

Guide to...

# Using the STAR approach

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# Introduction

STAR is a useful acronym for an effective method for describing your specific experiences:

- **S**ituation - what was the situation and when did it take place? (10%)
- **T**ask - what task was it, and what was the objective? (10%)
- **A**ction - what **action** did you take to achieve this? (70%)
- **R**esults - what happened as a result of **your** action? (10%)

The percentages above give a rough guide for how you can break down your answer. The most detailed part of your answer will be the action, where you describe how you dealt with the task and should leave the reader/interviewer in no doubt as to **what** it was you did, **the steps you took** to do it and **why** you did it.

## STAR is useful:

- When writing your CV
- When writing your cover letter
- When answering questions on application forms or when compiling personal statements (particularly if you have to stick to a word count)
- When answering 'competency-based' questions in interviews

## How to use STAR for your CV & Cover Letter

One key skill that is likely to be of interest to the majority of employers is 'organisation and planning'; very briefly here is an example that could be used to demonstrate this skill:

- **S**ituation = Helped with a charity event
- **T**ask = To raise money
- **A**ction = Put up posters on Newton Park campus
- **R**esults = Raised awareness and money for Mind

So, imagine you want to include this example in your CV and/or Cover Letter, but need to keep things concise. However, you still want to ensure that you are giving enough detail to make a strong impact, and convey what you achieved. Here is an example of how to find the right balance:

1. **First draft:** "Good organisational skills were vital to make a charity event a success".

**Comments:** Too vague.

2. **Second draft:** "Good organisation and planning were vital to raise money for a charity. We agreed who would be responsible for tasks, organised publicity and put up posters on campus. The event was a success".

**Comments:** Better but still does not tell us what the individual was responsible for within the team. Always talk about "I" not "we".

3. **Final draft:** "Responsible for organising a charity event which involved allocating responsibilities, setting deadlines, progress chasing and keeping team members informed. The event raised £500 and 200 students attended"

**Comments:** This is much better as there is a significant amount of information conveyed in only a few lines that clearly evidences organisation and planning skills with a strong outcome.

If you were using this answer on an application form, you could expand it further by talking about: how you set deadlines, progress chased and kept the group informed.

## Example Application Form Questions and Answers

Here is an example of how an employer has used competencies on an application form; the STAR approach has then been used to answer this question. Can you identify each part?

*QUESTION: Employees need to be able to show resilience in the face of adversity and handle difficult situations with calmness and confidence. Think of an occasion where you were involved in a difficult, confrontational situation with friends, family, colleagues or members of the public.*

*ANSWER: I was working as a receptionist at a leisure centre, and I had to deal with a customer who was not happy with one of the centre's rules. This rule did not allow children under 10 years to swim without an adult, however she wanted to leave her 7-year-old son with us to swim while she went shopping. It was a difficult situation because she became angry when I did not want to sell her a swimming ticket for her son. I clearly explained the rule regarding children under 10 years requiring adult supervision in the pool. I explained that this rule was there to ensure children's safety, as the centre did not have the facilities to be able to look after young children swimming without an adult. I did suggest that she could leave her son in the centre's supervised play area, and that she could go swimming with her son once she returned. The woman calmed down, and agreed to leave her son in the play area. If I had not explained the reason behind the rule, or offered her an alternative, the woman would probably have felt that the centre was unreasonable and not customer-friendly. She might also have cancelled her membership or asked to speak to the centre manager. She would no doubt have done so if I had been impatient with her, or had changed my tone and become rude.*

See also: Bath Spa Careers **“Guide to Completing Application Forms”**.

## Example Interview Questions and Answers

Often interviewers will use ‘competency-based’ questions during an interview, for example:

- *“Describe how you have achieved a goal through influencing the actions or opinions of others.”*
- *“Tell us about a situation where you have worked in a team context to achieve a particular objective.”*
- *“Can you give an example of a challenging project, activity or event which you have planned or organised with a successful outcome?”*

The STAR approach is particularly useful for helping you to structure your answer to these types of questions, and to keep your answer focused so you don't ramble too much, or give too brief an answer without explaining the specifics.

### **For example:**

*Outline a recent example when you collaborated with a team where people held different views to achieve a goal. What was your role in the team's success?*

**Situation** = As a member of Bath Spa University's Debating Society, I am part of a team containing a wide variety of students from various academic backgrounds, including creatives from art and design to more scientific subjects, such as geography, and with a wide range of personalities.

**Task** = During the Easter vacation, the society wanted to organise a team building weekend, and because the group is made up of very different individuals, there were many contrasting views about what we should do. The different suggestions were put to a vote and it was decided we would undertake an orienteering adventure.

**Action** = During the weekend we were split up into 3 teams of 5, and appointed a team leader for each group. I was voted team leader for my group, and I had responsibility for leading people to complete the various challenges throughout the weekend. My team included people with different confidence levels; some had no experience in orienteering, while others did it regularly and took part in competitions. Therefore I tried to motivate more experienced members to help the others and teach them skills, so that everyone would get something out of the weekend and would enjoy it. Additionally, there were alternative viewpoints as to how to approach each task; some team members were more methodical in their approach and others just wanted to get stuck in and work things out as we went along. It was essential for me to play a part in helping both types of people come to a mutual understanding, by making sure everybody felt listened to and their opinion was heard, even if the group voted against trying things their way. As team leader I initiated a 'group handshake' before starting each task, which brought everybody together and acted to 'draw a line in the sand' from that point onwards, so we could focus on completing the next task as a team.

**Results** = I provided good team leadership that encouraged us to work as a team, helping us to learn from each other, exposing each person's skills rather than weaknesses. We completed all of the weekend's tasks and the group seemed to bond well, even though there were differences along the way.

## Giving the Strongest Answer

You may have more than one example to consider. The best examples are those which:

- are the most specific, recent and relevant;
- clearly describe the skill being asked for;
- demonstrate action and something you actually did, as opposed to what you learned, or what you might do in a hypothetical situation;
- personalised, as opposed to saying what other people did or broadly what happened;
- have a positive outcome;
- are appropriate and gives you something you can talk comfortably about if asked for more detail;

Remember employers want to hear how you have used skills and behaviours in a positive way, so they can see how you would apply them in the work place.

## Top Tips

- Turn vague examples into clear, specific and measurable ones
- Use strong dynamic words to describe your examples (see the word bank in the Bath Spa Careers "**Guide to CVs**" to help generate ideas)

- Quantifying helps put your examples into context i.e. If you say you were a team leader it means more if you say how many were in the team.

## Task

Choose a skill from the following competencies and use the boxes below to try out the STAR Approach for yourself. Can you think of a time you have demonstrated one of the following competencies;

- Verbal Communication
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Organisational skills

Situation 10%	Task 10%	Action 70%	Result 10%

## Further Support from Bath Spa Careers

If you would like further support from Bath Spa Careers & Employability go to [bathspa.ac.uk/careers](http://bathspa.ac.uk/careers) to see the ways in which you can access our service, including workshops and events, appointments and to access our extensive range of resources.

You can also contact Careers Reception on 01225 875525 or at [careers@bathspa.ac.uk](mailto:careers@bathspa.ac.uk).

Please note that Bath Spa Careers does not endorse particular organisations.

(This guide was last updated in Summer 2019).

# GET A HEAD START

We're here to help you get a great start to your career. We're open all year round, so come and visit us in the Careers Space, book an appointment, or get in touch.

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