

Written and E-tray Exercises

Almost all graduate employers need people who can communicate clearly in writing, yet the traditional face-to-face interview cannot test this ability very well. In order to assess your ability to write concisely, critically and persuasively, you will often be asked to carry out written tasks as part of the selection process.

These exercises can test your ability to:

- process large amounts of information quickly
- analyse problems
- decide what information is most important
- reach conclusions and argue for them
- express yourself clearly, concisely and tactfully.

There are three main types:

- case study
- in-tray or e-tray exercise
- drafting exercise.

Any of these exercises could be based on an issue directly facing the employer.

Written exercises not only assess your thinking and drafting abilities, but also your ability to work quickly and act decisively under pressure. You will have to analyse the information, and do your writing within a set and fairly short time frame, usually without prior warning of the subject matter.

SOME TIPS FOR ALL WRITTEN EXERCISES

- Use the time well. It is best to work with 'quiet urgency', spending a few moments at the beginning on a mini-plan and skimming over the task before getting stuck in.
- Do not panic - the selectors are not looking for perfection, but the right level of potential.
- Do not be tempted to start writing immediately. Only write when you have worked out in outline what you want to say.
- Follow the instructions. Do not give way to the impulse to race ahead, without first being absolutely clear what it is you are being asked to do.

THE MAIN TYPES OF WRITTEN EXERCISE

CASE STUDY

This is an in-depth analysis of a complex topic. You will normally be given a lot of information about the issue which may be presented in a variety of ways, such as official reports, tables of figures, newspaper cuttings, memoranda, emails and other correspondence.

You have to decide what the main facts are, the problem which has to be solved and possible alternative solutions. You are usually then asked to write a report which summarises the facts, indicates

the various alternatives and outlines your own preferred solution, with reasons.

Possible examples:

- The pros and cons of whether an office should relocate to one of two new sites, expand while remaining in its existing premises or stay put without expanding.
- Critically reviewing the relationship between the organisation and Trade Union.
- Advice on the organisation's public relations strategy. (You will be given a number of options.)
- Write a press release about the organisation's view point on the new age legislation. (You may be given information about the organisation's recruitment policy, this may also include memos of various discussions about implementing the changes.)

Some tips

Watch out for contradictions, 'red herrings' and irrelevancies in the information. Decide as quickly as possible which information is actually useful and relevant to the task in hand, and which can be discarded.

You will probably have to make a definite recommendation - sitting on the fence between two or more solutions is likely to be penalised. You can, however, acknowledge other options as part of arguing the case for your preferred course of action.

There is unlikely to be only one right answer. Sometimes all of the possible alternatives could work, though usually some will be more sensible than others. What is important is how you analyse the problem and how effectively you argue your case. Even if you choose a 'wrong' solution the assessors will give you marks if you argue your case effectively.

IN-TRAY/E-TRAY EXERCISE

These exercises aim to show you the types of decisions and dilemmas which would crop up in a typical day at work for an organisation. Employers tend to use these to assess how you might cope in such a situation. You will have the supposed contents of your in-tray, which consist of a mixture of phone messages, emails, internal memos, letters and so on.

E-tray exercises are simply an imaginative update of the in-tray exercise and you would be required to read through a full in-box of email messages, which may also be a mixture of requests, memos and notes about phone messages awaiting your response.

The scenario is often presented as a Monday morning work schedule, perhaps after being away on holiday, so that there is quite a build-up of correspondence to deal with, some of which will have become urgent by now.

You will be given a time limit during which you will

have to perform a number of activities. These may include returning a phone call, writing a letter or sending an email, calling a meeting, reading and responding to a report or drafting a report. You would certainly have to put all the tasks in an order of priority, indicating the most important and/or urgent as well as giving an indication of what type of action is required, whether you need to delegate and to whom. Finally, you may also need to give an indication of how you would tackle each one and suggest an outline solution.

Some tips

This first thing is not to panic. The above can be broken down into:

- Which request you should do now?
- Which should you delegate?
- Which should you postpone?
- What urgent action will you take?
- How will you eventually tackle the tasks that you decide to postpone?

Try not to spend too much time analysing the topics in excessive detail, but give a brief indication of the main points. The selectors want to know whether you can grasp the essentials of an issue rather than all of its subtleties. Above all, make sure you have time to finish commenting on all the items.

The selectors will be interested in how you allocate priorities to the different problems. Make sure you indicate the reasons for your decisions. Remember also that the items will probably reveal the existence of other staff to whom you could delegate. Do not let seemingly urgent but trivial matters outweigh issues which do not necessarily have to be sorted out straight away but which nevertheless may be more important.

Look out for inbuilt contradictions in the materials. Saying 'yes' to one request might conflict with another item elsewhere in the in-tray.

DRAFTING EXERCISE

You are given the facts about a sensitive issue and have to express them in a clear but tactful way. The emphasis is less on analysing a problem and more on whether you can select the right facts and arguments, and present them effectively.

As with the case study, there is usually no obvious 'right' answer. While the decisions you make are important, how you present your case will greatly affect your performance. As long as you argue your point of view well and show awareness of the business issues involved, you can get away with choosing a course of action which the selectors would not have chosen.

Possible examples:

- Write a letter to an important customer saying why you are unable to waive a bill which they are querying.
- Respond to a journalist requesting your organisation's comments on accusations made by a competitor.

Some tips

Be aware of your readership. In this case there are effectively two groups - the person you are supposedly addressing in the role play scenario and the actual selectors who will assess your efforts. If you are making a sensitive point regarding a difficult issue, acknowledge any problems that this may cause the supposed reader(s) of the letter.

Without being unrealistic, try to emphasise the benefits of your chosen course of action to your supposed reader(s). Stick to your brief. For example, if you have to say 'no' to a customer, make sure you do just that. So, as well as being sympathetic, you may have to be firm.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- *How to Succeed at an Assessment Centre*, Kogan Page, 2006
- *How to Succeed at Interviews & Other Selection Methods*, The Careers Group, University of London, 2007
- *All about Psychological Tests and Assessment Centres*, Dr Jack JR van Minden, Management, 2004
- *Vault Guide to the Case Interview*, Asher, Chung and the Staff of Vault, Vault Inc, 2005
- *Futures Workbook 6*, Leeds Metropolitan University Careers Development Centre, click on 'interviews, psychometric tests or assessment centres' from the home page <http://careers.leedsmet.ac.uk>

Employers Websites:

- www.joinbain.com Bain & Co, interactive case studies. Click 'Test your Interview skills' on home page
- www.mckinsey.com McKinsey, two interactive case studies plus tips on how to approach a case study, search 'case interview' from the home page
- www.kpmgcareers.co.uk Go to 'Graduates' and 'Skills sessions'

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