

All About KSAs

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs) are factors that facilitate the objective, competitive evaluation of best-qualified applicants from the total pool of eligible applicants for advertised vacancies. KSAs are directly related to the duties and responsibilities of the position being filled and are predictors of successful performance. They are used in rating and ranking each applicant's experience, education, and training against the requirements of an advertised position. In a way, KSAs can be viewed as written interview questions.

KSAs:

- Are ratable from a written job application;
- Should be performed in a minimum amount of time (usually within 90 days of entering a job);
- Do not require a qualitative assessment of how well an applicant performed a function or duty;
- Do not reflect non-work-related qualities or traits; and
- Distinguish the best-qualified applicants from the basically qualified applicants within a pool of candidates.

Applicants also must possess/meet any ***selective factor(s)*** identified in a vacancy announcement in order to be considered basically qualified for a position.

What is a Selective Factor?

A selective placement factor is a competency, KSA, or special qualification that is in addition to the minimum requirements in a qualification standard but determined to be essential to performing the duties and responsibilities of a particular position. It is essential for a new employee to bring this quality to the job. A selective factor is customarily one that cannot be acquired within 90 days of entering the job.

How are KSAs Developed?

KSAs are developed through detailed analysis of the duties and requirements of the position (i.e., the position description, performance elements, competency statements, etc.). First, job elements that are key to the successful performance of the position's duties and responsibilities are identified. From these job elements, KSAs are identified and the rating or crediting plan is established.

What Happens Next?

The subject matter expert (SME) is assigned to review or rate the pool of qualified applicants. The SME reads each applicant's written response/description of how he/she meets each KSA (i.e., experience, training, or other evidence). Each applicant is given a numerical rating. Based on this numerical rating, the "highly or best" qualified applicants are referred to the selecting official for further consideration.

KSA Statements

The KSAs necessary for the successful performance of a position are stated in each job vacancy announcement. **It is important** to know that KSAs are often referred to in a vacancy announcement as:

- **Evaluation Factors,**
- **Rating Factors,**
- **Quality Ranking Factors,**
- **Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities, or**
- **Job Elements.**

How Important is it to Address the KSAs When Applying for a Job Vacancy?

It is very important! Some agencies value KSAs as a means of keeping down the number of applications they must review. They know that certain job hunters, even highly qualified ones, may not go to the trouble of applying if a separate statement is required. This means that the agency already has narrowed the field to the highly motivated and seriously interested applicants.

Sometimes it is a mandatory requirement. The agency will state in the vacancy announcement that if you do not submit a supplemental statement addressing each KSA, your application will not be considered. In some cases it is up to the applicant. An agency may "strongly suggest"; it may "recommend"; or it may point out that if you do not address the KSAs, you might not receive proper credit for all of your experience and skills. But the final decision about whether to do the additional work is up to you.

Addressing the KSAs – The Writing Part

Do not assume that the reviewer will pull the information out of your application package, because they will not. When answering the KSAs:

- Be specific.
- Be precise.
- Get to the point.
- Don't ramble.
- Use lots of examples.
- State specifically what you have done.
- Don't try to bluff the reviewer with words.
- Don't borrow language from the position description.

This same sort of guidance is often included in the vacancy announcements. The documents specifically ask for “detailed evidence” ... “clear, concise examples that show the level of accomplishment and degree of responsibility” ... “examples that show depth of knowledge, level of skill, degree of ability” ... evidence of “what you actually did and the results that were obtained.”

Here's what they do not want to see: generalized statements that say, in effect, “Yes, I have what you're seeking...take my word for it.” Nor are reviewers impressed with your claims to possess “thorough knowledge” or “familiarity with” or “considerable skill.” Such non-specific qualifying adjectives do not give them anything to measure. In fact, the phrases say nothing.

Some vacancy announcements try to help you focus on what they are after ...or why they are looking for a particular talent. For example: one of the mandatory KSAs in a vacancy announcement for a supervisory position is typically the ability to communicate orally and in writing. The announcement will state, “A manager must be able to communicate by writing well documented and easily understood material.” Applicants will be asked in the announcement to describe their accomplishments in the area as they relate to the technical requirements of the position. It will state, “Describe past accomplishments which demonstrate your writing ability. In doing so, describe the kinds of documents you have been responsible for writing, the type of review to which they have been subject, and the target audience.”

The ability to communicate orally and in writing is a required KSA for so many positions, at all levels of Federal service, so the elements of this KSA have universal importance. Here is how they might be addressed in an application:

- **Describe the kinds of documents you have written.** E.g., “I researched and wrote a 72-page document in support of a request for funding an international conference on ecosystem management of marine resources.”
- **Describe the type of review to which they have been subject.** E.g., “This document was reviewed by my immediate supervisor, the division director, and the ad hoc steering committee established to develop a conference agenda.”
- **Describe the target audience.** E.g., “This request and supporting material were distributed to eight Federal and five international agencies being solicited for funding.”

If appropriate, note the outcome of your efforts:

- **Describe the results of your activity.** E.g., “Ten of the 13 agencies approached readily agreed to provide the necessary funding support to convene the meeting, which is scheduled for the second quarter of the next fiscal year.”

Winning Words

The sole purpose of a KSA is to measure those qualities that will set one candidate apart from the others. Below is a list of winning words to consider when responding to KSA statements:

ACTION VERBS

Design	Administer	Manage	Devise
Improve	Conduct	Contract	Motivate
Research	Expand	Support	Monitor
Consult	Present	Organize	Sponsor
Train	Operate	Develop	Reorganize
Establish	Evaluate	Test	Recommend
Supervise	Edit	Publish	
Analyze	Produce	Coach	
Contact	Negotiate	Counsel	

SPECIFIC NOUNS

Products	Members	Publications	Morale
Courses	Surveys	Institutions	Document
Projects	Needs	Prototypes	Facilities
Reports	Goals	Analysis	Requirements
Campaigns	Plans	Study	Specification
Criteria	Policies	Conference	Budget
Findings	Performance	Guidance	
Accounts	Literature	Litigation	
Colleagues	Records	Procedures	

DESCRIPTORS

Implementation	Potential	Monthly	Diverse
Customers	Scientific	Federal	Annual
Strategic	Leading	Resourceful	Professional
Profitable	Pioneering	Fiscal	Quantitative
Collaborative	Successful	Analytical	Qualitative
Accurate	Accurate	Congressional	International
Adept	Legal	Definitive	
Competent	Numerous	Functional	
Statistical	Long-Range	National	

RESULTS

Increased	Decreased	Improved	Faster
Enhanced	Expanded	Enlarged	Growth
Quicker	Additional	Reduced	

The Most Common KSAs

A job hunter needs to review only a few announcements before realizing that there are certain KSA requirements that pertain to nearly all Federal vacancies. In a review of countless announcements, Human Resources Services staff identified several requirements that are commonly encountered. Among these are: ability to work with others; ability to manage complex programs and projects; and ability to conduct research, compile data, conduct analyses, and make recommendations.

The two most common KSAs by far are: (1) the ability to communicate orally, and (2) the ability to communicate in writing. Because of the universal nature of these two requirements, NARA offers a series of possible responses to these KSAs:

KSA 1: Ability to Communicate Orally

Example of a poor response: I am quite capable of oral communication as I have a lot of experience talking to my peers about a variety of subjects. You will see my skills at the interview.

Example of responses that convey specific information about an applicant:

At the GS-5/7 level: As a student at the University of Maryland, I completed course work in public speaking and drama. I have received training in clear and concise communication of all types of information, as well as training in persuasive presentation of views. During summers, I worked for Landmark as a tour guide. In this position, I conveyed information regarding the Nation's Capital to tourists from around the world. Enunciation and sentence structure were vital for effective communication especially with persons for whom English was not a primary language.

At the GS-9/11 level: As a claims examiner with the Office of Workers Compensation, I am called upon to explain highly technical information related to the laws, policies, and regulations regarding the Workers Compensation Program. I must gauge the comprehension level of the inquirer and deliver the information using terminology appropriate to that level. In addition to my duties as technical expert and point of contact, I participate in the preparation and delivery of presentations regarding the status of our program. I have delivered technical presentations to managers up to the associate director level.

At the GS-12/13 level: Throughout my Federal career, skill in oral communication has been vital to my success. As a staffing specialist, I have been required to present technical information in a variety of settings. I chair meetings with managers of various departments, providing information and guidance regarding changing policies and procedures. I prepare and deliver presentations to senior executives, anticipating questions and objections, and addressing these issues in a thorough and favorable manner. I have served as a training officer, conveying highly technical information regarding methods, policies, and procedures in a manner that helps the audience understand, retain, and utilize the knowledge presented. I have received advanced training in public speaking, and have been designated as a representative for my office during high-profile policy changes, representing my organization to all inquirers.

At the GS-14/15 level: As director of financial management for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, I am responsible for representing my agency in a variety of arenas, including Senate budget hearings. I must convey highly technical information regarding financial management policies and structures, budgetary requirements, and the overall mission of HUD in a manner that will foster support among Federal lawmakers. I must compile and review documentation and anticipate and address questions and objections. My success rests in large part on my ability to consider and respond to questions under fire. This requires an ability to coolly and logically consider the issues in light of available facts and concerns (economic and political considerations, for example) and present clear and concise responses. I have represented my organization in press conferences and before the media and am able to clearly present our mission and objectives in a favorable manner.

KSA 2: Ability to Communicate in Writing

Example of a poor response: In my time as a student, I have written many, many papers and letters which often communicate terribly complex information for the edification of the readership. I am a good writer and have no trouble making sure that what I write says what I want it to.

Example of responses that convey specific information about an applicant:

At the GS-5/7 level: As an undergraduate student at the State University, I was required to produce a minimum of five research papers each semester. These were technical papers that present and support a thesis statement, providing detailed documentation to justify my position. In my senior year, I produced a 25-page paper which explored the issue of public health systems in Europe and their possible application in this country. The paper received a grade of 98 and was published in the School of Public Administration's newsletter.

At the GS-9/11 level: For the past five years I have served as a free-lance writer, preparing text for publication in technical manuals, magazines, and other publications. I have written and edited materials in such subject areas as medicine, the arts, politics, and law enforcement. I am able to conduct research

and select the appropriate level of complexity for the target audience. In addition to the technical writing and editing that I have performed, I have published a collection of essays and several short stories. I am a member of the Washington Area Writers Guild and have been a guest speaker for American University's Professional Writers Seminar.

At the GS-12/13 level: As a program manager with the Maryland State Correctional Administration, I have been required to prepare detailed written reports and regulations on the development and management of correctional programs throughout the state. I have created procedural manuals and policy guidelines that are now accepted standards for all Correctional Administration operations. These written materials are clear, concise, and detailed and convey highly technical matter that could be vital to the safety and well-being of the staff as well as the prison populations. My manual on the proper search of inmate living space (shakedown procedures) provides detailed guidelines for securing individuals while safely searching for contraband. The manual provides thorough descriptions of unusual and innovative methods of concealment and has resulted in a 72% increase in the seizure of contraband since its implementation.

At the GS-14/15 level: As director of development with General Dynacon, I was responsible for directing the creation of all marketing materials for Federal defense industry marketing. I created complex technical proposals, often comprising many volumes and thousands of pages of highly technical data. I prepared the introduction and abstract portions of these proposals, synthesizing the information to create an informative overview of the contents in order to convey the information to non-technical management officials. These proposals were instrumental in securing new corporate business, and I consistently received bonuses based on my performance.

Sample KSA Responses

Below are four brief job descriptions and select KSAs needed for each job. Note that the sample responses illustrate different approaches but always satisfy the need to be specific and to give examples. Read each response thoroughly, regardless of the occupation or subject matter of the KSA. Review of these samples should help to prepare you to respond to any KSA you come across.

VACANCY ANNOUNCEMENT

National Archives and Records Administration

MERIT PROMOTION

VACANCY NUMBER	ISSUE DATE	CLOSING DATE
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POSITION: Museum Curator, GS-1015-13

DUTIES: Incumbent serves as museum curator for Japanese art with duties related to the identification, acquisition, preservation, exhibition and interpretation of objects in the collection. Incumbent develops plans to expand the collections, design exhibitions and related programs and performs scholarly and original research in the field; participates with other museum staff in developing plans for exhibition catalogues and scholarly and commercially oriented publications; serves as expert adviser to colleagues, scholars, the general public and professional research and educational institutions.

KSA REQUIRED:

Ability to conceptualize and develop museum exhibitions in areas of expertise.

EXAMPLE OF A RESPONSE:

As assistant curator with the Denver Museum of Art, I directed all exhibit planning actions for two-dimensional art forms. I remained current in all developments in the art world, interacting with dealers, collectors, and scholars to identify areas of possible interest to our patrons. I administered a budget in excess of 2 million dollars annually, directing financial planning for proposed exhibits.

I was responsible for selecting themes and subjects, specific artists, as well as the individual works of art. I designed layouts for new exhibits and coordinated with building maintenance staff for lighting and structural modifications. I created text, selected illustrations, and coordinated production of exhibit materials, including brochures and catalogues. In order to support public awareness of museum offerings, I developed marketing strategies and interacted with local media to promote new exhibits. Finally, I coordinated opening events, directing planning for formal gatherings to celebrate major exhibit openings.

I was responsible for all aspects of the Asian Arts Exhibit from conception through opening. I coordinated with collectors to secure valuable works of art; I worked with decorators to redesign galleries to support an "oriental" motif and supervised contractors in renovations to prepare for exhibit displays. I appeared on local television and radio programs to announce the exhibit and secure prime placement of ads in local print media. My 75-page, full-color catalogue received the Denver Star's Artistic Achievement Award and the exhibit itself received glowing reviews, as well as breaking existing attendance records.

KSA REQUIRED:

Ability to develop collections in specific areas of art.

EXAMPLE OF A RESPONSE:

While with the Denver Museum of Art in the 1980s, I initiated a collection of American Indian Art. At this time this was considered a craft industry, not art. I prepared a proposal and received authorization to begin a collection that has since grown to become a standard for the industry. To support collection development, I prepared a comprehensive acquisition plan that detailed types of works ranging from pre-Columbian through the modern works of Indian artists. I secured a budget for this collection, defining financial requirements and documenting all expenditures.

I interacted with private collectors, national museums, academic institutions, and corporate collectors to identify potential sources and secure works of art. I began the painstaking collection of pieces, tracing the development of the Indian culture from prehistory to today. The resulting exhibit was mentioned favorably in the Journal of American Art Museums and I was promoted to assistant curator in recognition of my contribution and capabilities.

VACANCY ANNOUNCEMENT

National Archives and Records Administration MERIT PROMOTION

VACANCY NUMBER	ISSUE DATE	CLOSING DATE
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POSITION: Personnel Management Specialist, GS-201-12

DUTIES: Incumbent provides advice and guidance for a range of personnel functions involving administrative, professional, engineering, scientific and clerical positions at all grade levels. Also serves as the resident expert for position classification and administration of the pay and hours of duty programs. Position classification duties will require approximately 40 percent of time.

KSA REQUIRED:

Knowledge of Federal position classification sufficient to classify a variety of positions.

EXAMPLE OF A RESPONSE:

As a human resource director with Peoples Airlines, I developed a comprehensive merit personnel management system based upon the system used by the Federal government. I created detailed position descriptions and a framework for the classification of new positions, utilizing the classification standards developed by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). In order to successfully complete this project, I studied this massive document thoroughly and interacted with OPM's Office of Standards Development to ensure a precise understanding of the systems and procedures used by Federal classification specialists. The system was implemented in 1979 by the airline and remains in effect. Since its implementation, there have been no successful challenges to its validity or integrity.

KSA REQUIRED:

Skill in written and oral communication to effectively provide direction to a variety of individuals and organizations regarding sensitive and controversial issues.

EXAMPLE OF A RESPONSE:

As a consultant specializing in Federal employment practices and procedures, I have developed communication skills that enable me to convey highly complex information regarding trends and practices in Federal employment to first-time Federal job seekers. I have written detailed instructional manuals, prepared informational materials, and drafted correspondence to advise individual clients and organizations in matters regarding Federal personnel statutes, policies, regulations, and procedures.

In addition to preparing and providing written products for my clients, I provide counseling and conduct seminars to explain the intricacies and mysteries of the Federal application, evaluation, and hiring processes. I

develop presentations to address the needs of the target audience and deliver up to eight-hour seminars to large groups. I anticipate questions and provide necessary information and guidance.

I am often called upon to provide assistance in matters involving disciplinary actions, grievances, EEO complaints, and separations. I must provide advice and support for the individuals involved, explaining the intent and terms of the regulations in question in order to assist them in devising effective job search strategies. I must utilize tact and diplomacy to provide practical advisory services in potentially volatile situations.

I currently serve as a consultant to several trade organizations and write a regular column for the foremost Federal Times publication in my field.

VACANCY ANNOUNCEMENT

National Archives and Records Administration

MERIT PROMOTION

VACANCY NUMBER	ISSUE DATE	CLOSING DATE

POSITION: Personnel Staffing Specialist, GS-212-11/12

DUTIES: Incumbent serves as senior personnel staffing specialist in providing technical advice and assistance to federal managers and program officials on personnel management programs; performs technical reviews and provides consultative services related to authorities delegated to federal agencies under the Civil Service Reform Act; reviews recruiting and examining functions.

KSA REQUIRED:

Knowledge of civil service laws, rules, regulations, and practices relating to competitive recruiting and examining and related programs such as EEO, selective placement, veterans preferences, etc.

EXAMPLE OF A RESPONSE:

As a personnel specialist with the Department of Energy, I worked within the framework for staffing actions as defined by the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) and the Federal Personnel Manual (FPM) of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. I served as a technical expert coordinating diverse recruiting and staffing issues within this complex system, which included both competitive staffing programs and special placement programs serving more than 3,200 employees.

Competitive placement actions required the review, interpretation, and implementation of numerous statutes, policies, systems, and procedures that governed the selection process. Determinations were made regarding the proper classification of the vacancy, and a responsive recruiting plan was devised. I was responsible for establishing the area of consideration and the "open" window for receipt of applications. I reviewed and interpreted qualification requirements, reviewed or developed a position description, and created a vacancy announcement. I worked with subject matter experts to devise a ranking schedule, defining the evaluation criteria for the examination process. Throughout all of the stages of the recruiting, examination, and selection processes, I advised senior managers regarding the proper interpretation of applicable laws and regulations for the management of the competitive process.

I was responsible for directing a significant portion of a major recruiting program to meet agency expansion mandated by Executive order. This was the initial creation of the Department of Energy as a separate entity during the energy crisis of the 1970s. I was assigned to recruit a large administrative support staff for this newly created organization. I worked

with senior executives to determine staffing requirements and devised recruiting programs to quickly bring qualified individuals on-board within the framework of the competitive process of the merit system.

During this time, I became quite familiar with the special hiring programs of the Excepted Service. I have used numerous excepted hiring schedules as defined by CFR Part 213. In order to acquire the needed expertise in a timely manner, it was necessary to utilize all available programs to streamline a sometimes unwieldy competitive process. I utilized Schedules A (handicapped, etc.), B (student programs and executive training programs), and C (politically sensitive positions) to bring in temporary and permanent employees. Proper procedures were then employed to convert those with temporary status to full-time competitive status.

In addition to special hiring programs in response to critical need, I have coordinated special hiring programs in response to agency policies and Federal statutes. I have participated in the development and implementation of recruiting programs to meet EEO requirements and Affirmative Action objectives. This has included special recruiting at minority and women's colleges and universities, as well as the identification of appropriate advertising vehicles for minority recruiting.

I have also interpreted and implemented the Veterans Readjustment Act and related veterans preference programs through numerous incarnations. This program has been used for entry- and mid-level hiring.

VACANCY ANNOUNCEMENT

National Archives and Records Administration

MERIT PROMOTION

VACANCY NUMBER	ISSUE DATE	CLOSING DATE

POSITION: Supervisory Librarian, GS-1410-13

DUTIES: Manages the collections care program, including preventive conservation and construction of protective enclosures. Determines goals, policies, procedures, and techniques related to physical treatment and storage of collections. Analyzes procedures for protection, security and economy.

KSA REQUIRED:

Knowledge of preservation treatment techniques and technologies as applied to library materials.

EXAMPLE OF A RESPONSE:

As a materials preservation specialist with the University of Virginia Library, I was responsible for the management of preservation activities for a collection of rare and antique materials in print, manuscript, audio recording (foil, was, tape, and CD), film, and video. I am aware of the variables that might impact on the condition of potentially fragile items within the collection, including exposure to light, heat, humidity, or atmospheric pollutants. My duties require that I develop systems and procedures to safeguard materials from potential damage or destruction. This includes the development and maintenance of facilities with stringent environmental controls, the introduction of protective sleeves and covers, and the decision to remove materials from general circulation (or to greatly restrict access and exposure to possible harmful elements).

In addition to preventive systems and procedures, I have served as a technical expert in the field of repair and preservation. I am familiar with the application of adhesives and fabrics to restore aging and damaged books and manuscripts. I have successfully restored materials from the 16th and 17th centuries, employing techniques that safeguard the historic significance of the material.