

IN GOOD FORM: HOW TO DEAL WITH ONLINE APPLICATIONS

Many large corporations field so many resumes that they've developed software approaches to sorting through them. Designed to remove formatting flourishes and distill resumes down to their essence, online job application forms help employers to filter out unqualified applicants and prioritize candidates who meet important selection criteria. Sometimes called applicant tracking systems (ATS), these proprietary forms can help employers get answers to the specific questions they want and more easily directly compare applicants. While submitting an online form can appear more straightforward than writing a resume from scratch, you still need to take deliberate steps to ensure that your submission stands out from the rest.

Be realistic: Nobody wants to hear this, but jobs posted online inevitably attract more applicants – often hundreds or even thousands. If a listing doesn't seem to fit your profile of skills and experiences, know what you're getting into. If you have the time, there's no reason not to apply, but it's fair to expect rejection. The best way to land *any* job is by getting a referral from a real human who already works for the hiring employer.

Follow directions: Every company uses a different application submission and processing system. What's important is that you fill out the form you're given accurately and supply all the required documents. Answer everything you're asked (including sub-questions), but be mindful of word limits. If you're required to attach a file, ensure that you use the specified file format. Often, this means creating a "plain text" resume and letter.

Do your work offline: Work on your application in your regular word processor, saving your work periodically. This approach will allow you to better check your spelling and grammar and will protect you against unpredictable outages. The last thing you want to do is lose your work because your browser crashes. When you're happy with what you've written, just cut and paste.

Have the right words: With online resumes, keywords become especially important. Some companies use automated search tools to seek out specific terms when determining which resumes to read and which ones to discard. Make sure your spelling is perfect and you use the most appropriate terminology for your discipline. Scan the job posting to identify important terms to include; don't try to get cute by using synonyms. Look beyond the keywords contained in the job posting by visiting the hiring company's website. Try your best to learn its core values and relate your various experiences and skills to the company culture. Look for borrowable words in company mission statements and "About Us" sections. The LinkedIn profiles of employees currently working for that company can also be helpful. Avoid nonstandard abbreviations.

Include all your education: Many application-scanning systems specifically look for the names of universities. If you've taken online, professional development, or other supplementary courses from another school, be sure to include that institution's name.

Check your formatting: Some online application forms effectively allow/instruct you to copy and paste your entire resume into a web-based field. If you do so, check to see that your formatting survives the jump intact. It may be necessary to restructure your resume to make it easier for the hiring committee to read.

Use your cover letter: In the absence of a full resume, your cover letter is more important. If you're asked to email or upload a cover letter, make sure you take advantage of the opportunity to foreground relevant skills and experiences that you couldn't fit on the application form. See our cover letter tips resource to get started.

Further reading:

- How to Make Them Respond when You Apply for a Job Online (Forbes)
- Your Resume vs. Oblivion (Wall Street Journal)
- The 9 Best Tips for Submitting an Online Application (USA Today)

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Mock interviews • Interest testing and assessments • Job fair and networking opportunities • Volunteer Internship Program (VIP)



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