

A Guide to Writing an Effective Application

An application is a platform to present yourself in a positive light highlighting the relevance of your knowledge, skills and experience to your chosen specialty. During the initial stages of an application, the application form is the main means of demonstrating your suitability for the role.

Accurate and clear communication, together with an attention to detail, is an important part of being a doctor, and your application is an opportunity to demonstrate these skills. Effective time management is essential throughout the whole application process.

Applications for training posts in the UK are done via *Oriel*, a UK-wide portal and recruitment system for postgraduate specialty medical, dental and public health education and training applicants. Oriel enables applicants to register for training, view vacancies, apply, book interviews and assessment centres, and manage offers: www.oriel.nhs.uk

When should I start thinking about my application?

Specialty training posts are governed by a strict national recruitment timetable, and the application window is relatively short. Timelines of key steps for different specialties can be found on <https://www.oriel.nhs.uk/Web/>

It is never too early to begin researching the specialty training application process. Find out what is involved in submitting your application and note the key dates. By giving yourself plenty of time to prepare your application and to address any shortfalls in your skills and experience you will avoid a last minute panic and accidental errors.

Importance of Person Specifications

Your specialty training application will comprise a series of questions that explore the clinical and non-clinical skills you have gained in your career so far. The structure and questions of the application form will differ between specialties and seniority levels (ST1 vs. ST3). As you will need to provide evidence proving that you have achieved the specified competences, check well in advance the requirements for your specialty.

Nationally agreed person specifications for various specialties and levels of entry can be found here: <http://specialtytraining.hee.nhs.uk/specialty-recruitment/person-specifications-2013/2015-person-specifications/>

Importance of Shortlisting Scoring Frameworks

When writing about your skills, experience and achievements, pay attention to shortlisting scoring frameworks (also called self-scoring, autoscores, automated scores or self-assessment for shortlisting). It describes the weighting that is placed on each domain (e.g. publications, presentations) in the context of

the application. These are the criteria that your completed application form will be scored against and to which you need your “evidence portfolio” to correspond. The more criteria on skills and experience that you meet, the higher the chances progressing through the application process.

Some specialties make shortlisting scoring frameworks publicly available on the lead recruiter’s website, at the discretion of the recruiting organisation. For example:

CT1 Recruitment autoscores for achievements in seven assessed domains:

<http://www.ct1recruitment.org.uk/recruitment-process/applying/application-scoring>

Psychiatry ST1 and ST2 shortlisting scoring framework can be found here:

http://www.rcpch.ac.uk/system/files/protected/page/Shortlisting%20Framework%20ST1%20and%20ST2%202016_2.pdf



Tip: If there is no specific shortlisting scoring framework available for your specialty at the time of your application, you can get some ideas about weighting that is placed on various skills and experience domains by doing an online search for scoring frameworks from previous years or other specialties.

Longlisting

Once applications close, applicants are progressed to the longlisting stage to assess their eligibility against a range of criteria outlined in the person specification. These include right to work in the UK, previous specialty experience and GMC/Fitness to Practise status.

Every year there are candidates who fail to be 'longlisted' because they missed the application deadline or filled out the application incorrectly (for example, not having the correct visa or having more than 18 months experience in a particular specialty). So g

Shortlisting

On completion of the longlisting process, applications that have met the minimum eligibility criteria will be scored against a nationally agreed, standardised shortlisting scoring framework, taking into account essential and desirable qualities in the job description. Responses on the application form are allocated marks according to a pre-defined marking scheme, which is based on the person specification. The total score for each candidate’s application form makes up the short-listing score.

The following websites offer further information about applications for specialty training:

Applicants’ Guides:

<http://specialtytraining.hee.nhs.uk/specialty-recruitment/applicant-handbook/>

<https://www.oriel.nhs.uk/Web/ResourceBank>

<http://www.st3recruitment.org.uk/documents>

<http://www.ct1recruitment.org.uk/documents>

BMA articles:

<http://www.bma.org.uk/developing-your-career/specialty-training/applying-for-a-specialty-training-post>

<http://www.bma.org.uk/developing-your-career/specialty-training/applying-for-a-specialty-training-post/tips-for-your-specialty-application>

ST1/CT1 recruitment: <http://www.ct1recruitment.org.uk/>

ST3 recruitment: <http://www.st3recruitment.org.uk/>

Please note that Public Health and General Practice Specialty Training selection processes differ from most other specialties:

GP training: <https://gprecruitment.hee.nhs.uk/Recruitment/Applicant-Guidance>

GP academic training: <https://gprecruitment.hee.nhs.uk/Recruitment/Academic>

Public Health: http://www.fph.org.uk/applications_in_england%2c_scotland_and_wales

Typical sections in the application form

Most application forms will require you to write about your motivation and commitment to specialty, and to describe your significant achievements to date. Below are some tips and pointers to help you think through your answers and come up with relevant examples.

Postgraduate degrees

- ✓ The importance placed on completion of postgraduate exams will depend on your chosen specialty and the level at which you are applying.
- ✓ If a qualification is not deemed relevant it will not attract a mark, but it may still be information that you wish the recruitment team to see as evidence of “commitment to specialty”.

Commitment to specialty

- ✓ What steps have you taken to gain a clear insight into your chosen specialty? Reflect on what you have learnt through these experiences.
- ✓ Map your skills and experience to the person specification.
- ✓ Offer fresh examples not mentioned elsewhere.
- ✓ By planning your application sufficiently in advance, you may be able to arrange a wide variety of experiences to include in this section (see separate “Commitment to Specialty” guide for ideas).

Clinical audit experience

- ✓ Detail the topic, your role, the guidelines audited against, the location, timeframes, and the outcome.

- ✓ What specifically was **your** contribution. The higher the level of involvement, the more points you will score.
- ✓ Was the audit presented or published, and was the audit cycle closed?

Achievements outside medicine

- ✓ Highlight the relevance of any achievements to your future training (for example, just stating that you were a President of a university sports society will not attract as many marks as a statement that describes attitudes and skills you developed while “coordinating a committee of five”, e.g. delegation, negotiation, problem solving).

Presentations

- ✓ More weighting will be placed on relevant presentations that are made at a regional, national, or international level than at a local level.
- ✓ Describe your personal contribution to the work.
- ✓ Mention the number of people in the audience and their feedback, if available.
- ✓ Audit presentations should not be included in this section.

Publications

- ✓ Although more weighting will be placed on publications appearing in peer-reviewed journals, it is worth mentioning articles that got published in regional magazines or specialty newsletters.

Teaching experience

- ✓ Describe your personal contribution (including teaching methods, audience and frequency), and reflect on what you have gained from the experience.
- ✓ Mention specific non-mandatory training courses you attended on your own initiative. Reflect on how your learning contributed to your development as a teacher/trainer.

Competency-based questions

Most application forms and interview panels use competency-based questions (CBQs) to assess your past behaviours, skills and competencies that will be relevant to the specialty you are applying to. A typical CBQ would be “Describe a time/situation when you have demonstrated <...> skill/behaviour”. For example:

1. Describe a time when you were faced with a problem and had to come up with a solution.
2. Describe a time when you worked as part of a successful team. What was your role and how did the team benefit from your contribution?
3. Describe a situation when you had to make a decision under pressure.

To score maximum marks, your responses must be concise, coherent, structured and must demonstrate relevance to the specialty. You can use recent examples from your medical work and/or extra-curricular activities (volunteering, societies, sports), as long as they have not been mentioned elsewhere in the application.

Structuring your answer:

A widely used framework for answering CBQs is STAR(R).

Situation – briefly set the scene.

Task – briefly describe what **your** specific task was in that situation.

Action – around 70% of your answer should be about describing what you do, how you did it and the reasoning behind it. Use **active verbs** (“*I assessed the patient’s vital signs...*” rather than “*this required assessing the patient’s vital signs*”) to highlight **your** role and contribution.

Result – briefly describe a tangible result or achievement that was possible due to your contribution. Make sure you map any behaviours and attitudes you are describing to the person specification. Your answer should focus on *what you achieved* and *not on what others did*, even if it was a team effort.

(**R**eflection) – mention what you learnt from a particular experience and/or what you might do differently next time.

You can also use BARE framework:


Background


Action


Result


Evaluation

Tips for writing impactful answers

 When asked to “describe a situation”, think about an event or occasion with **a tight timeframe** (a ward round, a handover meeting, assessing a deteriorating patient, a conversation with a patient). Vaguely defined timelines (e.g. “during my MD, I had to interact with various multidisciplinary teams”) make it difficult to answer CBQs in a succinct manner within the allocated word limit.

 Make sure you understand what behaviours a particular CBQ is assessing and check how this maps to the person specification (see below “What do skills buzz words actually mean?”)

 Describe what being in a particular role really meant. Mentioning job titles, no matter how impressive, will not get you as many marks as explaining what skills (relevant to the specialty!) you used or developed and what your specific achievements were in that role.

 Quantify your achievements:
How many people did you present your audit to?

How many new members did you recruit to a university society?
 How much money did you raise during a charity fundraising campaign?

What do common skills “buzz words” actually mean?

In addition to specialty-specific knowledge, clinical experience and technical skills, you will be assessed on generic skills throughout the application process (e.g. good communication, leadership, team involvement, judgement under pressure, decision-making and problem solving).

Your answers will stand out if, instead of relying on the “buzz words”, you describe your skills and experiences *in the context* of the specialty of your choice. For example, to demonstrate “good communication skills” for Genitourinary Medicine, mention your experience of sensitively discussing psychosexual problems with embarrassed patients. For Paediatrics, “good communication skills” could mean your ability to engage a young child in the discussion by quickly switching conversational style from adult to child and back to adult.

The table below offers some examples of how to make your answers appear more thoughtful and tailored to a particular specialty than merely using the “buzz words” (this applies to answering questions on the application form and during interviews).

Skill “buzz word”	Behaviours (what one can actually observe)	Positive indicators for scoring during specialty selection
Communication skills	Used plain language, summarised, actively listened, prepared appropriate visual materials / handouts, adapted tone of voice.	The ability to adapt behaviour, language or method of communication to a specific situation and/or audience.
Team working	Assessed abilities, allocated tasks, supported through a difficult task, monitored progress, asked for feedback.	The ability to contribute to and facilitate decision making in partnership with colleagues in a non-confrontational way. Encouraging, respecting and acknowledging contribution of others. Ability to compromise.
Problem solving	Evaluated situation and possible causes, analysed trends, investigated, evaluated.	Positivity when dealing with challenges. Resourcefulness. Efficiently maximising resources, information and time.
Time Management	Met a deadline, evaluated work load and set specific goals.	Capacity to exercise conscious control over the amount of time spent on specific activities, especially to increase efficiency or productivity.
Professional Integrity	Reflected on what happened, learnt from..., asked for feedback, discussed with a colleague.	Capacity and motivation to take responsibility for own actions.
Empathy and Sensitivity	Listened attentively, encouraged questions, chose appropriate setting, built trust and rapport.	Generating a safe and understanding atmosphere. Capacity and motivation to consider patients’ or colleagues’ perspectives and feelings.
Leadership	Negotiated, motivated, delegated, decided, allocated, welcomed feedback, asked for colleagues’ opinions, considered all factors before reaching a decision, used own initiative to...	Positivity when dealing with problems. Effectively managing staff and resources. Ability to reflect and learn from own work, to identify and fill gaps in knowledge. Commitment to continuing professional development. Personal attributes: decisiveness, honesty, drive, focus and empathy.
Judgement	Evaluated and prioritised tasks,	Remaining calm and under control. Ability to compromise

under pressure	delegated responsibilities, asked for help, used a <..> coping strategy, handled emotions.	and knowing own limitations. Ability to seek help if required.
Situation awareness	Acted quickly, checked facts, asked for clarification, noticed change, assessed risk, monitored response, changed plan, adapted approach in view of...	Ability to interpret/deal with subtle changes in clinical conditions. Ability to anticipate events, awareness of symptoms and signs suggesting changes to patient's condition. Awareness of cost and clinical value of investigations.
Organisation and planning	Identified resources and potential gaps, recognised priorities, scheduled, set a goal, developed a plan, kept someone up to date.	Anticipating need for changing situations. Effectively managing time and resources. Thinking ahead and planning for different contingencies.

General Tips for Application Forms

- 1) Start compiling your answers in plenty of time and aim to complete in more than one sitting. This will enable you to think of good examples and to get several people to review your answers, as well as spelling and grammar.
- 2) When thinking of examples, make sure they will reveal qualities or experiences that (a) are relevant to your specialty and (b) distinguish you from others filling in the same form.
- 3) Give the impression that you are someone who learns by reflection (e.g "*the role has allowed me to develop better ... skills, which will be relevant to ...*").
- 4) Quote your publications and presentations in Vancouver style (<http://subjects.library.manchester.ac.uk/referencing/referencing-vancouver>)
- 5) Contact potential referees early several weeks in advance of the application deadline, to ensure that you have the their correct contact information and they will be available to write a reference at a particular time.
- 6) Apart from *essential criteria*, your application should aim to highlight as many of the *desirable criteria* as possible.
- 7) Ensure there is no patient identifiable data anywhere in your application.
- 8) For any claims you make on the application form, be prepared to bring supporting evidence (original documents where possible) to any interview to which you are invited. The evidence is likely to be in the form of certificates for the 'hard' achievements, or a copy of a paper or abstract. For 'softer' achievements read "Evidence Portfolio" resource to see what may count as evidence, or use your own professional judgement.