

Application guidance

Tips on what to consider when applying for an entry-level job/internship at the Sutton Trust, and advice on how to frame your experience



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This document is designed to provide advice and guidance on applying for a role at the Sutton Trust, but you can also use these tips for other job applications.

Contextual recruitment

The Sutton Trust encourages organisations to use [contextual recruitment](#) when hiring, particularly for entry level roles. This means considering someone's achievements in the context of their background.

Example

If a candidate has no formal work experience but cares for a sick family member, they may have developed skills in other ways, and their experiences may have affected their access to opportunities.



The Sutton Trust has practices in place to consider the context of our applicants. You could ask other employers you apply to whether they use contextual recruitment.

For example, when writing a job description we will consider the skills and experience really necessary to do the job – some experience may not be essential and can be learned on the job. Our application form also includes space for candidates to declare any additional information, which could be about their background. This section is optional and will be used by the panel to put the candidate's achievements into context.

Please note: Contextual recruitment is designed to make the process fairer and to help us spot potential. It does not mean you will be prioritised for an interview if you were previously on free schools meals or have care experience for example.

Find out more about contextual recruitment [here](#) on the Sutton Trust website.



We ask candidates to complete an application form, others ask for a CV and cover letter. Many elements will be the same, so it's a good idea to have an up to date CV on hand you can copy from.

If you need advice on how to write a CV, or what information to include, check out some guidance [here](#) from Prospects.

For ideas on how to frame your experience, see [Slide 15](#).

The Sutton Trust application form includes a section for you to outline any additional information you would like the panel to be aware of. This is one of our contextual recruitment practices and will help the panel consider your achievements in the context of your background. For instance, you may wish to let us know whether you were eligible for free school meals at any point while at school or whether your parents went to university.

Please do not use this section to share any other information or add to your application answers.



- We will always advertise a specific interview date. If you can't make this time let us know and we will do our best to accommodate.
- If you have accepted another role since being invited to interview, please let us know in good time.
- Make sure you request any reasonable adjustments beforehand, for example extra time in the task, or documents in an alternative format. The Sutton Trust asks candidates when they invited to interview if they would like to request any adjustments.



- Review your application and remind yourself of what you said.
- Research common interview questions and prepare some answers you can adapt. Make sure you have answers ready for 'why the organisation' and 'why the job' – focus on why you're interested in the work, not why this role will further your career.
- Remember - if you don't have formal work experience you can still draw on skills you've learnt/things you've done in education/voluntary or other settings. But make sure you demonstrate your skills.
- Try asking someone you know to ask you the questions you've prepared and some others you haven't prepared so you can practice articulating your ideas on the spot. It can also be off-putting to hear yourself say words you've written out loud for the first time. Practicing out loud will also help you edit your prepared answers.
- Research the organisation, the sector and the role. Use this to prepare some questions for the panel to show your interest.



BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- Use the STAR method to structure your answers. Focus on what **you** did, not what other people did.
 - What was the **Situation**? Talk about the wider context of the problem.
 - What **Task** did you have to complete? Describe what your responsibilities were.
 - What **Action** did you take? Explain step by step how you addressed the problem. This should be the bulk of your answer.
 - What was the **Result**? Tell us what the outcome was – what was different because of your contribution?
- For ideas on how to frame your experience, see [Slide 15](#).



DURING THE INTERVIEW

- Try not to let nerves get the better of you - interviewers know you will be nervous and should try and put you at ease. However, make sure you don't cross the boundary into being too relaxed and coming across as unprofessional.
- Remember, interviews are a two-way conversation – it's a chance for you to get to know the organisation.
- You can bring in notes with any follow up questions or points to cover. You can also take notes during the interview to remember key points, but try to make them brief, and remember to show you are still listening.



- It's okay to ask interviewers to repeat the question, even if you've already started answering. You can also ask to clarify any points that don't make sense.
- It's okay to take some time before responding to a question to get your thoughts in order. You could even say something like "that's a good question, let me have a think" to give yourself more time. However, make sure you don't wait too long before answering – hopefully you should have prepared examples for a variety of scenarios.
- If you're asked to demonstrate specific experience and you don't have an example, it's okay to describe a different experience that uses similar skills. Make sure this is clear in your answer though.



AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- As the interview is finishing, remember to thank the panel for their time.
- Try to avoid overanalysing the interview too much – you did well to get to this stage.
- Request feedback to improve your performance in future. The Sutton Trust offers feedback to all candidates invited to interview.
- Don't worry if you don't hear straight away. The panel may give you a rough time frame for decisions to hear back. If this time passes and you haven't heard, you may wish to contact the panel and ask if they have made a decision.



1. Thoroughly read the job description and person specification – make sure you use this in your answers at application and interview and can demonstrate all of the skills outlined in the person specification. Entry level roles in particular look for skills rather than knowledge.
2. Do your research. For example, if you were applying to work in the Sutton Trust Programmes team, find out about all of the programmes we run and how they interact with other areas of the Trust. For our Development team, you could look at how we fundraise and where our money comes from, or for our Research, Policy and Communications team, review our key publications, look us up on social media, and familiarise yourself with our policy priorities. Use your research to form your own opinion of the organisation.
3. Make sure you show your passion and interest for the organisation's work, both in your application and at interview.



4. Where possible, avoid repeating examples at application and interview. If you do use the same examples, vary your explanation so the panel gets a fresh angle.
5. When discussing examples from your personal life (for example skills you learnt while caring for a relative), please ensure your focus is on skills gained, rather than a detailed account of what happened which may involve discussing private personal details.
6. Use 'I' more than 'we' – we want to know about your contribution, not about your whole team. Make sure you describe the results rather than giving a list of responsibilities.
7. Use specific examples even when answering a general question.
8. When talking about past experience (work or otherwise), focus on what you learned rather than what was negative.



Why not list the skills on the job spec and come up with examples for each? Try using the table below to help. For ideas on how to choose examples, see [Slide 15](#).

Skill	Example
Teamwork	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Worked on ? project with ? many people. I did ? and the outcome was ? 2. 3.
Communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3.
Attention to detail	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3.
Prioritisation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3.



- It's okay if you don't have direct work experience, particularly if it's an entry level role. You will gain skills and experience on the job, so you shouldn't feel pressured to be a perfectly polished candidate.
- We want you to talk about your experiences and what you have learned. The main things to think about are transferable skills, for example time management, communication, and attention to detail.
- The next few slides suggest some questions you can ask yourself when applying or interviewing for a role. You could draw on examples from a range of situations including part-time work, school, university, extra curriculars, hobbies or home life.
- The list is not exhaustive, and these are not questions you will be directly asked by recruiters - you should use them to identify examples to demonstrate your transferable skills. See [Slide 19](#) if you need more help splitting out the skills.

Tip: Don't feel you always need to outline perfect situations. Application and interview questions often ask about challenging situations - recruitment teams want to hear how you responded when things didn't go so well.



Work experience

- Did you work while studying (either at school, college or university)? If so, think about how you managed your time and how you prioritised work and study commitments.
- What kind of job do/did you have? If you worked with other people, what did you learn about teamwork and communication? If you worked in retail for example, how did you adapt your approach to each customer's needs and learn to take the initiative?
- How did you go about solving any problems? Was there ever a time when you had to confront an issue yourself instead of seeking help from your manager? What did you learn about responsibility and leadership?



HOW TO FRAME YOUR EXPERIENCE

Education

- What skills did you learn throughout your education and how? Think about writing, research, analysis, attention to detail etc.
- Did you ever do group projects or presentations? What did you learn from working as a team? How did you organise the project?
- How did you balance your studies alongside extracurricular activities, caring responsibilities, part-time work etc.? What did you learn about being organised and prioritising?
- What did you learn from extracurriculars such as school clubs or university societies? If you played sports for example, what did you learn about teamwork? If you took on a leadership role, what qualities did you bring, how did you develop, and what were your successes?
- If you went to university and lived away from home, what did you learn about being independent? If you went to university and lived at home, how did you balance family responsibilities with your studies and personal life?



Other experience

- Have you ever volunteered your time, and how has this developed your skills? For example, working at a charity shop could have honed your communication skills, or looking after a neighbour's pet could have made you more responsible.
- Do you help out at home, caring for younger siblings or older relatives for example? How has this developed your prioritisation skills and personal resilience?
- Can you talk about any hobbies not covered as organised extracurricular activities? If you like to cook for example, you could talk about your motivation, how creative you like to be, and the attention to detail needed for some recipes.



APPENDIX: SHOWING TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

This table is designed to help split some of the examples in slides 16-18 by skill.

Transferable skill	
Prioritisation/ Organisation/ Time management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you prioritise work and study commitments if you had a part-time job at school/university? • How did you balance studies/work and extra-curricular activities? • How have you coordinated projects, either solo or team based?
Attention to detail/ Analysis/ Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you used or developed any of these skills during your education? • Explain what hobbies you have any what motivates you to continue.
Teamwork/ Communication/ Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have you worked with others on group projects or in clubs/teams at school/university? • Have you worked together with colleagues in a previous job? • In what situations have you had to adapt your communication skills to get the job done?
Responsibility/ Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you learn living away from home at university, or balancing family commitments with education? • Have you taken on a leadership role in a school club or university society? What were your successes? • Have you helped out at home, caring for siblings or relatives?
Problem solving/ Initiative/ Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you encounter issues at a previous job you had to solve without your manager? • How have you dealt with difficult situations in all areas of your life? • Have you ever come up with a creative solution to a problem?



Take a look at these other websites to find out more about how to articulate your skills, and what to do if you don't have much work experience.

Some talk specifically about graduate recruitment, but you can use these ideas in other situations too.

- [Target Jobs](#)
- [Prospects](#)
- [UCAS](#)