

# KSA Handbook

A guide to presenting your  
**Knowledge**, **Skills** and **Abilities**  
when applying for positions.



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# KSA Handbook

<b>Part 1. Understanding KSAs</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1. Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities and the Application Process</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2. What are KSAs?</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.3. Why are KSAs Important?</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1.4. How is the Crediting Plan used for Merit Promotion?</b> ...	<b>2</b>
<b>Part 2. Writing Responses to KSAs</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>2.1. Preparing Responses to KSAs</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>2.2. Developing KSA Responses</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>2.3. Other Tips on Responding to KSAs</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2.4. Sample KSA</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>2.5. Action Verbs</b> .....	<b>10</b>

## **Part 1. Understanding KSAs**

### **1.1. Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities and the Application Process**

Candidates applying for positions often must include written responses to Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs) along with their resume, SF-171 or the Optional Application for Federal Employment (OF 612) for General Schedule positions. The KSAs are listed on vacancy announcements and require applicants to describe experience which demonstrates their possession of the respective KSAs.

### **1.2. What are KSAs?**

KSAs are qualities needed by applicants to successfully perform their job. They are used in the Merit Promotion process to distinguish the "**highly qualified candidates**" from among the "**qualified**" candidates. KSAs are defined as:

#### **KNOWLEDGE**

An organized body of information, usually factual or procedural in nature. For example, "*Knowledge of Contract Law and Regulations*" could be used as a KSA for a Contract Specialist position.

When responding, applicants should indicate what contract laws and regulations they are familiar with, discuss how they applied these laws and regulations in the work environment, and describe other significant situations they were involved in.

#### **SKILL**

The proficient manual, verbal, or mental manipulation of data or things. For example, "*Skill in Operating Personal Computers*" could be used as a KSA for a Computer Assistant position.

When responding, applicants should indicate what type of personal computers they have operated, discuss the various types of software programs they have used, and describe how these programs were applied in their work environment.

#### **ABILITY**

The power or capacity to perform an activity or task. For example, "*Ability to Identify Signs of Discord, Tension, or Abnormal behavior*" could be used as a KSA for a Correctional Counselor position.

When responding, applicants should discuss the various signs of suspicious behavior they have encountered, how they responded, and indicate what impact it had on the work environment.

### **1.3. Why are KSAs Important?**

KSA's are EXTREMELY IMPORTANT in the merit promotion evaluation process. Poor responses may prevent you, as an applicant, from being considered among the best qualified group. Remember, your score for experience is based solely on your responses to the KSAs, not the information included in your resume, SF-171 or Optional Application for Federal Employment (OF-612).

### **1.4. How is the Crediting Plan used for Merit Promotion?**

Upon receipt of your application package and KSA responses, the Human Resource Management staff will determine whether you meet the minimum qualifications for the position. Once minimum qualifications have been determined, the crediting plan is used to evaluate your responses.

A crediting plan is a three tier rating instrument. For each KSA in the crediting plan, scores are assigned for the highly successful, successful and barely successful level. Each level has a description of bench marks, which are examples of tasks a candidate would perform at that level.

In using the crediting plan, the Human Resource Management Staff will assign a numerical score based on your responses to the KSAs. Once the total score (responses to KSAs, performance appraisal, training) is determined, you will be ranked among other applicants. Those applicants who scored in the range of the highest scores will have their names included on the Best Qualified List. The Best Qualified List is forwarded to the Selecting Official, who ultimately makes the selection for the vacancy.

## **Part 2. Writing Responses to KSAs**

### **2.1. Preparing Responses to KSAs**

Prior to responding to KSA's, gather and review information on past and present experience. Remember, you do not have to restrict your responses to your present position, but can discuss related past experiences.

Check the following sources that are available to you when preparing to respond to KSA's:

- Get a copy of the vacancy announcement and read it thoroughly. Review the experience requirements in the vacancy announcement to determine if you have related experience.
- Pull out your current SF-171/resume/Optional Application for Federal Employment (OF-612) and make sure it is updated. You do not want information in your application package to be in conflict with your responses to the KSAs.
- Get a copy of any documents which will give you information that could be included in your KSA responses (i.e., college transcripts, training records, awards, documents you have written, etc.).
- If you prepare weekly or monthly status reports regarding the work you perform, gather them to review. These reports could provide information regarding past assignments, projects, or activities that need to be addressed in your KSA responses.
- Review you previous performance or progress review.
- Scan your computer directories and disks to help you remember past work assignments. Again, there may be a critical information that could be used in addressing your KSAs.
- Talk to someone currently in the position/discipline in which you're interested if possible. This works especially well for applicants who are contemplating a career change. In addition, it may help you determine whether there is any correlation between your experience and the position you are applying for, prior to addressing the KSAs.

- Maintain a personal notebook, table, or journal. You can record your major accomplishments, projects or activities as they occur. When it is time to respond to KSAs, you will have information at your fingertips.

## **2.2. Developing KSA Responses**

One of the most common errors made in addressing KSAs is to start writing randomly or haphazardly. Applicants may jot down thoughts with no organization and structure, and in some cases, no relationship to the KSA. What is written initially is put on paper and attached to the application package.

Of course, there should be brainstorming involved when preparing your responses to KSAs. Prior to responding to each KSA, think about what type of tasks you performed and why you performed them in relationship to the KSA. Think about for whom you performed the tasks. Ask yourself whether you made any major accomplishments. When performing these tasks, did a significant impact on the work environment occur?

By asking these questions, you think critically and objectively about the tasks you performed. In addition, it will help remind you to think "only" about tasks directly related to the KSA.

Of course, there are times when a particular task performed will apply to more than one KSA. In those situations, you may discuss the same task under different KSAs, but be sure to show the direct relationship of the task to the additional KSAs.

To reinforce the idea of organizing your thoughts when responding to KSAs, ask yourself these **five standard questions** as a "**checklist**" regarding individual tasks you performed.

1. **What** action was performed?
2. **Why** was the action performed?
3. **For whom** was the action performed?
4. What were the **accomplishments**?
5. Did the action produce a significant **impact** on others or the work environment?

When preparing KSA responses, you sometimes may write a long list of examples of tasks for each KSA. If the responses become too long, identify those tasks which are most critical.

How can you decide which examples of tasks to keep in comparison to those that can be discarded? Use the following type of tasks to represent your experience, when possible:

### **LEADERSHIP**

Use tasks that demonstrate your leadership, organization, or management skills. For example, applicants should discuss their role on committees and/or taskforces; discuss how they planned activities and events; or discuss their responsibilities in managing groups of individuals in various settings (i.e., office, classroom, organization/club, correctional environment).

### **FUNCTIONING IN A STRESSFUL ENVIRONMENT**

Use tasks that demonstrate your ability to effectively deal with stress related events/activities. For example, applicants could discuss their responsibility for inmate work details, describe their counseling experience, or discuss how they dealt with critical deadlines.

### **COMPLEXITY AND/OR CREATIVITY**

Use tasks that demonstrate complexity or creativity. For example, applicants could describe how they designed programs for personal computers, prepared papers on technical subjects, or used formulas to derive solutions.

### **PERTINENCE TO THE POSITION**

Frequently, applicants apply for positions outside their own discipline. However, applicants who have experience directly related to the position and include this in their responses, will usually be awarded the higher points.

### **MAJOR IMPACT OR SIGNIFICANT OUTCOME**

Use tasks where your actions had an impact on others or the work environment. For example, applicants could discuss procedures they developed for their office that streamlined operations; discuss how they negotiated a contract that resulted in a favorable outcome; or describe how their input on a project made a significant impact on the organization.

Applicants who respond to KSAs by showing a relationship to any of the above areas are more likely to receive more points for their responses. Place yourself in the panel member's seat and think about what you would look for if making the selection.

### **2.3. Other Tips on Responding to KSAs**

Listed below are additional tips to use when responding to KSAs:

- Express your accomplishments in specific or measurable terms. For example, "developed and wrote operating procedures for.....participated in five program reviews.....provided training once a month to groups of 10 to 15 employees on.....supervised approximately 10 inmates in ....."
- When describing work experience, be specific about your role in completing tasks. Sometimes it is difficult for reviewers to determine whether the applicant performed the task alone, assisted, or participated as part of the group, if not specifically stated.
- Show increases in production over a time period. For example, "developed operating procedures used by the division that reduced processing time by 50%..."
- Don't be modest in describing your accomplishments. Those reviewing your application cannot assume any level of experience that is not documented. In addition, they will not assume you performed certain tasks based on your "job title."
- Be honest and consistent in your responses to your KSAs and on your resume, SF-171, or Optional Application for Federal Employment (OF-612). References may be checked, so resist the temptation to exaggerate the truth. Information in your "KSA responses" should not be in conflict with your "resume, SF-171, or Optional Application for Federal Employment (OF-612)".
- Use strong action verbs describing your experience. Reviewers are likely to be impressed with direct language rather than vague or flowery prose. Avoid repetitive language and cliches, such as "I'm a people person." See the listing of Action Verbs.
- Don't try to "snow" the Employee Services Staff and panel members by passing off a "*philosophy*" for knowledge or experience. When you

lack certain experience, indicate **any** relevant training or academic course work. Use examples of volunteer work experience. Both volunteer and paid work experience are acceptable.

- Proofread! Proofread! Proofread! Get a coworker, supervisor, or other associate to help you proof your responses. Lack of attention to your grammar and spelling may diminish your written responses and leave lasting impression on the rating panel.
- Don't borrow language from your position description when writing your responses. Remember, managers and supervisors help prepare position descriptions and are familiar with its content. Paraphrase and make the language in the response your own.
- Remember to include all training/education related to the KSAs in your responses --- including job-related cross development courses. Do not expect the Employee Services Staff or panel members to guess what training might be applicable to the KSA by referring to your application. It is your responsibility and failure to do so may cost you valuable points.
- Type your responses. Why? It looks more professional and is easier to read and understand.
- Keep your responses no longer than 1 and ½ pages. Remember, get to the point and avoid including insignificant information.
- For each KSA, use either bullets "●" at the beginning of each response OR a paragraph format. If you use paragraphs, be sure to limit your paragraph size.
- Spell out all terms prior to using acronyms. Employee Services Staff and panel members may not always be familiar with abbreviated terms used in various disciplines.
- Do not refer reviewers to other parts of your application (i.e., SEE Block A of my SF-171) as a response to your KSAs. Produce your written response in a format similar to the sample response shown on page 9. There are no predefined forms for KSAs.

One of the most common errors applicants commit from the above list deals with using flowery or subjective language in KSA responses. Be objective by

stating the facts and avoid subjective comments about yourself as much as possible.

Let's look at responses to the KSA "**Ability to communicate orally**" from Applicant X who is applying for an Employee Services Manager position.

**Ability to communicate orally.**

**As an Employee Services Specialist, I interact with a variety of people, from staff to managers regarding training needs. I provide training to staff on a variety of topics. I set up training for staff. I meet with vendors. I have had many employees thank me for providing them with a better understanding of their training needs. My supervisor told me I was doing a great job and .....**

Applicant X provides limited detail regarding the tasks being performed. In addition, subjective information regarding how others feel about him is included.

Applicant X was given the task of rewriting his response based on KSA tips previously discussed. Now, let's look at Applicant X's final response on the SAF after thinking more about the tasks he performed.

In the second KSA response (see next page), the applicant specifically discusses the type of people s/he interacts with, the purpose of those contacts, and what accomplishments have been achieved.

If you can remember to:

- prepare;
- ask the five standard questions;
- avoid including subjective remarks in your KSA statements as much as possible;
- and keep in mind the additional tips given on writing responses to KSAs;

you should be able to improve your KSA responses and subsequently, your scores. Good Luck!

**IMPORTANT REMINDERS:**

- ➔ *There are no KSA forms. You must produce your written response in the suggested format on page 9. Be sure to include the vacancy announcement number and KSA you are addressing at the top of the page and your name and date at the bottom of the page.*
- ➔ *Remember also to include the name and telephone number of individuals who can verify your experience.*

## 2.4. Sample KSA

ELEMENT: **ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE ORALLY.**

For: 05-BRO-025                      Employee Services Manager                      GS-201-13  
Announcement No.                      Position                      Series - Grade

As a Supervisory Employee Services Specialist, I interact with staff, managers and supervisors on a daily basis to convey information on training programs, provide guidance on training needs, and supervise employee development staff. Specifically, I perform the following tasks:

- Conduct numerous training classes, both formal and informal, to groups of 15 to 35 individuals on such topics as "Instructors Skills", "Planning for Your Future", "Career Growth", "Using Lotus-1-2-3", "Providing Guidance to Your Employees" and "Basic Functions of the PC".
- Meet with managers, supervisors, and vendors to discuss training that is needed for specific groups, divisions, or sections. For example, the agency's Administrative Division had an influx of new secretaries who lacked Lotus 1-2-3 experience, which was now needed for a major long term project in the Division. After determining the Division's training needs and meeting with managers, I provided training to all secretaries. This training contributed to the Division meeting projected deadlines for work output.
- Brief upper management on specific budget needs and operating costs for employee training. In addition, I gave a formal presentation to upper management for an agency wide training program. Although the agency was facing cuts in other program areas, I was able to persuade management to approve this training.
- Supervise and provide guidance to 5 employees in the Employee Development Division. In addition, I meet with subordinates several times during the rating period to discuss employee concerns, goals, progress reviews, and the final performance rating. This past rating period, I developed an "Improvement Plan" that encompassed additional on-the-job training and formal training classes for employees who were weak in specific areas. I guided them in meeting established goals. Due to the positive turn-around in employee performance, this "Improvement Plan" has been deemed a success by upper management.
- I have completed the following training courses: 1) Effective Communication, 1/03; 2) Improving Supervisory Skills, 4/02; and 3) Negotiation with Others, 10/04.
- I was selected as "Supervisor for the Quarter" 4/03 to 6/ 04 by staff due to my concerns, interests, and efforts in helping subordinates to improve their performance.

Verifiable by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name & Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone Number

Applicant: Ms. Applicant

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## 2.5. Action Verbs

*Below is a listing of action verbs that you may wish to use when preparing your written responses to KSAs.*

accelerated	discovered	granted	ordered	specified
accomplished	displayed	guaranteed	organized	spoke
acquired	disseminated	guided	originated	staffed
adapted	distributed	halved	overcome	started
administered	documented	headed	supervised	stimulated
advanced	doubled	helped	paid	strengthened
analyzed	drafted	hired	participated	structured
anticipated	earned	hosted	performed	studied
applied	edited	illustrated	persuaded	submitted
appointed	educated	implemented	piloted	substituted
appraised	effected	improved	pioneered	succeeded
approved	elevated	improvised	placed	suggested
arranged	eliminated	incorporated	planned	summarized
assessed	employed	increased	prepared	supervised
assisted	enabled	informed	presented	surveyed
assumed	encouraged	influenced	prevented	synthesized
assured	enforced	initiated	procured	tackled
audited	engineered	innovated	professed	tapped
awarded	enlarged	inspired	profited	targeted
briefed	enlisted	instructed	programmed	taught
budgeted	ensured	insured	prohibited	tested
built	equipped	integrated	projected	traced
cataloged	established	intensified	provided	trained
caused	estimated	interacted	published	transformed
changed	evaluated	interpreted	qualified	translated
classified	exceeded	interviewed	ranked	traveled
collected	excelled	introduced	received	treated
commanded	executed	invented	recognized	trebled
competed	exhibited	invested	recommended	triggered
compiled	expanded	investigated	reconciled	tripled
completed	expedited	issued	recruited	turned
composed	explained	joined	reduced	unified
computer	extended	justified	regulated	updated
conceived	faced	kept	renegotiated	upgraded
conceptualized	facilitated	keynoted	reorganized	used
conducted	fashioned	launched	replaced	verified
constructed	filled	learned	replied	volunteered
contracted	filmed	led	reported	won
controlled	financed	located	represented	worked
convened	finished	maintained	researched	wrote
convinced	focused	managed	resolved	
coordinated	forecast	mandated	responded	
counseled	forged	marketed	revamped	
created	formalized	mastered	reviewed	
cut	formed	mediated	revised	
dealt	formulated	modeled	satisfied	
decided	fostered	monitored	saved	
delivered	fought	motivated	scheduled	
demonstrated	found	moved	screened	
designed	fulfilled	named	secured	
detailed	functioned	negotiated	selected	
determined	furthered	obtained	settled	
developed	gained	offered	simplified	
devised	garnered	officiated	solved	
diagnosed	generated	opened	sought	
directed	governed	operated	sparked	