



Guidance for Writing Job Descriptions

The Job Description (JD) and advert may be the first time a candidate engages with the University and what we care about. It is important to be intentional about how a JD is written, that it be easily understood and demonstrates our values of inclusivity and integrity. Consider reviewing the [University Strategy](#) to incorporate information about our vision, purpose and values.

To begin, you will need the following documents on hand:

- A Job Description template found on the [HR A-Z Forms](#) page.
- The [Grade Profiles document](#) - a reference guide for the skills and experience expected for each grade and job category (academic, technical, administrative).

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Overview and Purpose

The Job Description is a multi-functional document that serves as the basis for recruiting, training, and evaluating employees and acts as a guide for developing performance standards. It is important that the information listed on your JD has the right level of detail so that it meaningfully outlines what the role is designed to achieve.

Across the University, Job Descriptions are used for:



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Prospective staff - providing a clear description of the role, expectations and context. It forms a basis for their employment contract.

Current staff - helping staff and managers evaluate job performance. It acts as a benchmark for future training and development.

Organisational consistency - role matching and evaluation

- Role matching involves matching roles against pre-determined grade profiles to determine the grade of new roles or the re-grading of existing roles, undertaken by HR.
- Role evaluation is a more in-depth assessment of the grade of the role performed by trained evaluators but applies to only a minority of roles.

5 Principles for writing Job Descriptions

1. It's about the role, not the person

A good Job Description focuses purely on job expectations and outcomes and is not defined by the competency or capability of a current role-holder.

This is because Job Descriptions are part of workforce planning and should be designed to enable continuity and stability within the local area and broader organisation. It's important to reflect on the purpose and specific skillset needed to do the job. Tailoring a Job Description to the current role holder and relying on their specific qualifications or experience can lead to difficulties when filling future vacancies.

It is the responsibility of the manager to define the role in relation to organisational needs: tasks, duties and responsibilities that are required to be completed. When updating a Job Description or requesting a re-grading, this is particularly important to remember because the Job Description should only be updated to reflect sustained changes in the requirements of the job, not specific achievements of the role-holder.

2. It's a summary, not a list

Writing lists of tasks may cause candidates to lose interest or become overwhelmed, resulting in skilled individuals not applying.

Instead, explain the responsibilities in terms of the processes and functions they will be responsible for. What processes do they need to implement, have oversight of, manage? This not only helps candidates to see themselves in the role better, but also allows the manager to give ownership to the role holder over how they accomplish larger tasks.



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Additionally, consider including a description of a typical day at work for your role in the Additional Information section to help candidates visualise themselves in the role.

3. Use facts, not judgements

Try to describe the JD as objectively and accurately as possible, avoiding understating or overstating the requirements of the role. A clear, factual record of activities helps successful hires to be clear on the level of responsibility that they will be taking on and sets the stage for longer-term employee satisfaction and success.

Give specifics. For example, rather than saying a technician ‘maintains equipment’ it is better to describe the activity like: ‘performs preventive maintenance inspections and service on X machines.’ This has the added benefit of making it easier to talk about how to perform well in the role.

4. Keep language simple and welcoming

Overly complex language, jargon, and unexplained acronyms can cause confusion to potential applicants and may deter good candidates from applying. Try to use a simple word over a complicated one and keep sentence structure as simple as possible. Short, clear sentences are easier to understand and more accessible for everyone ([GOV.UK, Accessibility, Readability](#)).

Additionally, you can be positive and welcoming by avoiding using the third person and by using the pronoun ‘we’. For example: ‘we value...’, ‘you will...’, or ‘your responsibilities will include...’ suggests personal responsibility.

5. Take steps to be inclusive and avoid bias

Diversity of thought, perspectives, experience and skills bring demonstrable benefits to our work and to our decision making, as well as to our ability to build a truly inclusive institution. It is important to be mindful that the words we use can encourage some applicants and discourage others. We encourage you to look through [Diversifying Recruitment pages](#) for more information.

Unconscious bias can cause us to make decisions that are not objective, miss opportunities and limit potential. There are a number of online courses in your People and Money Learn App to complete before starting to recruit, including the short courses listed below. These are extremely helpful tools for understanding equality, diversity and inclusion issues for recruitment.

- Recruitment and Selection Essentials
- Challenging Unconscious Bias
- Equality and Diversity Essentials: Equality and Diversity Essentials



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Consider using a tool such as a [Bias Decoder | Totaljobs](#) to help make the language used in your job description more inclusive in relation to gender. The table below is a quick example of how words that may seem neutral may not be.

Avoid	Instead, choose words like
Lead (m)	Drive/Steer/Run
Honest (f)	Quality
Confident (m)	Exceptional
Competitive (m)	Motivated
Assertive (m)	Goal-oriented
Chairman (m)	Chairperson
Self-reliant	Independent
(f) Sensitive (f)	Customer-oriented
Dependable (f)	Responsible

The Job Description – Working through the template

Job Descriptions should usually be **no more than two pages long** and should describe the core of the role in broad terms; fine details are not necessary. Take care not to repeat the same information in different sections.

- **Job title:** The role title should be meaningful, succinct and accurately reflect the role. Please refrain from using internal acronyms within the job title.
- **Department/School:** Note the title of the department or where the job will be based.
- **Reports to:** Enter the job title, not the individual, to which this role reports (e.g. Head of School, Housekeeping Supervisor, Chief Technician, Director of Finance). If the role is answerable to more than one post for different areas of responsibilities, please give a brief indication of this division of reporting line. Please also highlight if the line manager is in a different location to the role-holder.

Job Purpose

This should summarise the overall purpose of the role from the University's point of view in **2-3 sentences**. It should not be a detailed description, but rather a highlight that attracts the reader to continue down to the more detailed sections. It should outline what the role is intended to achieve, providing relevant, factual, quantitative information that describes the scope of the role on an ongoing basis.



Main Responsibilities

This section should focus on and describe the key areas of responsibility and outputs for the job. Most jobs will have **4-8 main responsibilities in total**. If there are more than eight, it is probably a list of duties rather than the key areas of responsibility. You will find the [Grade Profiles document](#) particularly useful here.

Write the responsibilities in order of importance and estimate the approximate amount of time spent on each activity during the year (this will enable responsibilities that vary over the annual cycle to be described accurately). Time spent should be captured as a percentage. Each key responsibility must be no less than 5% of time and should add up to 100%.

Each responsibility statement should be constructed in two halves:

- First describe the main activity (what is done and to what/whom) by beginning with an action verb in the present tense (e.g. coordinate, analyse, design).
- Then describe why or the end result of the role

Examples

- Move and set up furniture and equipment in rooms throughout the University so that meetings and conferences can take place – % of time
- Maintain and update the student database within the School so that accurate and reliable information is available to Senior Management - % of time
- Provide technical assistance to academic staff, researchers and students so that experiments and research are completed in an efficient and timely manner - % of time
- Supervise and develop the support team so that staff have the motivation and skills to deliver required levels of performance - % of time
- Contribute to the delivery of teaching programmes for undergraduate students to meet the School's teaching objectives - % of time
- Contribute to writing bids to win research grants - % of time

Once the statements are drafted, check that:

1. Together they represent all of the key responsibilities of the role (the relative importance of each of these may change from year to year)
2. They focus on results, not tasks
3. Each one is distinct from the others, and describes a specific area which results must be achieved
4. They relate specifically to this job
5. Language is clear, simple and inclusive



Planning and Organising

This section describes the job's requirement for planning and organisation of the workload, other people, or resources. Consider both the practical and behavioural aspects of planning.

- Where does the work come from?
- What planning is required and over what timescale?
- To what extent does the role-holder need to proactively and effectively manage their own workload and time, and that of others? (*Excellence*)¹
- Is continuous improvement an important aspect of the role? (*Excellence*)
- Does the role-holder need to explicitly align their work to Strategy 2030, and if so, in which areas is this more important? (*Ambitious*)

Problem Solving

This section indicates the type of problems or challenges typically faced by the job holder and how they will be expected to solve them. The best examples for this section are not necessarily the most dramatic or unusual ones; think of the problems and challenges that occur most regularly in the job. Try to give up to three examples.

- What types of problems or challenges are typically faced?
- What part does the role-holder play in solving these?
- Does the role-holder think independently or in collaboration with others?
- To what extent will the role-holder be expected to understand the root-cause of issues and work constructively with others to resolve them? (*Principled*)
- How important is it for the role-holder to learn from the problems which arise and look for new and better ways of doing things? (*Relevant*)

Decision Making

This section describes how decisions are made and the accountability structure for making them. Give examples of typical decisions that would be made, including:

- How decisions are made
 - How important is listening to and acting upon constructive feedback in this role, and how might this impact their decision-making? (*Relevant*)
- What their role will be in making these decisions. Are they taken independently or in collaboration with others, or escalated?

¹ [Behaviours Charter](#)



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- What kind of guidance is in place to support decision-making? (E.g. policies, processes or legislation)?
- To what extent will the role-holder be expected to value different knowledge and skills from others as part of their decision making? (*Accessible and Inclusive*)
- How critical is role-modelling professional behaviour when making decisions, and what is the positive impact of getting this right? (*Principled*)

Knowledge Skills and Experience

In this section, you will need to describe the key attributes needed to perform the role at the required level. These will fall into two categories: 1. Education, Qualifications and 2. Training & Knowledge & Experience – see table below with examples.

As you approach this next step, consider a skills-based approach to find your ideal candidate. This means focusing on the results you would like to see, desired skills and abilities, and taking into account transferable skillsets. If the role has traditionally required a degree, take the opportunity to reflect on whether it is actually needed (Essential) to do the job or a would like to have (Desirable). Taking this approach will help remove unnecessary barriers, widening and diversifying your candidate pool. For more information and support with this, please review our [Diversifying Recruitment pages](#).

The following is an example of a Grade UE06/7 Administrative post

Attribute	Essential	Desirable
Education, Qualifications & Training	Broad experience acquired through a combination of job-related training and considerable on-the-job experience, demonstrating development through involvement in progressively more demanding relevant work/roles.	Qualification in X Membership of X
Knowledge & Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrable skills working in... • Knowledge and experience of practical application of • Tact and ability to deal with difficult and sensitive situations; a high level of emotional intelligence, and personal resilience. • Excellent communication, facilitation and presentation skills with staff at all levels including senior management. 	British Sign Language (BSL)



Dimensions

In this section, add any additional information that would help candidates better understand the scope of the job on an ongoing basis, including any management/ supervisory responsibilities. Please keep this section brief and avoid re-stating information already mentioned in other sections.

For example, you may wish to include size of budget, grant/funder information, volume of business, direct reports (without using names), etc. Include details such as the frequency and scale of tasks and activities e.g., annual departmental reporting. Are there essential physical requirements, such as climbing, standing, lifting heavy objects (max weight expected to be able to lift)?

Additional Information (optional)

Consider adding a brief explanation of any aspects of the job not adequately covered in previous sections and may be important for understanding the job requirements/ environment. This could include, but is not limited to, the following. This is also an opportunity to add in a note around reasonable adjustments and flexible working options.

1. Location of office
2. Size and scope of the team
3. Description of working hours. E.g. Shift work or atypical schedule expectations such as working weekends, nights, or on-call shifts
4. Will there be an option for hybrid/flexible working arrangements?
(You can find our hybrid and flexible working policies on our [HR Policies site](#))
5. Are there any travel requirements as part of the job?
6. Political or environmental factors that impact on the job
7. Nature and extent of commercial pressure

You may find it helpful to include an outline what a typical day at work might look like and what teams/people they would be in contact with.

Health and Safety Requirements and/or specific job hazard information

If applicable, select any Health and Safety requirements and key job hazards associated with the job. If there are none, please delete this section or write N/A. Further information on Health and Safety requirements can be found on the Health and Safety webpages <https://www.ed.ac.uk/health-safety/safety-responsibilities/recruitment>.