

The STAR Technique

A guide to describing your skills and answering those difficult application form questions

INTRODUCTION

The Skills Section is a common addition to many modern CVs, but describing how you perform the skills proves difficult for many people. When describing any skill such as Team Work or Communication it is important to explain in detail how you go about it, as it is this detail that sets you apart from other candidates. It is the same for questions on application forms. Questions such as “Describe a problem you’ve recently had to solve” or “Tell us about a difficult decision you’ve recently had to make” are very difficult to answer, but as with CVs, it is the detail in your response that makes you stand out from other candidates.

The star technique provides a structured way of describing skills and answering questions on application forms. Indeed, some employers actually suggest you use the technique when providing you guidance on how to complete their application forms.

STAR TECHNIQUE

The technique allows you to break down your response into manageable chunks. It first gets you to describe a **Situation** and then the **Task** before asking to you to provide the detail about the **Action** you took and finally asks you to describe the **Result**. The following gives you a more detailed description of how to use the technique.

▪ SITUATION

The first thing you have to do is to find a context or an environment that allows you to answer the question or describe your skill. Basically you are giving an example and this could be from part-time or full-time work, university, gap year, voluntary work, personal experience, Duke of Edinburgh Award, President of the Chess Club, or anywhere/thing that allows you to provide enough detail to impress the reader. This is the start of your answer and it should be short, sharp and succinct.

Examples:

- ✓ “When at university
- ✓ “A good example of team work is when I worked at a well known department store (you can include the name if you want).”,
- ✓ “Whilst on my Gap year in ...”.

▪ TASK

The next thing you should talk about is what you had to do, and this should link to the question you are being asked on the application form, or the skill required by the job. Again this can be fairly brief.

Examples

- ✓ “...I was in overall charge of organising the May Ball.”,
[Leadership]
- ✓ “...I worked in the customer service team.”
[Team Work]
- ✓ “...when my passport was stolen, I had to get a replacement.”.
[Problem solving]

▪ ACTION

This is the important bit as it will tell the reader exactly what **YOU** did. For some employers the context is less important than what you actually did, because they think that you will be able to apply the same process of team working or problem solving to different situations. So make sure you provide the detail, this means that this section will be longer than the others. To provide the detail you may need to reflect back on what you did, do this by breaking it down step by step. Remember to tell them what **you** did, especially when explaining how you work in a team (not what the team did).

Examples:

- ✓ “Organising the May Ball was a test of my leadership abilities. Firstly I had to recruit helpers which I did by, Next I had to find and book the venue which I did by, Other things I had to do were manage and co-ordinate the staff which I did by”.
- ✓ “When solving a problem I tend to spend some time thinking about it and think of scenarios which might help solve it. For example, recently the mini bus I booked to transport the rugby team to a match 30 miles away did not turn up. I dealt with this by”.
- ✓ “Loosing my passport was a major problem, I wasn’t sure what to do at first and so sought advice from family and fellow backpackers. They advised me to go straight away to the British Embassy who told me to complete forms and get some more passport photographs. I also had to.....”.

▪ **RESULT**

So you’ve explained how you solve a problem or work in a team, now you have to explain what the result was. This can be a positive result or a negative result, but if it is the latter remember to explain what you learnt and what you would do differently next time. Again you can be brief and to the point.

Examples:

- ✓ “The result was that every aspect of the event ran like clock work and I received numerous emails telling me what a great May Ball I’d organised. The key to this was the timetable of milestones I produced to track my tasks.”
- ✓ “Having found an alternative mini bus we made it to the game with minutes to spare. In future I will leave more time just in case these types of problems occur again”.
- ✓ “I eventually received my new passport but in future I will make sure my family have a photocopy of it, I will keep it in a safer place and keep a record of my passport number.”

So as you can see, putting all these elements together produces a detailed story which allows the reader to build a picture in their mind’s eye of your capabilities. Doing this means they do not have to be a mind reader!