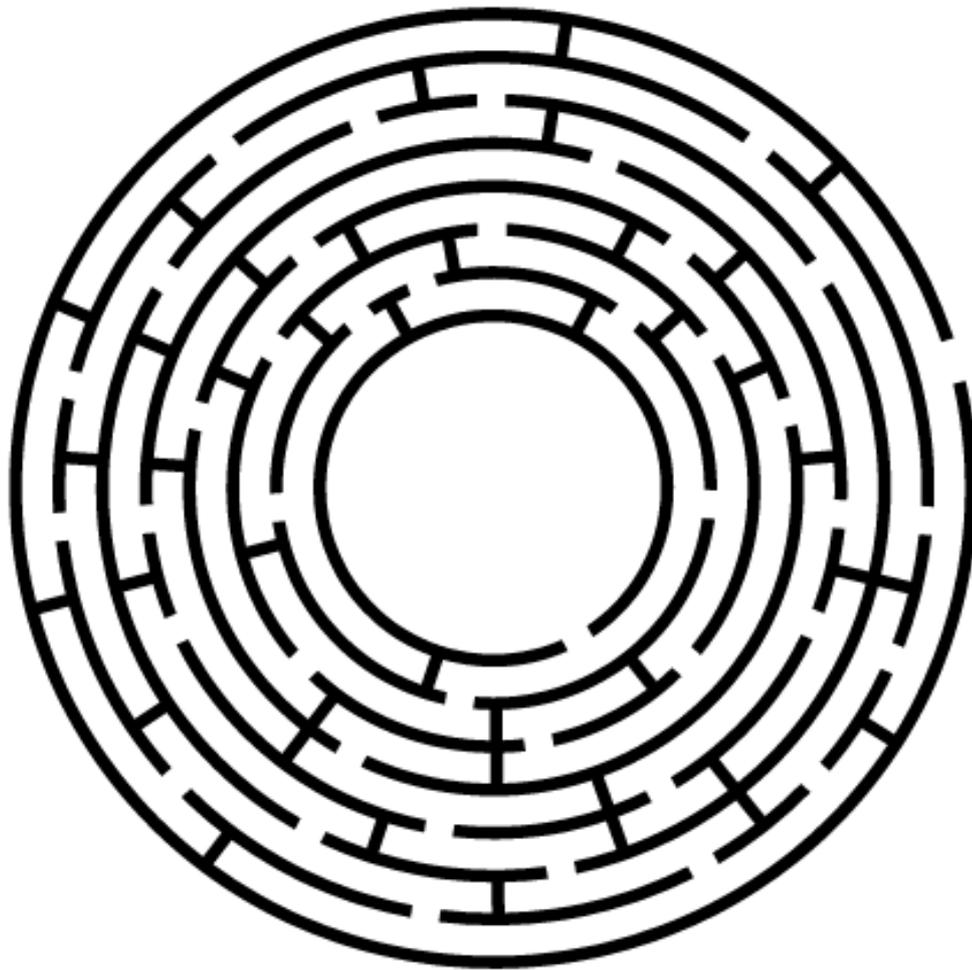


Unofficial Civil Service Guide 2.0: An Overview of the Application Process



PART 1 of 3

Disclaimer – This guide is NOT an official Civil Service product. The advice and best practices included come from various official and unofficial sources. We cannot guarantee that following our guidance information will get you a job.

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Author

Name: [Nathan White](#)



Role: Children’s Social Care Legislation Team

Department: Department for Education (DfE)

Background: I have worked at DfE since 2021 and co-authored the first [‘Unofficial Guide to Civil Service Applications’](#) with my best friend Joe Oakes (HM Treasury). Before joining DfE, I spent two years working on the Unlocked Graduates program as a Youth Justice Worker at HM Young Offenders Institute Feltham. In my short Civil Service career, I’ve been fortunate enough to have had several impactful roles that have given me real insight into how the Civil Service works!

Outside work, I am a trustee of two charities (*Art Against Knives* and *Unlocked Graduates*) and sit on the Careers & Enterprise Company’s “*Effective Transitions Fund*” steering group.

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Foreword

After publishing our first Unofficial Civil Service Application Guide in 2022, Joe and I were overwhelmed and astonished by the scale of interest and impact it has generated. The most surreal thing has been the countless people who've reached out to say that without the guide, they, or someone they know, wouldn't have been able to join the Civil Service!

Despite the guide's success, we continually received general feedback that far too many people *still* found securing a role in the Civil Service extremely daunting, too complicated, and out of reach for them - especially those from lower socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds! The most common barriers people report are:

- 1) Lack of awareness of opportunities and where to find them
- 2) In many cases, low confidence about their fear of not fitting into the Civil Service stops them from applying. This can manifest in people feeling they do not have the skills to succeed and feeling like the Civil Service is only for people from more privileged backgrounds.
- 3) Limited access to critical information, advice, and guidance can help them ace the application process.
- 4) They do not know anyone in their network with civil service experience who could help them navigate the process and overcome some of the abovementioned barriers. Many working in the Civil Service, including myself, wouldn't have been able to secure a role without this type of help.

In our view, the persistence of these barriers means that even though the Civil Service is taking steps to diversify its workforce, it remains unreachable for a large section of the population who are intelligent, passionate, and interested in public service.

These aspiring civil servants miss out on roles that, given the opportunity, they'd be a fantastic fit for. This isn't because they don't have the right skills or aptitude needed to succeed but, more often than not, because they do not know how to navigate the application process!

This guide is the first of three (please see below) we're sharing to help aspiring civil servants navigate the labyrinth of the Civil Service application process. It includes some things we wish we had known when we applied for our first jobs!

Please share this guide with anyone you know who might benefit from it!

If you'd like to find out more about applications, the Civil Service more broadly, or get in touch with us about something else, you can email us at unofficialguide.cs@gmail.com

Introduction

Whether you're ready to apply or curious to learn more, we hope this guide will provide valuable insight into the civil service.

This guide introduces applying to the Civil Service through the 'direct entry' route. It aims to assist individuals considering or actively applying to the Civil Service who seek more insight into the application process and tips for submitting a robust application!

For anyone considering applying, we advise starting with a browse of the [Civil Service Jobs](#) website, where all external (open to everyone), cross-government (open to existing Civil Servants in any department), and internal (open to Civil Servants in a specific department) jobs are advertised.

For anyone interested in applying, we recommend registering on the [website](#) and getting familiar with how it works. You can **filter** available jobs based on various criteria such as department, salary, location, grade, and role type (etc) to suit your preferences. When you're setting these filters, consider asking yourself some of the following questions to try and work out the type of role you want:

- *What interests you have?*
- *What grade do you want to work at?*
- *Which departments you'd want to be part of?* – If you want to learn more about the department you're applying to, look on [Gov. uk](#) to see their reports, plans, and strategies.

This might help you to understand their priorities and what they do.

Once you've had a browse and have a flavour for what sort of jobs you're interested in, you can **set up alerts** based on your chosen criteria, and you'll receive an email when a job that suits your interests is posted.

If you find a role (or a few) you're interested in, **look at the job description** and skills they seek. This is crucial to working out precisely what they're looking for in a candidate and will give you some idea of how you can ensure that in your application, you can demonstrate that you meet these criteria.

Chapter 1: The ‘Direct Entry’ application process

Through the direct entry route, most people will go through roughly 6-8 steps before being offered a job in the Civil Service (see sections below). Each step may vary across departments and roles, depending on the methods used to assess your suitability for the role. However, each job advertisement will detail how the process will work.

Step 1: Choose the correct grade for you to apply for

As an introduction, grades are a way of understanding seniority—however, names can differ between departments (see table below for examples). You can apply for any grade via direct entry. However, knowing how to navigate the ‘grade’ system and what grade is suitable for you can feel like a huge struggle to overcome (at best) and impossible (at worst) when considering applying for roles!

When deciding which grade to apply for, you should consider how the job specification aligns with your skills, experience, and interests and the level of responsibility you’re ready to take on. Finding a role that aligns with your skills, experience, and interests will give you the best chance of success!

Grade	Full name	Other depts	Cabinet office	DCMS	DWP	FCDO	HMRC	HMT	MOJ	MOD
SCS	Senior Civil Service	SCS 4	Permanent Secretary							
		SCS 3	Second Permanent Secretary, Director General							
		SCS 2	Director							
		SCS 1	Deputy Director							
G6&G7	Grades 6 and 7	G6	Band A	AU	G	D7	G6	E2	B1	A
		G7	Band A	A	F	D6	G7	E	B2	A
SEO/HEO	Senior Executive Officer	SEO	B2	B	E	C5	SO	D	C1	B
	Higher Executive Officer	HEO	B2	C	D	C4	HO	D	C2	C
EO	Executive Officer	EO	B1	D	C	B3	Officer	C	D	D
AO/AA	Administrative Officer	AO	C2		B	A2	AO	B	E1	E
	Administrative Assistant	AA	C1		A	A1			E2	F

Source: [Grade structures of the Civil Service | The Institute for Government](#) [Grade structures of the Civil Service | The Institute for Government](#)

Step 2: Review job advert

The first thing you should do is have a good look at the advert in detail and ask yourself the following questions:

- *Why does this job appeal to me?*
- *Do I have skills and experiences from current or previous roles that align with the essential and desirable criteria?*
- *Why would I be the right person for the job?*

Step 3: Get in touch with the hiring manager (optional)

If you are uncertain about any aspect of the application process, you should email the hiring manager listed in the advertisement. This can be particularly useful for people applying from outside the Civil Service.

The hiring manager is on hand to answer any questions you have about the process and role. These conversations are an excellent opportunity to determine if the role suits you, so treat them like a two-way mini-interview. Some topics that may be good to ask the hiring manager about include:

- What the job will look like on a day-to-day basis?
- How will your application be assessed, and what are they looking for in a candidate?
- For external candidates, how best do you present your non-Civil Service experience?
- Ways of working and culture in the organisation or team.

Another benefit is that speaking to the hiring manager and meeting them again in the interview may feel slightly less daunting, as you'll hopefully have already built a rapport with them. If you don't believe us, here's a quote from Sophie, an experienced hiring manager from DfE: "I like it when candidates get in touch with me! It shows they're serious about the job and helps them start making a positive impression."

If you're uncomfortable or unable to speak to the hiring manager, an alternate approach could be to connect with someone in the area/ department via LinkedIn to understand what it's like better.

Step 4: Submitting a written application

The first formal assessment stage requires you to provide written evidence demonstrating that you have the skills and experience needed for the job description.

A hiring panel, often made up of 2-3 people, will review your application and give you a score based on how the information you've provided meets/measures up against the job criteria. This part of the process is often called the 'sift.' If you pass this stage, you will be put through to the next phase, usually an interview (*see next section*).

The most common ways to be assessed at this stage are:

- **CV**
- **Behaviours**
- **Experience**
- **Statement of suitability**
- **Civil Service tests** (e.g., Verbal, numerical, judgment, strengths)

It's worth knowing that timescales for this process can vary depending on the number of applicants, and it's doubtful that you'll get any feedback on your written applications. Also, this is where most people struggle and fail to progress, so learning how to make it through the 'sift' is a crucial skill on the way to securing a vital role!

All that said, it's worth noting that recruitment practices vary considerably between departments, so read the advice they give. For example, the guidance below came from *two job adverts from different departments*:

- (Dept X) *"You are required to submit a Personal Statement of no more than 1200 words which provides evidence against each of the Essential Criteria above".*
- (Dept Y) *"Make your statement more personal than you'd write for behaviour statements, show more passion for the job, sell yourself, explain why this is important for your development, and explain why you are a good match for the role."*

Step 5: Completing an interview

If you have been fortunate enough to make it through the 'sift,' you'll be invited to an interview with the hiring panel. This is an excellent opportunity to showcase why you would be the best fit for the team and set yourself apart from the other candidates.

As part of the interview, you might be asked to do one or both of the following tasks:

1. Delivering a short presentation on a topic relevant to the job role. You will likely be given pre-reading to support your presentation and are usually not expected to do the more comprehensive reading.

2. Completing a technical task (e.g., scenario-based exercise).

It's worth knowing that only the top few applicants (e.g., 3-4) are invited to interview, so not reaching this stage does not mean your application wasn't good. It just means that other people scored higher on this occasion!

Step 6: Find out whether you've got the job

After your interview, the hiring panel will score each candidate based on predefined criteria, and the highest scorer will be offered the role. Usually, you'll be notified of the outcome via email within a few weeks.

As an applicant, there are three possible outcomes at this stage:

1. **Pass & offered a role** – highest scorer
2. **Pass but placed on a reserve list** – scored high enough, but the role is offered to someone who scored higher (see next step)
3. **Do not pass** - did not score high enough overall to be considered

Whatever the outcome, you should be proud of your efforts!! Ask for as much feedback as possible from the hiring manager (i.e., what scores you received and why). Some may even be willing to have a more detailed conversation about your interview performance. This feedback can help you improve for your following interview, whether a week or a year later, so try to converse if you can!

Step 7: You're on a reserve list (optional)

Many people find reserve lists and how they work confusing—with many unaware that they even exist! Being put on a reserve list means you passed the interview and were deemed skilled enough to do the role you applied for or a similar one, but another candidate scored higher than you and was offered the role instead.

Being on a reserve list is like being on a waiting list for a sold-out event: if someone ahead of you in the queue drops out, you might be able to take their spot, and you'll be first in line if a new tour date is announced!

While on a reserve list, there's a chance you may be offered:

- A. A different role in a similar area or a similar role in a different location without having to go through the application process again. *This is because you've proven your skills and capacity to do a job at the grade you've applied for through the process!*

- B. The original job you applied for if the person/people ahead of you in the reserve list drop out.

There's a high churn in the Civil Service, and roles often arise. This is actually how I got my first role!!

If you find yourself on a reserve list, here are our top tips for navigating the situation:

1. Speak to the hiring manager to find out where you are placed on the list and how reserve lists work in that department, as each department's approach may differ slightly.
2. Be proactive in asking the hiring manager to share your details with other teams that are either running or planning to run recruitment campaigns.
3. If you are offered a role while on the reserve list, do not feel pressure to take it. Instead, chat with the prospective manager/team lead to ensure the role fits you.
4. Do not let the potential of being offered a job stop you from applying for other roles. It's best to assume you won't hear anything; if you do, that's a bonus!

Finally, reserve lists are usually time-limited, with external candidates staying on them for up to 12 months and internal candidates for up to 3 months. Each job advert will usually specify if they'll use a reserve list and how long it will be kept. If you're not offered a role during this period, you'll need to apply again if a similar role emerges.

Step 8: Pre-employment checks

If you're successful in your application and are offered a role, you'll have to complete some background checks to test your eligibility to work in the UK, amongst other things. It's worth knowing that some of these security checks can take quite a while in the Civil Service, so don't worry if there is a long delay between receiving your offer and starting your job. The time this takes can vary depending on how detailed the tests are (role dependent) and whether you're an internal or external candidate, with checks taking slightly longer for the latter in most cases.

Top tip #1 - Persistence is key

Our first tip for acing Civil Service applications is to keep on trying. Most people don't secure a role on the first (or second) application, so don't be disheartened!

Some people have described it as similar to learning to drive a car, as you need to know to pass the test, irrespective of whether you're a good driver. It can take a few attempts to prove to the assessors that you are suitable/able by learning to tick the 'right' boxes.

One way to do this is to start early, as it can take a long time to get your head around the recruitment process, and there's often a lot of competition for roles, including against existing civil servants. So, it is essential to regularly practice the core assessments as this will help you develop ... and understand their basic requirements. (see next chapter). This will not only help to increase your confidence and boost your chances of success, but it will also save time (and stress) in the long run, as you're not starting from scratch when you see a job you want!

There aren't any shortcuts, so you must put in the time and effort. Our advice is always to take a long-term view. Once you're in the Civil Service, you'll probably do a lot of applications if you want to get promoted, so it's best to take that time to understand what 'good' looks like.

Chapter 2: The core components of a ‘good’ application

What criteria will your application be assessed against?

No matter the assessment method, all Civil Service applications (**including direct entry**) are evaluated against [Success Profiles](#). The ‘Success Profiles’ are designed to help assessors understand and approximate how well you’d perform in the new role and consist of the following five elements:

Category	Description	Common assessment methods
Ability	Your current or potential ability to deliver the standard of work required. Here, demonstrating an ability to learn and adapt quickly is critical.	<i>Aptitude tests, judgment tests, and presentations.</i>
Experience	Your knowledge, skills, and expertise related to the specific job have been gained through accomplishments in relevant or similar fields.	<i>Written applications, interviews, presentations, assessment centres, and CVs.</i>
Technical	Your specific professional skills, knowledge, or qualifications. There are over 20 professions in the Civil Service covering a wide range of specialised roles, and each profession has unique requirements to meet (e.g., membership to a professional body).	<i>Written applications, CVs, interviews, technical exercises, presentations, and tests.</i>
Behaviours	You will be assessed on your ability to demonstrate the 9 Civil Service-wide behaviours in the past to deliver positive outcomes. Expectations for each behaviour change depending on the grade you’re applying for.	<i>CV, tests, written applications, interviews, presentations, and assessment centres</i>
Strengths	These are the things you enjoy doing or are naturally good at. You do These things regularly, do well, and you’re motivated. The expectations here are the same for all Civil Servants, regardless of grade.	<i>Personality tests, interviews, and assessment centres.</i>

It’s unlikely that you’ll be tested on each success profile or assessment method in the same application process, so it’s vital to read the job description thoroughly to understand what they’ll ask you at each stage!

Considering these differences, paying attention to what each application asks you to do is also critical. Before starting, get your head around the information you must provide. The most important things for you to look out for are:

1. **Essential criteria** – skills and experience that every candidate **MUST** have to be successful
2. **Desirable criteria** - additional experiences or skills that are non-essential but would boost your chances of success with the hiring panel

Regardless of the assessment method, a successful application relies on showcasing your transferable skills and matching your capabilities to the job specification!

Whatever you're tested against, the hiring manager ultimately wants to know if you're someone who could fit into their team, adopt their goals, and deliver in a new setting!

How will your application be scored against the success profiles?

In direct entry applications, it's most common to be assessed on behaviours, experiences, and strengths across written assessments and interviews. Please see the information about the scoring methods used below:

- **Behaviours and experience** are often scored from 1-7 based on the criteria below. You'll generally pass to the next stage if all of the parts of your application score at least 4 out of 7:
 - One Mark: *Not demonstrated & no positive evidence*
 - Two Marks: *Minimal demonstration and limited positive evidence*
 - Three Marks: *Moderate demonstration*
 - Four Marks: *Acceptable*
 - Five Marks: *Good demonstration*
 - Six Marks: *Substantial, positive evidence includes some evidence of exceeding expectations.*
 - Seven Marks: *Evidence provided wholly exceeds expectation at this level.*
- **Strengths** are usually scored from 1-4 against the criteria below. Knowing that you can't prepare for 'Strengths' or practice beforehand is critical as they're marked against engagement, capability, and use. In most cases, you will need at least 2 out of 4 to pass the question:
 - One mark *indicates a weakness, with the candidate's answers showing that they don't have particular experience with an activity and aren't enthusiastic about it.*
 - Two marks: *This indicates a pattern of learned behaviour, where the candidate doesn't like performing the activity, even though they're adept at it.*

- Three marks: *This indicates potential for success, with candidates showing passion and enthusiasm about the activity despite not having enough experience. Candidates with potential strengths often show commitment to learning and improving.*
- Four marks: *This indicates that the candidate has considerable experience, understands the critical task, and is passionate about it.*

Top tip #2 – Our non-negotiables for acing an application

Preparing to apply

- **Be informed** – If you're being assessed, ensure you know the success profiles and how they relate to this application.
- **Be tactical** – Focus on applying for roles where you're confident that you meet most of the 'essential' criteria. The more overlap between the requirements and your skillset, the more likely you'll be able to apply successfully.
- **Be reflective**—Based on your personal experience or those of people around you, Consider what 'good' might look like for the role you're applying for and align your application's content with that image.
- **Be ambitious** - If you're applying for a promotion, write your example as if you're already at the desired grade rather than for the grade you are. You should try to give evidence that you're already operating at the grade level you're applying for!
- **Be a salesperson** - This is your chance to present your best version of yourself, so avoid downplaying your achievements, skills, and experiences. Key to this is defining and showing off your unique selling points and why they mean you'd be an excellent fit for the role, team, and department (*e.g., What are the 3-5 things you excel at that you want to get across about yourself?*). This is not the time for modesty.
- **Be forensic** - Read the job application in detail, line by line, to ensure you fully understand it. Then, get highlighters and colour code critical parts of the essential and desirable criteria and the success profiles being tested (*e.g., behaviours*) in the job application. This will help break down the job's specifications and make it easier to make sure you've ticked them all off in your application.
- **Be specific** – Tailor all your preparation to the job you're applying for. This means highlighting the skills most relevant to that role and stripping out anything else that isn't relevant. If you copy and paste applications for different roles, you might inadvertently put in applications for the wrong job.
- **Be a follower**—Follow the advice and guidance provided in the job description for completing the application (if there is any).

- **Be proactive** – Contact the hiring manager if you're unsure what they're looking for in a candidate.

Language to use in your applications

- **Be positive** - Use powerful/active words to add emphasis, and ensure you back these up with evidence. Avoid passive phrases like "I was asked to..." or "I was considering..." as they can give some people the impression that you're not motivated.
- **Be concise** - Use plain English and avoid using jargon or assuming that the hiring panel has any prior knowledge of your area of work. Avoid using industry language, phrasing, or acronyms wherever possible to keep your application simple, to the point, and easy to understand. If you use an abbreviation throughout your applications to save words, spell them out the first time for clarity. One approach is to keep it simple using terminology that your grandparents would understand. This is crucial because the panel is likely to review many applications, so the easier yours is to understand, the more likely you are to score high!!
- **Be self-centred**—Describe what YOU did, not what the wider team/area did. It's all about showcasing your contributions and the value they add. It's all about you, so use 'I' and NOT 'we.'

Other things to cover in applications, whether written applications or interview answers

- **Be evidenced** – Don't just say you're great at a long list of skills; prove it (e.g., *I am a strong communicator, as proven when I led [insert task] at [insert setting], delivering results for [insert beneficiaries]*). So, make sure to provide evidence in your application that shows:
 - A. You've done something similar to what they're asking for in the role, OR
 - B. You can pick up the job in a reasonable timeframe.
- **Be recent**—The more recent the experience, the better the application will be received and the more relevant it will be (unless it's a stand-out or exceptional project). Anything from a while ago (e.g., over ten years) might leave the assessor/interviewer wondering what you've done recently. We recommend against putting dates into your examples (e.g., "In 2024, I did X task).
- **Be a connector**—Even if it's tangential or indirect, it's your responsibility to show how your evidence relates to your ability to do the role you're applying for. One way to do this is by emphasising transferable skills (e.g., the ability to adapt and learn, communication, or leadership).

- **Be a learner**—Most assessors want to see that you're someone who learns from every situation you've been through, so show your capacity to learn and openness to new ideas.
- **Be a leader** – Showcase how you work with and deliver through other people, especially when applying for a more senior role.
- **Be results-focused** – Use quantitative or qualitative outcomes or data in your evidence to make your application stand out (e.g., As a result of [insert activity], I saved the company £100,000). Measurable outcomes are more memorable!

Before submitting a written application

- **Be open to feedback**—Get someone you trust to read through your application before you send it to ensure the spelling, punctuation, and grammar are on point. If possible, try to find someone with Civil Service experience, and use UK spell-checking (and not US)!

Considerations for future applications

- **Be creative** - There's no one version of the truth, so try different ways of completing your application over time and see what works best for you. One example could be setting out the impact before the action in an interview answer, such as: "*After recognising the challenge of [situation] was critical to achieving [desired result/task], I therefore did [action 1] and [action 2]*".
- **Be adaptable** - To save time when applying to multiple roles, you can reuse elements of your old written answers in your applications for different roles. However, we still strongly advise tailoring your application to the specific criteria of each job.

Top tip #3 - Use the STAR method throughout your application

Ensure you use the STAR method when writing an application or answering interview questions, as most assessors will look out for it!

For context, STAR stands for:

- **Situation (5-10% of your answer)** - *What was happening, and who was it affecting?*
- **Task (10-15% of your answer)** - *What were you responsible for leading/delivering?*
- **Actions (50-60% of your answer)** - *How did you do it, what did you do, why did you do it that way, how did you overcome challenges (and which ones did you face?).* This is where you'll be awarded the most points by hiring managers!!

- **Result (15-30% of your answer)** - *What tangible outcomes directly resulted from your actions, and what did you learn due to the process?* It's worth noting that results don't always have to be super positive. An example with a negative result can still be great if you show what you learned from the process.

If you want to make your answer even more impressive, you can add the following themes to the end of your STAR answer to make it STARLET:

- **LE (Learning)** - What you learned from that experience
- **T (Transferable)** - What transferable skills can you take to the new job

Why else should you use this technique?

Because it's a fantastic way to turn your example/evidence into a more compelling, straightforward, and (hopefully) convincing story about:

- A **problem** you were faced with,
- What **role and responsibilities** you were given to resolve it,
- The **context** you were trying to resolve it in (e.g., resources and constraints)
- The **actions** you took to resolve and overcome the problem (e.g., innovations)
- Why did** you choose to do it that way,
- What the **outcome** was as a result of your actions (e.g., improvements)

Consider what the assessors want to think, feel, and know about you when using this technique. You can do this by focusing as many sentences as possible on your role and approach to resolving the problem rather than spending too long describing the problem itself.

A great way to do this is to focus on the HOW and WHY behind your actions. It's not enough to tell an assessor what you did; you must explain how you did it and the thinking that drove those decisions. In short, it helps you to demonstrate 'conscious competence,' which gives an assessor confidence that you can recreate your achievements in the future.

Common mistakes

Many people spend too much time explaining the 'situation & task,' especially in interviews. Sharing the right amount of information here is challenging because if you:

- Say too little; the story will sound too simple, and you'll miss the chance to explain why it was so challenging.

- B. Say too much; an assessor might get lost in detail and miss the story's point, which is what you did.

We advise that you focus your situation and task on the most critical and exciting context an assessor needs without overwhelming them with information.

Chapter 3: The most important tip of all? Be Yourself!

The most game-changing advice we've ever received is to believe in yourself when applying. It sounds simple and a bit cliché, but it is true. When most people first attempt to join the Civil Service, they experience a LOT of rejection and can grow pessimistic.

However, we want to encourage you to start every application believing that you deserve it. If you can filter that belief into your words, hiring managers will feel that energy when they review it, and you'll have an even better chance of succeeding.

If you have any questions, you can contact us at team@unofficialguides.co.uk

Good luck out there!