



**University of Brighton**

Careers Service

Guidance  
Employment  
Volunteering  
Enterprise

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# Online and paper application forms

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Employers use application forms to get an idea of your skills, qualities, achievements and experience in a format they can compare with other applicants. Your aim when completing an application form is to present yourself effectively, so that the employer wants to interview you.

*'You would be amazed how many applications we reject when they have a 250 word limit but actually only write a sentence or two and think this will suffice, or just put bullet points.'*

*Also a lot of candidates get rejected immediately due to poor spelling and grammar, and even the lack of capitals for their own name and address.*

*Things like this will make the difference to a graduate's application being considered for the subsequent stages.'*

*Graduate recruiter, Santander*

Make sure it isn't you they're talking about...

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## Research and preparation

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Before you do anything else, read the application form through from beginning to end. This will help you plan what information should be included where. The essential points you want to make must be tailored to fit the form while still answering the questions clearly and concisely.

### **Step 1: Understand the employer and the job**

Read the job advertisement very carefully. What experience, personal qualities or qualifications are they asking for? This is usually called a 'person specification'.

If nothing is specified, you can still make an intelligent guess as to what the employer will be looking for by looking at the detail of the job description, or by doing some research about the company.

Use your contacts. Do you know anyone who already works at the organisation? Talk to them. The university's Alumni Association may be able to put you in touch with ex-students who are working for the company.

See our webpage **CVs and interviews** for ideas on researching a potential employer or contact the Alumni Association at [alumni@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:alumni@brighton.ac.uk)

### **Step 2: Match yourself to the job**

The person specification will often refer to 'essential' and 'desirable' requirements. Do not be discouraged if you do not meet all of the 'desirable' requirements. A person specification usually describes an employer's ideal candidate. They will expect to receive applications from candidates who match the majority, but not all, of these requirements.

Use the person specification as a guide and show how you match each of the essential requirements. Also show how you meet as many of the desirable requirements as you can.

You will need to demonstrate that you have the qualities, skills, aptitude or temperament required to do the job. The best way to do this is to give an example of something you have done that illustrates these qualities or that helped you to develop them.

For example, working at a call centre may have given you tenacity, endurance and a thick skin; waiting at tables could have developed your patience, tact and stamina.

Think through all the jobs you have done: industrial training, vacation work, voluntary work. Consider the positions of responsibility that you have held. You should also consider your studies and even your hobbies and interests. Decide if the skills or aptitudes you can demonstrate in each case might be relevant to the job you are applying for.

### **Step 3: Identify your unique selling point (USP)**

Remember that the employer is comparing your application with many others so make the most of your unique experiences and achievements.

For example, many applicants could have studied French, only one might have taught in a French school, worked in a Swiss children's holiday camp or taught English to immigrants.

Mention any other things you think are important: vacation courses attended, prizes won, voluntary work undertaken. Decide what your unique selling points are and make the most of them. Organise the form carefully to make sure your selling points make an impact.

### **Your degree**

Where your degree is particularly relevant to the job, the employer will probably want more information about course content and special projects. In this case your degree is a major selling point.

However, when applying for jobs where degree subject is not specified, the employer will still be interested in any relevant skills and aptitudes you have acquired during your course of study.

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## Answering the questions

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Make sure your application is focused and concise and you will maximise your chances of making the shortlist. Faced with cutting 100+ applications down to a shortlist of six or seven, an employer will not waste time sifting through your application looking for relevant content.

It is vital that your answers provide the specific evidence that the question is asking for. You may be asked to 'describe a time when you overcame obstacles to do something'. Make your answer as clear and concise as possible. Set the scene, say what you did and what the end result was.

Take care in completing any section asking for additional information in support of your application. This will usually be located at the end of the application form. Provide information that is relevant, interesting and that conveys your personality, but make sure that it also demonstrates that you have the qualities the job requires.

If you are offered an interview, the application form will probably be used by the interviewer as a basis for discussion. A lively, interesting form could lead to a good, stimulating interview. Keep a copy of the finished form, and your draft versions. You will need to re-read your application before an interview to remind yourself of what you said and how you said it.

Pay attention to detail, including spelling, grammar and punctuation and always use appropriate language.

### **Interests and activities**

Don't just give a list; try to expand on one or two points. Think about any achievements relating to your out-of-work activities which you can draw attention to. Remember this will contribute to the employer's impression of the kind of person you are. Be prepared also to talk about your interests at interview.

## **Gaps**

Avoid leaving gaps in the chronology of your application. If you have been unemployed say so, but be positive about how you used your time.

Don't leave sections blank - if questions are not relevant to you then put 'N/A' (this is an accepted abbreviation for 'not applicable').

## **Extra information**

If there is something you are keen to say which you think is a point in your favour, use your ingenuity to fit it into the most appropriate part of the form.

Attach an extra page to the form if there really isn't enough room in a particular section, but remember that the point of an application form is that it is a concise way of presenting information. An extra page may be of particular use to students of technical subjects who want to elaborate on special projects.

## **References**

Before giving someone's name as a referee get their permission and ask how they wish to be contacted – by email, phone or letter. This is courteous and sensible.

Employers usually expect at least one academic referee for recent graduates; the other could be an employer or a professional person who knows you personally.

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## **Tips for paper application forms**

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Make a photocopy and complete a draft of your application before you try to fill out the actual form.

Once you have finished the draft, ask a friend or family member to review it, or make an appointment with a careers counsellor. This is essential in checking that you are saying what you want to say in the best way possible.

Remember that the appearance of the form (neat, scruffy, smudged) is the first impression you will give before even a word is read.

Never fold an application form once you have filled it in, even if it arrived folded. Return it flat in an A4 envelope. The form will be photocopied for members of the shortlisting and interview panels and fold lines running through text may render the photocopied version illegible.

Be extra careful about grammar, spelling and punctuation. These mistakes can be enough to disqualify your application. **Always** proof read your application, don't rely on spell-check to do this for you.

If you copy text from one application form to another make sure it is relevant to that particular role.

If you can send your application early then do. There is growing evidence that some employers scan applications on receipt and invite applicants for interview before the deadline

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## **Tips for online application forms**

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When completing an online application the rules of spelling, punctuation and grammar still apply. Lack of attention to detail is just as likely to disqualify your application.

You will often have to answer questions within a fixed word limit. Concentrate on saying what you want to say and edit as necessary. Be prepared to leave out details if you are struggling to stay within the word limit. You can always expand on your answer at interview.

Don't sacrifice grammar for the sake of squeezing in everything you would like to say. This will count against you.

As with a paper form, if you copy text from one application form to another make sure it is relevant to that particular role.

Save a copy of the application form if possible, or copy the content into a Word document or similar.

'It is important to understand that the larger companies only have an online application system and do not accept CVs. Further, that a "please see my CV" in response to questions on the online application is a recurrent problem.

Recruiters are keen for students to also understand that the questions asked on applications should be approached as intensively as an interview question. A major retail recruiter noted that despite receiving 4,000 applications online, many were of poor quality and the company is still recruiting.'

*AGR Retail Sector Focus Group*

'Your job's online' is a DVD which is accessible via our page **CVs and interviews – application forms**. This gives an insight into how employers assess an online application.

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## **How to 'beat' scanning software**

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Recent media reports indicate that many large companies use software to scan applications and CVs looking for keywords. If the keywords aren't found the application is rejected before it gets seen by a human being.

Software will often be company and role-specific, so it's more important than ever to tailor your application to the job you are applying for. You should repeat back to the employer specific words and phrases they use in the job description.

Use the links below to get more information;

- **Lifehacker**

Tips on working with and getting past scanning software.

<http://lifehacker.com/5866630/how-can-i-make-sure-my-resume-gets-past-resume-robots-and-into-a-humans-hand>

- **Quintessential Careers**

Advice on effective use of keywords in CVs.

[http://www.quintcareers.com/researching\\_resume\\_keywords.html](http://www.quintcareers.com/researching_resume_keywords.html)

- **Resume-Help**

Information on application scanning and using keywords.

[http://www.resume-help.org/resume\\_scanning.htm](http://www.resume-help.org/resume_scanning.htm)

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## Contact the Careers Service where you study

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Come and carry out your research, speak to a member of the team or make an individual appointment to discuss your plans (or lack of them).

### **Eastbourne**

Room 113, Trevin Towers, Gaudick Road  
Eastbourne BN20 7SP  
(01273) 643845  
[careers.eastbourne@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:careers.eastbourne@brighton.ac.uk)

### **Falmer**

E Wing, Checkland Building, Village Way, Falmer  
Brighton BN1 9PH  
(01273) 643584  
[careers.falmer@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:careers.falmer@brighton.ac.uk)

### **Grand Parade**

Student Services, First Floor, Grand Parade  
Brighton BN2 0JY  
(01273) 643187  
[careers.grandparade@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:careers.grandparade@brighton.ac.uk)

### **Hastings**

Priory Square Building,  
Hastings TN34 1EA  
(01273) 644643  
[hastingsstudentservices@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:hastingsstudentservices@brighton.ac.uk)

### **Moulsecoomb**

First Floor, Manor House, Moulsecoomb Place,  
Brighton BN2 4GA  
(01273) 642855  
[careers@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:careers@brighton.ac.uk)

Careers Centres are usually open Monday - Friday 9.30am - 4.30 pm

This leaflet and related information is available online at [www.brighton.ac.uk/careers](http://www.brighton.ac.uk/careers) or in alternative formats – please ask for details.

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