

A work experience guide for secondary school students

Work experience will help you find out more about an occupation you are interested in, develop your skills and meet people. All these things will be helpful when you start to create your CV and apply for future jobs.

We have put together some tips to help you get started and some advice on how to get the most out of your work experience.

What is work experience?

Work experience involves spending time with an employer carrying out tasks or shadowing employees while they work. The length of a work experience placement could be from one day to a few weeks, and it is usually unpaid. It offers a chance to gain practical insights about an organisation and what the day-to-day jobs involve there.

Why should I do work experience?

Being placed with an organisation is a great way to:

- find out more about different jobs in the area you are interested in.
- network for future jobs.
- earn valuable experience and develop new skills.
- have a real employee experience.
- learn about a company's recruitment process.

Where do I start?

Before you start considering where to find work experience, it would be worth looking through a variety of different job profiles to get ideas about the types of roles that you might enjoy and that you find interesting. What is it about the role that you find appealing? What qualifications would you need to undertake for that role and what bracket might the starting salary fall under? A Future in Chemistry contains [job profiles](#) covering a breadth of careers within the chemical sciences and you can browse the profiles by [starting salary](#) and [entry qualifications](#).

Finding work experience is not always easy, especially in places such as scientific labs. Don't be afraid to ask but be prepared for people to say 'no'. However, try not to let that discourage you – if you have been turned down, ask why. If it is because of your age, you could reapply when you are old enough. If it is because they get too many requests, ask whether you could be added to a waiting list.

Here is some advice to get you started with finding work experience:

- Start thinking about work experience early as organising a placement may take some time.
- Contact your school's or college's work experience coordinator.
- Network – ask family members or your friends' parents if their employer offers work experience.
- Get in touch with a [local education business partnership](#).
- Ask at schools, colleges or universities – you may get work experience alongside a lab technician or researcher.
- Ask at local companies or organisations.
- Browse A Future in Chemistry's [work experience page](#) for further ideas about where to enquire about finding work experience.
- Look at job adverts in local newspapers, or on online job boards such as [Chemistry World Jobs](#) or [New Scientist Jobs](#). Although there may not be any advertisements for work experience placements, you will get ideas about what different companies do and can then contact them to enquire about placements in specific areas.
- You may be asked to write a CV or do an interview. This is your chance to tell prospective employers specifically what you hope to get from your work experience, where you are at in your studies and what skills you may be able to offer.
 - [Find out how to write a CV.](#)
 - [Find out how to prepare for an interview.](#)

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Things to consider

Before you apply for a work experience placement, it is important to find out what the placement would involve. Things to consider include:

- **how to get there** – how far away is the placement and how long would it take to travel?
- **facilities** – what facilities are available on site? For example, will there be somewhere for you to buy lunch, or will you need to bring your own?
- **accessibility requirements** – would you require any reasonable adjustments to be made in advance of your placement? Where possible organisations should make adjustments if you have a disability or long-term health condition, to enable you to work on an equal basis. Advance notice is advisable so that adjustments can be provided in time for your placement.
- **items needed for the placement** – are there any essential items needed for the work placement? This would be something to ask the person in charge to find out more about what the work experience would involve and if you would need any essential items such as specific footwear (if outdoors).
- **costs** – would you be paying for transport? Would there be food costs? Would you need to pay for any essential items such as footwear or clothing? You could talk to your learning provider if you have questions about this.
- **hybrid working** – would the placement involve hybrid working? Lots of companies offer hybrid working to employees nowadays, so would this impact your work placement?

Due to health and safety and/or security restrictions, not every place can offer practical experience. However, in these types of placements, you could still learn new skills in a real working environment and network.

What will I be doing during my work experience?

On your first day, you will have an induction, during which you will:

- learn about the company and their processes.
- receive an introduction to health and safety rules.
- be assigned a mentor/supervisor for your support.
- meet the people you will work with.
- find out what to do if you are ill and cannot come to work.

During your placement, you may have the opportunity to:

- **shadow employees** – this would enable you to learn more about different jobs within the company by spending time with one or more members of staff.
- **carry out practical work** – you might perform some tasks under direct supervision.
- **undertake a project** – you might do this after some training.
- **present your findings** – you might have the chance to show your results to your mentor or to other employees.
- **have a mock interview** – this would help you to learn more about the recruitment process.

Your mentor/supervisor will support you at all times during your placement, even though you may also work with other colleagues. If you have any questions or doubts, contact your mentor or supervisor.

How can I make the most out of my work experience?

Here are some ideas for making the most out of a work experience placement:

- **Make a good first impression** – be punctual, organised, suitably dressed and show that you are friendly and reliable from the start.
- **Set some objectives** – you may be asked about your expectations and what you would like to get out of your work experience placement. Think about the jobs you want to find out about, the questions you would like answered and the skills you would like to gain or improve.
- **Be organised** – follow instructions carefully and write down important procedures, dates and deadlines. Don't be afraid to ask if you have questions or need clarification.
- **Get involved** – keep an eye out for tasks you could do and don't be scared to ask to get involved. Ask your colleagues how you can support their projects.
- **Make suggestions** – don't be afraid to speak up, make comments and talk about your ideas.
- **Communicate with your colleagues** – introduce yourself to your colleagues, prepare some questions and ask people about their role, day-to-day tasks, highlights, challenges and so on.
- **Record your achievements** – produce a workbook or skills booklet to identify, reflect on and record the skills you gained and the work you carried out. This would be helpful evidence to draw upon when creating a CV and applying for future jobs.
- **Ask for feedback** – get feedback from your colleagues and your mentor as you go along. You could record this in your workbook and potentially draw upon this when creating your CV or during an interview.

What if I can't find work experience in my chosen field?

Undertaking a work experience placement would give you valuable experience and help you to develop your skills, even if it is not in your chosen field. Here are some helpful ideas to consider if you are in this situation:

- **Holiday or part-time jobs** – for example, working in a café to learn more about customer service and how to handle money, or doing a newspaper round shows commitment and reliability.
- **Voluntary work, summer schools and hobbies** – playing in a sports team, for example, develops your communication and team-working skills.
- **Find out about local events** – for example, university taster days, [local science festivals](#) or the [Big Bang Fair](#).
- **Consider summer placements or gap year schemes** – for example [Nuffield Research Placements](#) or [Year in Industry Placements](#). Look out for post school/college internships or think about university courses with industrial placements.
- **Your school, local authority or some organisations** – for example, the [British Science Association CREST Awards](#) or [STEM Learning](#) may help to set up work-related activities such as careers talks, mock interviews, site visits or industrial challenges and projects.
- **Browse A Future in Chemistry's [work experience page](#)** for further ideas about where to enquire about finding work experience.