The background of the entire page is a vibrant pink color. Overlaid on this background are several large, white, glossy circles of varying sizes. Each circle has a subtle gradient and a highlight, giving it a three-dimensional, bubble-like appearance. The circles are scattered across the page, with some partially cut off by the edges.

The physicist's guide to application forms

A series of booklets to help you in your career

The physicist's guide series

The physicist's guides are written to assist anyone with a background in physics regardless of what stage they are at in their career – this could be in education or employment.

These guides are unique because the writers have taken into account the skills and abilities that someone with a physics training or background has, so they are specific and relevant to physicists.

We hope that these booklets will be of assistance when you consider your career-development plan.

The IOP wishes you the best of luck in your career. If you require any further information or advice, e-mail **members.careers@iop.org**.

Other careers guides in this series can be found at **www.iop.org/careers**.

A large number of employers prefer to use application forms rather than CVs in their recruitment process.

This enables them to compare candidates more easily and encourages each applicant to focus on the specific qualities and skills that employers are looking for.

What is the key to completing application forms successfully? How do you say what you want to, clearly and concisely? And how should you make the best use of the limited space?

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How long do they take to complete?

The time it takes to fill in a form depends on how experienced you are. It may take several hours, so don't leave it until the last minute. In the case of online applications, once you've completed one you can "copy and paste" the basics (such as address, qualifications and equal opportunities information) to minimise the time. This will allow you to focus on the questions that ask for evidence of specific skills. Although online applications may appear to allow you to use the same information for many employers, you are unlikely to be able to do this beyond the basics because their questions are usually structured differently.

Make sure that you understand the submission process clearly. Some websites will allow you to save your answers in a personal file that you can return to later and edit. Others will only allow you to submit a form once, so you need to prepare your answers thoroughly before entering them. The majority of employers make the process very clear but they are bound to differ from one organisation to the next.

If you are uncertain about your form or want feedback about how you intend to fill it in, most careers services offer one-to-one advice (although they won't fill it in for you) and seminars on how to approach completing them. Make sure you allow enough time before the deadline, to have the form reviewed, because you may need to refine it before you send it.

It is important that you read the "rules" on the form and obey them. Never leave any part of the form blank – write "not applicable" if a section isn't relevant. Never write "see attached CV" unless the employer has stated otherwise.

Application forms are designed to allow prospective employers to compare candidates and their ability to present relevant evidence; employers will usually reject any that are incomplete or difficult to read. This may seem unfair, but to the employer a failure to follow instructions or communicate clearly suggests that you are either careless or indifferent. Neither of these is an attribute that will impress them.

As you sit down to start work on each form, have the company information and your personal skills audit (see *Getting the Most from a Physics Degree*) to hand for easy reference. Be aware that some companies screen their online application for key words, so make sure that you mention any key skills or technical experience with the same vocabulary as they have used in the advert. This also shows that you have read the advert carefully and really paid attention to what they're looking for.



“Most careers services offer one-to-one advice and seminars on how to approach completing application forms.”

The structured questions



“It doesn’t matter if you talk about your summer job, involvement in a student society or a gap year – the key is the approach you took and the difference you made in a particular situation.”

The best strategy for tackling questions is to balance your answer between setting the scene, describing what you did and explaining the impact that you had.

Always remember STAR:

- Situation:** Describe the circumstances, when it happened, where you were, who else was involved, etc. Keep this brief – one line should be enough to set the scene.
- Task:** Set out the tasks you faced – what were the challenges you encountered in the situation?
- Action:** Describing what you did in this situation is the key part of the answer. If you worked with others, indicate your role in the team.
- Result:** Finish the paragraph with a statement that summarises the outcome. This should also include the learning or development that you gained from the experience.

Most forms have a range of different questions, so you need a selection of situations to draw on when answering. Balance these between your course, any work experience that you've had and your interests. You want to show that you can apply your skills with different types of people and in different circumstances. If you only talk about your degree or a particular job (even if it is relevant), you are likely to appear one-dimensional. Presenting a range of experiences demonstrates to the employer that you can apply your skills and make a consistent impact in any environment.

With these points in place, let's take a look at some typical questions and see how using STAR can help:

Describe a personal or group task that you have had to plan or organise.

Describe a time when you have worked with others. What was your role and how did the team perform?

Describe a situation when you have had to convince others to do something that they disagreed with.

You may think that the questions are asking for experiences that you don't have or that aren't relevant to you, but what the employer is trying to find out is how you handle different situations. It doesn't matter if you talk about your summer job, involvement in a student society or a gap year – the key is the approach you took and the difference you made in a particular situation.

Look at the first draft answer to each of these questions and spot the common mistakes:

Describe a personal or group task that you have had to plan or organise.

X *In my final year I was allocated a research project that would account for 30% of my final year marks. It ran for 15 weeks and I had to work in an established research group, looking at the mechanical properties of the surface of a detector. There were concerns that variations in the thickness and smoothness of its surface were causing variations in the data collected. The group wanted to use the equipment for more sensitive analysis, so these effects had to be quantified.*

I didn't see my supervisor very often so I had to decide which experiments to perform and had to review my own results.

I talked to other researchers in the group to find out what concerns they had with the reliability of the data, then decided on a set of experiments that could be carried out within the time available. I gained a first-class classification for my project.

The answer above is not ideal:

- Too much precious space is lost describing the situation:
- In the middle section, by using the words “I had to”, the candidate suggests that the only reason they did anything was because they were compelled rather than because they had some say or control.
- The answer should focus on what the candidate did; not on what the supervisor didn't do. Never be negative.
- The last paragraph should be longer because it's what the candidate achieved. It should say whether or not the project was successful, rather than simply that it achieved academic credit.

The candidate could have answered as follows:



T *My final year project took me into an established group where I had 15 weeks to determine the suitability of a detector for a novel research project.*

A *In this timeframe I had to quickly establish the nature of the problem. I spoke with the researchers using the equipment to identify their concerns and from these drew up a list of experiments to confirm or eliminate them. At fortnightly intervals I prepared summaries for discussion with my supervisor, focusing on my interpretation of results and next steps, so that he could intervene if necessary. It wasn't.*

R *My project was academically successful (given a first-class degree mark), but I gained more satisfaction from contributing to novel research and the chance to develop my project-management skills. Having succeeded and enjoyed working in a troubleshooting role in this group, confirms my career interest in technical development.*

This is more likely to capture the employer's interests because:

- the candidate concisely emphasises what they did and what it could mean to the employer;
- they explain how the experience has helped them to choose their career path;
- the language that they use is positive and mentions words that are used on the application form, showing that they have read the question intelligently and tried to give the information that the employer is looking for.

Describe a time when you have worked with others. What was your role and how did the team perform?

X *During my first summer vacation from university I worked for a holiday park, where I was part of a team of other temporary workers. There were a range of activities at the park and my role was to work in the park's shop. I was responsible for managing stock, calculating the takings each day and ensuring that the till was balanced. I also had to deal with customer queries and concerns. The rest of the team were working on the rides, in the café and around the park. We were a successful team because the rides and shops were always staffed, so we met our responsibilities.*

This doesn't answer the question because:

- the candidate does not say what role they assumed in the team (e.g. coordinator, motivator or leader);
- they don't say how they contributed to the positive performance of the team;
- they are too general – it would be better to focus on a specific situation that they encountered.

Let's try this question again:

✓ **S** *During my first summer vacation I worked with a team of 15 temporary staff at a holiday park. We were responsible for staffing the rides, the shop and the restaurant. At first we didn't really act like a team because everyone just did their own job.*

T *I realised that this was a potential problem, because if any of us were ill the others might struggle to cover their post. I asked everyone if they would be willing to learn about other people's work to avoid this problem. Everyone was willing, partly because of the variety but also because some had previously found it difficult to cover for others.*

A *My role in the team was to take responsibility for a problem and to find a solution that was agreeable to everyone.*

R *My idea made us more confident about dealing with staff absences and our awareness of each other's work made us feel like a team.*

This answer now gives the employer useful information:

- It shows that the candidate has a practical approach when working with others – wanting to solve a problem even if it isn't their responsibility.
- It shows concern for the feelings of others because the candidate states that they want everyone to be “willing” to find a solution.
- It also describes the roles that the candidate played in the team.

Describe a situation when you have had to convince others to do something that they disagreed with.

✗ *In the situation I described above there was some resistance from some members of staff who were happy just to do their own work and didn't want to put any effort into learning about a new job. I convinced them to get involved because I told them that they were in a minority and it would let everyone else down if they weren't involved. I also explained that they would suffer if they had to take on other people's work and didn't understand what was involved because this would be more obvious to the park manager. In the end they agreed to be involved.*

The answer does not present the candidate in the best light, although it does answer the question:

- They use negative arguments to bring people round (“you'll let the others down”) rather than finding positive reasons to get involved. In a permanent working relationship this might lead to future problems.
- The language they use suggests that the candidate simply told the other team members what to do rather than addressing their concerns.

Looking at all three answers, the final question should ideally refer to a new situation (rather than the same one as the second question) because this shows that the candidate can operate in different environments.

✓ *In our department, potential undergraduate students are shown round by postgraduates or lecturers, who tend to focus on the academic side of student life and don't present a wider view. I suggested that the department should use second and third year students for the tour. Many lecturers were very unhappy with this suggestion and rejected my idea, when it was raised at a departmental meeting. I then talked to some lecturers individually and asked them why they were against the idea. Most were concerned that the tours would focus on the social side and put off more serious candidates. Before the next meeting I prepared an overview of a student-led tour, highlighting what it would add to the admission process. I also suggested that the admissions tutor could tell us what we needed to say, and listen to additional information we would provide about student life through a short training event. The head of department invited me to present these ideas at a meeting and they were accepted.*

This is a very good answer because it demonstrates the tenacity of the candidate, who hasn't been put off by the rejection of their idea. Specifically:

- The candidate discuss what the problems were and presented their case again, but having taken the lecturers' concerns on board. They come across as a good team player who is adept at dealing with difficult situations.

Although the STAR is not highlighted, the candidate has used it to structure their answer.

Where can you look for more support?

www.iop.org/careers

www.prospects.ac.uk a great range of advice and links to employer recruitment sites.

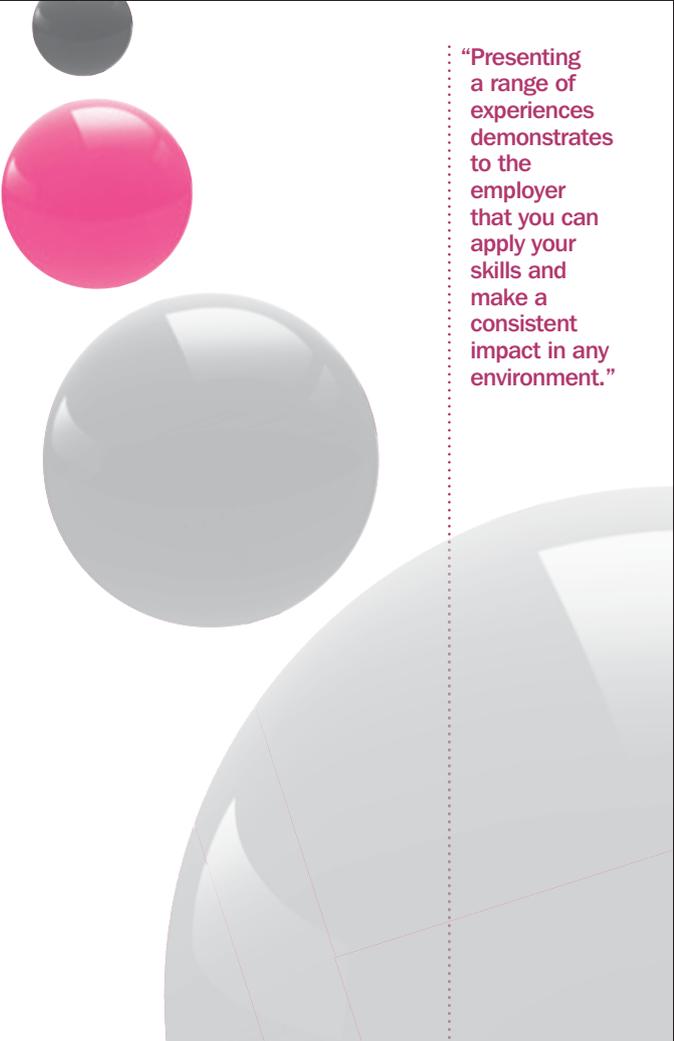
www.grad.ac.uk/jfp for PhD-specific advice.

<http://selectsimulator.com> a tutorial for online application forms – complete your own online application, with helpful tips.

Final thoughts

- Never miss a deadline or send an incomplete form – both are virtually certain to result in your application being discarded and you will have wasted time that you could have spent on another application (or your degree).
- Don't write too much, even if the amount of text is not restricted. Remember how many forms the recruiter will have to read and focus on the relevant skills and experiences that they will want to see.
- Keep a copy of your form to review before an interview. Always focus on what your role and responsibility were and how it contributed to the team's success.
- Avoid using the same situations when answering each question. You should show that you've used your skills effectively in many different environments.
- Remember to avoid academic jargon – employers may not understand exactly what you mean. For example, you could replace the word “outreach” with “presenting”, “communicating” or “creativity.”

Written by Dr Sara Shinton.



“Presenting a range of experiences demonstrates to the employer that you can apply your skills and make a consistent impact in any environment.”

Find out more...

More information can be found
at www.iop.org/careers.

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Contact information

The Institute of Physics

76 Portland Place

London W1B 1NT

Tel +44 (0)20 7470 4800

Fax +44 (0)20 7470 4848

E-mail members.careers@iop.org

www.iop.org