or appreciation as well as knowledge gained.

    Throughout the 3 stages try to quantify where you can, e.g. in a team of 6, a 100 page report, raised £250 for charity. This helps the employer to understand the scale you were working on and judge your performance in context.

3. Open-ended questions or personal statements

Typically a form will ask you to "provide information in support of your application". The key to answering these questions well is to use a good structure.

A detailed job description is provided for most jobs. Usually you should address every point on the specification. You could follow the order and/or sub headings they have used as this will make it easy for them to review your application and to see that you have the essential or desirable skills needed for the job.

- Say why you are interested in this organisation – the employer will want to see that you understand what makes their organisation different, and that you understand their products or clients.
- Why are you interested in this particular role? Show where your interest and motivation has come from, and that you understand the realities of the role.
- With personal statements take each point on the job description in turn and using the CAR structure provide examples of your ability to perform these tasks. You can use examples from your previous jobs, volunteering, extra-curricular activities or from course work to do this.

Deal with one topic at a time and do not return to it (otherwise the answer appears repetitive).

The ideal length may depend on any other questions asked on the application and how you structure your statement. Using headings and addressing individual aspects of the person specification will take up more space. Aim for around 1-2 pages of A4.

Applications for postgraduate study

Unlike undergraduate courses there is no central admissions system to apply for the majority of postgraduate courses (Teaching and Medicine are some exceptions that use UCAS). This means you may be asked to apply through a range of different formats depending on the course and institution. Many will ask you to write a personal statement or answer questions that cover many of the topics below.

Personal statements

Personal statements are extremely common in applications for further study.
Your statement should include strong reasons why you want to do the course and why you are a suitable applicant. Hard evidence is needed to prove that you have sufficient interest, skills and motivation to work hard and succeed.

Follow the instructions on the application form carefully, there may be a word limit or the institution may indicate topics they want you to focus on. 1-2 pages of A4 are normally enough.

1. Establish the topics you want to cover first. Once content is decided, you can think about how you are going to structure the information.
2. Think about how many words you want to use for each topic. Don't spend 80% of your answer covering one point and then cram everything else into the remaining 20%. Plan a basic outline and then edit sections later.
3. Put the most important information first: your interest in the subject and why you are a suitable candidate. Don't save your best selling points until last - you should immediately create a good impression.
4. Each topic must lead logically onto the next. Don't randomly jump from one section to the next, or mention something and re-visit it

several paragraphs later. Your statement is evidence of your abilities - you must be coherent. To do this take the same approach as you would to plan an assignment.

5. End on a positive note.

More information on UCAS statements for teaching and medicine on our website:
www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/applicationsinterviews/studyapplication

Structuring your statement

You can change the order to highlight the areas you feel are most important to your application and create a natural flow for the reader. Not all the suggested content will be relevant for all applicants.

Opening – start strong, keep them reading
Too many Personal Statements start with a variation on "I've wanted to study XXXX from a very young age…" You can do better than that. Open with what inspires you about the subject. It could be a lecturer, a journal article or any other factor, but open with something strong and interesting, to hook your reader and keep them going.

Why this university / research group?
Be specific – don't make generic statements such as "Because you are an internationally-renowned university with an excellent academic reputation".
If the university itself made a difference in your choice - what was this?

- Have you studied there before and enjoy the environment?
- Is location and the opportunity to gain work experience locally a factor?
- Has it got a strong reputation in this particular field of research?
- Does the institution / local area have an especially good range of resources to assist you with your studies?

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- Are there specific academic staff you want to do research or study with?
- Perhaps it offers something else unique?

Why this subject?
- Your motivation - When did you become interested in this subject and what have you learned about it?
- Explain what drives your interests and provide strong evidence to back up your claims - e.g. include authors you admire, theories / problems which interest you, conferences you have attended, or relevant work experience.
- It is especially important to demonstrate your commitment if you are applying to a conversion course – why the change of direction?
- What is it about the structure of the course, or the choice of modules, that appeals to you? Did you attend an open day or talk to lecturers?
- Demonstrate subject knowledge, through relevant prior learning, projects, dissertations, case studies etc. It could also come through relevant work experience in this field.
- In the case of PhD applications, explain what of their research you've read. Reference their journal articles or books, explain what interests you and where you have further questions. You don't have to be an expert yet, but they will want to know that you've read their stuff.

Such details show that you have researched thoroughly and really want to study at the institution. Check details carefully; stating that you want to work on a project that is outside of the department's area of expertise or be supervised by an academic who no longer works at the institution, will not impress!

Academic ability
For a course academic credentials are important - will you cope with the academic rigors of the course? Tutors will consider:
- The level of your degree.

- Final classification / average grade.
- The standing of the institution where you are studying / have studied.
- Do you stand out? Academic prizes for exams or dissertations.
- Does it match your learning style - can you demonstrate this? Will you have to do group projects can you demonstrate teamwork or leadership?
- Can you demonstrate the dedication and resilience required to complete the course? Ability to use initiative, problem solve, manage workload, work to deadlines, work under pressure.
- Other academic skills relevant to the course e.g. computing skills, knowledge of relevant scientific techniques, analytical or research skills etc. Explain your skills in detail - do not assume the reader will understand your capabilities just by reading the title of your final year project.

Personal skills & experience

You can talk about work experience, volunteering and extra-curricular activities in more depth here, but make sure you are evidencing key knowledge or skills needed for this course and your future career options.

Your future

What are your career aims? How will this course help you achieve them? Including this information could help establish your motivation and commitment. You can talk about knowledge gained, skills, accreditation with professional bodies etc.

If, for example, if you have a particular career or job in mind, talk briefly about this on your application. The same applies if you plan to go on and do an MPhil / PhD in your chosen subject.

Application forms: essentials for everyone

Frequently asked questions

My UCAS points/degree classifications do not meet the employer's requirements. I have extenuating circumstances but there is nowhere on the form to explain them, what should I do?

Phone the organisation's graduate recruitment/HR department and ask what they advise. However many recruitment numbers have automated responses and you may not get through or may not get a response to your enquiry in time. If all else fails, find a general number for the organisation from their brochure, website or directory enquiries. This will usually be a switchboard so ask to speak to someone in the relevant department (keep a record of who you spoke to).

The application form asks me to enter a UCAS point score but I don't have one because I took school qualifications in another country. What should I do?

Call the organisation's graduate recruitment/HR department and ask what they advise. However many recruitment numbers are automated responses and you may not get through or may not get a response to your enquiry in time. If all else fails find a general number for the organisation from their brochure, website or directory enquiries. Ask to speak to someone in the relevant department (keep a record of who you spoke to).

How can I find out if there is a standard expectation of how to complete a form for the sector I am applying for?

Some professional bodies produce information about making applications, so track down the appropriate website and find out. Also talk to people in your field who will have an idea of what the "market" requires.

I have a disability can I get an alternative format of the application form?

Ask the organisation to send you a paper application form. They should have a paper version even if they do not want to do all their recruitment this way.

How far back should I go when drawing on examples?

In most cases you should not go back more than five years. It doesn't look good if you don't have any recent examples to use. If there are a number of questions on the application form, try and draw examples from different parts of your life, e.g. recent work experience, University coursework.

How can I cover up things on my application form that I am not proud of?

If asked directly about something, you really have to answer the question, however, you don't have to be negative about it. There are ways to think positively about most situations.

- If you are asked to give all your exam results and you failed one in the first year then you still have to list it.

- If you started a degree programme & changed course or University, it is not a bad thing. It shows you were able to evaluate the situation and take appropriate and positive action.

If not directly asked, don't highlight anything that you think is a weak point in your application, and where possible just don't refer to anything that you know is a flaw! Also don't be worried about making a lot of a little! Another angle which may be appropriate is to use examples of where your life has not gone to perfect plan as evidence for certain application form questions, e.g., on problem-solving, determination.

If there is a general question at the end asking for additional information – how should I go about answering it?
This tends to occur in two ways: If it occurs after you have already answered lots of questions about yourself – it is worth considering if you have any achievements and/or personal strengths that fit with the employer's selection criteria that you have not been able to get in elsewhere.

Alternatively it could be that this is your chance to explain something that you know may be perceived as a flaw – e.g., exam results. For some jobs, especially in the public and voluntary sector, it is common for there to be only one general question which asks you to detail information in support of your application. In such cases you should closely follow the job's person specification and show how you meet each and every criteria – this kind of response would usually average 1-2 sides of A4.

Do I have to write in full sentences?
Use your preferred and most effective style to convey a point. In some scenarios it may be appropriate to use bullet points or headings. For example you may use headings for each point listed on the job description with a description underneath about how you match that criteria. Remember that the majority of your application should be in written prose.

Can I attach additional information?
Many employers will say that if there is something really important that you want to tell them that doesn't fit on the form, then it is OK to send some additional information. Also, where appropriate it can be courteous to enclose a covering letter with an application form, saying what vacancy you are applying for, where you saw it advertised and expressing the hope for consideration of your application.

How should I disclose information about a disability/health issue?
Under the 2010 Equalities Act employers are not allowed to ask questions about health or disability on an application form. They are however

allowed to ask whether you require any reasonable adjustments to be made to enable you to participate fully in the recruitment process. Some forms (especially for certain jobs e.g., police, nursing) will directly ask you about health/disability issues – in this case you really should give all the details that you feel are important.

Remember that your disability or health condition could provide positive examples to use on your application form: e.g. determination & time management
For further advice on how and when to disclose a disability see our guide 'Employment Support/Advice on Disclosure for Disabled Students & Graduates' available on the Careers Service website:
www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/startingpoints

How should I answer the question about location?
Be honest if there is one or more location you really want to work in, but being flexible in your preferred location obviously maximises your chances of getting a job. Decide what is your priority – location or job? Remember it may always be possible to move to your preferred location later!

Common mistakes to avoid

Large graduate recruiters receive thousands of applications. Often hundreds of these applicants had the specified grades, skills and personal qualities but were rejected because they failed to complete the application form to the required standard.

1. Poor spelling and grammar
   This is the most common reason for rejection. To minimise errors:
   - Re-read your work (preferably after a break).
   - Keep sentences short (maximum 2-3 lines)
   - Punctuate properly, don't forget commas and full stops.
   - For UK applications use UK spelling e.g. organised NOT organized.

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2. Not answering the question

Applicants often do not answer every part of the question. Some provide a long list of reasons why the recruiter should hire them, even though that is not what the question is asking.

When reading the question, number each part and make sure you answer them all. Underline key words to stay focused on answering the question.

3. Not explaining how you used a skill or how you personally contributed to a task

Employers want you to provide a concise explanation of how you used your skills and knowledge. This is called providing evidence. The recruiter also wants an indication of how substantial your skills/knowledge/achievements are, so remember to provide scale e.g. wrote a newsletter for 300 members of the School. Candidates who just list achievements or skills e.g. can produce reports, persuade people to change their minds, can work hard do not really tell the recruiter anything. Why should they just accept what you say without evidence?

When talking about teamwork emphasise your personal contribution. Do this by starting with a very brief explanation of what the team were doing and then focus on your role/contribution within the team. Again remember the CAR model.

4. Being negative/underselling yourself

Don't focus on what you haven't got to offer! You will only create a negative impression of yourself. Don't write about your perceived flaws i.e. you have not undertaken an internship or don't have every skill the employer is looking for. Don't describe your experiences as basic or general or then ruin your answer by listing mistakes you made or things you didn't get to or manage to achieve. Instead use upbeat

language e.g. developed good office experience, fully competent in all aspects of Microsoft office.

5. Other careless mistakes

When you are making lots of applications it is easy to slip up and not proof read your work, especially when cutting and pasting from other documents. KPMG are not going to be impressed by an application that says how excited you are to apply for Accenture. Looking forward to working in the media industry is great but not if you are applying to the education sector!

Further information

- www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/applicationsinterviews/af
- Get 1-1 advice on your application www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/services/applicationsadvice