



Careers

# A guide to CVs, cover letters and application forms



[lse.ac.uk/careers](https://lse.ac.uk/careers)

# Welcome

Our careers consultants have written this guide with input from employers and common questions asked by LSE students.

The first section focuses on identifying your skills and values and what employers are looking for, before starting your job search. The following sections give an overview of CVs, cover letters, and application forms.

We recommend reading through each section before you start applying as it will save you time and effort. All examples and advice relate to jobs in the UK. If you need support applying for roles outside the UK or writing a specialised application (like an academic or creative CV) visit our website ([lse.ac.uk/careers](https://lse.ac.uk/careers)) or book a one-to-one appointment with a careers consultant.

LSE Careers is open all year round and whether you have a clear idea of what you want to do after your studies or haven't started thinking about it yet, we can help.

We offer seminars on CVs, cover letters, and application forms throughout the year and you can also have your application reviewed in a one-to-one appointment. Browse and book on LSE CareerHub: [careers.lse.ac.uk](https://careers.lse.ac.uk)



**Jenny Blakesley**  
*Director, LSE Careers*



## Contents

Welcome	3
Before you start applying	4
CVs	10
Cover letters	23
Application forms	27
Further resources	35

# Before you start applying

Job applications offer you the opportunity to expand upon who you are and what you have done to demonstrate you fulfil the three Cs:

- the **competencies** to do the job – the skills, qualities or attributes
- the **commitment** to do the job – the energy, drive or enthusiasm
- the **cultural fit** to work within the organisation – a shared belief in the values pursued by the organisation.

## Identify your skills

You need to be clear about the competencies you have to offer the organisation and job you are applying for. Completing an application successfully requires you to do more than simply list your achievements. In order to persuade an employer you are the ideal candidate, you need to prove it with specific evidence and articulate this in a succinct way.

You can find lots of useful self-assessment and matching tools on our website ([lse.ac.uk/career-planning](http://lse.ac.uk/career-planning)). You can use these to navigate the career planning process and find the most appropriate information and resources for whatever stage you are at.

## Conduct a skills audit

Below is an example of how a simple skills audit might look but remember this table is not an exhaustive list of skills or examples.

The skills required by this organisation are...	Examples demonstrating these skills could include...
<b>Communication</b> including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• verbal skills</li><li>• non-verbal/body language</li><li>• written skills</li><li>• presentation skills</li><li>• adapting style to the needs of the audience</li><li>• listening skills.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• writing essays, dissertations or articles for the <i>Beaver</i></li><li>• speaking to clients and preparing reports at work</li><li>• networking at careers events</li><li>• involvement in mentoring.</li></ul>

“ I am very satisfied with the service and help provided by LSE Careers. I feel that it has already helped me during my first months here to develop my career perspective and goals much further. ”

LSE student

## Tips for skills auditing

- Identify transferable skills, ie, skills that can be taken from one job, activity or sector to another
- Think broadly about the skills you have developed through:
  - academic study
  - previous employment
  - volunteering
  - travelling
  - student societies
  - other extra-curricular activities eg, hobbies and interests
- Think about which examples are the most interesting, relevant and illustrative of your abilities to the employer.

### The skills required by this organisation are...

#### **Teamwork** including:

- building relationships
- supporting others
- negotiation skills
- setting aims and achieving shared objectives.

#### **Leadership and decision-making** including:

- managing conflict
- delegation
- sensitivity to others' needs
- taking responsibility.

#### **Problem-solving** including:

- identifying or anticipating problems/areas for improvement
- being flexible when faced with challenges
- using logical or lateral thinking to find solutions.

#### **Organisation and planning** including:

- time and resource management
- handling pressure
- prioritising activities
- meeting deadlines.

#### **IT** including:

- using software packages in a variety of contexts
- using the internet and email.

#### **Creativity** including:

- innovative ideas
- making improvements.

### Examples demonstrating these skills could include...

- volunteering projects
- being a member of a sports team or student society
- undertaking group projects as part of your degree or at work.

- being on the committee of a student society
- making career management decisions in your personal life
- project management at work
- mentoring
- volunteering.

- resolving customer complaints
- modifying methodology used in a research project or dissertation
- designing a simple database to more effectively manage client contacts for a charity, society or small business.

- planning an overseas trip
- organising an event
- managing a project as part of your degree or at work
- balancing your study and a part-time job.

- social media
- Word, Outlook, PowerPoint etc.
- analysing data using SPSS, Excel or Stata
- Dreamweaver, FrontPage, WordPress, Drupal.

- raising money for charity in an unusual way
- improving your productivity/motivation, e.g. starting a study support group with friends
- solving a problem.

The skills required by this organisation are...	Examples demonstrating these skills could include...
<p><b>Numeracy</b> including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• descriptive statistical skills</li> <li>• inferential statistical skills</li> <li>• budgeting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identifying patterns in data for academic projects</li> <li>• practical experience on an internship</li> <li>• handling stock or cash at work.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Commercial awareness</b> including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• having an understanding of the marketplace and competitors</li> <li>• being able to predict future trends</li> <li>• identifying new opportunities</li> <li>• effectively promoting products/services</li> <li>• thinking strategically beyond the boundaries of the immediate team.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• keeping up to date with the FT, Economist, websites, social media etc. to analyse current affairs and relate them to the particular organisation or role</li> <li>• involvement in entrepreneurship ventures, eg, LSE Generate competitions and awards: <a href="http://lse.ac.uk/generate">lse.ac.uk/generate</a></li> <li>• assisting customers and closing sales in a part-time retail job.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Personal qualities</b> including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reliability</li> <li>• proactivity</li> <li>• self-motivation</li> <li>• adaptability/flexibility.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrating a “can do” attitude and not being easily deterred or demoralised</li> <li>• standing in for a colleague at a meeting.</li> </ul>

## Conduct a values audit

This is an example of a simple values audit. Use it as a starting point to identify what really motivates you and whether the organisation and job you are applying for is a good match.

Things that motivate me are...	What does the job/organisation offer?
<b>Learning new things and variation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in-house training courses?</li> <li>• opportunities for secondments?</li> </ul>
<b>Sociable working environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• open-plan working environment?</li> <li>• coaching and mentoring networks?</li> </ul>
<b>Working on written projects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• report writing for senior management and media?</li> <li>• opportunity to contribute to professional journals and in-house publications?</li> <li>• responsibility for departmental website?</li> </ul>
<b>Time off to pursue outside interests/ spend time with family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adequate annual leave?</li> <li>• flexible working hours?</li> <li>• typical working week of 35 hours?</li> </ul>

## What employers are looking for

Most applicants find it relatively easy to complete their personal details and qualifications but lose inspiration when they are asked to write about themselves in more depth. Often this is because they don't know enough about the organisation, the job or their own skills to begin constructing an answer.

### Research

Researching what the organisation does, what they have to offer and what competencies they are looking for involves more than simply reading the recruitment literature.

The LSE Careers website ([lse.ac.uk/careers](http://lse.ac.uk/careers)) contains information on different employment sectors, ways of planning your career, and marketing your skills. You will also find a range of reference material in the LSE Careers Resource Centre on Floor 5 of the Saw Swee Hock Student Centre.

Visiting the organisation's website and reading their publications are good places to start to find out more about:

- the organisation's structure and culture
- their current projects, campaigns, products or clients
- their long-term strategies.

Find out whether the organisation has received any media coverage recently on either social media or the national or trade press.

“Have a look at the company website and social media including LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Find out about any events, including virtual events such as live chats, you can attend to ask questions and find out more about the company. If you meet someone from the company you are interested in and they give you their business card, make sure you use that connection and email them to ask questions and keep in contact.”

KPMG

Investigate the organisation's main competitors. Also consider developments within the sector, for example changes in the law or the merger of two competitors and the potential impact.

Attending employer presentations, careers fairs, and open days will provide you with opportunities to network with current employees. Speak to alumni through our Meet an Alum events and LinkedIn. Try to find out more about their day-to-day work, training and promotion opportunities within the organisation, and typical career development.

Talk to employees from different divisions of the same organisation, as well as their competitors, to see how their job roles and career paths may differ. This will help to ensure you are applying to the organisation or specific division that best matches your skills, motivations, and future plans.

### Top tip

Use our Resource Centre and library on Floor 5 of the Saw Swee Hock Student Centre for research and ask us if you need help with anything.

### Understand the job

Most organisations will provide you with a job description, which will give you a basic outline of the tasks you will be expected to undertake. Some organisations will also provide a person specification to explicitly identify the skills you will need to complete these tasks.

Use this information to check that you meet their essential criteria for qualifications and experience. This will help ensure you are targeting jobs at the right level. For example if the organisation asks for a postgraduate qualification in economics, do you have one? If not, is there a more appropriate entry-point into this organisation for you?

“It’s really important for an employer to hear that a candidate identifies with the organisation’s values, that they understand the responsibility the role demands, and that they are committed and inspired to take that role on.”

### Teach First

#### Top tip

Use the job description and person specification as checklists to self-assess your application. Have you provided clear examples to demonstrate you have all the relevant competencies mentioned in them?

## Plan and draft

A well-researched, planned and drafted application is better than a hundred rushed applications. There are no shortcuts – only ways to manage the time you spend on them more effectively. You might be tempted to copy all or part of your previous applications but we strongly recommend you don’t do this because it suggests to employers you lack commitment and enthusiasm for the job.

### Tips for planning and drafting:

- Read this guide and any instructions from employers on the application process thoroughly
- Know the deadlines for all applications and keep track of them
- Set aside time for each application – if necessary, incorporate this time into your diary or study timetable so you don’t miss the deadline
- Make rough planning notes before you draft your CV, cover letter or application form answers
- Take your time when reviewing your documents so you find it easier to spot any errors or omissions
- Use the checklists in this guide to ensure you have demonstrated that you have the competencies, commitment, and cultural fit.

## Language

You are being invited to write in your own words meaning your ability to write concisely and coherently is being assessed, so be personal.

The way you write about your experiences is nearly as important as the activities themselves. Write confidently about your achievements using professional, proactive and positive language. However, avoid using jargon that cannot be clearly understood and if you use any abbreviations you should explain them.

Professional, proactive and positive language gives the reader the impression that you make things happen and that you are in control. It highlights the fact that you have analysed the competencies required and your own experiences, and identified a match.

### Examples that can be used to evidence various competencies include:

#### Leadership:

• coordinated • implemented • established • managed • led  
• directed • supervised • delegated • coached • allocated

#### Communication:

• trained • negotiated • influenced • consulted • presented  
• persuaded • interacted • advised • addressed

#### Research:

• analysed • investigated • determined • experimented  
• surveyed • solved • synthesised

#### Organisation:

• streamlined • scheduled • encouraged • expanded • resolved  
• budgeted • (re)organised • prepared • administered

#### Interpersonal:

• collaborated • facilitated • mediated • consulted • liaised

#### Taking initiative:

• initiated • created • designed • established • launched  
• set up • conceived • implemented

#### Achievements:

• promoted • launched • developed • redefined • simplified  
• persevered • enhanced • accelerated • improved  
• completed • produced • secured • increased • doubled

Use words such as “achieved”, “created” and “organised” and avoid words such as “basic”, “attempted”, “limited”, “numerous”, “many”, “several”, “some” and “various”. Present information in the most positive light but remember there is a clear distinction between doing this and exaggerating.

### Tips for language:

- Review the language used on an organisation’s recruitment literature and website to see what resonates with them but beware of simply mirroring the same language
- Show evidence of having dissected and analysed the different requirements
- Write in a simple and direct way using short sentences
- Check the language you have used is in the right context by getting feedback from the LSE Language Centre ([lse.ac.uk/languages](https://lse.ac.uk/languages)) or a professional currently working in your chosen field
- Always use the spell check on your computer (but remember it does not always identify all mistakes) and make sure it is set to UK English.

### Did you know?

Top reasons employers give for unsuccessful applications include: poor spelling and grammar, not answering the question asked, not following instructions, lack of research on the organisation and not practising for tests that are part of the application process. Read on for specific advice on CVs, cover letters, and application forms.

“Think about how you demonstrate what skills you have gained through your experience and whether you can draw these out more. For example it may be implicit that captaining a sports team shows teamwork and leadership, but make this explicit where possible. Your experience and positions of responsibility are evidence of your skillset, so don’t forget to reference the relevant skills. ”

**Morgan Stanley**

## Talking about disability

Whether or not you disclose your disability is a very personal choice. LSE Careers offers tailored services for disabled students including a dedicated careers consultant specialising in disability and employment, and longer, flexible appointments available to accommodate individual needs. You can visit us or email [careers.disability@lse.ac.uk](mailto:careers.disability@lse.ac.uk) for advice on recruitment processes, disclosure, reasonable adjustments to recruitment processes and the workplace environment, legal issues and other disability careers issues.

We have further information for students with disabilities on the LSE Careers website ([lse.ac.uk/disabilitycareers](https://lse.ac.uk/disabilitycareers)) and you can visit [gov.uk/browse/disabilities/work](https://gov.uk/browse/disabilities/work) for details about employment rights. For advice on disability issues during your time at University visit the Disability and Well-being Service, email [disability-dyslexia@lse.ac.uk](mailto:disability-dyslexia@lse.ac.uk) or call 020 7955 7567.

## References

Before you apply for any job, think about who your referees might be. References are often requested by an employer on an application form or when you secure a job offer, so you don’t need to mention them on your CV.

In most cases an employer will request the names and contact details of two referees, preferably an academic and a recent employer. This is to check that you have studied or worked where you say you have and that you are a good candidate for the role.

Most employers are more interested in what the reference says rather than the referee so don’t worry if your most recent employer is not relevant to the job you are applying for. If you don’t have a previous employer you can use two academic references, or one academic and one extra-curricular one.

Aim to choose people that know you, your capabilities, and can vouch for your work ethic. Always ask permission to use someone as a referee, and discuss the types of jobs you will be applying for and the skills required with them.



# CVs

## Relevance

Curriculum vitae (CV) means “story of your life”. However, with only one or two pages for your CV you can't afford to treat this literally. Be selective about what you include. Always ask yourself the question “Is this going to be relevant to the employer who is reading this?” If it isn't, then discard it.

## Tailoring

Your CV needs to match the job you are applying for. For example, if the job requires skills in teamwork and creativity, you need to ensure the employer can clearly see that you have gained these skills somewhere in your life. Maybe you worked in a team on a course project or perhaps you had a creative idea for an event which a society organised. The important thing is that the employer can see that your CV is tailored to them and not a generic CV that is being sent to every employer.

## Layout and design

You can influence where the employer looks on your CV by the amount of space you allocate to certain sections. For example, in your education section for most circumstances you will want to draw employers to your LSE degree. You will also need to think carefully about your choice of headings to highlight key experience.

### Academic CVs

These are different in several respects from other CVs. For example, they do not have the same length restrictions and are expected to contain more detail about your academic achievements, publications, and teaching experience. For more information, look at the PhD section of the LSE Careers website. Our careers consultant for PhD students runs seminars on writing academic CVs and applying for jobs in and outside academia. Use LSE CareerHub to book on to these seminars as well as one-to-one PhD/Postdoctorate appointments at [careers.lse.ac.uk](https://careers.lse.ac.uk)

### What is the difference between a résumé and a CV?

If you see an advert asking for a résumé it's likely that they have in mind a one-page document. A résumé usually covers the same areas as a CV, but with less space to go into detail. See page 13 for an example.

## Gaps in your CV

Employers can question extensive periods of unexplained time on a CV and as a general rule, it is always best to explain these gaps. Obviously, you don't need to account for every week or even every month, but if, for example, you took a year between school and university to go travelling, it is best to account for it and mention it on your CV.

However if there are very personal or sensitive reasons which prevented you being in work or study (including things like criminal convictions, long periods of illness, and caring for family members) then you don't have to declare these on your CV. You should, however, be prepared to talk about any gaps in your CV at interview. There is a balance between explaining everything that has happened and deciding what information is strictly relevant to an employer. You can also mention details on your cover letter or application form, if appropriate. If you are unsure about your situation then talk to an LSE careers consultant.

## Truthfulness

You should be willing to talk about anything on your CV at interview, even details in your interests and extra-curricular activities sections. You don't know what kinds of things your interviewer might also be interested in or have knowledge about so avoid exaggeration. Remember it is against the law to lie on your CV.

# Layout and design

## 1 How long should a CV be?

Some organisations expect a one-page CV, but for most a two-page CV is acceptable unless otherwise specified. In almost all cases your CV should be no longer than two sides of A4. A common exception to this is an academic CV.

## 2 What is the difference between a “chronological” and a “skills based” CV?

In most cases you will use a chronological CV, which has standard sections such as education and work experience. Your achievements in each section will be ordered in reverse chronology (i.e. most recent first). However, there may be occasions where you start off with a section on the skills you have gained, with examples of where you gained them; this is a “skills based” CV. It is most commonly used when you have significant relevant experience or an existing career and are looking to change direction and need to emphasise transferable skills.

## 3 Should I use different colours on my CV?

We recommend black ink on white paper as standard. Using more exciting colours will certainly make you stand out, but perhaps not in a positive way unless you are applying for a creative or design role.

## 4 What font should I use?

Sans serif fonts, like Arial, can make your CV look clean, neat and most importantly readable. Use a font size between 10 and 12. Avoid unusual fonts; they have the effect of making the reader focus on the font rather than the content.

“It’s important to be clear and concise to make it as easy as possible for the recruiter to be drawn to the key information, so don’t include big chunks of writing. Also, use the space wisely and really consider the formatting and layout; for example use bold or capital headings to break up the information.”

Cancer Research UK

## 5 Should I send my CV as a Word document or a PDF?

Send a PDF version if possible, unless otherwise specified. A PDF will look the same on any computer, whereas sometimes a Word document might look different (overflowing to three pages for example) depending on the software version.

## 6 Are there any good examples of CVs I can use?

There are many example CVs on the LSE Careers website. However, it is never a good idea to just copy one exactly. Your information is unique and to present it in the most favourable light you will need to make changes to any example you find.

## 7 I have previous work experience. Should I present my CV differently?

The same basic principles apply, for example giving your most relevant information highest priority on your CV. However, you may want to consider different formats such as a skills based CV. Even if you have more experience, your CV still needs to be on a maximum of two pages, so you may have to be more selective depending on the organisation’s needs.

# First page of a typical two-page CV

## Amit Chopra

a.chopra@lse.ac.uk | linkedin.com/AmitChopra | (+44)123456789

Clear headings

### EDUCATION

**BSc. Government and Economics** 10/2013 – 06/2018  
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

- Expected Grade: First Class (Honours)
- Dissertation researched the changes to economic public policy and the extent to which the changes were affected by outside influences/institutions from a political science perspective

**Singapore GCE 'A' Levels** 01/2011 – 12/2012  
National Junior College, Singapore

- 9 As including further mathematics, physics and chemistry
- Three distinctions for special papers in mathematics, physics and chemistry
- Highest grades in Singapore

**Indian Class 10<sup>th</sup>** 02/1998 – 12/2010  
Delhi Public School, R.K.Puram, New Delhi, India

- 93.2% overall including mathematics, English, science and social sciences
- Results in top 2% of year (out of 300 students)

### WORK EXPERIENCE

**Intern, National Policy on SMEs department** 07/2014 – 09/2014  
Ministry for Trade and Industry, Singapore

- Developed a revised long-term strategy as part of a team, including deciding on which industry sectors and functional areas to focus development efforts
- Researched and presented results to the team on establishing comparative international benchmarks for Singaporean agencies in the SME sector

**Spring Intern, International Team on European Equities** 04/2014 – 04/2014  
Goldman Sachs, London

- Presented research findings (compiled as part of a team) regarding the equities of a European client, to the client and senior bosses

**Customer Assistant** 04/2013 – 06/2013  
Paris Gourmand, Singapore

- Supervised café and team of assistants in day to day running of the business
- Managed time to ensure efficient but good customer service

**Volunteer Mentor** 02/2013 – 04/2013  
Singapore Indian Development Association

- Managed the programme which coordinates volunteers and mentees and recruits more mentors, as part of a team
- Mentored three children from disadvantaged households, encouraging them to stay in education
- Organised mentor programme through administrative duties

Dates all in the same place

Sections clearly differentiated

Plenty of white space creates uncluttered design

Good use of bullet points and space to emphasise key skills and responsibilities

For more CV examples, visit  
[lse.ac.uk/careers](http://lse.ac.uk/careers)

## Example of a single page CV (sometimes called a “résumé”)

Smaller margins than two-page CV

Clearly defined sections

Combines sections which might be separate on a two-page CV

### EDWARD BACKER

e.backer@lse.ac.uk  
(+44) 123456789

#### EDUCATION

- MSc European Political Economy, London School of Economics** 2015-2018
- Analysis of the European process of political and economic integration.
  - Focus on European models of capitalism, Spain and the philosophical rationale of Europe.
- BSc (Hons) International Business, 2:1, Warwick Business School** 2011-2015
- Focused on: International Marketing and Strategy, Latin-American Economies, Service Operations Management and European Political Economy.
  - Third year spent as Erasmus in Barcelona at ESADE Business School.
- European Baccalaureate, 80.84%, ESADE Business & Law School, Luxembourg** 1999-2011
- French-speaking section, AAB.
  - Focused on: economics, history, English, Spanish and mathematics.

#### RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

- Voluntary Work Internship at ADA (Luxembourg)** June 2015 – August 2015
- Analysed the tracking information of the evolution of micro-finance institutions via a rating fund commissioned by the World Bank.
  - Reported evaluation results through written work on NGOs demanding state funding.
  - Translated various work including the annual report.
  - Edited the online bibliography database.
- Student Work Placement at DuPont de Nemours (Luxembourg)** July 2014 – August 2014
- Created access databases for the Energy department.
  - Liaised with colleagues to determine important information and data to be included in databases.
- Administrator at the European Court of Auditors (Luxembourg)** August 2011
- Organised diverse documents in all EU languages.

#### ADDITIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Cashier and Steward at the University of Warwick Cinema** Sept 2012 – Sept 2013
- Communicated with customers to ensure good customer service.
- Student Employment at the European Investment Bank (Luxembourg)** August 2011
- Organised and distributed internal and external mail in two divisions of the bank.

#### LANGUAGES & IT KNOWLEDGE

- French and Spanish: Native speaker.
- English: Fluent.
- Catalan: Intermediate.
- Greek: Basic, simple comprehension, reading and speaking.
- Very good knowledge of MS Word, Excel, Access and Outlook.

#### AWARDS & INTERESTS

- “Diploma Superior de Español” awarded by the Cervantes Institute, 2003.
- Tennis: Member of the Warwick team 2011-2012, captain of my hometown team in 2008.
- Basketball: Player since the age of 12, member of my hometown team 2004-2007. Hometown council award for basketball achievement, 2004.
- Took part in the Close-up Foundation two weeks study tour of the political and social institutions in New York, Philadelphia and Washington DC, 2003.

Very concise information

Less white space on a single page CV

For more CV examples, visit  
[lse.ac.uk/careers](http://lse.ac.uk/careers)

# Personal details

Large clear name.  
No need to write  
“curriculum vitae”  
anywhere

**Amit Chopra**

a.chopra@lse.ac.uk | linkedin.com/AmitChopra | (+44)123456789

Include your  
LinkedIn profile  
or any personal  
websites or blogs  
if they are relevant

Provide up to date  
contact details

## 1 Should I include a career profile/objective?

A career profile or objective is a short statement, usually at the top of your CV, saying something about you and your career aims. For new graduates or postgraduates, career profiles are not necessary as this content is addressed in your cover letter.

Profiles can be a useful addition to a CV if you have very specific experience and you are clear about the particular career area you are going for. If you are changing career they can help you to state briefly your previous area of experience and what you are aiming for now. Profiles can also be useful if you are asked to send a CV without a cover letter.

## 2 Do I need to mention my nationality and work permit status?

You don't have to mention your nationality on a CV for a UK role. If any other information on your CV suggests you need a visa/work permit and this is not the case, then highlight you have permission to work here.

If you do need a visa or work permit, there is a resource on the LSE Careers website ([lse.ac.uk/careers](https://lse.ac.uk/careers)) where you can search for UK organisations licensed to issue Tier 2 visas. You can also wait to raise the subject at interview stage as this will allow you to “sell” yourself in person. If you are unsure about anything, please contact the International Student Visa Advice Team (ISVAT) for information and advice: [lse.ac.uk/isvat](https://lse.ac.uk/isvat)

Though not required on CVs, employers may ask you to state your nationality on application forms to find out whether they will need to apply for a work permit for you, or if you are applying for certain jobs, for example in government. If you are asked as part of an equality and diversity questionnaire, this is only seen by the organisation's Human Resources team.

## 3 What if I'm applying outside the UK?

Read the application advice carefully and use resources such as “GoinGlobal” and country profiles, available on the LSE Careers website, to research the recruitment norms of different countries.

## 4 What doesn't need to be included?

You should not be asked for a photo in the UK. It is illegal for employers to ask you to declare your age or gender (though it may be deducible from other information like your name and the date of your qualifications) and also illegal, except in certain rare situations, for employers to discriminate on grounds of gender.

# Education

Gives expected result

Explains non-UK qualification

Selects a relevant module to explain

## EDUCATION

<b>BSc. Government and Economics</b> London School of Economics and Political Science, UK	10/2013 – 06/2018
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expected Grade: First Class (Honours)</li><li>• Dissertation researched the changes to economic public policy and the extent to which the changes were affected by outside influences/institutions from a political science perspective</li></ul>	
<b>Singapore GCE 'A' Levels</b> National Junior College, Singapore	01/2011 – 12/2012
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 9 As including further mathematics, physics and chemistry</li><li>• Three distinctions for special papers in mathematics, physics and chemistry</li><li>• Highest grades in Singapore</li></ul>	
<b>Indian Class 10<sup>th</sup></b> Delhi Public School, R.K.Puram, New Delhi, India	02/1998 – 12/2010
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 93.2% overall including mathematics, English, science and social sciences</li><li>• Results in top 2% of year (out of 300 students)</li></ul>	

### 1 What part of my education should I give most prominence?

You should give most prominence to the part of your education that is most relevant to the job you are applying for. Usually, this is your most recent education but you can emphasise an earlier qualification if it is more relevant, as well as specific modules or projects.

### 2 Do I need to give the full addresses of the places I have studied?

No, giving the city is enough; for example, "Sciences-Po, Paris". You can add the country if you feel the city is not very well known.

### 3 Do I have to list all my qualifications and modules?

Unless the employer specifically asks you to, you don't have to list everything but remember to include all those that are relevant to the application you are making. Try to be selective. Listing your A levels is fine but try to summarise your GCSE grades. For example write "10 GCSEs including Maths and English, at grades A\* to B". Don't overlook the importance of group projects, research, and dissertations.

In addition, show you are well-rounded by highlighting your extra-curricular pursuits as many employers rate experience, intelligence, and aptitude above qualifications when considering candidates and applications.

#### 4 Some of my qualifications are non-UK. How do I translate them into UK ones?

Educational systems vary widely and a grade or degree classification can mean quite different things from country to country. The best way to approach this is to explain your qualification so that the reader understands its significance. You can use phrases such as, “equivalent to top five per cent of year”, or “highest possible grade”. GPAs and percentages will normally be accepted. For more information look at the NARIC website ([naric.org.uk](http://naric.org.uk)). If you are unsure about anything, contact the organisation you are applying to directly.

#### 5 How should I present predicted grades?

In most situations this is more important for undergraduates than postgraduates as many employers specify a certain class of degree as an entry requirement. First of all consult your tutor to find out what they think your final result will be. If this is not possible then make a realistic estimate based on your previous years’ grades. You can use a phrase such as “predicted result 2:1”.

Employers will rarely ask for a “merit” or “distinction” for postgraduate qualifications, so unless the job is placing particular weight on your degree, it is optional.

#### 6 Should I mention awards and scholarships?

Use these to impress the reader with your good academic track record. If you have many, going back to your time at school, it may be best to select a few of the most prestigious or most recent. For each one you give, say what the award or scholarship was for, what you were awarded eg, a prize or bursary, what proportion of people received an award in your year and any other details that quantify the achievement.

“In order to direct your potential employer to the most prominent and relevant elements of your course it can sometimes help to include a little background information on your degree. If you’re stuck for ideas, why not browse through your university course outline and pick out the most relevant parts?”

**LSE Careers Consultant**



# Work experience

Talks about skills, achievements, and results

## WORK EXPERIENCE

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**Intern, National Policy on SMEs department** 07/2014 – 09/2018  
Ministry for Trade and Industry, Singapore

- Developed a revised long-term strategy as part of a team, including deciding on which industry sectors and functional areas to focus development efforts
- Researched and presented results to the team on establishing comparative international benchmarks for Singaporean agencies in the SME sector

**Spring Intern, International Team on European Equities** 04/2014 – 04/2014  
Goldman Sachs, London

- Presented research findings (compiled as part of a team) regarding the equities of a European client, to the client and senior bosses

**Customer Assistant** 04/2013 – 06/2013  
Paris Gourmand, Singapore

- Supervised café and team of assistants in day to day running of the business
- Managed time to ensure efficient but good customer service

**Volunteer Mentor** 02/2013 – 04/2013  
Singapore Indian Development Association

- Managed the programme which coordinates volunteers and mentees and recruits more mentors, as part of a team
- Mentored three children from disadvantaged households, encouraging them to stay in education
- Organised mentor programme through administrative duties

Uses positive, proactive language

Quantifies success with figures

Explains organisation and role when necessary

## 1 What counts as “work experience”?

Work experience is everything from full-time positions and internships, voluntary/unpaid work, part-time jobs, and entrepreneurial activities. All of these can be directly relevant to a role. Employers are interested in the transferable skills you have developed and so it is your job to decide how relevant each experience is to your application and to highlight this.

## Importance of voluntary experience

Volunteering is an opportunity to make an impact on society, develop new and existing skills, meet new people, improve your confidence, give your CV a boost and more. The LSE Volunteer Centre advertises a range of opportunities on LSE CareerHub and you can book one-to-one discussions for advice on finding a suitable role:

[lse.ac.uk/volunteercentre](http://lse.ac.uk/volunteercentre)



## 2 Do I need to give the full addresses of the places I worked?

Mentioning the city is enough, for example “Marks and Spencer, London” or “London School of Economics and Political Science”. Add the country if you feel the city is not very well known.

## 3 If my job title is in a foreign language, will I need to translate it?

If the title is very different and obscure then you will need to translate it into the language of the country of application. For the UK market, check with an LSE careers consultant that you have an accurate translation which means something significant. A clear description of the work you did will also clarify your application.

## 4 I have different experience from different sectors, gained at different points in my life. How do I present that on my CV?

One option is to list the experience in reverse chronological order. However it might be more effective if you grouped or “themed” your experiences. So, instead of a general heading called “Work Experience”, you could have two or more headings such as, “Legal Experience”, “Banking Experience”; or alternatively “Relevant Experience” and “Additional Experience”.

*“Make your headings work for you. You can use them to subdivide your work experience so that you can collect together the most relevant experience in one section. Then put that section in a prominent place on your CV. For example if you are applying for a consultancy job and you have a mixture of consultancy and other work experience, create a section called “Consultancy work” for your first page and another called “Work experience” that can appear later in your CV. ”*

**LSE Careers Consultant**

*“Experience should be recent, relevant to work history and in reverse chronological order. Never underestimate your experience – skills can be transferable so if you can demonstrate they match the role, any experience can be of interest. ”*

**VSO International**

### Top tips: presenting your experience

- Your CV should direct the employer to the skills and experience they have asked for. If you can demonstrate the skills you have acquired and apply them to the role you are applying for, then any experience can be of interest. Don't underestimate yourself.
- Your CV may form the framework of your interview. Be comfortable with what you have written and be prepared to elaborate and talk enthusiastically about anything on your CV.
- Be clear about your individual contributions to the achievements you list and be ready to explain them at interview.
- Avoid obscure abbreviations, jargon or slang.
- Try to quantify successes with facts and figures – “scored in top 5 per cent”, “increased sales by £X”, “managed a team of five staff”.
- Remember not to misrepresent any information – employers can revoke an interview or offer if you do.



# Achievements, interests and additional skills

Gives appropriate level of detail

Quantifies success with figures

Headings are flexible in these sections

Goes into detail about interests

EXTRA CURRICULAR EXPERIENCE	
<b>Secretary</b> London International Model United Nations	10/2014 – present
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Coordinate the weekly meetings of the Organising Committee and ensure timeline requirements are met</li><li>• Arrange venue and accommodation for over 70 participants</li></ul>	
<b>Secretary</b> LSE Debate Society	10/2014 – 06/2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Active member and debater in the LSE Debate Team, representing LSE at inter-varsity tournaments</li><li>• Organised weekly meetings of the society, coordinating 30 members</li><li>• Planned, prepared and facilitated the LSE Open 2015, an international inter-varsity competition, attended by 200 contestants</li></ul>	
<b>International Editor</b> The Beaver, LSE's weekly newspaper	10/2014 – 06/2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wrote a dedicated column on international affairs</li></ul>	
<b>President</b> National Junior College Debate Club	01/2012 – 12/2012
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Debater in the NJC Debate Team</li><li>• Liaised with peers to ensure attendance at the Club, with responsibility for over 80 debaters</li></ul>	
AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 'Best second year exam performance, with reference to first years' at LSE, out of a possible 2000 students; The CS MacTaggart Prize 2015</li><li>• Student of the Year 2013 out of 500 students; National Junior College, Singapore</li></ul>	
IT SKILLS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Statistical software packages including eViews, Minitab and Stata</li><li>• Touch typing ability c. 60 wpm</li><li>• Proficient in all major Microsoft Office applications, including complex formulae in Excel</li></ul>	
INTERESTS	
Backpacked through Mediterranean Europe for nine weeks, a particular highlight was visiting Florence and experiencing the Uffizi and Accademia museums	

Same layout as work experience

Uses selective examples and explains the significance

Highlights relevant IT skills

## 1 What goes in my interests section?

This is an important section where recruiters look for evidence of what you have achieved outside of your studies and work experience. It enables you to identify things that really interest or motivate you. It may also indicate what your values are, aspects of your personality and the transferable skills you have developed. It is better to include one or two things which you are really involved with and can describe fully, rather than to give

“While relevant experience is always viewed positively, don't be put off applying if you don't have this. Think about the skills you've developed through other work experience and extra-curricular responsibilities and be explicit about these skills in your CV.”

**FTI Consulting**

a long list such as “reading, squash, cricket, dancing, music” with no detail. You might also want to include team or group activities that show you can interact well with other people. Treat this section in the same way as the rest of your CV using dates, divisions such as “school” and “university” or grouping similar things like sports, as well as numbers to show your achievements and enhance impact.

## 2 What if I haven't taken part in extra-curricular activities?

You don't have to include a section on extra-curricular activities or achievements, but employers are often interested in what you do outside of work and academic studies. Think widely about what you have done before you came to University and whilst you have been at LSE or previous institutions. Activities like volunteering, mentoring, being a course representative, organising an event to raise money or the profile of a particular cause are all relevant experience. It is never too late to get involved in something on or off campus.

## 3 How important are languages and how best can I demonstrate them?

This will depend on the position that you are applying for. If languages are one of the requirements of the job it may be worth writing them in a short, specific personal profile at the top of your CV or in a prominent position on the first page. You need to describe your level of fluency using terms like “native”, “fluent”, “intermediate”, “basic” or “conversational”.

“Candidates that show a combination of experiences, behaviours and technical skills typically stand out as the most well-rounded and talented individuals. Use your application to share unique experiences and interests, and your involvement in academic and extra-curricular activities. Demonstrating skills like entrepreneurial spirit, problem solving, and ability to motivate teams or peers will also help you stand out.”

L'Oréal

## 4 What level of IT skills do I need to demonstrate?

Towards the end of your CV, you can detail your familiarity with relevant packages, programming languages, operating systems, web design software and anything else listed on the job description and person specification.

## 5 Should I include social media?

Yes – platforms such as blogs, LinkedIn, and Twitter can portray you in a professional light. Including them on your CV shows you have a grasp of new media, technological and communications skills, a passion for certain subjects or writing, and possibly a network of people who are interested in what you have to say. Personal social media accounts for private communication with friends are probably best hidden from employers. Keep them off your CV and alter the privacy settings so that only your friends can view them. It is also worth searching for your name online to see what kinds of things employers can find out about you whilst they screen applications.

### CV writing tips from a recruiter

- Be concise and ensure your information has an impact.
- Keep it simple and clear – you can always elaborate at the interview.
- Analyse the job description – read it and identify which relevant skills, experience, and competencies you have or consider other experiences that could be appropriate.
- If you have any gaps in your experience, for example through a career break or travelling, explain it on your application.
- Academic and professional qualifications should flow in a logical order.
- Check your CV including spelling and get a friend or family member to read through before submitting if it helps.

# CV checklist

## Content

### Personal

- Have you included your contact details?
- Does your email address sound professional?
- Have you included an up-to-date LinkedIn profile?

### Education

- Have you given most space to your most recent or relevant education?
- Have you mentioned relevant modules, projects, dissertations, and awards?
- Have you highlighted key or relevant transferable skills?
- Is your education section easy to follow and consistent in approach?
- Is there anything else you need to explain (eg, "A" grade is equivalent to the top 1.5 per cent)?

### Work experience

- Have you included job title, dates, organisation name, type of business and location?
- Have you used proactive words to highlight your skills, impact, and the significance of your achievements?
- Have you ordered this section and identified skills that are tailored towards your chosen future role?
- Is this a comprehensive overview of all the jobs you have had?

### Achievements/positions of responsibility

- Have you displayed specific evidence for your skills?
- Have you demonstrated the significance of your achievements?  
Can you quantify them?
- Have you highlighted the most relevant roles or skills for the job you are applying for?
- Can you include any of these positions (eg, volunteering) to highlight suitability for a particular job?

### Skills

- Have you included your IT skills and evidenced these?  
How competent are you?
- Do you speak any languages? Is the proficiency level of each expressed?
- Is there any other information to include eg, driving licence, professional training courses?

### Other interests

- If there is space on your CV, do you go beyond listing lots of one-word examples?
- Have you given a variety of interests highlighting different skillsets?
- Can your interests be used to demonstrate responsibility, commitment, and achievement?

### References

- Has the employer asked for references to be included?  
Unless requested to it isn't necessary to include them on your CV. See page 9 for more information.

## Layout and design

### Rationale and targeting

- Does your CV follow protocol for your chosen sector (is a one-page or two-page CV the standard?)
- Are there specific CV guidelines for the country you are applying to?
- Have you tailored your skills and experience to the role?
- Is the structure logical and the space allocation of sections appropriate to their importance?

### Written style

- Is the language positive and enthusiastic in tone?
- Have you checked for vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors?
- Are capital letters used correctly?
- Is your CV jargon free and are acronyms explained?
- Have you proof-read for errors?

### Presentation

- Are the headings clear and easy to read and are they descriptive/tailored?
- Does your CV have well-spaced sections?
- Is all the information in your CV formatted the same way and easy to scan read?
- Does your CV use the same font as your cover letter?

“CVs should be a snapshot of what you have achieved in an orderly fashion that’s easy to digest. Put yourself in the position of your future employer who may be looking through hundreds of CVs – they want to know who you are, where you’ve worked, what you’ve achieved academically and personally and what you are hoping to do next. So choose your words wisely and check for mistakes.”

### Seven Hills

#### Top tip

Print your CV to see what it looks like in reality. Is there a lot of white space or too much text? Are the margins too large or small? Your CV could be read in as little as 8 seconds. Make sure it is immediately appealing – ask yourself what impression it leaves you with.



# Cover letters

A cover letter is a one-page document, read in conjunction with your CV, that highlights relevant skills, experiences, and achievements. Employers recognise and reject generic cover letters so each one you write should be tailored to a specific role and organisation using the job description and person specification.

## 1 Which is more important, the CV or the cover letter?

They are equally important as both are used to form an impression of you. The cover letter is often the first thing the employer sees and it sets their expectations for what follows. A good cover letter highlights your key strengths and motivations for wanting to work for an organisation and a CV goes into more detail about your achievements.

## 2 What needs to be in a cover letter?

Employers expect you to show your interest and motivation, demonstrate your knowledge of the organisation and why you want to work there, and show you are the best person for the position through your qualifications and experience. As long as there is a clear structure, the order of how you address these points is flexible.

When focusing on the employer and why you're applying for the job, include some interesting and relevant facts about the organisation. Your qualifications and experience can include relevant academic, extra-curricular, and work achievements as well as other interesting aspects of your life. Show them you are capable of thinking clearly and that you are a motivated, proactive learner.

## 3 How long should the cover letter be and what is the correct layout?

In general, cover letters are one side of typed A4 and are set out like a formal business letter. Your name and address should be at the top, right-hand corner of the letter. Follow the employer's instructions and advice but if they don't specify then something

around 400 words or three to four paragraphs is about right, and certainly not more than one page of A4 paper.

Aim for short, sharp sentences that make for concise, gripping paragraphs. Write in a clear and logical manner and remember the way you write and present yourself says a lot about you. Have a look at the example cover letter in this section or on our website to see how this is done.

### Top tips

- Keep the language personal but formal. Think about how you would speak to an employer at interview.
- Tailor each cover letter by researching the organisation and referring to the job description and person specification.
- Be positive. Use action words but don't lose sight of your own style or achievements.
- Avoid repeating key words or phrases.
- Always end on a positive note. You can end by reaffirming your motivation, enthusiasm, and suitability.
- Check your letter several times and get someone else to check it too.

*“It's really important your cover letter says something specific and unique about why you want to work for that organisation. Go beyond the obvious on their website, do your research and show you are genuinely motivated and enthusiastic about what the organisation does. This is what employers are looking for and will help you stand out from other applicants.”*

**LSE Careers Consultant**

#### 4 How should I address and sign off my letter?

Reply to the name used in the advert or application pack. The correct greeting in a business letter is always formal. It normally begins with “Dear” and usually includes the person’s title, ie, Professor, Dr, Mr, Ms etc. and last name (make sure you use the correct spelling). If addressing a female recruiter, does the job advert specify whether they are Mrs, Miss, or Ms? If it doesn’t say then it is best to use Ms. When you know the name of the person, sign off with “Yours sincerely”.

If a name is not given, contact the organisation and ask for a named individual who deals with recruitment. If you are not able to find a named individual, you can use “Dear Sir/Madam” and sign off with “Yours faithfully”.

#### 5 Can I use bullet points or subheadings in a cover letter?

You can use bullet points or subheadings to help structure your cover letter. However remember that you are still writing a formal business letter so write clearly and succinctly.

#### 6 My circumstances are unusual, how should I present these in a cover letter?

Think about the needs of the organisation and try to present the information to meet those needs, emphasising the transferable skills you have acquired. Focus on all areas in which you feel the employer will be interested.

#### 7 All the organisations I am looking at seem to be the same. How can I demonstrate that I know the differences?

It is often assumed that the way to impress is to show you have carried out a lot of research. This is true up to a point. The strongest cover letters show you have done some research but also make a link between you and the organisation using the job description and person specification. You may also want to show initiative and speak to people working for the organisation to learn more.

#### 8 Are there any example cover letters at LSE Careers?

We have example cover letters on our website ([lse.ac.uk/careers](https://lse.ac.uk/careers)). Remember these are only guides; your cover letter needs to be tailored and specific to the role and employer.

“It can be tempting to think of applications as a numbers game, and that the best approach is to apply to as many employers as possible. That can cause your cover letter to look very standardised and errors to creep in. Check whether the organisation you’re applying to has a statement of values, and read the role description carefully. Then use the cover letter to guide the employer to the sections of your CV or application form that show your own values are aligned. This will make your application appear more tailored and shows the employer that you would be a good fit.”

**Morgan Stanley**

#### 9 Can I discuss my cover letter with someone at LSE Careers?

We run one-to-one appointments throughout the year where you can discuss the style and content of your applications and how to tailor them to particular positions. However, these do not cover spelling and grammar; you should see the LSE Language Centre for help with this. You can use LSE CareerHub to book CV and cover letter discussions at [careers.lse.ac.uk](https://careers.lse.ac.uk)

#### 10 What do I put as the subject header when sending my cover letter via email?

Follow any instructions in the job advert (like including a reference number). If there are none, use “Application for (job title)” as the subject line. If you are sending a speculative application you can be less specific but try to keep your subject header concise and professional.

#### 11 Can I send a speculative CV and cover letter?

Sometimes roles are not formally advertised so you can enquire about upcoming opportunities or express an interest in working for an organisation. Try to find out who deals with recruitment through calling or networking, as personally addressed applications are the most effective and professional. Include a CV and cover letter (media and journalism applicants should also include one or two examples of portfolio or published work). Once sent, wait between one and two weeks to follow up.

# Example cover letter

**Recruiter's name and organisation's address**

Ms J Joseph  
Graduate Recruitment Manager  
TB4 Consultancy  
London WC2R 2LS

22 September 2017

Dear Ms Joseph

I would like to apply for the position of Trainee IT Consultant recently advertised on the LSE Careers vacancy board. I have just started a one year master's course in Information Systems at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

As you can see from my enclosed CV, I worked during my undergraduate degree at the University of Warwick gaining valuable experience as an IT business analyst with Société Générale and as a volunteer with Peace Way Foundation. At Société Générale, one of my key achievements was to design and implement a company-specific information system which has resulted in a 25% reduction in administration time for the bank. Also, as part of the internship in the New York office, I completed a 60 page report on how a good information system strategy could be developed and implemented by senior managers. Working as a volunteer with the Peace Foundation in Bangkok further developed my cultural awareness and relationship management skills, qualities also relevant to the work of an IT consultant. As well as these qualities, my undergraduate studies have also developed my skills in researching a topic, making presentations, writing reports and analysing data.

One of the main reasons for choosing IT consultancy as a career is that I have for a long time been interested in business but also fascinated by how technology and information systems can improve organisational effectiveness. The variety of working on different projects across different sectors of work also appeals to me. My reasons for applying to TB4 are as follows: First, the range of clients TB4 works with is considerably broader than many of the other major IT consultancy firms that I have been researching. I recently read an article on [www.top-consultant.com](http://www.top-consultant.com) about the innovative work you have done both in the public and private sectors relating to IT systems mergers and information security, an area I'm very interested in. Secondly, having attended your recent presentation at LSE and having spoken with Jim Bowen, I was impressed by the enthusiasm with which he talked about his work and the many opportunities at TB4 for ambitious graduates.

I am very excited about this opportunity and look forward to discussing my application with you in greater detail. Should you require any further information please get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

Paola Vincent

**Applicant's name and address**

Paola Vincent  
33 Emmengate Street  
London  
SE12 3PY

**States clearly where the position was advertised**

**Talks about education and work experience to emphasise relevant skills and achievements**

**Customary sign off for writing to a named person. Use "Yours faithfully" if you don't have a named person to write to**

**Writes precisely about why they want to work for TB4. Avoids vague generalisations**

For more cover letter examples, visit  
[lse.ac.uk/careers](http://lse.ac.uk/careers)



# Cover letter checklist

## Content

- Have you tailored your cover letter to the position and organisation using the job description and person specification?
- Is your motivation for the specific area, job, and organisation clear?
- Have you researched the organisation and made a link between yourself and them and how you can meet their needs?
- Do you use relevant examples to highlight qualifications, experience, strengths, competencies, and achievements?
- Is the language positive and enthusiastic?
- If you are changing career direction, have you demonstrated transferable skills and recognised and addressed any skills gaps?
- Have you checked for vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors?

“*Format to impress: make your CV and cover letter as easy on the eye as possible, keep them succinct, ensure you structure your achievements in a logical and clear way, and proof-read for spelling and grammar errors.*”

**The Boston Consulting Group**

## Layout and structure

- Have you followed business letter protocol?
- Have you addressed your cover letter to a specific person (where possible) and signed off appropriately?
  - Dear Ms Smith...Yours sincerely
  - Dear Sir/Madam...Yours faithfully
- Does your cover letter follow a clear and logical structure; is it easy to scan read?
- Have you written concise sentences and paragraphs with no more than 400 words/one page of A4 overall?
- Is your text left aligned or justified and cleanly formatted?
- Have you used a professional font which is legible (11pt is ideal) and the same style as your CV?



# Application forms

Application forms allow employers to ask all candidates the same questions, making them as fair and objective as possible. They offer you the scope, with open-ended questions and personal statements, to give evidence and examples and make the best first impression you can whereas CVs and cover letters can restrict you to selected highlights.

## Make time to apply

No matter how outstanding your qualifications and experiences, failing to set aside adequate time to research, draft, and proof-read your application form may leave an organisation with doubts about your motivation and commitment to join them.

Just as there are no hard and fast rules about how much time you should set aside to write an essay, the amount of time needed to complete each application form will vary. But the basic principle remains: don't leave your application until the last minute.

## Read the instructions

Application forms are a simple way to test your ability to accurately follow instructions and write concisely within a word limit. Before you start writing check to see whether the organisation you are applying to has any instructions on how to complete the application form and make sure you follow them.

*“Explicitly refer to the role profile whenever you can, making direct comparisons between your past experiences and exactly what the role is requiring. In doing this you are making the recruiter’s job a lot easier. Try to avoid jargon and overuse of adjectives. We often see grand sentences full of adjectives and enthusiasm without actually saying a great deal about the candidate! In short, keep it relevant.”*

**British Council**

*“I have really benefitted from your services – I used LSE Careers at every step of the application process and it was reassuring, supportive and very instructional.”*

**LSE student**

## Answering application form questions

### Draw on all areas of your life

Over the course of an application form use examples of achievements from across your academic study, work, and extra-curricular activities to show you are a well-rounded, balanced individual.

### Be precise and give one example

In most cases questions are phrased along the lines of “Tell us about a time when...” or “Give an example of...” Here you need to give detailed evidence of a particular competency by giving one precise example of how you have demonstrated that skill (rather than a variety of different examples). Also, be aware of any word limits.

### Quantify

Throughout your answer, try to quantify what you did and the outcome where you can. This will help the employer to understand your contribution and assess your impact.

### Break down what is being asked

Show you understand what is being asked. For example, for a question about teamwork, does your answer show that you have a good understanding of what it means to work successfully in a team? Have you shown you co-operated, listened to others’ concerns, compromised where necessary, encouraged, supported, and negotiated?

# Competency-based questions

Competency questions focus on your skills or personal qualities. Typical competencies include “teamwork”, “motivation”, “leadership”, “commercial awareness” and “creativity”.

When you see a question that starts with “Tell us about a time when...” or “Give an example of...” you are being asked to demonstrate a particular competency.

## How do employers use them?

These types of questions are based on the theory that how you have behaved in the past will predict how you behave in the future. Subsequently employers see this type of question as a robust and fair way of assessing applicants on their current abilities and potential to fulfil the role they are recruiting for.

They will often assess your application against:

- **Competency frameworks**, which list the key competencies they expect their staff to have
- **Behavioural indicators**, which specify in detail the different levels of performance they expect at each competency.

Your first experience of competency-based assessments is likely to be on an application form but you can also expect to come across this type of question in interviews. Later, when you are employed by an organisation, competencies may be used in your appraisals as a tool to manage performance and personal development.

“Competency questions are designed to give you the best opportunity to sell yourself. Use examples from work, volunteering or extra-curricular activities to demonstrate how your skills and experiences are relevant to an organisation. Make sure your examples relate to the assessment criteria and that you refer to actions you specifically did, using ‘I’ rather than ‘we’ to show your potential as an individual.”

Sainsbury’s

“Structure is important: you will be one of many that are applying, ensure you articulate your message concisely and with purpose throughout the application process.”

LSE Careers Consultant

## Top tip

Use the model skills audit **at the beginning of this guide** to identify the particular competencies an employer is looking for and how and when you have demonstrated these requirements.

## Use a clear structure

Area to cover	What to include	How much emphasis on this area?
Situation	<b>Brief background</b> Give a brief introduction to the event so the reader knows the context.	10 per cent
Task	<b>What did you have to do?</b> Describe in detail what was required.	10 per cent
Action	<b>What did you do?</b> Give plenty of detail about what you did, how you did it and what skills you used.	70 per cent
Result	<b>What was the outcome?</b> What happened in the end? Be specific and quantify where applicable.	10 per cent

As you can see, the emphasis is on what you actually did and how this relates to your ability in a particular competency.

## Examples of competency questions and answers

### Teamwork and interpersonal skills

Tell us about a time when you worked in a team. What was your role and what did you achieve?

Since last summer I have worked part-time alongside my academic studies as a catering assistant for The London Events Company. I work in a team of four, headed up by an events manager. Recently the team was tasked with completing our annual customer feedback survey.

I attended a team meeting prior to one shift where we divided tasks according to our experience and skills. Given my academic background in methodology I offered to design the survey. I set about this by first reading around best practice in survey design and seeking advice from some academic contacts in my department. I drafted an initial survey and shared this with the team via a presentation in our weekly meeting. I sought feedback from the team and ensured all of the team's comments and amendments were pooled into the final survey. My role was then to proof read the final draft, correcting any errors and checking back with other team members to ensure accuracy. The other members of the team were responsible for collecting the survey responses. I then offered to analyse and extrapolate trends around customer satisfaction once the data had been collected.

The annual customer feedback survey was completed two days ahead of schedule and was considered successful by the management team. Customer satisfaction was found to have risen by 10% on the previous year.

**Provides lots of detail on what they actually did**

**The outcome is precise and quantified**

**Uses one precise example to demonstrate working well in a team**

# Motivational questions

Motivational questions enable employers to find out more about whether you have the energy, drive, and enthusiasm to do the job, and whether you will fit into their organisation.

In order to do this, they may ask questions to gauge your understanding of the job, organisation or sector, and your career interests and objectives.

Typical questions include:

- Why do you want to work for us?
- What differentiates us from our competitors?
- How and why have you decided to apply for this career discipline?
- Where do you see yourself in x years' time?
- What are the major challenges facing the retail/ telecommunications/ automotive industry/city firms in the next five years?

"Motivation" may even be identified in the job description or personal specification as a required competency. To assess that you have these qualities employers may ask you to give details of your main extra-curricular activities and interests to date. What have you contributed and gained from the experiences?

“*Tailoring your application is key. We often see great candidates who have completely failed to research our organisation. Try not to get too caught up understanding absolutely everything the organisation does though. Focus instead on key strategic documents like the organisation's corporate plan, strategy or annual report. The objectives, values and targets of the organisation are more important than memorising loads of data.*”

**British Council**

## Top tip

Use the values audit in the **Before you start applying** section at the beginning of this guide to identify what motivates you and how this matches the job, organisation, and sector.

## Answering motivational questions

### Show you have done in-depth research

The **Before you start applying** section at the beginning of this guide provides advice on the best resources to use when researching the job, organisation, and sector. The research you do will really help you define your choice of job/employer and help you to respond well to application form and interview questions.

### Translate your research into successful answers

Avoid answering questions in a predictable and formulaic way. For example, don't say "I want to work for your organisation because of the enlightening and informative talk last month at LSE that demonstrated your friendly and open culture."

It sounds better to say: "I want to work for Organisation X because of your two recent acquisitions in mainland China, where I can utilise my knowledge of both the culture and language, as explained by John Watts at the LSE presentation last month."

### Provide individual, original answers

When demonstrating your levels of energy, drive, and enthusiasm think about what motivates you and how you cope with difficulties and obstacles. If you are asked to give an example, use one that is relevant to the question asked. This can be from any area of your life for example a travel experience, an extra-curricular pursuit, or a work project.

## Example of motivational question and answer

**Identifies why consulting and why this particular organisation – shows evidence of research by identifying precise information about the organisation's business practices**

**Uses an example from their volunteering experience to demonstrate transferable skills such as the ability to analyse information and communicate findings**

### Career choice

Why have you chosen a career in consulting?

I am very keen to pursue a career in management consulting. The wide range of projects, strong client interaction and great mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis are only a few of the reasons why this area appeals to me. X Consultancy has especially captured my attention with its strength in the private equity business and its innovative approach to business growth through being the only company to accept equity in the company as a payment method. X Consultancy enjoys an excellent reputation in the market and recent press coverage confirms a very sound financial base. I believe this implies everyday tasks that are diverse, challenging, and according to the press coverage, high prosperous.

During my internship with Consultancy XYZ, I worked on a project that involved developing a regression model for a pharmaceutical company launching a new product. I particularly enjoyed successfully applying my quantitative skills in a real-life business scenario. At the other end of the spectrum, I also take pleasure and succeed in collaborating with others and communicating new ideas. Alongside my full-time studies I recently volunteered to work on a consultancy project with a local homelessness charity. The charity was considering taking over another organisation working in the same field and I was required to carry out the due-diligence necessary to make a series of recommendations around whether the charity should take this forward. There was a large amount of financial data to analyse and I was required to communicate professionally and efficiently to source the correct information from the director of the partner organisation. This culminated in a report for the charity trustees.

Overall, I believe the combination of my specialist technical skills, excellent communication skills and analytical approach would make me a valuable asset to the company.

**Gives specific examples of key competencies required for the role and shows ability and enthusiasm for this type of work**

# Personal statements

The personal statement does not have to be daunting providing you adhere to some simple principles with respect to: content, structure, and language. There is also some overlap with cover letters, particularly around purpose.

## What is the purpose of personal statements?

- Personal statements help organisations to find out more about you and distinguish you from other candidates
- They are an opportunity to present your motivation, work experience, extra-curricular activities, skills, and qualifications to demonstrate your suitability for the role
- They provide scope for you to emphasise the connections between the organisation, requirements of the job, and the benefits you offer.

## Completing a personal statement

Follow the same principles mentioned in the **Before you start applying** section at the beginning of this guide and throughout this booklet: research, research, research.

Using the job description and the person specification as your guide, try to visualise the employer's ideal candidate for the role and then ensure your answers demonstrate that you are that candidate.

“*Your personal statement is an opportunity to introduce yourself and demonstrate your understanding of, and enthusiasm for, the role and organisation. Focus on a few skills evidencing how you have developed them and how they would benefit the role – the key is quality over quantity. Choose examples which showcase a range of experiences and interests to distinguish you from others. You should also explain how the role will benefit your future career; balancing what you will bring with what you will learn.*”

Wellcome Trust

## Structure

As with any formal writing exercise, structure is crucial. Here are some things to consider:

- Read the opening question carefully and ensure you have identified everything it is asking you, for example:

1 Please use the following space to give us any information supporting your application, tell us why you have decided to apply for this position and provide evidence of any educational, employment and extra-curricular activities which demonstrate that you have relevant skills for the role

2a

2b

Here it is important to address all the areas in the question:

- 1 Motivations – use the **Motivational questions** section (page 30) to tackle this style of question.
- 2 Competencies – this question is asking you to
  - a provide the best examples from all your experiences, and
  - b ensure that they are targeted to demonstrate how you meet the needs of this particular role.

## Top tip

Proof-read your application as a spelling error or a typing mistake can make the difference between being in the “yes” or “no” pile.

### Top tip

One of the safest ways to ensure you have adequately covered all the competencies from the job description and/or person specification is to use the competency headings, or other headings from the job description, to structure the statement.

As well as being assessed against a competency framework, you will also be assessed on your ability to analyse the different competencies, to make connections between them, and to communicate your message concisely in writing.

If there are many competencies and you have a word limit, look for opportunities to group them. For example competencies that can potentially be merged include “teamwork and motivation” with “leadership” or “organising and planning” with “project management”.

### Content

It is important to consider the priorities for each section and to arrange the content for maximum impact. Most importantly, as with your essays, make sure you answer the question.

### The introduction

- Make the employer read on with a strong opening sentence, followed by a clear outline of any structure you will follow
- Make sure your tone and style is appropriate to the sector.

“ Word counts or character counts should guide you on the level of detail you should give. Show your ability to write clearly and concisely but do make use of the full word count if possible. You should also structure your answer to ensure you are answering the question. ”

**Linklaters LLP**

### The middle section

- Use STAR structure outlined in the **Competency-based questions** section (page 28) to structure your personal statement
- Link your skills, experience, qualifications, and achievements to the organisation and the competencies in the job description and person specification
- Make confident statements backed up by relevant evidence to demonstrate you are the ideal candidate – but leave something to talk about at interview
- Be confident in what or how you contributed by using the personal pronoun “I” but make sure you don’t overuse it
- Quantify your successes where possible and appropriate.

### The conclusion

- Bring together the different strands of your supporting paragraphs
- Make the final link between the job and your individual profile of skills, knowledge, and experience to confirm you are an excellent match for their requirements
- Promote your enthusiasm for the job and the organisation to leave a good impression.

### Top tip

If you met an employee at an LSE event mention this to show that you are committed to learning more about the organisation. Don't rely solely on the organisation's website and recruitment literature.





# Application checklist

## Content

- Have you adequately researched the job, organisation, and sector beforehand to inform and tailor your answers?
- Have you used a range of examples drawn from all aspects of your life: extra-curricular, work experience, and your studies?
- Have you mentioned any awards or relevant overseas experience that may help your application stand out?
- Do your examples demonstrate your skills and professional goals? Do they show evidence of analysing what you did and how you did it rather than simply being a list?
- Are your answers accurate, confident, and concise? Do they adhere to any word limits?
- Have you answered all sections and addressed all the elements of the job description/person specification?

## Structure

- Do your answers follow the STAR structure? See page 28 for more information.

### In particular for personal/supporting statements:

- Does the opening paragraph capture the reader's attention?
- Have you made it easy for an employer to read and make a quick judgement that you meet the requirements of the role?  
*eg, using competency headings to structure your statement.*
- Have you concluded enthusiastically and avoided clichés?

## Language

- Have you demonstrated energy, drive, and enthusiasm in your answers?
- Have you checked for any unnecessary duplication and typos?
- Is the language positive and enthusiastic?
- Have you avoided mirroring the language found in the organisation's recruitment literature?

## Overall

- Is your application interesting to read and have you distinguished yourself from other candidates?
- Do you demonstrate you have the three Cs – competencies, commitment, and cultural fit? See page 4 for more information.
- Have you proof-read and reviewed your application?
- Have you received feedback from friends, family, colleagues or an LSE careers consultant?

### Top tips

- Don't copy examples from any of the resources you have used to do your research, including this booklet, because employers can spot generic answers very easily.
- Keep a copy of your application form so you can refer to it at a later date and use it to prepare if you are invited to interview.

# Further resources

This guide only covers the basics of searching for jobs and completing applications so if you need further support please use the resources listed here.

## LSE Careers website

You can find examples of CVs, cover letters, and application forms from LSE students and alumni on our website [lse.ac.uk/careers](https://lse.ac.uk/careers)

LSE Careers also subscribes to several specialist and exclusive careers resources which are free for you to use including:

- Vault: Career Insider, an exclusive online careers library where you can download careers ebooks.
- GoinGlobal, which offers employment guides to more than 40 countries including regional cover letter examples as well as international job advertisements.

## Seminars

Our careers consultants run regular seminars during term-time which are full of advice on how to construct CVs, cover letters, and application forms and how you can best market yourself to prospective employers.

There are also specialist seminars focusing on specific sectors, such as writing CVs for academia or finance, as well as basic and advanced seminars which cover different stages of careers – from recent graduates to experienced hires. You can use LSE CareerHub to search for and book seminars at [careers.lse.ac.uk](https://careers.lse.ac.uk)

## One-to-one appointment

Use some of the online resources and try to attend a seminar before booking an appointment so you are well prepared and can get the most from your one-to-one.

Short appointments are available throughout the year and can be booked on LSE CareerHub. Morning appointments can be booked from 9.30am the day before you'd like the appointment. If you'd like an afternoon appointment, this can be booked from 9.30am on the same day.

You will get feedback on the structure, content, and targeting of your CV, cover letter or application form from a dedicated team of careers consultants. If you want help with proof-reading, contact the LSE Language Centre.

## LSE Language Centre

Struggling with writing a good application in English? At the Language Centre you can sign up for courses to help improve your business English, find out about language exchanges with English speaking students, and get your documents checked for spelling and grammatical errors. Please note there is a cost attached to some services. Find out more at [lse.ac.uk/languages](https://lse.ac.uk/languages)

## LSE LIFE

Based on the ground floor of the Library, LSE LIFE is the School's centre for academic, personal, and professional development. We also offer careers drop-in appointments in LSE LIFE during term-time. Find out more at [lse.ac.uk/lselife](https://lse.ac.uk/lselife)



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**[lse.ac.uk/careers](https://lse.ac.uk/careers)**

Find us **@LSECareers**



### **Opening hours**

Monday – Wednesday: 9:30am-5:00pm

Thursday: 9:30am-8:00pm

Friday: 9:30am-5:00pm

The School seeks to ensure that people are treated equitably, regardless of age, disability, race, nationality, ethnic or national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation or personal circumstances.

This brochure can be made available in alternative formats on request – please contact LSE Careers.

Design: LSE Design Unit ([lse.ac.uk/designunit](https://lse.ac.uk/designunit))