

Stories with STAR power

Responding to selection criteria and writing short responses / suitability statements



Alongside your resume, some employers, particularly government departments and larger organisations, will request a more detailed response that directly links your skills, experience and achievements to the role. This may take the form of a **written statement**, a **short response**, a **response to selection criteria** or an **extended cover letter**.

Through this written response, you may be asked to:

- Outline your suitability for the position, referencing the role description (responsibilities or duties) and/or key capabilities (technical and transferable skills)
- Respond to a small number of selection criteria (approximately four to six criteria in most cases) that outline essential and desirable qualities (sometimes listed under a heading such as “How you will be assessed”)
- Explain or “pitch” why you are the ideal candidate by demonstrating your strengths and potential.

Employers use this additional evidence to assist with the shortlisting process to determine who is offered an interview. They usually specify how long your response should be. Two pages is most common. It is crucial that you adhere to their specified length requirement. A strong response is often the difference between making the cut or being overlooked, so it's worth investing the time to get it right.

Step 1: Understand what the employer is really looking for

Before you start, take the time to really understand what the employer is seeking in an ideal candidate. Use our resource [Beyond the Job Ad](#) to help unpack employer expectations, their values and priorities, and to identify what to research about the organisation.

Step 2: Reflect and gather your evidence

Brainstorm the various ways you have demonstrated the knowledge, skills and personal qualities the employer is looking for, or similar experiences that could demonstrate transferability. Try to think of “**case studies**” or “**stories**” that you could use in your response. Aim for examples that:

- Provide specific details of when, where and how you have demonstrated your capability.
- Include qualitative or quantitative indicators of success or impact.
- Showcase both technical skills (job-specific) and transferable skills (such as communication or teamwork).

Look over your resume to ensure you have considered options from your training, course placements, internships, work history, volunteering and community activities.

Step 3: Select your strongest evidence

Your brainstorming session will hopefully provide a range of examples to choose from. Narrow down on just a few examples that best demonstrate your suitability for the role. One good example per criteria is usually enough. Use the following guidelines to help you determine which of your examples to use in your response:

- **Relevance or transferability:** How closely does the example align with the key capabilities or criteria? Or can you clearly demonstrate the transferability of the skills and knowledge demonstrated from one context to another? Bonus points if the example demonstrates multiple capabilities or criteria!
- **Currency:** Is the example recent enough to reflect your current skills and experience?
- **Impact:** Can you describe the results of your actions in qualitative or quantitative terms?
- **Challenge or complexity:** Does the example involve navigating a difficult situation; applying strategic thinking, problem solving or decision making skills; or demonstrating initiative or leadership?
- **Clarity:** Can you explain the scenario clearly and concisely, without needing too much background? Can you be specific about the actions that you took to achieve a result?
- **Distinctness:** Does the example help you stand out from other applicants? Is it memorable or unique?
- **Breadth:** When combined, do your chosen examples sufficiently cover the range of skills, abilities, aptitudes and personal qualities the employer is assessing?

Ensure that you can confidently elaborate on the examples you decide to use in your response at your interview.

Step 4: Draft your response

If the employer has asked you to respond to specific assessment criteria separately, write each criterion as a heading in bold font and provide your responses underneath each one. If a more general response is appropriate, you can just write a series of paragraphs that demonstrate your suitability or fit.

Whichever format is required, a proven strategy to present your examples clearly and persuasively is to use the STAR or STARL method.

- Situation** What was the context? Where did the experience occur? Keep it brief and relevant.
- Task** Describe the challenge and expectations. What needed to be done? What was required of *you*?
- Actions** Outline the specific steps you took. Focus on *your* contribution (“I” statements, not “We” statements). If there were multiple actions, rather than writing these in a long paragraph, you might find it easier to write more concisely and draw attention to your skills by using bullet points, commencing each point with a [strong verb](#).
- Result** What was the outcome? What changed as a result of your actions? Include any measurable or meaningful impact (qualitative or quantitative outcomes).
- Learning** Link what you learned from this experience with the role. How has this experience prepared you for future success?

Here is an example of a STARL response:

Demonstrated ability to build and sustain relationships with a diverse range of stakeholders, including the ability to negotiate, resolve conflict and positively influence and motivate others.

While working at Happy Valley Respite, I cared for a resident who had recently transitioned from hospital. The resident was experiencing confusion and distress, and her family was anxious and frequently questioned the care being provided. Tensions were rising between the family and staff, and morale among the team was declining. While my role was to support the resident’s wellbeing, I identified the need to build trust with the family, and help foster a more positive and collaborative environment among staff. To achieve this I:

- Supported the resident to settle into the facility by establishing daily routines, introducing calming techniques, and actively encouraged her engagement in meaningful activities suited to her cognitive ability and interest preferences to promote social connections with staff and residents.
- Initiated respectful conversations with the family to understand their concerns and provide reassurance.
- Explained our care routines clearly and empathetically to help the family feel informed and involved.
- Liaised with the multidisciplinary team to ensure the care plan reflected the resident’s evolving needs.
- Encouraged colleagues to share regular updates with the family and exercise transparency in all interactions.

The family became more trusting and engaged, and the resident’s emotional state improved with the added familiarity and support. Staff reported feeling more confident in handling interactions with the family, and the collaborative approach was praised during our monthly team meeting. I learned that clear communication, empathy, and consistency are key to building relationships with families and motivating colleagues, and even small gestures, like involving families in care decisions, have a significant impact on trust and patient outcomes.

Situation

Task

Actions

Results

Learning

Step 5: Proofread and polish

Check your written response to ensure it meets the expectations of the employer (e.g. length requirement) and addresses the role requirements and/or all of the assessment criteria clearly and succinctly. Mirror the language from the advertisement, role description and selection criteria to demonstrate your alignment. Remember that your response provides evidence of your communication skills and attention to detail. Ensure correct grammar, spelling and punctuation, and a professional look with a font such as Arial size 10/11 and consistent formatting.

Seek expert support from the JCU Careers and Employability Team

Many university students have never applied for positions requiring a response to selection criteria or an extended response demonstrating their suitability for the role. Take the stress and the guess work out. Book your personalised appointment through our [CareerHub](#) to get feedback on your written application.

