

#1 Writing Applications That Stand Out – TCLA Guidebook

By Jaysen Sutton

The aim of this guidebook is to supplement the presentation delivered on our first webinar on Writing Applications That Stand Out. Due to time limitations, I had to be selective in the information I presented, whereas this guidebook is designed to expand and provide additional resources based on the presentation.

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Learning application technique is the biggest thing you can do right now to substantially increase your chances of securing a training contract. Law firm applications are so specific and unique, so different to other types of applications that many candidates fall down simply because they don't realise there is a particular way to approach law firm applications.

Moreover, there is a technique to applications. It's essential that you learn how to communicate your motivations and sell your experiences on paper if you want a shot at standing out.

The important thing is that all of this is learnable and something you can get better at over time. **It's a skill, not a talent.** It's something everyone can learn with enough practice. The aim of this guidebook is to give you as much actionable advice as I can on how to write a stand-out application.

Quantity v quality

This is a question I get asked a lot. How many applications is the *right amount* to send out? Our answer to this is to send out as many as you can. It's necessary for you to send out as many applications as you can if you want a chance at securing a training contract. The unusual part of the law firm application process is that you can expect most firms to reject your applications. Even a strong candidate who sends out 10 applications can expect to only receive a handful of interviews if they are lucky.

With that in mind, unless there are only a select few firms you are interested in, it's necessary to send out as many applications as you can if you want to maximise your chances. In doing so, you raise your chances that the right recruiter at the right time will see your application and think: *this person is worth interviewing*.

Even then, you can expect only a handful of firms to interview you and to convert an even smaller number into a vacation scheme or training contract offer. If you are sending out more applications, more firms are likely to interview you, and you raise your chances of just one firm saying yes.

You also mitigate the inevitability of having a few bad interviews. To get good at interviews, you have to practise interviewing. If you send off more applications and therefore secure more interviews, you'll become an overall stronger candidate. Then, when it comes to you securing that one interview with your dream firm, you'll be far better equipped to handle tough questions – because chances are you'll have been asked them already.

That's why when candidates tell me that they received all rejections in their previous round, usually the first question I ask is: *How many firms did you apply to?* If the numbers are small, my advice is to send out more applications. It could be that you were rejected for reasons that had little to do with the strength of your application answers.

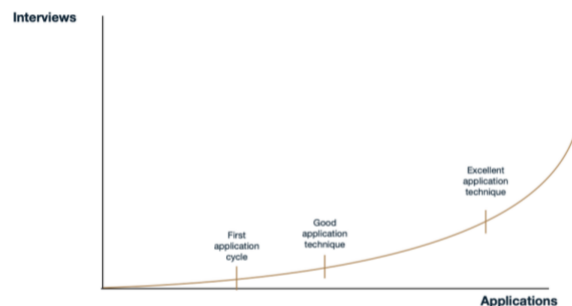
In fact, just because you received a rejection doesn't mean you wrote a bad application. It could be the case, but it could also be down to luck, the competition, the preferences of the recruiter, your grades and work experience – or any number of other reasons.

So, where does quality factor in? Well, I don't see this as a comparison between quality and quantity because all of the applications you send off should be of the utmost quality. What I would say is that there is a marginal benefit in sending off a '92% good' application versus a 95% application if it takes you many more weeks to complete the '95%' good' application.

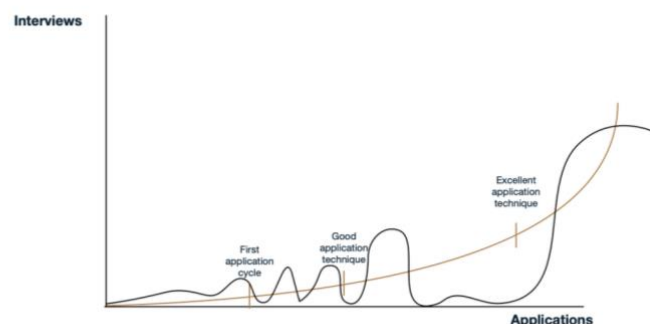
In other words, rather than spending weeks finetuning very minor details of an already brilliant application, my advice would be to send off your application more quickly because you stand to gain more from sending off an additional application in that time.

Expectation v reality

Going through a normal application process, you might expect the application to interview conversion to go something like the below. The more applications you send off, the better the technique you develop, and the more interviews you subsequently receive.



Unfortunately, the reality is quite different, and you might expect something like that in the graph below. You could develop fantastic application technique and still face rejections from the next four, five or six applications you send off.



That's one of the reasons this process is so tough. It's what causes many candidates to give up. The truth is that developing fantastic application technique won't lead to guaranteed interviews.

Now, if developing excellent application technique won't lead to guaranteed interviews, what's the point?

Well, the point is that assuming your grades and work experience are not substantial barriers to your application, over time you should see an average increase in the number of interviews you receive. That's so important when you only need one firm to give you the final offer.

Equally, I am only talking in averages here; some candidates will have better odds and can expect to see a very high application to interview conversion rate after developing excellent application technique, especially if the rest of their application is very good.

Candidates who may have a below average profile (based on their grades and work experience) may also be able to compensate by writing a stand-out application. A recruiter might be willing to give a candidate a shot because they see the candidate's potential in the way they justify their motivations and sell their experiences.

The competition

Rejections suck. When you spend weeks on an application only to receive an automated email discussing the level of competition, it can be quite heart-breaking. That said, I think it really helps to explain this in context to show you why a rejection doesn't *necessarily* mean you are a bad candidate.

| Firm Name | Applications received pa | Percentage Interviewed | Trainee places 2023 |
|-----------------|--------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Cleary Gottlieb | 1,500 | 5% invited to open day | 12-16 |
| HFW | 1,000 | 10% | 15 |
| Hogan Lovells | 3,000 | 9% | Up to 50 |
| Jones Day | 2,000 | 10% | 15-20 |
| Macfarlanes | 1,000 | 15% | 33 |

*Figures are approximate. Latest figures from Lex 100, updated for 2020

The sample firms provided the above information to Lex 100. As you can see, these firms receive over 1,000 (and sometimes several thousand) applications for vacation schemes and training contracts each year. Out of those, they roughly interview between 5 to 15%, more or less depending on the firm (some firms I looked at had their percentage interviewed at 25%).

Take Jones Day, for example, out of the 2,000 applications they receive, they're only going to interview 200.

What does this mean?

Put simply, your application needs to be selected out of 1,800 applicants. I'm drilling down on this because I think it helps to realise what the competition means. It means that you could be a strong candidate, but a firm will only invite so many to interview, and therefore they'll have to reject you. In this case, a firm didn't reject because you are a weak candidate. They rejected you because they were reviewing 100+ equally brilliant applications and they just had to make a decision.

Now that's not always the case. Many candidates go into this process without a prior understanding of the importance of selling your motivations and experiences in the right way. Most do send off weak applications.

Hopefully this discussion of the competition explains why your application really has to WOW the recruiter if you want a chance of being invited to interview. You need to be aiming to write an application that is in the top 1%.

Standing out in an application

So, what does it mean to stand out in an application? I'll be going into more detail about each particular area in this guidebook, as well as in our future guidebooks. However, for the time being, here is how I'd summarise this:

1. Do you demonstrate authenticity and deep thinking?

Most answers to questions on application forms don't demonstrate deep thinking. For example, a candidate's answer to 'why commercial law?' is frequently a paraphrased version of an answer they've read online, an application they've read, or a talk they've listened to, whether wittingly or not.

Deep thinking is key to a stand-out application. It'll stand out because your answer will be unique and personal to you. Because you've taken the time to really think about why you are doing what you are doing, your answer won't sound like anyone else's. This is so important when a recruiter is reviewing thousands of similar application answers.

Now, this doesn't mean that you can't use other ideas to shape your answer. You want to be using your experiences, conversations and research to develop a convincing answer. However, rather than simply restating these points, it's crucial to take on the challenging task of articulating why this is the career you want, why you are applying to a particular firm, and why you are a stand-out candidate.

2. Do you have a compelling story?

Stand-out applicants treat their applications like a story. Candidates think about the lasting impression they leave on a recruiter in the way they frame their cover letter or answer an application question.

When discussing their experiences, they have the confidence to be vulnerable but also the confidence to talk about why they have achieved so much. When discussing a topic of interest, they focus on the best bits and speak with enthusiasm.

In your application, you want to take the recruiter on a journey. You want to leave them with the feeling that they have to interview you.

3. Do I know that you are 100% committed to commercial law?

It's really tough to be a commercial lawyer. You'll be spending much of your life at the firm, often working very long hours. You'll face significant pressure from clients and from your colleagues. At times, you'll have to carry out mundane work.

A law firm recruiter is well aware that this is the reality of becoming a commercial lawyer. That's why they can't have candidates who haven't really thought their motivations through. They need to know that candidates have really contemplated why a career in commercial law is for them - they understand what the role involves, including the unsexy aspects, and yet they want to become a commercial lawyer anyway. A recruiter needs to know that a candidate has very clear motivations, because this will keep them going through the most trialling times. For a law firm, this will ensure that the candidate

doesn't change their mind about becoming a lawyer half-way through their training contract.

With that in mind, it's imperative that you demonstrate in an application that you really know what you're getting yourself into and that you back this up with specific experiences. If you give a recruiter any semblance of doubt or a lack of clarity as to why you particularly want to be a commercial lawyer, you're going to be rejected.

4. Can you prove, without doubt, that you want to work at my firm?

Similar to the answer above, a firm needs to know that you're going to be at the firm for the long term and that you have the potential to be a future partner at the firm. If you are simply applying to the firm as a means to an end or if you haven't deeply thought about why you are applying to a firm over other firms, you are going to be rejected.

5. Do you convey the qualities I am looking for with the way you write?

You can tell a lot about a candidate from the way they write their application form. Unlike many other professions, the quality of your writing is essential to your ability to perform the role of a commercial lawyer. Sloppy writing tells a recruiter that you lack attention to detail. Poor grammar will lead a recruiter to question your ability to converse with a client. By contrast, good writing doesn't just tick the boxes; it allows you to convincingly sell your application. It is what makes for a memorable application.

6. Do you present a convincing case that you are worth investing in?

Ultimately, all of the points mentioned before comes down to this. After all, if a firm decides to hire you, they'll be investing a substantial amount of time and money into you. It also means they'll be choosing you over hundreds of other exceptional candidates. You need to convince a firm that you are 100% worth investing in.

The Big Three

In this guidebook, I'll now discuss three areas which most law firm applications will require you to write about:

- Why commercial law?
- Why this firm?
- Why you?

I will further examine these questions in our future guidebooks.

Justifying 'Why commercial law?'

To begin, here's how I'd summarise our best advice for delivering a stand-out answer to this question.

First, ask yourself: *is your current justification for 'why commercial law?' authentic? Is it really based on your genuine reasons for wanting to become a commercial lawyer?* As discussed previously, many candidates have developed reasons that aren't actually their own. They're designed to impress rather than being based on a candidate's own experiences. The quickest way to work towards a stand-out answer is to write an answer that you can proudly say is your own.

Second, it's important to consider whether your reasons are specific to commercial law. Many candidates make generic points, such as discussing the 'fast-paced environment' within commercial law or how stating that the profession interests them because it is 'intellectually stimulating'. These phrases aren't specific to commercial law; they could equally apply to many other fields, from finance to medicine.

Third, are you actually answering the question? As we'll see, many candidates don't actually answer the question of why they want to become a commercial lawyer. Instead, they often discuss why they are well suited to the profession or they explain what commercial lawyers do. We want to keep your answers 100% focused on your motivations for becoming a commercial lawyer.

Fourth, be personal with your reasoning. I want to know why you personally want to become a commercial lawyer. Explain how your particular experiences have confirmed that this is the career for you.

Let's look at some examples of weaker and stronger answers.

Example 1:

The diagram shows two paragraphs of a candidate's answer. The first paragraph is highlighted in pink and the second in light blue. Red dashed lines connect specific parts of the text to callout boxes on the right, each labeled 'Jaysen Sutton'.

Paragraph 1 (Pink): I have chosen a career in commercial law because, in short, my experiences with commercial law have intrigued me and I believe my personality and skill set are good fits. I have a strong drive to achieve at a high level and I thrive in fast-paced environments, even under pressure. As a languages student, I particularly enjoy working with words to carefully construct arguments and to communicate concisely. Now that I am studying the GDL, the academic rigor of the law is both attractive and an enjoyable challenge.

Paragraph 2 (Blue): A career in commercial law needs problem-solving skills and a keen sense of attention to detail. As such, a career in commercial law is the right fit for me because these two skills are amongst my strongest. In my final year at [university], I worked in a team to establish a business. This insightful project, coupled with my Young Enterprise experience, has allowed me to understand how business development works and how to achieve goals while working in a team.

Callouts:

- Jaysen Sutton**
A wordy and generic opening. We want to cut out the fluff and lead directly with your specific reasons for wanting to become a commercial lawyer.
- Jaysen Sutton**
This could equally apply to many City professions. Why commercial law in particular?
- Jaysen Sutton**
Much better. This is personal and based on a candidate's experience.
- Jaysen Sutton**
No need to waste sentences describing this. The recruiter knows this already.

In this first example, the candidate begins with a generic opening about how their experiences have 'intrigued' them and how they feel they are well suited to the profession. Generally speaking, I'd advise candidates to avoid introductions and conclusions in their application answers. It's often a waste of the word count, and it would be far more impactful if you jumped straight into your specific experiences. The exception to this is if a concise introduction adds substantive value to the clarity of the answer.

The candidate then goes on to use generic phrasing about their 'drive to achieve at a high level' and how they 'thrive in fast-paced environments'. Again, the problem here is that this could apply to many other professions; it isn't specific enough to commercial law.

Thereafter, the candidate does begin to discuss their languages degree. This comes across well; it is personal to the candidate and based on their specific experiences.

The second paragraph fails to convincingly answer the question. The first half generically discusses why the candidate is well suited to a career in commercial law. In the second half, the candidate is doing well to discuss an experience, however it's not clear how this is connected to the question and the candidate's justification for why they want to become a commercial lawyer.

Example 2

1. Why do you want to become a Commercial lawyer (250 words)?

As a X, the vast amount of business experience gained at the interface of law and financial services has provided me with a deep understanding of the needs and the dynamics of clients and how to effectively work with internal stakeholders to deliver results in tight timeframes.

Over the last X years, I have worked for a range of legal and financial services firms from X to Y, and believe I can draw upon this range of experience to be a well-rounded lawyer. As a X, I've managed wide-ranging relationships and led on complex international projects working closely with the legal trading teams to deliver the funds mandates. I've also kept well informed of market developments and new regulations to ensure my business area was compliant with all relevant legal requirements.

I have a proven track record of delivering results in a dynamic and legally complex environment through leading a multitude of projects, including the design and execution of X. The majority of my X experience focused on the X functions and in this capacity, I acted as the key interface between the X and the various key internal and external stakeholders. [redacted] This coupled with my extensive commercial experience is why I am motivated to qualify as a commercial solicitor.

Jaysen Sutton

This is more of an explanation of why you'd make for a good commercial lawyer. It's also very buzz-wordy. Try to avoid phrases like 'dynamics of clients' and 'internal stakeholders' and instead be more specific with what you mean.

Try to focus on justifying why you want to become a commercial lawyer, especially as a career changer.

Jaysen Sutton

As above, this is more of an answer for why you'd make for a good commercial lawyer, rather than a justification of why you want to be one. Try to focus on your motivations here.

Jaysen Sutton

Same as above.

Jaysen Sutton

This is very buzz-wordy and doesn't come across as authentic or personal. Try to focus on your motivations here.

Jaysen Sutton

Rather than using stakeholders, I'd suggest being specific as to who you are referring to.

A thank you to the recent career changer who allowed us to break down this application answer. This candidate clearly has a range of impressive experiences; however, their answer comes across as if they are writing to impress, and they fail to directly answer the question.

In the first paragraph, the candidate uses unclear and vague phrasing including the 'interface of law and financial services', 'internal stakeholders' and the 'dynamics of clients'. It's far better to be personal and specific with the reasoning and to steer away from using buzzwords; they don't get a recruiter any closer to why a candidate is applying. For example, who are the internal stakeholders they are referring to? What do they mean by 'dynamics'? The candidate is also discussing what skills and knowledge they have developed in their existing role, rather than explaining why they want to become a commercial lawyer.

In the second paragraph, the candidate did begin by being specific, discussing the range of financial and legal experience they have. The problem here is that the candidate is using these experiences to justify why they'd make a great lawyer, rather than explaining why they want to become one, which means they aren't answering the question. As a career changer, it's especially important for this candidate to convince the recruiter that they are 100% clear on the decision they are making, backing this up with specific proof. Unfortunately, I'm not getting this from the answer here.

In the final paragraph, the candidate begins with vague and generic phrasing. They discuss their 'proven track record of delivering results in a dynamic and legally complex environment'. It's hard to know what this means, and the candidate isn't providing specific proof. More importantly, this is again not discussing why the candidate wants to become a commercial lawyer. This is a running theme throughout the rest of the paragraph.

As mentioned, it is clear that the candidate does have a range of legal and commercial experience. To improve this answer, they should focus on how these experiences have affirmed their decision to become a commercial lawyer. Evidence should be used only to explain how this is relevant to their justification, and they should save their discussion of 'why me?' for a different question.

So, how do you tie in your personal experiences with your specific reasoning?

Let's consider discuss through further examples.

Below, the colour yellow denotes a candidate's discussion of their experiences, while the colour red indicates where a candidate has used specific reasoning to justify why they want to become a commercial lawyer.

Example 3

I recently participated in a negotiation workshop on a multi-jurisdictional dispute in fictional telecom market which has encouraged me to pursue a career as a solicitor. In a team of five we were tasked with coming up with a stance on negotiations. We created a clear strategy and delegated tasks to ensure we covered all necessary points in the limited time. Here I enjoyed building upon my negotiation skills, knowing when to listen to and when to communicate and persuade. Although preparing for the session was logistically challenging (because of the sheer volume of documentation) we were able to formulate a plan which we were proud of that satisfied our client, which was very rewarding.

In this example, the candidate clearly spends too much time discussing their personal experiences without discussing how this is related to why they want to become a commercial lawyer.

A discussion of your personal experiences should serve to back up the broader point you are making about your motivations for commercial law. You should be wary of digressing into a discussion of 'why you?'.

Example 2:

Through working alongside General Counsel and the Head of Investigations as a paralegal for BT on a billion-dollar litigation, I have grown to appreciate the interplay between corporate objectives and legal concerns facing a FTSE 100 company. Whilst on my vacation scheme at Macfarlanes, I deepened my understanding of the day to day life of a commercial lawyer. I enjoyed thinking on my feet and being pushed outside my comfort zone drafting shareholder resolutions and board minutes. I was motivated by the fact the due diligence I worked on for a large private acquisition in the M&A department would have a global impact on commerce.

This answer is better. As you can see, the opening comes across as far more impressive because the candidate is referring to specific parties rather than 'internal stakeholders'.

While the candidate could do with being a little clearer when referencing the 'interplay between corporate objectives and legal concerns', this is not a substantial issue as the candidate is tying this into the context of his own experiences. Here, he really well to apply this to the concerns 'facing a FTSE 100 company', rather than discussing this generally.

Importantly, the candidate is not simply stating or seeking to show off the fact that he has secured a vacation scheme. Instead, he is drawing out how this is relevant to his motivations for becoming a commercial lawyer. The candidate does well to end with how he enjoys the role that commercial lawyers play based on the impact they have on commerce.

Some of these reasons could be a little more personal, but the candidate does very well to use specific experiences as a way of justifying the point he is making. There is no doubt here that the candidate has substantial legal experiences to prove his desire to become a commercial lawyer.

Example 3:

| | |
|---|--|
| After completing the LLB, I was drawn to working at the Financial Ombudsman Service (FOS) because of my interest in business and commerce. At the FOS, I enjoyed being an adjudicator, providing access to dispute resolution outside of the courts. I analysed policy contracts and credit agreements and drafted persuasive opinions as to whether complaints should be upheld or rejected. Because of my entrepreneurial spirit, being a director of two limited companies, I realised that my true passion is helping businesses protect their commercial interests, rather than regulating them. I applied for work experience at Kidd Rapinet after coming to this realisation. | Jaysen Sutton Specific, impactful opening. |
| | Jaysen Sutton Specific detail. Not 'I reviewed contracts and drafted opinions.' |
| | Jaysen Sutton Clever interweaving of the candidate's impressive experiences. |
| My time at Kidd Rapinet confirmed my suspicions: I enjoyed taking part in the day-to-day tasks carried out by commercial solicitors. This provided me with a view of a commercial solicitor's role as a legal advisor who helps businesses succeed using legal, commercial and advisory expertise. I found the work stimulating and it piqued my curiosity and desire to learn. | Jaysen Sutton This is original – I'm yet to see this in an answer because it's based on the candidate's unique journey. |
| | Jaysen Sutton The candidate is walking the reader through their journey. |
| To explore commercial law further, I attended Clifford Chance's open day. I read books relating to finance and capital markets beforehand, but at the open day, I was able to see first-hand how these concepts are applied by lawyers in commercial transactions. I worked on an M&A case study and learned about the different legal considerations including AML regulation, employment law, tax law, litigation and many more. I felt mentally stimulated and engaged at this event and left feeling determined to pursue a career in commercial law. | Jaysen Sutton We have led with the candidate's experiences, now we are focusing on the reasoning. |
| | Jaysen Sutton We're back to telling a story. |
| | Jaysen Sutton Comparing theory to practice. |
| | Jaysen Sutton We are being very specific. |
| | Jaysen Sutton Reaffirming the desire to become a commercial lawyer. |
| | Jaysen Sutton Note, this answer is easy to read. We are not relying on buzzwords or clichés. |

This example is from another career changer. Off the bat, you can see from the spread of red and yellow that the candidate has found a balance between mentioning their specific experiences and justifying their reasoning.

The candidate begins leading with their specific experiences. While more space is being allocated here than normal, this is fine due to the fact that the candidate is a career changer and has a wealth of prior commercial experience.

The candidate then discusses how this led to her decision to becoming a commercial lawyer, namely that she realised her passion lies in 'helping businesses protect their commercial interest, rather than regulating them'. This is a unique answer that I haven't seen in other application answers, precisely because it's based on the candidate's specific experiences. This is also exactly what I mean by writing an answer that is specific to you and your circumstances – it comes across as original, authentic, and far more compelling than using generic or cliché phrases to describe your motivation for commercial law.

The candidate also does very well to discuss her journey. This is what I referred to before by presenting a compelling story. The candidate her initial experience, then her decision to secure legal work experience at Kidd Rapinet, and then how her experience led her to attend Clifford Chance's open day. By discussing how her interest in commercial law evolved over time, the candidate presents a compelling narrative for she she wants to become a commercial lawyer.

If I'm being picky, the candidate could have been more specific with some of her reasoning at times (e.g. with phrases like 'mentally stimulated'). That said, their general answer was convincing enough.

Developing your own answers

If you're struggling to develop your own reasons for why you want to be a commercial lawyer, that's okay – it's actually really hard to articulate why you want to pursue this career. In the same way, it took me a long time to put into words my motivations for starting up TCLA. However, while the process of articulating this clearly is challenging, it's really

important to take the time to think deeply about your reasons. This will ensure that you don't face a rejection because a recruiter has doubts about your desire to become a commercial lawyer. Moreover, it'll stand you through many applications and interviews.

I wouldn't think of your answer as concrete here either. This is an answer that should evolve over time based on the new experiences you have. Your answer at the end of your application period will typically look very different to your initially drafted answer.

I have created an exercise to help you develop your unique and personal answer to 'why commercial law?', which is partly inspired by the idea of reasoning from first principles. Here are the steps:

1. Get a blank piece of paper or open up a Word document.
2. Begin by writing as honestly as possible why you want to become a commercial lawyer. Don't worry if you feel some of the points here shouldn't make it through to an application answer, the point is to draw out your honest reasons for wanting to become a commercial lawyer.
3. For each point you make, ask yourself questions: 'Why?', 'So what?', 'How is this connected to your experiences?'.
4. Once you can't go any further into your reasoning, use this as the basis for your application answer.

For our upcoming guidebook on this topic, we'll be sure to show you further examples of how you can apply this exercise in practice. What you should find is by questioning your points, your answers are going to be more developed. If they stand up to this level of your own scrutiny, chances are they'll stand up to the scrutiny of the recruiter as well.

2. Why are you applying to this firm?

Let's examine the differences between a weaker and stronger answer to this question. Weaker answers tend to lead with flattery. Candidates justify their interest in a firm by discussing a firm's 'market-leading practice area' or its 'fantastic reputation'. Note here that firms aren't impressed by being told they're impressive. They want to know *why* you think they are impressive.

Similarly, weaker candidates tend to flood an application with mentions of awards, deals and facts about a particular firm. While it's good to evidence that you have researched a firm, you don't want to waste space describing a firm. The focus of your answer should be on why you are applying – and evidence should be used to back this up.

Stronger answers demonstrate a deep, authentic understanding of the firm. Candidates don't need to rely on flattery or flooding their answer with basic facts about a firm because they are confident in their reasons for applying. When they do use evidence, it clearly serves a point. Each of their points are selected for a reason and well developed. They are also personal and specific when explaining why a factor about a firm appeals to them.

Let me take you through some examples to explain.

Example 1

I want to become a solicitor at X because I am excited by their rapid expansion and their forward-thinking attitude towards technology. I believe that such an environment promotes innovation, allowing me to grow as an individual within the firm.

X has grown rapidly over the past few years, doubling the amount of offices with recent acquisitions in Luxembourg and Manchester showing the firm has no intention of slowing down in their goal to be a leading law firm across Europe. With annual turnover of £207 million in 2018, it is clear the firm's ambition is paying off.

A lot of X growth stems from their forward-thinking attitude towards technology. X has taken technology as an opportunity to work for clients in diverse sectors like technology and life sciences. Such advice needs innovative employees, which is why having a culture that proposed individuality is so important. Modern problems need modern solutions and X culture promotes that.

Jaysen Sutton

Unless there is something more specific to say, I avoid 'expansion' as a justification for why you are applying. So many firms expand, so this isn't specific enough.

Jaysen Sutton

A buzzword that many candidates use in their applications, but this isn't really telling me anything.

Jaysen Sutton

Points need to be backed up with proof.

Jaysen Sutton

Comments about personal development are quite vague, we need to be very specific.

Jaysen Sutton

Don't describe a firm – the firm already knows what it does. A recruiter wants to know why YOU are applying.

Jaysen Sutton

Same usage.

Jaysen Sutton

So many law firms invest in technology. Why is X's firm's specific approach to technology notable to you?

Jaysen Sutton

It's unlikely you have a deep view of a firm's culture.

In this example, the candidate begins their answer by discussing the firm's 'rapid expansion'. The problem with this point is that it could apply to any expanding law firm. I generally advise discussing a firm's revenue or profit increase because this isn't really saying much, and a firm's revenue may regularly increase and decrease between years.

The same applies to discussing a firm's 'forward thinking attitude' when discussing the use of technology at a particular firm. Most large commercial law firms are using technology, so if a candidate wishes to discuss this, they should be clear about 1) why what the firm is doing within technology is unique and 2) why this specific investment is personally important to them. It's not enough to generally discuss a firm's investment in technology, which is what many candidates do.

In the second paragraph, the candidate is only being descriptive. This isn't relevant to the question – the firm wants to know why you are applying to their firm, not how much you know about their particular firm.

In the final paragraph, the candidate is again being vague about the firm's investment in technology, which could equally apply to any number of firms. The candidate also begins talking about culture, but they don't reference anything to back this up. Generally, it's unlikely that you'll have a deep understanding of a firm's culture, especially if you haven't met a firm. With that in mind, it's far better to be specific about what attracts you to the firm than using a vague umbrella term like culture to describe your point.

Example 2:

Debevoise also has a strong transactional practice and, importantly, an intellectual approach to law. As a [EU Nationality]-American I would like to be part of a U.S. firm, which—as is true of Debevoise—are known for strong pro-bono initiatives and engaging international work. Out of the firms I surveyed, Debevoise's London office stands out for not merely being an outpost but rather a vital part of the firm, even having a former UK Attorney General as a practice chair.

Jaysen Sutton

Why does this matter to you?

Jaysen Sutton

What does this mean?

Jaysen Sutton

This can apply to any firm.

Jaysen Sutton

This is better, but we need more development here.

In this example, the candidate needs to work on developing their points. They mention the firm's transactional practice, pro bono initiatives and international work all in one paragraph, but we aren't clear on why this is important to the candidate. If the candidate lacks the space to develop a point, they should confidently feel they can discard this.

Moreover, these are points that could apply to any firm. Pro bono work, for example, is something that most firms undertake. It's also a minor aspect of what you'll do as a commercial lawyer. The only instance I'd mention pro bono in justification of 'why this firm?' is if there was something very specific about a firm's involvement that genuinely appeals to you.

So, what does it mean to be specific and develop your points?

Well, let's look at a selection of firms. For each of these firms, a substantial proportion of applicants will mention the same thing:

| Firm | Everyone talks about... |
|-------------------------|--|
| Baker McKenzie | Global brand |
| Freshfields | Eight seat training contract |
| Herbert Smith Freehills | Balance between corporate and disputes |
| Jones Day | Non rotational system |
| Slaughter and May | Best friends approach |

Does this mean you shouldn't mention any of these points? No, not necessarily. The reason so many candidates mention these points is often precisely because they are a unique differentiating factor. The problem is that many candidates go onto discuss why this appeals to them in the same exact way.

For example, with Freshfields, many candidates reference the eight-seat training contract. A substantial proportion go onto discuss how this allows them to 'make a more informed choice upon qualification'. Because these candidates haven't deeply investigated why the eight-seat training contract personally appeals to them, they end up writing the same 'why this firm?' paragraph in a way that fails to stand out.

Example 3:

| | |
|--|---|
| I am interested in becoming a solicitor at Linklaters for four reasons. The first is its unique balance of practice areas, almost evenly split between financial and corporate, unlike most of your competitors who focus mainly either on the former (Allen & Overy, Clifford Chance), or on the latter (Freshfields, Slaughter and May). In an age when clients have such a great degree of choice when choosing a commercial law firm, being able to provide them with the best legal expertise on the market, whatever area of law it is, is a vital element of Linklaters's profile and attractiveness. | <p>Jaysen Sutton Rather than simply discussing the balance of practice areas, the candidate goes on to develop this.</p> <p>Jaysen Sutton Further development made here. (Ideally, the candidate would also tie in why this matters to them.)</p> |
|--|---|

By contrast, in this example, the candidate demonstrates far more thought in their answer. While many candidates discuss how Linklaters is strong in a breadth of practice areas, this candidate expands on this point, discussing how the firm's balanced split between financial and corporate practices is unlike most of Linklaters' competitors. In doing so, they cleverly demonstrate that the candidate understands how Allen & Overy and Clifford Chance were traditionally strong in finance, while Freshfields and Slaughter and May have been traditionally recognised for their corporate related work. Similarly, the candidate continues to develop this point, discussing how it matters to clients who desire the 'best legal expertise on the market'.

To improve this answer, the candidate could have also discussed why this balanced practice area expertise matters to them, thereby making their answer more personal. That said, they did largely make up for this by being so specific with their reasoning.

So, what does it mean to link a specific experience with your personal reasoning?

Let's lead with another example to demonstrate this.

Example 4:

Lastly, I am drawn to Dechert's commitment to diversity. I believe that diversity is a prerequisite to sound commercial advice in a globalised economy. Namely, it can reduce groupthink and offer different perspectives. I wish to train and work in a firm that also recognises this. As such, the fact that 17 of the last 30 trainee solicitors at Dechert have been Aspiring Solicitors members assures me that Dechert's values and strategy align with my aspirations.

Jaysen Sutton

Clear, specific reasoning as to why diversity is important to the candidate.

Jaysen Sutton

Specific evidence provided to back the point up.

This is an excellent example of a candidate doing just that. Rather than simply stating their interest in diversity, the candidate goes on to explain why. They then back this up with a reference to Dechert's specific investment in this area.

If appropriate, the candidate could have also chosen to be personal about this here, discussing why diversity is important to them based on their personal experiences. For example, if they were an Aspiring Solicitors member, they could have discussed why Dechert's decision to take such a high proportion of trainees from this organisation mattered to them.

It should be clear to see that the candidate does a brilliant job of using simple, specific and direct language to make their points, rather than using clichés or buzzwords.

Example 5:

I am applying to Kirkland & Ellis because of its expertise in private equity. This is an area I became interested in during my last vacation scheme when I carried out a research task for a lawyer in the corporate department. I learned how private equity clients had substantial experience doing similar deals in the market, which influenced the way we presented the information back to the client. Because private equity drives substantial activity in Kirkland & Ellis's London office, I feel a training contract at the firm would push me outside of my comfort zone because the clients are sophisticated and know what to expect of their lawyers.

Jaysen Sutton

The candidate's interest in the firm is clear. We are not simply describing Kirkland & Ellis's expertise in this area.

Jaysen Sutton

Backed up by personal experience, without spending too much time discussing what the candidate did.

Jaysen Sutton

Importantly, we are explaining how the personal experience is relevant to the point the candidate is making.

Jaysen Sutton

Well-tailored to the firm.

Jaysen Sutton

Tailored to private equity – this is not just a personal development point.

Here is another strong example where a candidate is discussing Kirkland & Ellis's practice area strengths. Note, the candidate is not flooding their answer with references to deals and awards. Instead, they lead with Kirkland & Ellis's private equity activity and dive straight into explaining why this is relevant to their application – their own interest in private equity.

Later in their answer, the candidate continues to be specific by discussing how 'private equity drives substantial activity' in the London office of Kirkland & Ellis. Here, the candidate is demonstrating that this is a difference compared to firms where private equity is not the core focus of the firm.

The candidate is confident enough to allow the recruiter to infer some of their knowledge here, so they can concentrate the limited space on justifying why the point they mention matters to them. With the final sentence, the candidate again provides a clear explanation as to why private equity matters to them - because private equity firms (as clients of law firms) are sophisticated and know what to expect of their lawyers.

Justifying 'Why You?'

We are going to dive into this with more specific detail in our guidebook on selling your experiences. In the meantime, here are some important points to note:

Standing out isn't about how impressive your experiences are, it's all about the way you sell them. It's really important I reinforce the idea that if you don't really sell your experiences, show why you are so impressive, and tease out your most noteworthy achievements, a recruiter won't be convinced that you are worth investing in. This is something that often feels uncomfortable, but as we'll discuss in a future session, it's only because you're not used to thinking about your experiences in this way.

When discussing your experiences, it's also very important that you drill down on the specifics of what you did. Every single point must be packed with specific detail, justifying what *you* did, what you achieved and what the outcome was (where appropriate).

Let's look at some examples to demonstrate this.

Example 1:

My first-year university self was way too strategic about what I did in my free time. I sought to improve my public speaking skills, so I joined Debate. I led [Plant-Based Society] to make many university-sponsored smoothies. I also joined [Student Newspaper], the student newspaper, to brush up on writing, oblivious to how much journalism meant to me.

Jaysen Sutton
This is quite informal and vague.

Jaysen Sutton
What did this entail? What did you do? Why was this notable?

Jaysen Sutton
We aren't developing these points – how did you lead the society? Were you selling these smoothies?

Jaysen Sutton
I'm not too sure about what you are trying to say here.

In this weaker example, we can see that the candidate has failed to 'sell' why they stand out as a candidate. They've briefly discussed their experiences, summarising a range of activities they did and why they chose to do them.

However, after reading this, I'm not left thinking: *wow, this candidate is so impressive*. Instead, I'm left thinking that the candidate has some unique experiences, but they haven't really shown me why they are impressive. It's likely that I'll select the candidate who was confident enough to tell me why they were so impressive.

Example 2:

In fact, it is in hockey that I have had my proudest achievement to date, where I captained the England U17 Boys team at the Sainsbury's School Games in 2015. In preparation for the event, I coordinated with my teammates and coaches and trained across four training camps throughout the summer of 2015 where we were training upwards of twice a day and playing practice matches against national opposition. We were to compete against teams from England, Scotland, Wales and Ulster in a six nations tournament and so to prepare for this, we organised sessions where we would train under fatigue to mimic the high intensity of an international tournament. As a result of our hard work throughout the summer, I was very proud to lead my country to a silver medal at such a prestigious multi-sports event, where 1,600 athletes compete across 5 days of competition.

Jaysen Sutton
Jumping straight into the specific example.

Jaysen Sutton
Breaking down exactly what the training involved.

Jaysen Sutton
Provides an insight into the discipline involved in achieving this – it's important we spell this out.

Jaysen Sutton
Ends with an impressive, quantifiable result.

By contrast, the example above is significantly better. The candidate has the confidence to lead with their 'proudest achievement to date', rather than simply introducing that they enjoy sports and like to spend time playing hockey. By leading with their proudest achievement, I'm already clear that the candidate has interesting personal hobbies that matter to them. I'm hooked, and I'm left wanting to know what achievement they have that they are so proud of, which makes me want to read the next sentence.

Thereafter, the candidate provides specific detail throughout. For example, rather than simply stating that they train for their hockey competitions, the candidate details how frequently they train, which provides someone without a prior understanding of the experience to understand how much commitment and discipline this involves. This is crucial; too many candidates brush over the specific details, assuming a recruiter will be able to understand how impressive a candidate is being. Rather, it's important that you show a recruiter exactly how hard you worked to achieve what you did.

Finally, the candidate leaves with a clearly impressive outcome. Note how this answer would be significantly less impressive if the candidate said, 'As a result of our hard work throughout the summer, I won a silver medal at the event'. Instead, sells the experience, discussing his role in 'leading the country' where '1,600 athletes compete across 5 days of competition'. It's hard for the specific detail here to not leave a considerable impression. I'm left thinking this candidate is a leader and someone who knows how to work extremely hard to achieve a goal.

Importantly, note how the candidate has shown, rather than tell. As we'll discuss in the future guidebook, it's important to focus on what you did in your particular role and allow a recruiter to infer the obvious competencies this developed. There's no need to state, 'I therefore have strong leadership skills and work well within a team'. It's far better to use the space to focus on what you have achieved.

Example 3:

I have recently become president of the X College University Challenge Society. I was in charge of selecting a team on the basis of academic merit, and I organise regular practices to sharpen our general knowledge and ability to work under pressure. I am currently training my team for the show's try-outs.

From June to October, I was treasurer of the Freshers' Committee. I was responsible for tracking our £600 budget and brainstorming fundraising methods. I enjoyed collaborating with the other members of the executive team; persuading them to endorse my suggestion of charging for college merchandise was difficult, but I was eventually successful. I thrived on this challenge and found it rewarding, especially as I delivered the project on budget.

I love reading. In my spare time I devour a wide range of fiction and nonfiction, which I then review on Goodreads and my blog. My followers number nearly 2000 across all platforms. I also write literary articles for [media website], which has improved my communication ability; some of my pieces have been read over 50,000 times.

Here is another good example to demonstrate how to sell your experiences, outside of the context of sport. In this case, the candidate has again been very specific about their role – from selecting the team to organise practices. At every moment, they are being specific, rather than generally describing the role.

In the second paragraph, the candidate demonstrates a variety of skills from financial responsibility and organisation to teamwork. Notably, they aren't simply stating that they have these skills, they are allowing the recruiter to infer this from the way they write about what we did.

Even with the candidate's interest in reading, they have been specific. Sometimes we see generic statements in an application about how a candidate enjoys reading in their spare time. Instead, here is a great example of how to expand on an interest like this in a way that is unique and interesting for the recruiter to read.