

How to Get Past AI Sifting on UK Job Applications



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Most medium and large UK employers now use **Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS)** to manage high volumes of job applications as part of their AI sifting process. These systems filter CVs and application forms before a recruiter reviews them. Understanding how ATS works—and how to write for it—can significantly increase your chances of reaching the interview stage.

This article explains how ATS works, how to use personal examples effectively, when and how to tailor your CV, how to spot clues in application forms, and whether a cover letter is worth adding.

What Is an ATS and How Does It Work?

An Applicant Tracking System is software used by employers to:

- Collect applications
- Scan CVs and cover letters
- Rank candidates based on job-related criteria

In the UK, popular ATS platforms include Workday, Taleo, iCIMS, Greenhouse, and Oracle. These systems do **not** make final decisions, but they **decide who gets seen**.

ATS typically looks for:

- Keywords that match the job description
- Evidence of required skills and experience
- Job titles, qualifications, and tools
- Clear structure and readable formatting

What ATS Struggles With

- Creative layouts, tables, graphics, or icons
- PDFs with embedded images or text boxes
- Vague or generic wording
- Unexplained career gaps

UK-specific note: Many UK employers score candidates against **essential criteria** listed in the person specification. If your application does not clearly demonstrate these, it may be automatically rejected.

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Using Personal Examples in AI Sifting That Work for ATS and Recruiters

Personal examples are essential, but they must be **explicit and evidence-based**. ATS systems work best when skills are shown in context.

Weak Example

“Good communication skills and experience working in teams.”

Strong ATS-Friendly Example

“Collaborated with a team of 6 stakeholders to deliver weekly client reports, improving response times by 20%.”

Another Example (Admin / Office Role)

“Provided administrative support to a department of 25 staff, managing diaries, processing invoices, and maintaining accurate records using Microsoft Excel and SharePoint.”

Another Example (Retail / Customer Service)

“Handled an average of 40 customer queries per shift, resolving complaints in line with company policy and maintaining a 95% customer satisfaction score.”

These examples work because they:

- Include **skills + tools + outcomes**
- Use common ATS keywords
- Show scale and responsibility

In the UK, competency-based recruitment is common, so examples should clearly show **what you did, how you did it, and what happened as a result**.

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Should You Adapt Your CV for Each Application?

Yes. In the UK job market, tailoring your CV is **strongly recommended**, especially for roles in the public sector, education, healthcare, and large corporations.

What Tailoring Actually Means

You do **not** need a completely new CV each time. Instead:

- Match your wording to the job description
- Move the most relevant experience higher up
- Remove or minimise irrelevant roles
- Adjust your personal profile to reflect the role

Example

If a job advert emphasises *stakeholder engagement*, your CV should include:

“Regularly liaised with internal and external stakeholders to coordinate project updates and manage expectations.”

If the advert uses *customer-focused*, use that exact phrase—**ATS often scores exact or close matches**.

How to Spot Clues in UK Application Forms – AI sifting

UK application forms often provide very clear clues about what is being assessed.

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Look For:

Essential vs Desirable criteria

- Repeated phrases across the advert and form
- Competency questions such as:

“Give an example of when you worked under pressure”

“Describe a time you demonstrated teamwork”

These questions are often scored against a framework (sometimes with AI assistance). Your answer should:

- Directly address the competency
- Use the same language as the job description
- Include a clear outcome

Example Answer Structure (STAR, simplified)

- **Situation:** Brief context
- **Task:** What you needed to do
- **Action:** What you did (skills/tools)
- **Result:** Outcome or learning

Avoid storytelling without evidence—clarity and relevance score higher than style.

Competency Questions : How They Are Assessed (and How to Answer Them Well)

Competency questions are a core part of recruitment in the English job market, especially in the **public sector, NHS, education, large corporations, and graduate roles**. They are designed to assess how you have behaved in real situations, based on the belief that **past behaviour predicts future performance**.

Many employers now use a combination of **ATS scoring** and **structured human marking** to assess these answers. This means your response must be:

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- Easy to scan
- Clearly linked to the competency
- Supported by evidence and outcomes

How Competency Questions Are Scored

Competency answers are usually scored against a framework, for example:

- 0 = Not demonstrated
- 1 = Limited evidence
- 2 = Meets requirement
- 3 = Strong evidence

To score well, your answer must:

- Address the competency directly
- Use relevant keywords from the job description
- Show **what you personally did**, not what “we” did
- End with a result or learning outcome

Vague or overly narrative answers tend to score poorly, even if the experience itself was strong.

Example 1: Teamwork Competency - Competency Questions

Question:

“Give an example of when you worked effectively as part of a team.”

Weak / Low-Scoring Answer

“I work well in teams and always get along with colleagues. In my previous role, I worked with different people and helped where needed. We completed our tasks successfully and everyone was happy.”

Why this scores poorly:

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- No specific situation or role
- Overuse of “we” with no personal contribution
- No skills, tools, or actions described
- No measurable outcome

An ATS or assessor cannot clearly identify evidence of teamwork here.

Strong / High-Scoring Answer

“In my previous administrative role, I worked as part of a team of five supporting a busy department. During a period of staff absence, I took responsibility for coordinating shared workloads by creating a daily task tracker in Excel and checking in with colleagues each morning. This improved communication within the team and ensured all deadlines were met on time, despite reduced capacity.”

Why this scores well:

- Clear context and team size
- Specific personal actions
- Demonstrates teamwork and organisation
- Includes a positive outcome

This answer is easy for both ATS and human assessors to score against the competency.

Example 2: Working Under Pressure Competency

Question:

“Describe a time when you had to work under pressure to meet a deadline.”

Weak / Low-Scoring Answer

“I am used to working under pressure and can handle stressful situations well. My role often involved deadlines, and I always made sure my work was completed on time.”

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Why this scores poorly:

- Generic statements
- No real example
- No evidence of how pressure was managed
- No result or reflection

This sounds confident but provides nothing measurable.

Strong / High-Scoring Answer

“While working in a customer service role, I was required to process a high volume of enquiries during peak periods. On one occasion, system delays meant we were at risk of missing same-day response targets. I prioritised urgent cases, communicated realistic timeframes to customers, and used pre-approved templates to speed up responses. As a result, we met our service level targets and reduced follow-up complaints.”

Why this scores well:

- Clear pressure scenario
- Shows decision-making and prioritisation
- Uses relevant workplace skills
- Ends with a tangible result

This answer directly demonstrates the competency rather than simply claiming it.

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Common Mistakes to Avoid in Competency Answers

- Writing in general terms instead of giving a real example
- Using “we” without explaining your individual contribution
- Focusing on feelings rather than actions
- Forgetting to include outcomes or learning
- Ignoring the language used in the job description

Remember: competency questions are not personality tests. They are evidence-based assessments.

A Simple Formula That Works (Without Overcomplicating)

You do not need to rigidly label STAR sections, but your answer should clearly include:

- **Context** – What was happening
- **Action** – What *you* did and how
- **Result** – What changed or what you achieved

If an assessor can easily highlight these three elements, your answer is likely to score well.

Should You Add a Covering Letter (and How Long Should It Be)?

Yes, in the UK you should include a cover letter whenever there is an option to upload one, especially for:

- Professional roles
- Graduate schemes
- Career-change applications

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Ideal Length

300–500 words

- 3–4 short paragraphs
- No more than one page

What a Good UK Cover Letter Includes

- Why you are applying for *this* role
- How your experience meets the key requirements
- A brief explanation of anything unclear on your CV (career change, gap, part-time work)

Example Focus

Instead of:

“I am passionate and hardworking”

Use:

“My experience in customer-facing roles has strengthened my ability to manage competing priorities while maintaining high service standards, which aligns closely with the requirements outlined in the job description.”

Cover letters are often scanned by ATS but read by humans—write clearly, professionally, and directly.

Work Areas and Job Fields Actively Recruiting in the UK – AI sifting

While hiring trends change, the following areas continue to recruit strongly across England:

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High-Demand Sectors

- **Healthcare and Social Care** (NHS, care assistants, support workers)
- **Education** (teachers, teaching assistants, SEN support)
- **Technology and Digital** (IT support, software, data analysis, cyber security)
- **Construction and Skilled Trades** (electricians, plumbers, site managers)
- **Logistics and Supply Chain** (warehouse, transport planners, drivers)
- **Finance and Accounting** (accounts assistants, payroll, auditors)

Customer Service and Call Centres

Hospitality and Facilities Management

Public Sector and Local Government

- **Professional Services** (HR, project management, compliance)

Entry-Level and Career-Change Friendly Roles

- Administration and office support
- Customer service and retail
- Trainee IT and digital roles
- Care and support roles
- Apprenticeships and graduate schemes

Many of these employers rely heavily on ATS due to application volume, making tailored, keyword-aligned applications especially important.

Final Thoughts on AI Sifting

Getting past ATS in the English job market is about **clarity, relevance, and evidence**. Use specific personal examples, tailor your CV to each role, read application forms carefully, and support your application with a focused cover letter. When you align your language with the employer's requirements, you greatly improve your chances of progressing—both with AI systems and human recruiters.