

Use Your Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs) to Your Advantage in the Federal Job Application Process

Introduction

Like other employers, federal agencies are moving to automated application and screening systems with the goal of simplifying the application process and expediting hiring decisions. There are still some aspects of applying for a federal job, however, that you may find unfamiliar. One area that can be particularly confusing for applicants is the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA) questions required by many agencies.

This tool is a general guide designed to help you in applying for jobs that require KSAs by demystifying the KSAs and explaining the role that they play in the federal job application process. As with all aspects of the federal application and recruitment process, it is of utmost importance to do research on each specific agency of interest to learn about any special standards, guidelines, or style requirements. For more detailed information on KSAs and other mechanics of the federal job application process, please refer to the resources listed at the end.

What ARE KSAs?

“KSAs,” an acronym for Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities, are a set of questions to help determine if you are a good fit for the job, based on, you guessed it, your combined set of job-related knowledge, skills, and abilities. Some agencies may refer to KSAs using other names, such as quality ranking factors or supplemental statements. In some cases you may see questions that refer to job “competencies,” which encompass knowledge, skills, and abilities as well as attributes such as leadership potential and initiative. Typically, you will be asked to respond to anywhere from three to six KSAs. Take advantage of the opportunity the KSAs offer you to fully describe the skills you would bring to the job.

One federal agency Web site best describes why KSAs are important. *“A primary purpose of KSAs is to measure those qualities that will set one candidate apart from the others. . . How well an applicant can show that he or she matches the position’s defined KSAs determines whether that person will be seriously considered for the job.”*

If you still find the KSAs a daunting prospect, equate them to something you are familiar with – a traditional set of interview questions. This way you can look at the KSAs as an opportunity to use real life examples to sell the experiences, education, and activities listed on your resume (and as an added bonus you get to edit your answers before you

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management breaks down the definition of each component as follows:

Knowledge: A body of information applied directly to the performance of a function.

Skill: An observable competence to perform a learned psychomotor act.

Ability: Competence to perform an observable behavior or a behavior that results in an observable product.

submit them!). Below are examples of real job openings and accompanying KSAs from the federal government’s official job site, www.usajobs.opm.gov, matched with an equivalent question that an interviewer might ask to get at the same information.

A Job Announcement For:	... Includes a KSA That Reads:	... Which is Like an Interviewer Asking:
Investigative Assistant, GS 5/6	Ability to gather facts and communicate findings clearly, both orally and in writing.	“Tell me about a project you worked on in school or in a previous job in which you had to write a report and present the findings to an audience.”
Accountant, GS 5-12	Professional knowledge of accounting methods, principles and procedures in order to evaluate, design, implement, and modify systems for adequacy and accuracy of accounting information.	“What accounting methods and principles have you learned that will enable you to evaluate or modify accounting systems? Also, can you tell me about any internships or school projects in which you utilized accounting methods and principles, and how you used them?”
Park Ranger, GS 7	Knowledge of recreation site operation and maintenance techniques and ability to apply them to work.	“I see you volunteered regularly at the regional nature center during your four years, and that you worked as a life guard for a few summers. What did you learn in those experiences and how would you apply it to this job?”
Microbiologist, GS 7-9	Knowledge of safety procedures and safe handling of hazardous biological agents.	“What experience do you have working in a lab with hazardous biological agents? If somebody in your lab accidentally knocked over a hazardous sample, what procedures would you follow?”
Intelligence Specialist, GS-9	Skill at making presentations in front of a group.	“Tell me about a time when you had to make a persuasive argument, perhaps for a class project or internship. Tell me about another time when you had to make a presentation for a large audience and the tools and techniques you used.”

Isn’t My Resume Enough?

A resume is an important component of the job application process since it conveys your general experience, education, activities, and other accomplishments. However, addressing the KSAs listed in the job opening is essential, because the KSAs provide you with an opportunity to draw attention to and expand upon the specific factors the agency is looking for – and an opportunity to spell out why you are the best candidate for the job. In addition, don’t leave something out of your KSA responses just because you assume they will see it on your resume – redundancy is not a bad thing here. On the flip side, references to any significant experiences in your KSA responses should reflect points made on your resume.

So . . . How Do I Write a KSA?

Apply the same rules when writing KSAs as you would in submitting an essay response or writing sample – use the active tense, don’t ramble, and read it over to make sure you are answering the question being asked. Naturally, as with any job you apply for, make sure you do thorough research on the agency to which you are applying. Writing KSAs isn’t rocket science, but below are some pointers!

1. Read the job announcement carefully, highlighting key words or phrases describing the position responsibilities so you remember to address those points in your KSA responses.
2. Go back to your resume and outline a list of possible experiences you've had that address each KSA. Review each list and select the items that best illustrate a link between your experience and each KSA.
3. Add information relevant to each KSA that may not be included in your resume – such as any specialized training, publications, leadership roles, student activities, or awards. Make sure you take credit for your whole range of experiences, including volunteer work, internships, school projects, and extracurricular activities.
4. Link all these different examples explicitly to the KSA questions. Whether you've worked as a waitress or cashier, served as a student club officer, or volunteered at a nursing home, the key is to tie these experiences back to the KSAs in a way that demonstrates that you are the best candidate for the job being advertised.
5. Write your KSAs in the first person, and use concrete examples to illustrate your skills. This is your opportunity to more fully elaborate on skills and responsibilities outlined in your resume, and examples are much more descriptive and memorable than an assertion that you have certain knowledge, skills, or abilities. Be sure to include examples that demonstrate your ability to take initiative.
6. Focus on any outcomes to which you directly contributed, citing quantitative data where possible. For example, use data that measures how much (like how much money or time you generated or saved), or how many (like how many people attended, how many units you produced), and point to positive change (percentage growth or savings) when possible.
7. Make sure your answers reflect your level of responsibility. Similarly, clearly identify who you interacted with and how, such as providing key information to a manager, working with a group of peers, or supervising a team.
8. Target each KSA answer to read between half a page and a page in length. Remember that a busy person will be reading through your application, so it is important to find the right balance between providing compelling information and information overload.
9. Review your answers to ensure they are succinct and easy to read. Always use plain language and don't use acronyms! Focus on content, and don't forget to proofread!
10. Ask a friend who knows you well to read over your finished answers. Your reader should make sure that you have included all of your relevant experiences, that your responses flow well, and that the answers don't contain any typos or grammatical errors.

A Sample KSA: Skill in Written Communication

Below are examples of answers to a common KSA, "Skill in written communication." After reading through this guide, it shouldn't be difficult for you to see why one answer is much stronger than the other!

Example of a poor response:

My communication skills are excellent. I am often asked to help out in this regard and have been commended for my work.

Example of a better response:

In the past 10 months, I have taken over a number of writing assignments previously held by my supervisor. These include:

1. Drafting monthly reports on leasing activities under the purview of our office. These are routinely approved by my supervisor without change and are circulated to 10 field offices and Regional Directors.
2. I have assumed the responsibility of reporter for the quarterly meeting of the bureau's Research Directors. Reports of these meetings are reviewed by the Director's Office prior to distribution to all participants.
3. In January, I completed the course, "Writing Analytical Reports," offered through the National Independent Study Center. This was a six-month course involving 24 hours of training and covering such areas as: planning an analytical report, collecting and analyzing data, identifying possible solutions to problems addressed in the report, and organizing, writing, and editing the report.

In addition, while I was a student in college I developed and was recognized for my strong written communication skills in a variety of capacities. These include:

1. A summer internship with my state representative, for whom I drafted constituent correspondence and press releases. Though I was an intern, the majority of the one- to two-dozen letters and press releases I wrote each week were sent without modification.
2. During my senior year, I served as the chapter president of my honor society, and wrote monthly progress reports to send to the headquarters of the honor society.
3. Throughout college I was a staff writer for the student daily newspaper. As a reporter I wrote both short news stories as well as in-depth feature articles on a weekly basis, and was selected for the feature writing award by the editorial board my junior year.

Select Additional Resources on KSAs and the Federal Job Application Process

Bureau of Prisons Web site: <http://www.bop.gov/hrmpg/ksa/hrmksahndbk.pdf> “KSA Handbook: A guide to presenting your Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities when applying for positions.”

Centers for Disease Control Web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/hrmo/ksahowto.htm>

Department of Labor Web site:

http://wdsc.doleta.gov/jobs/Federal_Application_Process/Knowledge_Skills_Abilities/

Kraemer, Kathryn. “Career Corner: The Lowdown on KSAs,” Government Executive Magazine Web site, July 13, 1999. <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0799/071399cc.htm>

OPM’s USAJOBS Web site: www.usajobs.opm.gov/EI64.htm

Troutman, Kathryn Kraemer. *Ten Steps to a Federal Job: Navigating the Federal Job System, Writing Federal Resumes, KSAs and Cover Letters with a Mission*. The Resume Place. Baltimore: 2002.