

Unifrog Guide to Work Experience - How to find it and how to be successful on it

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Work experience is valuable for all students. It gives an insight into a professional field and can also look impressive on a CV and Personal Statement. Unifrog has put together a guide of everything you need to know about finding, preparing for and completing work experience.

Finding work experience

Think broadly

It can sometimes be difficult to think of work experience ideas. Especially if you don't live in an urban area, it can feel like there are very limited options. Try to get creative when brainstorming ideas; think of all the different jobs in the field of work you wish to enter, rather than focussing on just one career path.

For example, you may struggle to find work experience shadowing an anaesthetist, but within the field of 'Healthcare' you could work at a dental practice, nursing home or GP clinic – experiences which would still all be relevant to your career goal.

Here are some work experience examples which could be relevant to your subject:

- Museum, archive office, National Trust site, archaeological digs (History, Classics)
- Gallery, workshop, branding department of a company, architect (Art, Design)
- Talent agency, backstage theatre work (Drama)
- Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), translating company, journalism, broadcasting, library, publishing company (English Literature, Modern Languages)
- Water works, research and development department at a local factory, green energy, oil and gas company (Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Engineering)
- Pharmaceutical company, dental practice, nursing home, hospital or GP clinic (Medical Sciences and Human Biology)
- App development company, IT security company, school IT department (Computer Sciences)
- Local astronomy observation centres, automobile and aviation manufacturers (Maths, Physics and Astronomy)
- Teaching your subject to younger students at school, writing articles for a blog or student magazine, starting a society or study group (All subjects)

Use contacts

When organising work experience, try to be realistic. You are unlikely to be allowed access into the head office of a national organisation with no prior experience. Look for local businesses or people with whom you already have a connection (a parent of a fellow pupil, a family member or friend etc).

Alternatively, ask your careers officer to suggest organisations where pupils from your school have previously worked; if they made a good impression then the company may be keen to have another student.

Contacting an employer

Wherever you decide you want to work, make sure to contact the employer to ask them with plenty of notice. You need to allow people time to organise your visit.

When contacting someone to ask for work experience, keep your email or letter polite and formal (even if you already know the person you're writing to.) You want this person to offer you their time and assistance so it's important to make a good impression. If possible, try to email a specific person (rather than the generic email address for company enquiries) as you will be more likely to get a response.

Be clear on the number of days you will be working - it will be for a week and it will be full time. Explain why you're interested in learning more about the organisation and why you would be suited to the work. Make sure to include what you think you could bring to them (even if it's just to help with admin), rather than just what you think would be interesting for you. Include a copy of your CV with your email/letter to offer more detail.

Tip: Larger companies often run work experience programmes specifically tailored to students which you can formally apply to online. These include organisations such as HSBC, John Lewis, or the BBC.

Before you get there

Do your research

Work experience is about learning new things, so you don't need to know everything before you arrive. However, it's important to find out exactly what the organisation does and role of the department you'll be working in. Have a look on the company website and check out its aims, values and founding story to give you some background information before you arrive.

Prepare questions

Preparing questions before your work experience will ensure you don't waste any valuable time trying to think of something to ask when shadowing professionals. Think about exactly what you want to learn from this experience and who you want to talk to.

Here are a few example questions to get you started:

- What made you want to work in X field?
- What is your favourite / least favourite thing about your work?
- Was there a particular reason you chose this organisation? How does it compare to other places you have worked in?
- What route did you take into this profession?
- Do you have any advice for someone wishing to enter this field?
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Send an email one week beforehand

If you haven't been contacted since organising the work experience, it's a good idea to send another email before you're due to start. Ask for confirmation of the hours you'll be working, where you need to go and who you should speak to when you arrive. Again, keep all your contact polite and formal, and try to show that you're looking forward to the experience.

When you get there

Act professionally

Make a good impression by arriving on-time and dressing smartly. Be friendly and polite to everyone you meet and remember to thank anyone who offers their time or assistance. Complete any task you are given willingly and to the best of your ability. If you can show you are a committed and professional individual, you may be invited back for more work experience or possibly even a job.

Engage with the employees

Don't just sit in the corner and observe. If you ask questions, engage in conversation and act interested in the work then people will be more willing to help you. Being able to confidently engage with others is an important skill for any work place. In addition, any interesting conversation you have could provide material for discussion in an interview or Personal Statement.

Make contacts

Don't be afraid to request someone's email address or business card, in case you have any further questions in the future. You never know when it could be useful to know someone in your field.

Take notes

During work experience you will be given a lot of information in a short space of time which can be quite overwhelming. Note down all your findings throughout your time so you can refer back to the experience later on when applying for a job or university.

After work experience

Follow up email

Solidify your connection with an organisation by sending a follow up email. Particularly if there were a group of students on work experience, a short and polite thank you message at the end of your time can make you stand out. It demonstrates initiative and enthusiasm, as well as showing that you are appreciative of the experience.

Reflect on your experience

When mentioning work experience in an application, try to reflect on your observations and provide thoughtful insight, rather than giving a random list of your duties. This will demonstrate that your experiences have provided you with a greater understanding of your chosen field.

Questions to reflect on post-work experience:

- What did you enjoy about your work experience?
- What did you dislike?
- What skills have you developed?
- How has it changed your understanding of the profession/industry?
- How does this affect your plans for the future?

Tip: if you obtained your work experience through a family contact, never mention this in a Personal Statement or CV (but obviously do not lie if you are asked directly). It's more impressive if you managed to find a placement yourself, and mentioning your family makes it appear as if you're trying to name drop.

Instead of: "I worked at my aunt's publishing company", try: "I worked at a publishing company"