

If you've started your online research for opportunities, you'll already be aware of just how many types of volunteer experience are available to you. Once you've selected a number of organizations or agencies that interest you, it's time to start preparing applications. This process will be particularly important if you're working with an NGO or other non-profit organization, since there is often some competition for volunteer positions overseas. If you're applying to go abroad with a placement agency or voluntourism company, you might not be required to create a comprehensive application, but we still recommend reading the advice below!

Self-Evaluation

Self-evaluation is an important part of the volunteer application process. Taking the time to sit down and assess your strengths, weaknesses and motivations can be enlightening, and can help you make a stand-out application.

Understand Yourself

Before applying for a position, assess your skills, deficiencies and motivations. Volunteer organizations thrive on the passion of participants, so having a clear sense of purpose is crucial to your success in the application process. Although you may be anxious to set the wheels of your international adventure in motion, don't skip the crucial self-evaluation step. Truly understanding your skills and motivations is one of the best ways to make your application stand out from the crowd!

Interview Yourself

One way to begin the process of self-evaluation is to pretend that you're being interviewed for a position. In this exercise, you should take on the roles of both interviewer and candidate. Ask yourself why you're seeking a volunteer experience. What are your motivations? Why have you selected a particular organization to apply to? Are you motivated by a particular issue or destination? Likely, you have specific goals for yourself – whether they are gaining professional experience, enhancing your language skills, or the simple satisfaction of knowing you've made a difference. Think about how your answers relate to the mandate of your selected organization. Once you have gone through this process, you'll be able to write confidently about your sense of purpose and your unique combination of skills. You'll also be able to make better judgments about which organizations suit your particular needs.

Make an Inventory of Your Skills

It may be helpful to generate a list of your previous experiences and the tasks that you engaged in for each one, to help jog your memory. Don't forget to include any work with student organizations, volunteer organizations and even short-term service-related projects. Almost every experience builds specific skills, and an organization may be in need of candidates with language, technical, administrative, communication or even agricultural skills.

Don't forget that your commitment to, and interest in, the mission of the organization or funder is a key component of your application. Understanding your motivation for engaging in an experience can help you to explain how your previous activities and academic experiences have led you to make your application.

Understand Your Organization

Once you've found an organization that you wish to contact, about either a volunteer position or a funding opportunity, your next task should be to research how this organization understands and governs itself. By doing more in-depth research, you may find that an organization that at first seemed to be the perfect fit is in fact not so well-suited to your needs. Alternatively, you may find that the more you learn about a particular organization, the more enthusiastic you become, in which case your newfound knowledge will help you craft an even better application.

Begin by examining all the materials you have about an organization (either its official Web site, or the results of the other research that led you to the organization). Pay particular attention to the organization's mission statement or mandate, as well as its sponsors. This step is important even if you happen to have a personal connection within the organization or department. Understanding the organization's sponsors, and how the organization is accountable to them, will give you a deeper understanding of how best to focus your application. If an interview is involved, you'll also be able to talk intelligently about the organization's operations.

Consider seeking out former participants or grantees directly to learn more about the skills the organization needs, as well as its overall culture. The better you understand how your mission fits with the organization's mission, the easier it will be to write application materials – and to prove that you are the perfect candidate.

Making Your Application

When you have completed your self-assessment and carefully researched one or more organizations that fit your volunteer profile, it's time to put together your application. At this point your main priority should be to understand each and every one of the application requirements. There's nothing worse than missing out on an opportunity because of a technicality or requirement that you overlooked accidentally. If you think that submitting additional materials may improve the strength of your application package, always take the time to contact the organization and ask if they will allow it. It could be perceived as arrogant to simply include the additional materials. When no requirements are specified, it is generally safe to submit a one-page resume and cover letter – each of which should be tailored to the specific opportunity for which you are applying:

- **Align yourself with the organization:** When composing your tailored resume and cover letter, keep in mind that you want to highlight the skills and goals that conform to the organization's mandate. This process is about highlighting your skills in such a way that they reflect the goals of the organization.
- **Use concrete examples:** Illustrate your qualifications with thoughtful details. For example, instead of saying "I have worked with children in the past," say, "For the past semester, I have led a weekly story circle for elementary school age children at the local library. This has inspired my interest in children's literacy."
- **Don't address your weaknesses:** Although you should be aware of them, and may have to discuss them in the event of an interview, avoid focusing on your perceived deficiencies in your application.
- **Be realistic:** While keeping the focus on positive, be accurate. If you are applying for funding and required to submit a budget, be realistic—don't try to strategically over-or under budget.

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