

15 Top Tips for a Successful ST Application

The following hints and tips have been produced to assist you in preparing your ST application. We have tried to include a range of examples to help with common queries that have come up in the past.

Tip 1

What is a competency and a 'competency based' application?

- **What is a competency?** These are individual abilities and characteristics that are key to effectiveness in work – a competency reflects clusters of skills, abilities and knowledge needed to perform a job, with a premise that past behaviour is a useful predictor of FUTURE performance. In other words: ARE YOU GOING TO BE A GOOD SPECIALTY REGISTRAR?
- The application questions are therefore generally 'competency based' – often asking for an example or situation where you demonstrated that skill/knowledge or ability. These questions don't concentrate on the act or situation itself, but more **HOW** you dealt with it, showing your ability to **learn and reflect** and demonstrate what you **CAN DO** – just telling your reader about the situation won't get you high marks.

Tip 2

What can I learn from the person specification?

This is a really useful piece of information to get familiar with. The questions on the application form reflect the knowledge, skills and attributes required by the relevant specialty person specification. It can help you to:

- Assist in preparing potential evidence for key statements
- Judge what elements are likely to come up from the specialities you are applying into – the key statements generally correspond to **ONE** section of the person specification, so for example, with 'communication skills', it is likely that a key statement will ask about this in the application form
- Depending on the specialty, the following areas **may** well be assessed

Communication

Empathy and sensitivity

Team working

Teaching and training

Negotiation skills

Organising and planning

Judgement under pressure

Professional integrity/probity

Problem solving and decision making

Vigilance and situational awareness

Tip 3

Where do I find evidence from? Does it have to be clinical?

You need to read the question carefully to judge what evidence you use, but here are some ideas which you might like to think about:

- Daily experiences that you have documented in your portfolio
- Care presentations in meetings
- Journal Club presentations

- Audits that may have been presented at departmental meetings especially if they have some relevance to the chosen specialty
- Teaching medical students (note dates and subjects and collate feedback/evaluation from students)
- “Reflective Learning” case reports
- Publications? Case reports for journals?
- Seen something rare?
- Help develop clinical guidelines for your Trust?
- Involvement in a research project (state your ACTUAL role)
- Special interest groups locally or nationally
- Postgraduate exams (e.g. part 1 exam done in Foundation?)
- Awards/prizes

Ask yourself:

- **Why does it stand out? – Was it local, regional or national?**
- **What were the different levels of behaviour or activity?**
- **What kind of mind set did you bring to the achievement?**
- **What could you have interpreted differently or from another point of view?**
- **What did you learn from this example/experience?**
- **Was there any follow up learning as a result?**
- **How does it apply to Specialty Training?**

Tip 4

Got an example question to help me?

Describe a recent example from your own experience where a clinical situation needed to be acted upon quickly within a multi-disciplinary team. What was your role in the team and how did your actions enable the team to overcome the situation?

Knowing about the knowledge, skills and attributes required by the relevant specialty person specification may help you to identify themes within a question. Reviewing the above example, what themes can you identify?

When approaching a question about team working, it can be useful to ask yourself first, ‘what is team working?’, ‘What does it mean to work in an effective team?’. Consider doing a Google search to read through definitions of teamwork to help you approach your responses more effectively. Try to avoid use of ‘we’ when talking about teamwork – e.g. don’t say ‘we did this/that’ – say something like ‘my contribution to the team was to..’, ‘my role in the team was ..’, ‘from this I learnt..’.

Tip 5

Promoting Yourself

There are no buzz words or key phrases. There scorers are looking to see if you have answered the questions in your own words. This about the language you use in answering the questions and consider some of the following words to help you:

Cognitive

Collected, assessed, analysed, ordered (e.g. ranked), selected, applied judgement, discriminated

between variables, evaluated, interpreted, problem solved, reasoned, formulated, memorised, recalled, audited, researched, deduced, reasoned.

Self-Managing

Organised, supervised, managed, negotiated, budgeted, achieved, developed, directed, marketed, audited, researched, managed stress, coped with pressure, assertiveness, managed boundaries/limitations, self-evaluation/audit, identified potential, improvised, adapted, dealt with, adjusted, applied

Organising Skills

Managed, planned, set goals, decided, facilitated, motivated, led, contracted, initiated, delegated, identified

Group skills

Encouraged, monitored, cooperated, shared (e.g. responsibilities), assessed, evaluated others, dealt with conflict/apathy/negativity, explained, persuaded, negotiated, influenced, empathised, mentored, coached, listened, reflected, clarified

Sell yourself through plenty of personal **adjectives** that mirror what the question is looking for:

Accurate, Conscientious, Calm, Methodical, Resilient, Sensitive, Reliable, Responsible, Persuasive, Impartial, Resourceful, Correct, Thorough, Unbiased, Flexible, Attentive, Influential, Assertive, OTHERS??

Tip 6

How can I make my answer flow?

Using the 'STAR' method can be a really helpful way of making sure your responses are **FOCUSSED and RELEVANT** and make them easy to read by your assessors. Use the STAR grid below to help you structure your responses:

- **SITUATION** – put the situation in context: **briefly** describe the situation so that the example can be clearly understood by your assessors – avoid explaining too much detail at this stage
- **TASK** – Go in to more detail: when, where, how many, how often, etc.
- **ACTION** – state what action you actually took – what was **your** contribution? Avoid 'we' if talking about a situation in a team context. The assessor needs to know what specific contribution/difference **YOU** made
- **RESULT** – describe the outcome – what were the positives/learning points/reflections on the situation?

Think about what your involvement was – what was your role?

- How did you do it?
- What did you actually do?
- What was the highlight/low point?
- What skills did you acquire/develop further?
- What difference did YOU make?
- What obstacles did you have to overcome (if any)?
- What feedback did you receive either positively or negatively?

- What did you LEARN as a result? (About the situation/topic and about yourself)
- **How have you applied your learning to specialty training?**

Situation The background + context	Task More details: what, when, where, how, how often	Action What was your contribution?	Result What was the outcome, result & learning?
Use the first 12-25% or so of your response to 'set the scene' – giving enough detail to prepare the reader (or listener) for the rest of your response, but not going overboard with facts. Then add more detail which is relevant to what they need to know. What did the example occur? How often? (e.g. was it something that was sustained over time or was it a one off activity?) Where did it happen? How many people were involved? Offer the most relevant details for your response.		Use the next 50-70% or so to go in to what you actually did. Be specific about the detail.	Use the final 15-25% or so to tell your reader (or listener) about the outcome and what you learnt from the situation – showing evidence of reflection, insight and learning, what you might do differently next time and/or how it applies to Foundation training.

If you have 150-200 words to play with, STAR can help you structure your response much more effectively and keep you focussed on the level of detail you provide.

Tip 7

Use of passive and active language

Sharpening up your attention to your choice of language is another way of fine tuning your application. **Consider the following example about leadership:**

'In this role I was required to delegate tasks to other team members for a charity event and I learnt a lot from this event in terms of team working'

(PASSIVE: This statement doesn't demonstrate team working skills – 'I was required to' could mean 'I was told to' - doesn't tell us much about what they ACTUALLY learnt)

Now consider the next example about leadership:

'In 2005, I led a team of 6 people as president of (society), to organise an annual charity event for (society). My contribution to the team was to ... What I learnt from this was ... The result was that from an initial budget of £1,000, the event made a profit of £3,000 for the charity

*(ACTIVE: it tells the reader what they did [led] and in what capacity [president] – it tells us more about the **actual number of people involved** in the event and **who the event was for**, which can then be extended on through use of specific examples – you can also see the 'STAR' technique being applied in this example, to add relevant **evidence and reflection on learning**).*

Tip 8

Saving words – every word counts!

While your application needs to 'flow' and make sense, you can also save valuable words to concentrate more on your **EVIDENCE**.

As a result of this I was able to ...
(9 words)

Consequently / therefore / hence ...
TO (1 word)

Owing to the fact that ...
(5 words)

TO Because of ... (2 words)

At the present time I am ...
(6 words)

TO Presently I ... (2 words)

Before doing this I would ...
(5 words)

TO Preceding this ... (2 words)

In order to make this effective, I supervised ...
(8 words)

TO I supervised (2 words)

One of the things I learned from this experience was ...
(10 words)

TO From this, I learned (4 words)

Tip 9

General advice on scoring

- Focus on answering **all parts** of the application.
- Think about how you are linking your evidence to your application by making it **relevant** to the question being asked i.e. a great example/achievement will not score well if it does not answer the question or is not supported by the evidence of reflective learning/applicability to specialty training.
- Reflect on the **quality** of the answers you are providing before submitting your application.
- Read and answer all questions carefully.

Applications may be shortlisted using Royal College or locally agreed scoring criteria.

Tip 10

A note about plagiarism

- The application must be your own work – you have to declare that it is on your application form.
- Don't lie on your application form.
- Applications can be randomly selected for audit where you may have to provide additional evidence, testimonies etc.
- The online system uses a sophisticated plagiarism finder – beware of copying!
- It is a serious breach of probity under Good Medical Practice if you are found to have plagiarised your application form and you may be reported to the GMC.

Tip 11

Spelling, punctuation and grammar!

- You may or may not lose marks through these, but make sure your **spelling, punctuation and grammar** is checked and double checked to give your application a professional edge.
- Use short, concise sentences that make sense – past errors from applicants have been silly mistakes that could have been easily rectified.
- Even if you have completed your application initially in Word, it doesn't pick up all grammatical and spelling errors so make sure you proofread it before submission! Also

remember to double check that you're matching the answers to the correct questions if you're copying/pasting from Word – mistakes have occurred in the past, no doubt in a last minute rush!

Tip 12

Preparation – What can I do in advance?

Application

- Thank about your application early on
- Approach referees in advance – it's courtesy, plus, when they write the reference they are more likely to remember who you are!
- Use your portfolio – your reflections and evidence can act as extremely helpful *aide memoirs* when it comes to answering competency based questions.
- Record evidence of achievements in advance of the application process opening – these can be tailored with a lot less effort later on to the key statement areas.
- Take time to familiarise yourself with the application form before you start completing it – make sure you understand the sections first.
- Consider drafting responses in rough/Word (but see note above on grammatical errors). Consider booking at least three sessions in your diary to work on it. It will take longer than you think to complete the application.
- Make sure you complete all the sections.
- Get feedback from peers, family and friends – talking things through can help you refine or generate additional examples and evidence that you may not have otherwise thought of. Remember that you must submit your own work.
- Keep a copy of your form – just in case!
- DON'T PANIC! Talk to colleagues, peers and family – show them THIS HANDOUT so they can help you interpret how you put all the tips in to practice!

Time Management

- Familiarise yourself with the timetable and make sure you register in good time.
- Try to submit your completed application a week before the deadline date.
- Be methodical about your approach – set yourself weekly goals to make the process more manageable, keep you focussed and on track.
- Don't leave submission until the last minute – if people submit all at once – system crash!?

Tip 13

Assessors Nightmares

Try to see the application from your assessors point of view:

- Assessors don't know who you are – no personal details are made available to assessors to avoid scoring bias, but this also means that they cannot assume things from your application
- Contrary to popular myth, assessors aren't all surgeons! There will be a mixture of people from different specialties making up the scoring panel.

- There is likely to be a non-medical assessor on the scoring panel so also bear this in mind (often referred to as a 'lay-assessor')

The following comments have been generated from previous scoring panels – think about these when constructing your responses:

- Overuse of same verbs – becomes boring to read
- Lack of promotion of positive points
- Poor grammar, spelling and/or punctuation – lack of creativity with language
- Examples don't 'stand out' from other peers
- Fails to answer the question set
- Lack of qualifying information (e.g. when/where/how many)
- Hasn't reflected well or shown evidence of insight and self-awareness
- Ignored the person specification
- Left a question blank!
- No relation to Good Medical Practice
- Inappropriate 'name dropping' in an attempt to get a higher mark
- No or little actual evidence demonstrated
- Just recounted the situation – not what they learnt/how they made a difference
- Limited range of examples
- Response not structured well
- Repetitive – get a thesaurus!
- Use of convoluted sentences
- Using sentences that just appear to make up the word limit, rather than of actual evidence that flows with the overall response
- Use of big words – trying to over-impress doesn't work!

Tip 14

Why an application may fall down

- Failure to understand the question being asked
- Sections of the application form incomplete or completed incorrectly
- Underselling yourself in the application
- Running over the word count
- Lack of reflection, insight, self-awareness, learning, application to practise

Top 15

Got any more resources to help me?

- **HEE Specialty Training**
<https://www.specialtytraining.hee.nhs.uk/>
- **Health Careers Website**
www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/
- **Good Medical Practice (2013)**
http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/good_medical_practice.asp