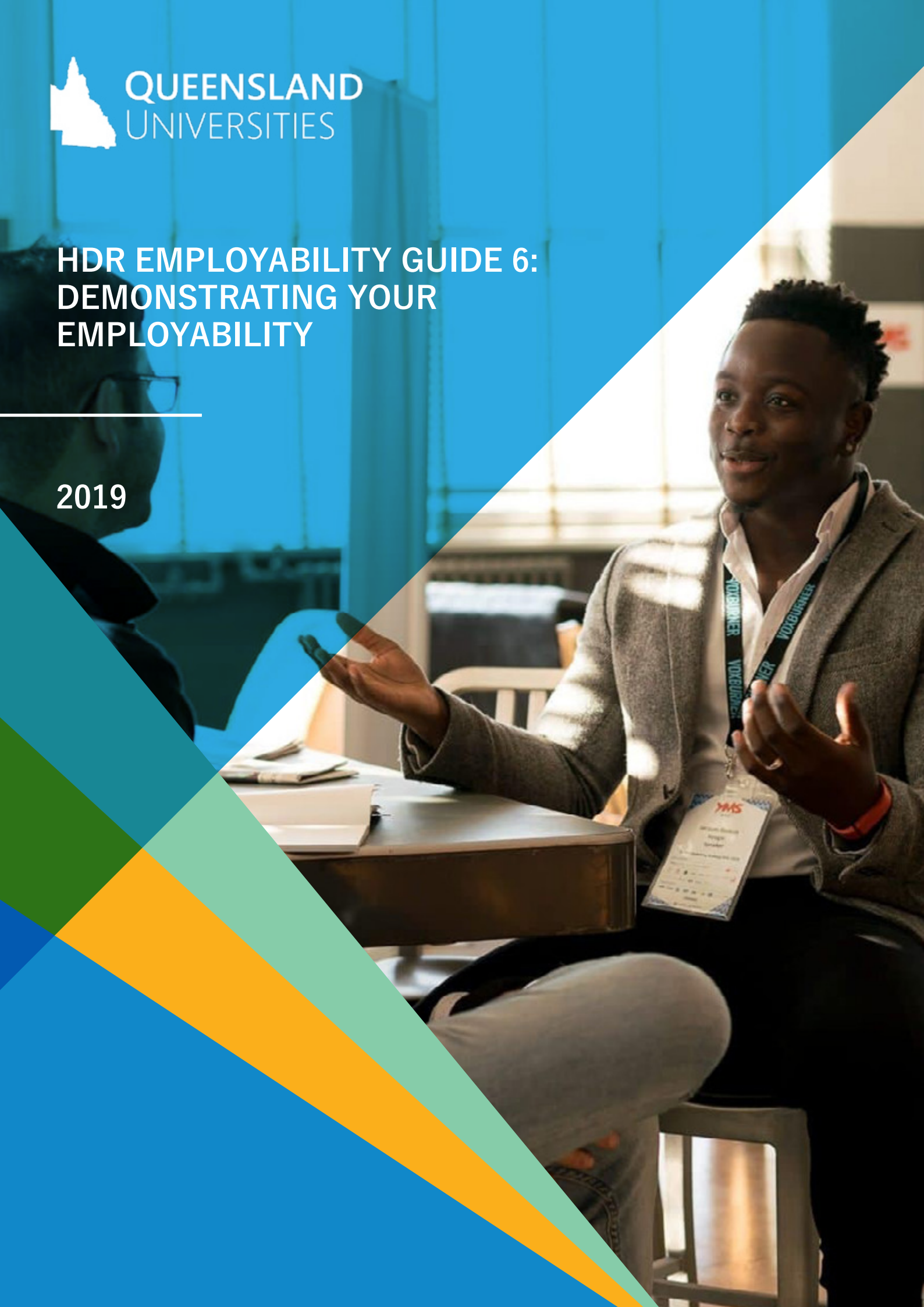


HDR EMPLOYABILITY GUIDE 6: DEMONSTRATING YOUR EMPLOYABILITY

2019



HIGHER DEGREE BY RESEARCH EMPLOYABILITY

GUIDE 6: DEMONSTRATING YOUR EMPLOYABILITY

Demonstrating your employability is not only about *what* you include in application documents, it's also about *how* you talk about yourself.

Applications (including resumes, responses to selection criteria, cover letters, interviews and so on) are all about clearly and concisely communicating your value to potential employers (also covered in Guide 4).

To do this you need to master the following three steps:

1. Self-assessment: understand what you have to offer. This includes your discipline-specific and transferable skills; research capabilities; knowledge; experiences; attributes; interests and so on (covered in Guide 3).
2. Research: understand the job market; develop your awareness of what employers are looking for—both now and in the future; and research the organisation you're applying to (covered in Guides 1 and 2).
3. Synthesis: connect the two (covered in this guide).

Simply stating and listing your skills—or assuming your qualifications and experiences speak for themselves—is not enough. In job applications you need to clearly explain the skills you have developed and provide evidence for your claims. Most importantly, you need to clearly articulate your benefit to the employer and your ability to meet their needs in their context—or how your capabilities from step 1 connect with your findings from step 2. For example, “I am proficient at X as evidenced by Y, which is relevant to Company Z because...”

You

- ◆ Skills
- ◆ Abilities
- ◆ Knowledge
- ◆ Experiences
- ◆ Interests



Articulate you into
their context



Employer

- ◆ Needs
- ◆ Values
- ◆ Context

This Guide focuses on demonstrating your employability in job applications; however, much of the content may also be relevant for applications in other contexts such as awards and grants.

Key considerations for job applications

Tailoring your application

It is a useful strategy to have ‘templates’ for your resume or CV, cover letter and selection criteria responses. However, it is essential that you tailor these for each role you apply for. Generic, stock-standard applications will immediately send your application to the middle or lower half of the pile.

Applying for a job isn’t just about telling an employer you have the ability to do the job, it’s about (1) showing that you understand what they are looking for (2) demonstrating that you can do the job and (3) persuading them you are a ‘good fit’.

How?

- ◆ Mirror the style of the organisation—become familiar with their website; mission statement; objectives; annual reports—and match their language, values and creativity/conservatism in your application material (see Guide 4, Activity 4.4).
- ◆ Use the language of the job advertisement, the position description and the selection criteria to emphasise your value.
- ◆ Reflect the language of relevant professional bodies and the industry more broadly.
- ◆ Articulate the connections between your experiences and their needs.
- ◆ Demonstrate a passion for the work they do during conversations or a job interview—by referring to material you have read (for example, blogs and journals) or events you have attended (such as conferences and professional development activities) that are relevant to their field.

Try to put yourself in the role of an employer. You are seeking a professional that will be of value to your organisation and be motivated to produce quality work. You need them to work well with your existing team. They will be representing your company and have an impact on your business. You want the best possible person for the role. What would you be looking for in an application?

Language

Use your research skills to identify appropriate language used by the organisation and the broader industry (covered in Guide 4) and match this language in your application material.

Additionally, ensure you:

- ◆ are concise
- ◆ clearly state your skills
- ◆ use first person and an [active voice](#) (“I developed a prototype” is stronger than “a prototype was developed”).



Content

Read the job advertisement, position description and selection criteria carefully to identify what an employer is looking for. Use this to guide the information you include across all components of your application.

While it is generally advisable to reflect the norms and expectations of the broader industry of the organisation you are applying to, you should always consider any details of the job advertisement material that may contradict these norms—rather than relying on general perceptions across very large and heterogeneous groups.

For example:

- ♦ If a non-academic position has selection criteria relating to publishing research, then it would be appropriate to include your academic publications in your application.
- ♦ If an academic position has selection criteria relating to community/industry engagement and impact; then it would be appropriate to highlight community volunteer work; stakeholder consultations; and non-academic publications such as industry reports, blogs, articles on LinkedIn or The Conversation and so on.

Additionally, there are many employers of HDR graduates that bridge the academic and industry /government sectors (such as CSIRO and the national Academies) and therefore don't clearly fit the pattern of either sector. For example, a post-doc position on an ARC Linkage Project may incorporate a combination of academic research outputs and the practical application of research findings.

Tip

Where possible, mirror the priorities of the role and the values of the organisation.

Formatting

The key is to ensure the employer can easily navigate the document to find what is most relevant to them. This is best accomplished through consistent heading structures, tab settings and other signals/signposting to guide the reader. Additionally, text should be a decent size (11- or 12-point) and easy to read (think Times New Roman, Arial, Calibri).

Resume basics

Resume or CV (curriculum vitae?)

Although there are differences between a resume and a curriculum vitae (CV), the terms are generally used interchangeably in Australia.

Style of resume

Resumes differ in style and length according to the context (country and industry) and most importantly, the requirements of the employer. Generally, there are two types of resumes:

1. Chronological—listing qualifications and experience from most to least recent (under appropriate headings).
2. Functional—categorising similar qualifications and experiences into functional areas or expertise/under informative headings such as Academic experience, Research experience, Teaching and so on.

In Australia, resumes are usually two to five pages in length and tend to use a combination of styles, sometimes even in a single resume. For example, education is usually listed chronologically, but experience can be listed chronologically or in functional groups. In America and Europe, one-page functional resumes appear to be more common. However, trends are changing due to the global nature of the workforce and you should therefore clarify expectations regarding length and style—regardless of which country you are applying in.

There are no set layouts—however, there are numerous templates and guides available for you to explore, from the most creative to the simplistic. Some good examples are available through [Vitae](#), the [Griffith Graduate Research School](#) and the [University of Cambridge](#). Choose a layout that reflects your style, matches your industry requirements and best highlights how you meet the needs of the employer.

Content should be ordered in terms of *relevance and recency*. If the role requires a specific qualification, list qualifications first—then move onto experiences. If it requires experience, list experiences first and qualifications second. Many roles will require both, so use your judgement to determine the most appropriate order.

Publications can be listed from most recent to oldest or, alternatively, list those in which you are first author first (from most recent to oldest).

Tip

Using a header with your name and contact details across all of your documents (letter, resume and selection criteria responses /statement of claims) adds a professional touch.

Formatting

Your HDR degree and project title should be listed in full for applications for any role or organisation. Additionally, you should also include your supervisors for academic roles.

Publications: bold your name in the list of authors.

Grants: List the title of the grant, research team or group (with your name highlighted in bold), the dollar value of the grant and the outcome.

Content inclusions and exclusions

Deciding what to include in your resume goes back to the three steps of articulating your value to employers; knowing what you have to offer and knowing what employers are looking for.

If in doubt about what to include in your resume it can be useful to ask someone who works (or has worked) in a similar organisation. Additionally, many universities and organisations have resume and application guidelines on their websites.



Activity 6.1

Use the table below as a guide to identify items (such as qualifications or experiences) you may or may not need to include in your resume; decide when these items should be included or excluded and briefly outline your reasons for doing so. This will provide you with a considered plan or outline for your resume.

Guidance	Item to include or exclude	Reason for inclusion (evidence of skills and benefit to employers)
About yourself		
Be selective. Information that might allow discrimination against you and is irrelevant to the role should be excluded (for example, gender and date of birth—unless specifically requested in the application process).	<i>Example:</i> <i>ATSI status</i>	<i>The position involves working in remote communities and affiliation would support my application</i>
Your qualifications		
Include qualifications that are relevant to the position or that explain what you have been doing with your time (gaps in your history create questions). If they are not directly relevant, consider communicating the transferable skills obtained.	<i>Example:</i> <i>Boating Licence</i>	<i>Not relevant if the role is in central QLD as a public administrator</i>
Your experiences		
Omit outdated (more than 10 years ago) experiences if they are irrelevant to the role and you have enough relevant experiences. If you have diverse experiences, you might consider a functional resume which groups experiences for example: Research experience (then list this chronologically); Administrative experience and so on.		

Guidance	Item to include or exclude	Reason for inclusion (evidence of skills and benefit to employers)
Publications		
The number and types of publications you include in your resume will depend on the role you're applying for and the number of publications you have (using the same considerations for professional profiles as covered in Guide 4).		
Grants		
The number and types of grants you include in your resume will depend on their relevance to the role you're applying for, and whether they demonstrate relevant skills. For example, when applying for academic roles you should list all research grant applications whether successful or not, as they demonstrate your participation in grant writing and an understanding of budgeting.	<i>Example: \$500 local government equipment grant for my football club</i>	<i>Not-for-profits, R&D organisations, many commercial companies and businesses value a track record of bringing in funds from external sources, regardless of the focus of the grant</i>
Other content		
Consider other experiences you have that might be <i>relevant</i> . For example, publications; conferences; volunteering; hobbies and interests; travel; memberships and the like.		
Referees		
Many application processes include reference checks. This involves contacting people you have nominated to ask questions about you as a candidate. It is essential to include them if the application process requires it. Choose your referees carefully as they need to support your application by offering a positive opinion of your work (see Strategy 3 in Guide 4). Character referees are less valued by employers. It is best to list supervisors or colleagues from previous/ current work, study or volunteering contexts.		

Beyond the basics: Tailoring to meet the needs of employers

Using a generic resume is one of the most common mistakes in job applications. While it is a useful strategy to have an up-to-date resume or CV ‘template’, it is very important to make adjustments to your resume based on the context in which you are applying—and the requirements or criteria of the position.

Always consider what this particular employer needs to know and adjust your resume to include relevant information. For example:

- ◆ Reorder content to place the most relevant and recent first.
- ◆ Use the language of the job advertisement material, the organisation and the industry more broadly.
- ◆ Highlight connections between your experiences and their needs.

Tip

When using templates, make sure there aren’t spelling and grammatical errors as this will immediately send your application to the bottom of the pile.

If applying for many similar roles at similar organisations you may find your resume only needs minor tweaking for each application. However, sometimes you may find substantial restructuring of your resume is required—especially if you are applying for a variety of roles in a variety of sectors. For example, consider some of the differences between the following suggested guidelines¹ for academic and non-academic roles:

Academic/research positions	Non-academic positions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Mirror the university/research organisation priorities of research, teaching and service◆ List your degree in full—along with thesis title, supervisors and outputs◆ List all publications from newest to oldest, or list those in which you are first author first◆ List all research grant applications whether successful or not (demonstrates relevant skills)◆ List title of grant, research team or group, dollar value of the grant and the outcome◆ Use theoretical language and discipline-specific terminology	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Mirror the priorities of the organisation/role◆ List your degree in full, state thesis title and articulate the relevance of the research or skills gained◆ List some relevant publications and provide a link to others◆ List successful grants that are relevant to the role or demonstrate relevant skills◆ Language is very applied and specific◆ Have at least one non-academic referee

¹ Bear in mind these guidelines are general and not necessarily fixed or constant.

Stretch activity

Find a professional in your desired industry and seek feedback on your applications. Ask them what makes a candidate stand out from the rest. Make adjustments to your applications based on their feedback.

Don't stop there, we all know a sample size of one does not provide significant results! Keep seeking feedback and adjusting—applications are evolving documents.

Concerned about lack of relevant experience?

If you feel you lack relevant experience, challenge your thinking. Ask yourself: does the position you are applying for not suit you at this time—or are you just undervaluing the skills you already have.

Consider putting more emphasis on your transferable skills (broad skills that can apply in any context):

- ◆ Place relevant qualifications first and give a brief description or overview of the course content and learning outcomes.
- ◆ Write up practicums, internships, community and voluntary work in the same format as you would a paid position—placing an emphasis on the transferable skills you applied in those contexts.
- ◆ Explain the process you undertook to complete your research in terms of broader skills (breaking down complex tasks, data analysis and so on).
- ◆ Consider experiences you have had outside the context of study and work. For example, travel demonstrates a number of skills and personal attributes (resilience, cultural sensitivity, capacity to cope with ambiguity, a sense of adventure and more).

Gaps in your resume?

Many recruiters question gaps in employment history and make negative assumptions if they are not explained. If you have had periods of unemployment for whatever reason it is important to explain these—or at least de-emphasise them.

When providing an explanation for gaps or disruptions in time, frame them positively. For example, note any travel, part-time work or professional development opportunities during a gap year. Or, if you changed degrees, try adding a positive comment about it:

- ◆ 2012-2014
Bachelor of Science, Queensland
University of Technology
- ◆ 2011
Bachelor of Business, Griffith University
(*upgraded to desired degree*)

De-emphasising gaps:

- ◆ Consider a functional resume as described earlier in this Guide. Content under each functional heading is still listed in reverse chronological order, but the heading structure breaks the timeline taking the emphasis off any gaps
- ◆ Provide only years without months when listing dates.

Cover letters

Your cover letter should be a professional introduction. It might be the first impression a prospective employer gets of you—so don't leave it to the last minute and don't rush it! Write your cover letter and emails as you would any professional document by preparing appropriately and include:

- ♦ why you are writing (“I am applying for...”)
- ♦ how you meet their identified needs (“I have a ... as outlined in the job description”)
- ♦ how you exceed their needs (“In addition, I ...”)
- ♦ why you want to work for them (“I have a passion for ... and after reviewing your website I noted ...”)
- ♦ how you can be contacted—along with an enthusiastic thank you and a positive concluding statement (“I look forward to discussing this with you further...”).

Be concise, confident (but not arrogant!), professional and enthusiastic. Ensure you have absolutely zero spelling mistakes or grammatical errors—edit, re-edit and then get a friend or colleague to double check it!

Selection criteria or statement of claims

Most job applications require you to address the selection criteria or make a statement of claims. This means they want you to provide evidence that you meet their needs. Some want each criterion addressed on a separate page; others a broad statement addressing all criteria together in a given number of pages. If in doubt, you can phone the contact person to identify the correct format.



Step 1: Analyse the criteria

- ◆ Read all material available and discern what skills and abilities they are looking for.
- ◆ Determine how they want you to answer each criterion—do they ask for knowledge of /qualification in/understanding of/ability to acquire and so on? If so, you can speak from a theoretical perspective. If they ask for experience in/demonstrated capacity/ability to ..., your response will require more specific, applied examples.

Step 2: Brainstorm all the experiences you've had that are relevant to the position. Formulate stories to provide as evidence in your statement.

The STAR formula can help:

- ◆ **S** – Describe a **situation** or context. For example, “While working as a for” Keep this concise (one to two sentences).
- ◆ **T** – Describe the **task**/what had to be done. “I was responsible for” .
- ◆ **A** – Describe the **action**/step-by-step process you took to complete the task—ensuring you highlight the skills and attributes they are looking for. “Firstly, I applied my ability to (insert skill required) by Secondly, I”.
- ◆ **R** – Define the outcomes or **results** of your actions. “By doing this we achieved” or “As a result”.

For example, to address the requirement of liaising with multidisciplinary teams:

- ◆ **S** – In my role as a member of a X organisation.
- ◆ **T** – I was required to organise a function for like-minded professionals.
- ◆ **A** – I contacted participants across various sectors and promoted the relevance of the event, clarified requirements, organised displays and coordinated a team of volunteers.
- ◆ **R** – The function was a success with numerous attendees providing positive feedback.



Activity 6.2

Step 1: Find a job advertisement for a position you might be interested in and brainstorm the experiences you have that provide evidence of the skills they are seeking (specifically, the selection criteria).

Criteria /skill required:			
Study	S T A R	S T A R	S T A R
Work	S T A R	S T A R	S T A R
Professional involvement /development	S T A R	S T A R	S T A R
Volunteering /community	S T A R	S T A R	S T A R
Other	S T A R	S T A R	S T A R

Step 2: Pick one of the skills/criteria and write a response with the needs of the employer in mind, weaving together two or three of the stories you generated in the table. Try to ensure a balance by using examples from different contexts (for example, uni, work and travel) as this helps your skills appear more robust and transferable. Keep your voice [active](#), use action words and be results-orientated.

Step 3: Edit! Read and re-read your application to ensure it is error-free.

Step 4: Ask a friend or colleague to give you feedback on your response—including how well you've addressed the skill/criterion, the relevance of your examples and the sentence structure /language/tone of your response.

Stretch activity

Consider how you would adjust your responses or use different examples for variations of a single skill. For example, how might your response differ across the following variations of ‘communication skills’ (taken from the selection criteria of recent job advertisements suitable for HDR graduates)?:

- ◆ Excellent written and oral communication skills.
- ◆ Good written and oral communication skills, particularly with respect to preparing a variety of document types that provide advice and recommendations in a clear and concise manner (e.g. reports, correspondence, briefs).
- ◆ Communication skills that demonstrate experience in stakeholder engagement and communicating messages to a variety of audiences.
- ◆ Demonstrated excellent communication skills and passion for delivering creative and impactful content.

Tip

Talk in terms of ‘package’ not salary as this can include things like superannuation; health insurance; car; computer; phone and so on—which allows more room to negotiate.

Discussing salary expectations

Researching and clarifying your salary expectations prior to actively applying for roles will ensure you are not caught off guard if asked about this at interview. Research your field and the relevant context (such as country; state; position level; role type such as managerial vs operational; experience and qualifications required and so on) to gain an understanding of the average income before you enter in any discussions about salary. Be aware that job location can impact the salary (Business Analysts in Melbourne are often paid at a higher rate than in Brisbane). If you enter negotiations without some understanding you are at risk of under- or over-selling yourself. Either way, you will leave a bad impression.

Try not to discuss your salary prior to being offered the position as you do not want this to influence the application process. Do some research about what might be an appropriate salary range just in case the interviewer asks about your expectations—however, do not raise the topic unless they do!

In-depth salary data can be found on [PayScale](#) and the [Fair Work website](#). Additionally, you can also look at the salary range on job advertisements for similar roles (at similar organisations and located in the same city) for comparisons.



Written by Beth Keane and Dr Shari Walsh, Growth Psychology

Reviewed by Cassandra Wardle, Queensland Universities

Designed by Alicia Stokes, Griffith Graduate Research School

Developed in 2019 for the Higher Degree by Research (HDR) Experience and Employability Project, co-funded with the support of the Queensland Government's International Education and Training Partnership Fund, managed by Study Queensland within Trade and Investment Queensland.

This HDR Employability guide would not have been possible without the support, feedback and contributions of the 60 HDR Ambassadors (representing eight Queensland universities) involved in this project. We acknowledge and thank our ambassadors for their valued input.

Study
Queensland
Start here. **Go anywhere**



TIO Trade & Investment
Queensland
AUSTRALIA



Higher Degree by Research (HDR) Experience and Employability Project partners:

