



Using the STAR method for competency questions

Many students visit CityCareers for help with job applications and interviews. Graduate application forms and job interviews often include questions that can be hard to answer, especially competency-based questions. We recommend using the STAR approach. You will find examples of STAR answers in this document.

What is a competency-based question?

Competency-based questions ask you to describe how you have demonstrated a skill or attribute. They usually start with “Tell me about a time when you...” By using these questions, the employer is trying to find out about your skills in areas such as:

- Leadership
- Resilience
- Problem-solving
- Integrity
- Organisation
- Ability to operate outside your comfort zone
- Communication
- Analytical Skills
- Initiative
- Teamwork
- Drive

What is STAR?

Situation – set the context/scene. Where were you? Who were you with? When did this occur?

Task – briefly outline what you had to do

Action – spend most of your answer focusing on the action you took

Result – describe a positive outcome

Key Points

- Always focus on your own contribution. Describe how you made a difference. Use “I” for your answers, rather than “we” did this or that.
- Describe a wide variety of situations. Avoid focussing on one particular experience as this does not reflect the breadth of experience that employers are looking for.

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Examples

Competency questions may have varied types of wording. You may be asked about a specific situation, or asked about a time when you “demonstrated leadership” or another skill. When preparing for your interview or to write your application, think about a specific situation for each of the skills. An application form will include the questions for you; for an interview, look at the job description and person specification and prepare to speak about the skills listed.

The following examples are for written application forms. However, when speaking in an interview you should still use the STAR method to structure your answers. Thinking about your answers to potential questions ahead of time can help you answer more quickly and naturally in the interview.

These examples are meant to provide guidance on the types of situations you can talk about and how to structure a STAR answer. You should never copy any sample answers you find anywhere in your actual application forms or interviews.

Leadership Skills

S - In my second and third year at university, I developed my leadership skills by working as a student ambassador, a paid role at City University. On one occasion last term, I was working with 10-20 secondary pupils in a secondary school who were from disadvantaged backgrounds to raise their understanding about university life and to encourage aspirational thinking and self-belief.

T - I had to lead from the front in a class room for a 40 minute lesson including organising and coordinating activities, setting targets, delegating tasks and making decisions. It was a challenging class, where some pupils showed evidence of low self-esteem and were disengaged whilst others were being disruptive.

A - Through setting out my expectations early on, I was able to respond promptly and firmly to inappropriate behaviour, so was able to manage this well. Also early on, I also showed an interest in the more withdrawn pupils by encouraging them to contribute and praising their efforts, which built their trust and co-operation. Then by interactive delivery including carrying out interesting and challenging activities such as quizzes and debates, including pitching one side of the class against the other, I engaged and motivated the class to take part.

R - The enthusiasm of the class rose and was infectious and the students achieved the task within the given timescale. Developing these techniques was a challenge at first, but experiences of this kind developed my resilience, which I feel would be useful in a leadership role in the future. Success in the role was evidenced by seeing many pupils go on to higher education, which has been very rewarding. (274 words)

Communication

S - During my second year at university, I tutored several A-level maths students privately. I demonstrated excellent communication skills when helping students understand difficult concepts, simplifying them and explaining them in ways that suited different individuals.

T - On one particular occasion, I had to help a pupil understand the relationship between a graph and its associated algebraic equation.

A - In order to explain this in a way that he could understand, I listened attentively first. By dedicating some time to assess the pupil's prior knowledge and learning strengths, I realised that he had a good spatial awareness but average numerical skills. I then decided to focus more on the visual aspects first, demonstrating how changes in the equation triggered changes in the shape of the graph. I asked questions constantly, in order to assess how my communication was coming across. At one point I realised that the subject was quite dry for this student, so I tried to sound more enthusiastic and engaging. I was very happy to notice that my change of approach started to produce results soon.

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R - Gradually, the student started to see the relationship between points of intersection of graphs and solutions of equations, and eventually, he could predict how changes in the equation affected the graph.

This was a very rewarding experience as the student was very appreciative of my efforts. It also prompted me to reflect on how it's important to understand your audience in order to manage communication barriers and adapt your style. (250 words)

Resilience

S - Half way into the first year of my degree I began to have major doubts about whether a degree was right for me and that I could do well on the course. My initial grades were worse than I'd expected. I was feeling overwhelmed by having to organise my own time between the course, other parts of student life and preparing for my future career. I was feeling far away from my usual support network.

T - I had the task of trying to turn this situation round and ultimately decide whether to remain on the degree course.

A - I showed three forms of resilience. Firstly I reminded myself of my motivations for wanting to do a degree particularly around the type of life I wanted after. Secondly I reached out to my academics, my careers service and to the university professional mentoring program for advice and support around achieving my academic and career goals rather than trying to manage things alone. Finally I broke down my bigger goals into smaller more manageable bits and set myself target dates to achieve these smaller bits, checking to see how fitted together into my schedule.

R - Visualising my future life with the elements that a degree would allow me to have when my spirits did dip kept me going. Going for smaller, more achievable goals gave me momentum and increased confidence and laying things out against a timetable reminded me how achievable they were. Seeking motivation, advice and information from others allowed me to understand how I could improve my approach to course work, gave me hints and tips about how to manage myself better and gave me a new support network close by. I finished my 1st year with better grades, motivation and organisation. I'm now in my final year, happy and doing well. (300 words)

Analytical Skills

S - Anticipating the time between finishing our final year at high school and starting our degrees I and 3 friends had briefly discussed going on a summer trip round Europe. We all felt we would have enough money each to do it and enough time. However the idea was in jeopardy when in quick succession one friend learnt of an unexpected cost that would divert some of their financial funds and another learnt of an additional demand on their time.

T - I took it upon myself to do some data driven analysis to identify whether the trip was in actual fact still possible. I set out to do both some anticipated cost analysis and time based analysis into potential routes.

A - Firstly I identified four potential round trips each a little longer in distance than the last one. I worked out the different travel costs for each trip including any discounts for group travel. I worked out a realistic daily budget for food taking into account the current exchange rate between the pound and euro. I researched 3 different tiers of accommodation options by averaging out the cost of 4 examples of hostels, bed and breakfasts, and hotels from each country. I put all of this information into one worksheet in a spreadsheet. I then presented this to my potential fellow travellers starting off with a particular scenario that I felt met all our needs.

R - Systematically laying out this information helped us go through my example choice and other different scenarios around route, accommodation and time. We were able to identify another option that combined different elements of accommodation and suited all our circumstances. It involved using a group travel discount for four or more people that meant we could all afford to do it but couldn't if only 3 of us went. (300 words)

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Problem-solving

S - Last week, at the super-market where I work part-time, a customer wanted to buy a bottle of wine, but it was 7am and we cannot sell alcohol before 11am. I explained this but he got very angry.

T - I had to keep within the law but keep the customer happy.

A - I listened to his complaints, kept calm and sympathised, which allowed the customer to calm down. I explained that we couldn't break compliance and asked if he was willing to return later. I offered to put the wine and the other items that he had gathered to one side, so that when he came back he could finish his transaction quickly. He agreed to this. I ensured that other staff knew where his items were and that he was going to return for them.

R - He returned later and bought his goods. He also came to me & thanked me for my help. (150 words)

Initiative

S - During my time at University, I worked part-time in the enquiry desk at the Students' Union. This was a good opportunity to develop useful and transferable skills, but also some of my attributes such as initiative.

T - My Enquiry Assistant post was shared by several students from different degree backgrounds. I noticed that the resources and information that we needed to access in order to provide a good service were scattered about.

A - I decided to share the knowledge that I was acquiring in my degree and put into practice the skills that I was learning. I proposed the creation of a secure website that would contain all the information and resources at a click of the mouse that would help me and others to perform better at the job. I had a number of conversations with my peers and my supervisor, in order to gauge the level of interest in my proposal. All my peers agreed that this would be very useful, and my supervisor encouraged me to proceed and praised my initiative. I then sought input from everyone involved, which helped me design a secure website that is still being used today by the Enquiry Assistants.

R - My initiative resulted in a nomination for a Student Engagement Award. The nomination entry commented on how I had gone beyond expectations by improving the existing resources and my willingness to put my skills into practice. I think initiative is a key trait of my personality and I am committed to continue capitalising on it in the future. (250 words)

Integrity

S - In Year 2 of my Sociology degree, I was elected by 70 peers to be the Course Representative as someone they could trust and rely upon to get their voice heard by academics and to fairly represent their views, to bring about any necessary changes.

T - The role required me to attend a termly meeting with 3 Sociology lecturers including the Head of Sociology to exchange information and resolve any difficulties. I also had to attend the Student Experience Committee each term with 20 other Course Representatives in the School of Arts and Social Sciences, chaired by the Associate Dean of the School and attended by seven professional staff from the Library, IT, Careers, Facilities, etc.

A - Before my first course meeting and Student Experience Committee meeting, I emailed students to see if they had any issues they wanted to raise. The response was low, so I persistently approached individuals in person to gain feedback. Through this direct approach, I found there were concerns about the turnaround time of received marked assignments. Students also felt that more careers events should be offered to suit the interests of Sociology students, rather than the many employer presentations relating to business and technical subjects. In presenting the concerns of students, I had to be both assertive and diplomatic.

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R - With both initial meetings, I achieved positive outcomes. Course work is now usually returned within the agreed timescale to Sociology students and the Careers Service agreed to review its delivery to Sociology. This has resulted in a new event "Working for a Charity", where 5 speakers shared their experiences, which was well attended and another well-attended event "Counselling as a Career", with more planned. I feel that I demonstrated that I could be trusted to represent students' views effectively from the outset in way which brought desirable results. (300)

Teamworking

S - In my second year at university, I was selected as President of the Literary Society, which did not have many members (about 40) and attendance was often low. There were 3 other committee members.

T - Our aim was to organise a high profile events programme over 3 terms with leading speakers such as authors, poets and academics and to increase the membership of the society and attendance at events.

A - At our first meeting, I encouraged people to say if they had any preferences about tasks they would prefer to undertake. This established a positive, open working relationship from the start and showed recognition of the strengths of each team member. One person wanted to be treasurer, another the publicist and the third person wanted to focus on organising the events. My particular role was to invite the potential speakers, to host the events and to coordinate the activities. I elicited suggestions for possible speakers and listened carefully to the contributions of the team. This encouraged the team to pool our knowledge and resulted in an excellent range of prospective speakers. I then communicated with the team throughout the process, so that we were all clear about developments such as who was visiting, timing of publicity, and how to deal with problems such as cancellations. I also encouraged the team to update each other about any relevant issues.

R - The team organised a series of very successful and well attended events with prestigious speakers including x,x,x, and x. Membership increased to about 100 and the team received very positive feedback from academic staff about the quality of the speakers and contribution to university life. I helped to achieve this by having a collaborative approach from the start. (285 words)

Organisational

S - During my placement year at IBM I had to organise the customer training schedule for my department and in addition to this pull together and edit a publication for an impromptu conference.

T - The customer training schedule had to be prepared before Christmas and this overlapped the period of pulling together and editing the conference publication. In fact the conference had to be scheduled at short notice to the surprise of my manager. So there had been no time to anticipate this unforeseen work load.

A - To manage and balance both activities (i.e. the conference publication and training schedule) I firstly identified in the calendar the deadline for completion on both activities then moved my deadline backwards by 3 days giving me a buffer of time to allow for any additional eventualities that may have occurred. Then I broke each activity down into small parts to complete working back from my deadline. When doing this I concentrated on being realistic with my time (since I had other daily admin to perform) and allocated 1 or ½ day to complete the various parts of each activity. Before starting these activities I built in an expectation of where I wanted to be on each activity in relation to particular dates. As I progressed through each activity I monitored my progress and re-prioritised giving more time where needed to ensure I met my expectations in terms of being where I expected to be by a particular date.

R - My manager was impressed by the way I handled both activities at once. She also commented on how professionally I had accepted and taken on the additional workload. There was also good feedback on the publication from delegates. Plus the training schedule I produced which effectively cut by a third the time of delivery. (299 words)

Drive

S - Last year, I was part of a team of eight arranging an expedition to Chile for my Duke of Edinburgh's Gold Award. Each person in the team was allocated a role.

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T - My chief role was as Fundraising Manager. I arranged a variety of activities including sponsored runs and car washes and the team collectively raised 80% of the money we needed over 11 months. Towards the end, I could see that energy and motivation was dwindling – particularly as we had all put in so much hard work.

A - After so many upheavals and rejections, morale in the team was low but we still needed to get the rest of the money which would pay for equipment. I stayed focused on my end goal of ensuring we raised the necessary funds, and after speaking with others, explored other options. I started researching and contacting companies which provided mountaineering equipment. After several rejections, I managed to schedule a meeting with one company who agreed to provide the equipment we needed in exchange for us solely promoting their brand.

R - As a result we were able to all go to Chile and complete the expedition. This role really tested my drive and taught me how a positive outlook and persistence can help achieve an end goal. (215 words)

Ability to operate out of my comfort zone

S - During my time at university, I worked part-time as a waitress in a very busy family run restaurant. After having worked there for 3 months, I had demonstrated that I was able to take on many responsibilities. At this point, the front of house manager announced she would be leaving in 2 weeks. The front of house manager and the restaurant owner asked whether I would like to try being the front of house manager on weekends until a permanent member of staff was appointed. This included managing bookings, being a hostess and dealing with any complaints. I decided to take on the role as I could see it would be a valuable opportunity for me.

T - On my first weekend, it was an extremely busy Saturday. The kitchen was short staffed. Therefore customers were experiencing extended waiting times for food, seated customers were complaining and a queue was forming outside the restaurant for customers with bookings. I had to make sure we were able to keep current and waiting customers happy.

A - I soon realised that I needed to ensure there was open communication between customers on waiting times, so I spoke with the chef and liaised with each of the customers, keeping them informed about waiting times and offering them a free drink as a gesture of goodwill. Whilst I dealt with seated customers, I assigned one of the waitresses to speak with the waiting customers to inform them of the situation and to offer to rebook them for another date with a 25% discount any food & drink purchased, if they did not want to continue waiting.

R - This resulted in the customers calming down and improved the level of customer satisfaction. It also increased the likelihood of customers returning to the restaurant on a regular basis. (300 words).

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