

Guide to...

Using the STAR(R)

Approach



Explore
Experience
Progress



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INTRODUCTION

The STAR(R) Approach is a useful strategy for:

- Writing your CV and cover letter for job opportunities.
- Answering questions on application forms or writing personal statements.
- Answering 'competency-based' questions in interviews (e.g., "Give us an example of a time when...") and highlighting the relevance of those experiences.
- Reflecting on what you have learned or gained from your experiences.

The STAR(R) Approach is a strategy for giving specific examples to evidence your skills and experience:

SITUATION

What was the situation and when did it take place?

TASK

What was the task or objective? What did you need or intend to do?

ACTION

What specific action did you take? How and why did you take the action you took?

RESULT

What was the outcome of your action?

REFLECTION/RELATION

What did you learn from this experience (reflection)? How does this experience relate to the career decisions you are making and/or the role you are applying for

It is important to always use the main STAR structure when providing examples, with the 'Action' being the most important part, so make sure you use more detail when describing the 'Action' you took.

The 'Reflection' or 'Relation' part of STAR(R) are optional extras but can be useful when reflecting on what you have learned ('reflection') and for making connections between the experience and your future career aims ('relation'). 'Relation' is particularly useful for job interview settings.

USING STAR(R) FOR CV & COVER LETTERS

The key to writing an effective CV and cover letter is to tailor it to the role you are applying for and evidence how you possess the experience and skills the employer is looking for. To do this, you need to be concise but specific when providing examples, using language that has a positive impact.

Let's imagine you are applying for an opportunity that requires you to have skills in 'organisation and planning'. Let's also imagine that you have demonstrated these skills by organising an event that you ran on campus. You could briefly summarise this example using STAR:

- **Situation:** Helping with a charity event on campus.
- **Task:** To raise money
- **Action:** Leading a team, booking the venue, and advertising the event .
- **Result:** Good event attendance that raised money for the charity Mind.

For your CV or cover letter, you want to be able to explain this experience of using your organisation and planning skills in a concise and impactful way.

Here is an example of how to find the right balance:

First draft:

"Good organisational skills were vital to make a charity event a success".

Comment:

Too vague.

Second draft:

"Good organisation and planning were vital to raise money for a charity. We agreed who would be responsible for tasks and organising advertising. The event was a success".

Comment:

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

Final draft:

"Responsible for organising a campus charity event which involved leading a team, sourcing the venue, and planning the advertising campaign. The event successfully raised £500 and 200 students attended."

Comment:

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.

USING STAR(R) FOR APPLICATION FORMS

Application forms are typically structured in one of two ways.

Firstly, some application forms include a large blank space for applicants to write a supporting statement. As you are likely to be less restricted in terms of wording and length compared to a CV and cover letter, you can expand your examples to add more detail. In the example used in the previous CV & Cover Letter section, you might add more detail by talking about how you led the team, how you negotiated the venue, and how you planned the advertising campaign. An application form is also a good opportunity to relate your skills to the job role you are applying for.

Secondly, some application forms may be structured around specific questions.

Here is an example:

Application form question: As a Graduate Human Resources Assistant you will need to be able to show resilience and handle difficult situations with calmness and confidence. Give an example of when you had to deal with a difficult situation.

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 to a nearby shop. It was a difficult situation because she became angry when I said I could not sell her a swimming ticket for her son to swim unsupervised. I calmly but clearly explained the rule regarding children under 10 years requiring adult supervision in the pool and why this rule was important for children's safety and safeguarding. As an alternative, I suggested that she could leave her son in the centre's supervised play area while she went to the nearby shop, and that she could go swimming with her son once she returned. The customer calmed down and agreed to leave her son in the play area. If I had not explained the reason behind the rule in a calm tone and offered her an alternative, the customer may have felt that the centre was not customer friendly. This experience taught me the value of active listening to understand another person's perspective. My ability to handle difficult situations with tact and diplomacy makes me a suitable candidate for a graduate human resources assistant as I can apply my skills in communication and my ability to remain calm when supporting colleagues.



USING STAR(R) FOR INTERVIEWS

Many employers use competency-based interview questions to assess at interview whether the candidate possesses the right skillset for the role they have applied for. A competency-based interview question asks for an example of an experience:

Give an example of a time when...you've had to prioritise a range of tasks to meet deadlines.

Tell us about a time when...you've had to work collaboratively in a team to achieve a common goal.

Describe a time when...you've demonstrated your leadership ability.

In the same way in which you can use the STAR(R) Approach to give a detailed example in response to an application form question, your interview answer should:

- Be specific (focusing on one example).
- Be structured using STAR(R).
- Provide enough detail so that the interview panel clearly understands the situation and what you did, therefore, ensuring you have answered the interview question.
- Support the interview panel to recognise your ability to reflect on what you gained from the experience and/or relate your experience to the role you are being interviewed for.



USING STAR(R) FOR REFLECTION

You may be encouraged, throughout your studies and in future job roles, to reflect on your experiences and learning, and consider how they support you with your skill and career development. This is where the 'Reflection' part of the STAR(R) Approach is useful in expanding on your reflective thinking.

'Reflection' is considering what you learned or gained from an experience, your thoughts and feelings associated with it, and how the experience supports you in your future career development.

In this example, let's imagine you recently took part in an academic group project and are reflecting on the experience using STAR(R):

During my 'Industry Practice' module of my Business & Management degree, I was part of a team of students working on a project to plan and deliver a charity event. I put myself forward as project team leader during our first project meeting, as I was keen to gain leadership experience. This meant I was managing a team of three other students. To ensure the project was planned and delivered successfully, I started by scheduling regular team meetings. At the first meeting I explained the key roles and workstreams required to meet the project brief and why I felt the assigning of key roles was beneficial to ensure clarity of responsibility, but that as a team we would continue to meet regularly to discuss progress, resolve any issues and ensure that the project plan was on schedule. The assigning of key roles along with regular meetings largely worked well, but one team member was sometimes absent from meetings. This created friction in the group because it was perceived not everyone was contributing equally. As project leader I arranged to meet separately with the team member. I listened to their reasons for missing some team meetings and learned they felt their ideas were dismissed by the team. I explained they were a valuable member of the team and reminded them of a time they had made a great suggestion around the marketing of the event that the team had agreed on. I encouraged them to join the next team meeting and as a result they contributed significantly to the project. As a team we were able to deliver a successful charity event raising £500 for a local charity and our event gained a strong grade for the module.

On reflection, I learned how challenging it can be taking leadership responsibility, especially when managing a team project with a tight deadline. I had not anticipated having to deal with friction amongst the team and a team member who was sometimes absent from meetings. Whilst I found the experience of dealing with a team with differing views and levels of motivation really challenging, it helped me to recognise how important active listening is in supporting teams I am leading. As I am keen to work in events management after graduation, I feel I now have some leadership experience and know how important being a supportive and open leader is to ensure team success.

HOW TO CHOOSE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES WHEN USING STAR(R)

It may often be the case that you have more than one example you can use to evidence your skills or experience. For example, if an employer is looking for someone with 'strong teamwork skills' there may be many instances in which you have worked as part of a team. Perhaps you've undertaken a team-based university assignment, participated in a team-based sports club, worked as a team in your part-time job or been part of a team summer volunteering scheme.

When thinking about which specific example to choose, ask yourself:

- What is your most relevant example?
- Is the example recent (try to use examples within the last 5 years where possible)?
- What example best describes the skill being asked for?
- Does the example adequately enable you to structure your answer using the STAR(R) Approach?



FINALLY, KEEP A RECORD!

Sometimes it can be difficult thinking of and choosing specific examples to evidence your skills and experiences. You may find it useful to create your own template using the STAR(R) Approach so that you can keep a record of your experiences and what you have achieved as your progress in your studies. You could start by listing your key skills and using the STAR(R) Approach to write down specific examples of how and when you have utilised these skills. Example template:

SKILL	SITUATION	TASK	ACTION	RESULT	REFLECTION / RELATION
VERBAL COMMUNICATION					
TEAMWORK					
ORGANISATIONAL SKILLS					
PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS					
ANALYTICAL SKILLS					



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