

How to answer competency-based questions on job application forms

Competencies are characteristics of a person that help them to be successful at work. They could be a behavioural skill (eg teamwork), a technical skill (eg report writing), an attribute (eg honesty) or an attitude (eg optimism).

When you are asked to complete a competency-based question we are looking for a specific time you have used this particular competency. For example, you may be asked to "describe a time you've had to work as a team" or to "provide an example of a situation when you have dealt with conflict."

What we are looking for here is a specific example on a particular day and time and NOT a sentence suggesting that you use these skills all the time. That is too general, you need to be very specific. This may be opposite to what you expect. Telling us you use them all the time may be true, but one specific example gives you the opportunity to go into detail about HOW you used it. If you have used it in the past there is a better likelihood you will be able to use it in the future.

This is the same principle as in an interview, however in an interview the interviewer will probably tell you if you are not being specific enough but the good news is that in an application form you have a lot more time to structure your answers.

The STAR Model

Ensuring you are focused on the answer to the question in the limited space you have, a good model to follow is the STAR model. Ensure your answer covers each of the 4 aspects. We have given some suggested questions but this is not a full list, there may be other things you could consider.

Situation

E.g. what was the situation and why were you there. Ideally from within the last 2 years but longer ago if you have reasons. The situation can be from any part of your life it doesn't have to be linked to the role you are applying for

Task

E.g. what were you trying to achieve and if relevant why? Were you in a team or alone?

Action

E.g. what did you specifically do and say and how did you act. Reference what others did but be clear which aspects were you and which were others by using the word "I" rather than "we" wherever possible.

Result

E.g. what was the outcome of this work? It doesn't always need to be a positive outcome but if not then you should stress what you learnt from it.

The first two parts give good context and explain why the situation occurred so are important. Focus most of your time on the Actions and Results though, which help us to understand the things which would make you successful in this role.

Remember ethical conduct is vital so these should always be genuine examples and get someone to check your spelling and grammar so that it reads well.