

## Completing an Application Form for the Civil Service and Public Sector

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Completing a civil service or public sector application form can be a challenging task. You will need to include almost everything you would include in your CV (your educational background, qualifications and work experience). You will also be asked to complete several competency or achievement questions. This article is written by Tina Kinirons, who has both shortlisted and interviewed in many public sector competitions and who sees first-hand the variation in how candidates complete their application forms. The advice in this article is based on this experience and will help you complete your application form.

### Writing the employment record section

All the public sector application forms include an employment record or work experience section where, as with your CV, you are asked to include details of the roles you have held, starting with your current role and working backwards. Most of the forms ask you describe to your main responsibilities for each role. A minority of the forms will ask you to emphasise your work experience that you feel is relevant to the post you are applying for. This later part is sound advice for all public service application forms. For each role that you list, try to focus on the parts of your work experience that are particularly relevant for the role, because it's your suitability for the requirements of this role that is the interviewers' focus.

When including the detail of your roles, try to include your accomplishments and achievements, not just your job responsibilities. When you only list your job responsibilities, it reads like a list of what you were asked to do in a role, without giving the reader any sense of what you accomplished in the role. Instead, include sentences that outline what you have achieved, so that the reader gets a clear picture of what you did in the role, not just what you were asked to do. For example, a responsibility might have been *"Responsible for processing applications for xyz"*. You might rephrase that as *"Processed applications for xyz, always meeting processing deadlines"*.

As you list out the details of each of your roles, start each sentence with a verb. Have a look online for "CV Strong Verbs" to help you in selecting appropriate verbs. The job role description and/or the definition of the competencies all include verbs, so keep an eye on those and reflect those verbs back in your application form. Use past tense verbs for all your previous roles, such as *"managed"*, *"led"*, *"organised"* etc. For your current role you could either use the present tense or verbs ending in *"ing"*, so that would mean using *"manage"*, *"lead"*, *organise*" or *"managing"*, *"leading"*, *"organising"*.

### Writing the competency or achievement questions

Some application forms are looking for the **details of one example** for each competency, some for two examples per competency, while still others are asking for a summary of your achievements and expertise in the competency that makes you suitable for the role. You need to be clear about which type of answer you are providing.

If you are asked for one or two **detailed examples per competency**, think about your best example(s) and remind yourself of the details of both what you did and what outcome it had. A good scoring answer will need you to be clear about that detail. Include specifics and be concrete in the information you include. The interviewers are not looking for a theoretical answer, they are not looking for buzzwords and they are not looking for a textbook answer. Instead, they want to know what you actually did to display the particular skills, competency or behaviours that they know will be needed in the new role.

Follow this **structure for your competency answer**:

- a) **Outline the context** – briefly explain the nature of the task, problem or objective of the piece of work that you are using to outline your experience in the competency (this is the Situation and the Task parts of the STAR technique).
- b) **Detail what you personally did** and how you demonstrated the skill or quality. Be clear about what your contribution was and what actions you took (this is the Action part of the STAR technique).
- c) **Summarise the outcome**, impact or result of the work that you did (this is the Result part of the STAR technique).

Write a little about the context, a lot about the actions you took in that situation and a little about the impact, or the outcome, of what you did. The actions you outline allow the interviewers to match your experience to the requirements of the new role. The outcome or results of your actions give the interviewers some indication of the contribution you made and the quality of your work. The interviewers need to understand the context to help them in judging your actions and the outcome.

When writing the detail of your example, you need to keep an eye on the definition of the competency and ensure that the example you have selected is touching on all the skills and behaviours outlined in that competency. It doesn't read well if you include too much of the actual words of the competency definition in your answer – but, at the same time, you need to make sure that the example that you have selected highlights all aspects of the competency.

If you are instead asked to **summarise your achievements, contributions and expertise**, you need to pull together an overview of the highlights of your career that are particularly relevant to the competency and the role in question. Include the work you have been involved in (from any role you have held) that displays the competency, but also keep in mind the role that you are going for and use that to guide your choice of what to include. Some candidates write this section as a list of brief bullet points that are a mix of responsibilities and achievements (anything from 10 to 15 bullet points per competency). Other candidates include fewer bullet points and give more information about each area that they include (4-6 bullet points) – this format is almost like making each point a mini-competency answer providing context, actions and results. Other candidates include a few bullet points of summary and one detailed example.

Keep in mind that if these are being used as part of a shortlisting exercise, they are being assessed from two perspectives. Firstly, do the work examples that you have included sufficiently demonstrate all aspects of the competency. Secondly, are the examples that you have included at a sufficient level of seniority to match the requirements of the new role.

### Reviewing the form before submitting it

Finally, when you have completed the application form, allow some time for you to review and edit the form. It is the first impression that the interviewers will have of you – make sure that the paperwork you submit makes the right first impression. It may also form the basis of the shortlisting process. Review the form, read each word out loud slowly and then edit. Give it to a colleague or a friend and have them give you feedback. You need to be really picky about this document, both so that you create the right impression of yourself and so that you make it through any shortlisting process.