

# Interview and application advice for NQTs: the frequently-asked questions

How many schools should you apply to? Can maternity cover lead to longer-term jobs? Our experts share their top tips

To help prepare NQTs for the world of teaching and achieve interview success, here are the most common questions asked at the Hays NQT mock assessment days, answered by an expert panel of headteachers from their partner schools.

## **The panel:**

The expert panel is made up from a diverse range of experienced school leaders:

- **Wendy Tomes, principal, Sidney Stringer Academy, Coventry**
- **Peter Kent, headteacher, Lawrence Sheriff School, Rugby**
- **Helen Morgan, head of school, Hipperholme & Lightcliffe High School, Halifax**
- **Steve Bowles, vice-principal, Grace Academy, Solihull**

## **How do I know that I have selected the right school to apply for?**

**SB:** I would always recommend you do as much research as possible, study the information in the initial advert, the person and job specifications, the school website and of course the Ofsted reports. A visit can be useful prior to an interview, but do not ask all your questions as you will need to save some for the interview. Ask questions that will make an impact with the school, to demonstrate that you are really switched on and understand the key strengths and issues around the school, the Ofsted report and school website will help you in gaining this understanding.

**HM:** There is nothing like walking through a school's gates to see if the ethos of the school is right for you. Does the ambience reflect the vision, values and attitudes you had hoped for? Take the opportunity to talk to students and staff (teaching and non-teaching) so that you get a clear feel for the school and what it is about. Make sure you get the opportunity to walk around the school, go into lessons, look at any displays and see the behaviour of pupils at break and lunchtime. You need to have a clear sense that students are happy and that you will be well supported in your first year as a teacher.

## **How many schools should I apply for?**

**WT:** Apply for as many as you feel are genuinely of interest to you. Every headteacher will have a different idea of what makes a [good application](#), so get your applications in to as many opportunities as you can.

PK: Don't just go for every school you see. Read the adverts carefully, look at the background information provided by Hays and the school. Ask around; ask if some of your peers know anything about the schools that you are looking at.

### **Can a maternity post lead to more, or should I ignore these when I am applying for NQT jobs?**

**HM:** Not at all – maternity posts can open doors, however as schools' budgets are shrinking I can see these positions becoming less attractive. If you are not successful in securing a full-time permanent post, a maternity cover position does provide a good opportunity to 'get your foot in the door' and build your experience in readiness for further applications. It will also help you in terms of making sure you are the candidate with 'more experience' and dependent on context, this can you stand out as a more attractive prospect.

**WT:** A maternity vacancy can provide a good initial opportunity, however, I would suggest only applying if the maternity post is for a full academic year as it will allow you to complete your first NQT year in one school. If the position is less than the academic year, then I would recommend you only consider applying if you really cannot find a job elsewhere.

### **I am looking for part time work - do I have to wait until I see a part time advert, or should I apply to the school and make them aware I only want part time work?**

**PK:** That is fine, but make it clear at the point of application. From experience, it can be very annoying if you are interviewing a potentially suitable candidate to be suddenly told something that was not mentioned in the original application.

**HM:** If you are up front in your application, the school is in a position to make a considered decision and may invite you for interview if they have some flexibility with the appointment. There is a stronger possibility of being more successful with this approach if there is a skills shortage in your specific subject.

### **Do schools shortlist all applications, or should I have confidence that I have done something right on my application form?**

**SB:** No, shortlisting is based on the most suitable candidates. I would recommend that you tailor your application and include a punchy letter 'selling your skills and experience and personality' to the role.

**HM:** No – we always cut candidates, simple spelling or factual errors will result in not being shortlisted. Letters that are personalised to the school and give the school a flavour of who you are, why you want to teach and your experiences so far, will generally be more successful. Letters that look like they are standard or have been 'cut and pasted' are usually unsuccessful. Try to refer to things from the prospectus, school information or website that attracted you to that school in particular.

### **At what point does quoting the school ethos and vision statement become a turn off to a school?**

**WT:** I am always pleased to see evidence when an [application](#) is personal to our school and that an applicant hasn't just submitted a generic application. I like it when a candidate can show they subscribe to this vision.

**PK:** I agree, it can be overdone, but in my experience it is more common for ethos and vision to be ignored by many candidates. Heads want to see that you have done some reading about their school and they will recognise the time you will have taken in putting the information together. However, one (maybe two) references would be enough.

### **How should I write my personal statement? What information should I include?**

**HM:** I always stress that you should [write your statement](#) formally using standard English and make sure that it is fluent and accurate.

An obvious structure would be:

- The context for why you want to be a teacher and your passion for working with young people and your subject.
- Why you want to work at a particular school (refer to their prospectus and website).
- Your experience so far and reflections on it and different aspects of teaching – for example; assessment, differentiation, planning lessons – you could do this by placement or key stage. Demonstrate that you are able to reflect on what you have learned and use it to help improve and develop.
- Your pastoral experience and commitment to wider school life.
- Why you are a strong candidate for the post at that school.

**PK:** Focus upon the way in which your skills and talents will make a contribution to the school. Link in what you are saying about yourself, with what you perceive the school to be looking for. These statements should be different each time you make an application because they should refer to the information provided by the school.

### **How do I prepare for safeguarding questions if I haven't had to deal with any relevant situations?**

**WT:** You don't have to have dealt with any specific safeguarding issues in the past, you just need to reassure the panel that you know how serious it is. You need to demonstrate that you would make sure you would be trained and understood the school's procedures. Ask who the named contact is in the school and what training is offered to staff.

**SB:** Advise them that you would check the policy of your current school. If not consult any union or DfE document. I would say that experience is not vital, knowing principles of what to do is more important to a school. Best to know these but actually they can be refined.

### **If I study two subjects, what is the best way to structure my answers for interviews?**

**PK:** Often it will be clear which one the interviewer is focusing upon. However, it is fine to distinguish between the two ("in maths we take this approach, while in physics...")

**HM:** Focus on the subject you will be teaching, but don't be afraid to draw in your other subject, it demonstrates that you are versatile.

Is it better to prepare answers for competency based questions (for example, learn them off by heart) or not?

**SB:** Try not to learn everything by heart apart from the theoretical content and aspects of a topic. When answering any question "say it, explain it and give an example". So know the theory, use this to give your answer (yes/no). Explain it through an expansion of the theory and then give an example based on your experience. Interviewers will be interested in how you apply the theory to improving learning, so be careful you do not waffle unnecessarily.

**PK:** I would advise you not - it is likely to come over as a prepared answer. An honest attempt at responding directly to a question is normally the best approach.

### **What is an NQT mock assessment day?**

At Hays we work in partnership with headteachers from around the UK to provide NQTs mock assessment days, where they are put through their paces on the types of questions they will be asked at their first interview. The NQT's are given expert advice from both the headteacher and a Hays recruiting expert on how to achieve interview success and secure their [first teaching job](#).

To speak to a recruiting expert contact your local [Hays office](#) or [request a call back](#) from the Hays education team and we will call you.

*Content on this page is provided by Hays Education - supporter of the career advice hub.*