The 
Totally Unofficial 
and 
Completely Unauthorized 
Guide to Participating in 
Federal Appointment Processes 
(Applications, Exams, Interviews, References)

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Four things to be a happy applicant

- Understand yourself
- Understand different types of jobs
- Understand how to find out about jobs
- Understand how to succeed in process

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Overview

Introduction
- Personal overview
- Approach

Applications
- Cover letters (RoI, ducks)
- Eligibility
- Prep template #1
- Samples
- Resumes

Written Exam
- Planning
- Source material
- Emphasis on structure

Interviews
- Unexpected questions
- Rating guides
- Prep template #2
- Examples
- Emphasis on structure

References
- Choosing
- Supporting

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Applications
Cover letters: Four ways to fail

1. Over-estimating Return on Investment (jumps)
2. Never even apply (#s lie)
3. Ignore process (online issues, latest version, deadlines, no cover, overusing generics, ignoring headings, etc.)
4. Quacking up
   - “While I do not have experience…”, “I speak duck”, “I have experiences that are similar to ducks”, “I am in the duck family”…
   - I am a duck, I have always been a duck, you will never see a better duck!
Crafting your cover letter, part I: Ticking the boxes

- Opening: Title, Level, Competition, PRI

- Eligibility (1): Education, Employment status, area of selection, language, citizenship

- Eligibility (2): Security clearance, organizational needs (EE), operational requirements (relocation/travel/overtime hours), conditions of employment (travel/irregular hours/part-time)
Cover letters:
Sample text for part I

I am writing to you in order to apply for the (title) (xx-xx level) position in the department (competition xxxx-xxx-xx-xx-xxx). I am sending this letter, and the attached detailed resume, in order to demonstrate my eligibility (A) and qualifications (B-Essentials & C-Assets) against the Statement of Merit Criteria.

I am an indeterminate employee of HRSDC working in the National Capital Region as a substantive xx-xx, and my PRI number is xx-xxx-xxx. I have a Bachelor’s degree in xxxxxxxxxxxxx from xxxxxxxxx (19xx) and a Master’s degree in xxxxxxxxxxxxx from Carleton University (20xx). I am willing to work overtime as required, and travel within Canada and internationally as part of my duties. I have a Level II – Secret security clearance which was updated in 2004 and I meet the official languages proficiency for the position, with a current profile of EBC.

Option: “I meet the official language proficiency for the position, but my profile is out of date and I need to be retested”
Crafting your cover letter: Part II: Experiences - The WRONG Template

- Typical approach is simply to match jobs against experiences
- Works if you are easily able to be screened in
- Easy to miss things and to have insufficient “evidence”

But there is a SECRET alternative…shhhhh!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience 1</th>
<th>Job 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience 2</td>
<td>Job 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience 3</td>
<td>Job 1,3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Secret Template #1: Experiences (Essential AND Assets!)**

- **Goal is overwhelming evidence you meet requirement**
- **For each experience, look at each job / academic / volunteer**
- **THEN craft paragraph with best examples (i.e. not ALL)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exp 1</th>
<th>Job 1</th>
<th>Job 2</th>
<th>Job 3</th>
<th>Acad</th>
<th>Vol.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exp 2</th>
<th>Job 1</th>
<th>Job 2</th>
<th>Job 3</th>
<th>Acad</th>
<th>Vol.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exp 3</th>
<th>Job 1</th>
<th>Job 2</th>
<th>Job 3</th>
<th>Acad</th>
<th>Vol.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B2. Experience in managing human and financial resources

Since 2002, I have had extensive responsibility for human resources. I acted as deputy director within the policy coordination team at CIDA, assisting in leading a team of eight, directly supervising two policy analysts, and acting as director almost 20% of the time. While working at SDC on international issues, I was the head of a team of seven analysts and one support staff on issues related to bilateral relations, multilateral engagement, and policy development. As manager in policy integration at HRSDC, I led a team preparing an integrated policy framework, implementation plan for creating a Centre of Excellence, strategic regional engagement, participation in medium term policy planning, branch coordination of corporate planning requests, and international benchmarking and comparisons; and I am now the manager of the performance team within Integrated Planning and Accountability, as well as having acted as director for five weeks during the summer.
Resumes

- Lots of exciting models out there, most of them completely irrelevant for screening!
- Listing your “skills” doesn’t matter in a formal screening process – you have to PROVE them, not just list them
- Simplest design:
  - Job 1, Time, Experience/duties
  - Job 2, Time, Experience/duties
- Resume should have words from poster sprinkled throughout
Written Exams
The Written Exam: General planning

- Find out in advance (i.e. ask!):
  - On computer? With Internet or not?
  - Hand-written? – EVERY OTHER LINE!!!
  - Duration
# Exams: What is covered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage Breakdown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility</td>
<td>90% cover letter / application, 10% language test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>100% cover letter, application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(** Officially 100%, but more like 75% cover, 5% written, 20% interview)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>80-85% written, 15-20% interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abilities</td>
<td>15-20% written, 80-85% interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Suitability</td>
<td>20-40% interview, 60-80% reference check</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Written Exam: What to review?

- Macro documents
  - Reports on Plans and Priorities, Departmental Performance Reports
  - Internet site for “Vision”, “Mandate”, recent general speech by Minister

- Micro documents
  - Divisional mandate?
  - Substantive files for that area i.e. FAA, HRts
  - Be wary of the incumbent trap!

- What is your goal? Short reusable modules!
The Written Exam: Structure is King!

- Poorly constructed answer with content leaves markers confused
- Expect questions appropriate to category
  - ES – briefing note
  - AS – PSC tests, short answers
- Expect the unexpected
  - Problem-solving steps
  - Policy development cycle
  - Project management cycle
  - Teamwork / partnership / consultation process
The Written Exam: Writing it!

- If you memorized short modules, dump them out of your head in short notation form
- Need to manage your time!
- Save often!
- Outline your answer and answer ALL of the question i.e. “recommendations”
Interviews
Interviews: General preparations

- Main process question: Do you get the questions 30 minutes in advance or not?

- Knowing yourself – do you talk fast? slow? short answers or elaborate stories?

- Be ready for unexpected questions with problem-solving headings, policy development cycle, project management cycle
Interviews: Extra speaking points

- Unexpected questions for icebreakers or oral ability – may not be rated but sets tone for interview
  - How you are the best candidate / past experience / personal strengths / achievements
  - How it relates to your career goals
  - Weakness – and what you are doing about it (NOT something that is relevant to the job!)

- Frequent content of other questions:
  - How to deal with challenging project / difficult employee
  - Teamwork or partnering examples
  - Leadership and communications
  - Values and ethics – PSC or personal (respect, diversity, lifelong learning)
**Interviews: Getting serious**

<table>
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<th>Notes</th>
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</table>
Interviews: Knowledge

- Same prep as for written:
  - Macro documents: RPP, DPR, speeches
  - Micro documents: Files, division mandate
  - Substantive area files: Finance? Human rights?

- The goal is same as written exam – “short” modules to drop into answers
Interviews: Abilities, personal suitability

- Generally speaking, only three main types of questions:
  1. Experience – Tell us of a time when you…
  2. Process – What steps would you take in this situation
  3. Principles – What factors are important in this situation or scenario

- **Surprise**: All three questions are scored the same way!
Interviews: Understanding the rating guide

- All relevant elements from the poster (knowledge, abilities, personal suitability) have “answer key” prepared in advance that says WHAT is a good answer
- Not prepared by rocket scientists
- Has to be GENERIC answer structure to accommodate every candidate
- You can do SAME process to figure out what the criteria looks like, and prepare your answer accordingly
Interviews: Example - “Initiative”

- Dictionary.com:
  - An introductory act or step, serving to initiate
  - Readiness and ability in initiating action;
  - One's personal, responsible decision
  - The power or ability to begin or to follow through energetically with a plan or task
  - An opening move: took the initiative in trying to solve the problem
  - Synonyms: leadership, forcefulness, dynamism

- Rating guide: Candidate’s answer demonstrates:
  - Decision: Did something that wasn’t part of normal duties (new) or assigned – did it before and without being asked
  - Dynamic Action: Can’t be picking up piece of paper
  - Results: Followed through with plan / task
  - Other: Planning, leading (*), risks, questions status quo, originates rather than react or respond, creativity

* Initiative is one of worst understood personal suitabilities
Interviews: Proper preparation

- IF you know there’s a rating guide
- IF you know there are three types of questions
- IF you know every element has to be tested AND only those elements

- You can figure out your answers without even knowing the questions. I give you…

**Secret Template #2**
## Interviews: Secret template #2!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPERIENCE</th>
<th>PROCESS</th>
<th>PRINCIPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Experience** (1,2,3,…) | 1. Work  
2. Academic  
3. Volunteerism | | |
| **Knowledge** (1,2,3,…) | 1. *Position 1*  
2. *Position 2* | 1. Step 1  
2. Step 2  
3. Step 3 | 1. Principle 1  
2. Principle 2 |
| **Abilities** (1,2,3,…) | 1. *Position 1*  
2. *Position 2* | 1. Step 1  
2. Step 2  
3. Step 3 | 1. Principle 1  
2. Principle 2 |
| **Personal Suitability** (1,2,3,…) | 1. *Position 1*  
2. *Position 2* | 1. Step 1  
2. Step 2  
3. Step 3 | 1. Principle 1  
2. Principle 2 |

**Goal: One box or all three!!!**
Q: Name a social or economic trend facing Canada and discuss implications for HRSDC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer 1: Aging population</th>
<th>Answer 2: Aging population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographics → Aging population, living longer, baby boomers, fewer children too</td>
<td>Demographics → Aging population, living longer (see it in own family too with aging parents, uncles / aunts), baby boomers, fewer children too (saw it while working in social area, types of issues)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for HRSDC:</td>
<td>Implications for HRSDC:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Labour market shortages, etc.</td>
<td>- Labour market shortages, etc. (saw it while working in LMP, broad spectrum of issues; key principle of income security is participation in labour force)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Health care costs, caregiving issues</td>
<td>- Health care costs, caregiving issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Life-long learning</td>
<td>- Life-long learning (new areas of learning in process: learning, acquiring, using, adapting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Score:</strong> 7 or 8 out of 10</td>
<td><strong>Score:</strong> 8 or 9 out of 10 – MORE ROBUST ANSWER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q: You have three requests due today – a briefing note due for 3:00 for the Minister, a report on yesterday’s meeting for Director due at 11:00, and materials for ADM for meeting tomorrow, but due at noon today. Which order would you start on them?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer 1:</th>
<th>Answer 2:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ 11:00 Report for Director</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ 12:00 Materials for ADM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ 15:00 Briefing note for ADM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Score:</strong> 5 out of 10</td>
<td><strong>Score:</strong> 8 or 9 out of 10 – <strong>NOT BECAUSE ORDER WAS DIFFERENT, BUT FOR “EXTRA” ELEMENTS</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Need to meet deadlines while ensuring quality
- Need to prioritize and manage time effectively
- Issues: Sequencing, Audience, Substance
- Might have to shift as progresses, or might need extra resources, and would discuss with manager, but based on above analysis:
  - ▪ 15:00 Briefing note for ADM
  - ▪ 12:00 Materials for ADM
  - ▪ 11:00 Report for Director
Interviews: Structure is Queen!

- Structure + average content better than perfect content and no structure
- Good to outline but you are NOT reading a script

Standard answer:
- Introduction: Show you understand question
- Body: Tell them how many parts to your answer, and focus on results, say “I” not we – What you would do, why, how
- Conclude: Tell them you’re done – nicely, without repetition
Interviews: Overall tips

- Use the template in advance, divide up examples over several answers and create solid structure.

- If possible, use language from Statement of Merit – KNOW WHICH ELEMENT IS BEING TESTED???

- No shooting yourself in the foot:
  - Add personal tips to your sheet (i.e. slow down, eye contact, manage time)
  - BE POSITIVE: No negative comments about past – talk about new directions or changes
## Extra examples: Advice, pressure

### Ability to analyze and make recommendations on complex policy issues and provide strategic advice to senior management
- Understands scenario
- Seeks out relevant sources
- Articulates analysis and assumptions in logical fashion
- Makes relevant recommendations
- Information provided relates well to developing policy options
- Level of detail appropriate to audience
- Explains rationale for recommendations

### Ability to work under pressure and meet tight deadlines // Ability to solve problems // Dependability
- Appropriately characterizes problem
- Able to determine priorities even in times of stress
- Adjusts work plan
- Pays attention to detail
- Delegates or gets assistance where appropriate
- Inform, engage, and seek advice from senior management, where appropriate and in a timely manner
- Effective time and resource management
- Tries to meet deadline in face of obstacles and frustrations // Delivers on time or sets expectation when timeframes unachievable
- Presents options or alternatives to management for consideration
## Extra examples: Interpersonal, communications

### Ability to work in team environment OR Effective Interpersonal Skills

- Recognizes the importance of interpersonal relationships
- Creates and maintains productive relationships
- Able to achieve results through co-operative interactions
- Shares information with interested parties, stakeholders
- Tries to understand other’s perspective
- Builds consensus
- Interacts with diplomacy, respect and consideration
- Is respected and influential
- Has ability to find appropriate ways to approach others about sensitive issues
- Makes decisions with a sensitivity for how these decisions may affect others
- Builds and maintains trust

### Ability to communicate effectively

- Communicates clearly so the audience understands: Is the message clear, direct and easily understood? Heard easily, does not mumble
- Uses correct words and grammatically correct structures: rules of grammar observed? Are grammatically correct structures used?
- During the interview, points covered are presented in logical sequence with no erratic backtracking: Are ideas logically developed and presented in reasonable sequence?
- Does not lose listeners in lengthy or complicated explanations: Is message brief and to the point?
References
References

- Choosing the right people
- Approval

- Preparing your references: Soft prompting / scripting
  - Cover letter
  - Suggested areas already highlighted
  - Examples while working with them
Conclusion
7 Habits of Highly Successful Applicants

1. Know yourself and what you want
2. Invest your time wisely
3. Quack like a duck
4. Write proper cover letter
5. Anticipate the likely questions
6. Structure your answers
7. Prep your referees

P.S. Share your approach!