

Work experience: a guide for school students

During work experience you can find out what it is like to have a job in the area you're interested in.

The experience will help you develop skills and gain contacts you'll find useful when looking for future jobs. We've put together some tips to help you get started, as well as some advice on how to get the most out of your work experience.

What is work experience?

Work experience is a chance to spend some time in a company or organisation; this can be anything from one day to a few weeks. It is unpaid, although you might receive some money for meals and travel.

Why should I do work experience?

Being placed with a business is a great way to:

- find out more about different jobs in the area you're interested in
- gain contacts for future jobs
- earn valuable experience and develop new skills
- have a real employee experience
- learn about the recruitment process

[Find out what other students say about doing work experience](#)

Where do I start?

Finding work experience is not always easy, especially in places such as scientific labs, where employers might be concerned about your health and safety. Don't be afraid to ask, but be prepared for people to say no; try not to let that discourage you, though.

If you have been turned down, ask why. If it is because of your age, you could reapply when you're old enough. If it is because they get too many requests, ask whether you could be added to a waiting list.

Here's some advice to get you started:

- Start thinking about work experience early as setting one up may take some time
- Contact your school's or college's work experience coordinator
- Ask family members or your friends' parents if their employers offers work experience
- Get in touch with a local [Education Business Partnership](#).
- Ask schools, colleges, universities – you may get work experience alongside a lab technician or researcher.
- Ask at local companies or organisations. The best person to contact is a schools/education liaison officer, schools ambassador or someone in the human resources or community liaison department.
- 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 ads for work experience placements, you will get ideas of what different companies do, and can then contact them asking for 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 (rather than just 'finding out more about the work').
 - [Find out how to write a CV](#)
 - [Read advice on how to prepare for an interview](#)

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'll work with
- find out what to do if you're ill and can't come to work.

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.

During your placement

While you participate in work experience you may have the opportunity to do the following:

Shadow employees

Learn more about different jobs within the company by spending time with one or more members of staff.

Do hands-on work

Perform some tasks under direct supervision.

Undertake a project

Receive training and carry out a project yourself.

Present your findings

Create a presentation to show your results to your mentor or to other employees.

Take part in a mock interview

Learn more about the recruitment process.

The limits of work experience

Due to health and safety and/or security restrictions, not every place can offer hands-on experience. However, this won't make your experience less valuable: you'll learn new skills in a real working environment and gain contacts for future jobs.

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

To get the most from your time in work placement, it's important you do the following.

Make a good first impression

Turn up on time, be suitably dressed (if in doubt dress smartly) and show that you're friendly and reliable from the start.

Set some objectives

You may be asked about your expectations and what you want to get out of your work experience. Think about what jobs you want to find out about, the questions you'd like answered and the skills you want to gain or improve.

Be organised

Listen carefully to instructions and write down important procedures, dates and deadlines, but don't be afraid to ask if you want to know more 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.

Get to know your colleagues

Make an effort to introduce yourself to your colleagues. Prepare some questions and ask people about their role, day-to-day tasks, highlights, challenges and so on.

Stay in touch

Ask your colleagues whether they're happy for you to stay in touch after your placement, which may help you when looking for future jobs. This can be via email, phone or in person.

Record your achievements

Produce a workbook, photo or video diary, or keep a skills booklet to identify what you have done and learnt. This will help you when applying for future jobs.

Ask for feedback

Get formal and informal feedback from your colleagues and your mentor as you go along.

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

Every work experience – even if it isn't directly relevant to your job ambitions – is valuable, and will help develop your skills.

- Holiday or part-time jobs: working in a cafe to learn how to deal with customers and handle money; doing a newspaper round shows commitment and reliability.
- Voluntary work, summer schools, hobbies: playing in a sports team, for example, develops your communication and team-working skills.
- Find out about local events such as [The Big Bang Fair](#), [Headstart](#) and university taster days.
- Consider [summer placements](#) or gap year schemes, such as [Nuffield research placements](#) or [Year in Industry](#); look out for post-school/college internships or think about university courses with industrial placements.
- Your school, local authority or some organisations – for example, [Industrial Cadets](#) or the [British Science Association's Crest Awards](#) – may offer or help set up work-related activities, such as careers talks, mock interviews, site visits, or industrial challenges and projects.

Universities understand that it is difficult to find relevant placements, and it is not necessary to have work experience to be accepted onto a degree course.

Useful links

- [A Future in Chemistry](#): study options, job profiles and careers advice for students interested in chemistry
- [175 Faces of Chemistry](#): find out more about the lives and careers of 175 inspiring chemists

Case studies

Engineering at Cathelco

Jack had the chance to try out different jobs in a company.

Cathelco designs and produces devices that decrease metal corrosion in seawater for example on cruise or naval ships. For one week, 15-year-old student Jack joined Cathelco's more than 100 employees at their headquarters in Chesterfield, UK. Having been interested in engineering, Jack asked his school to help him set up the placement. "I wanted to see what it was like in the engineering work environment", he says.

During his one-week placement, Jack had the chance to find out more about different jobs engineers do at Cathelco – from assembling circuit boards to creating switches and making a sea water filtration device. In addition to having a mentor who he could contact in case he had any concerns, Jack worked with different people during his placement, learning about what they do and how they work.

■ “They sent me around the entire place – I now know what roughly I’d like to do.”

Jack enjoyed his experience at Cathelco. He says, “I liked it and thought that this is something I might want to do in the future.”

Chemical analysis at Kent Scientific Services

Leah’s work experience increased her confidence in university lab courses.

Having just finished her A-levels, Leah decided to do a work experience placement over the summer holidays. “I wanted to get some more hands-on lab experience and was looking for local work experience; Kent Scientific Services came up on the county council’s website”, Leah explains. Kent Scientific Services is a small company in Kings Hill, UK, that analyses chemical samples.

During her one-week experience at the company, Leah got the chance to purify and analyse chemical samples with a variety of techniques, such as chromatography, mass spectrometry and UV spectroscopy. Leah had previously done work experience in organic chemistry at Lundbeck, a large pharmaceutical company near Copenhagen in Denmark, but wanted to see what working in a smaller company was like. “Working at Kent Scientific Services was a lot more independent”, says Leah. “My supervisor Barry trusted me to just get on with things.”

■ “The experience has helped me to know that I want to go into lab research.”

Leah is now studying sciences at the University of Bath. Her experience is not only a useful thing to put down on her CV but “I’m also a lot more confident in the lab”, she says.

Glassware testing at British Glass

Iona worked both in the office and the lab during her placement.

Glass Technology Services, part of the British Glass Manufacturers Confederation, is a testing facility for glassware in Sheffield, UK. Interested in going into a science profession in the future, sixth-form student Iona decided to do a work experience with British Glass. “My school couldn’t provide me with a practical work placement”, Iona explains. “British Glass wasn’t too far away and fitted in with my needs as it linked in very well with the sciences.”

Iona spent some time in the offices filing and organising data, creating a website and undertaking some research on women in science, technology, engineering and maths, “which I found very interesting as it is a very important subject”, says Iona. She also went into some of the labs, observing the scientists working there and even tried her hand on machines like the electron microscope. ‘I also got to test glass for its properties and see if it was suitable for use in the real world,’ Iona explains.

■ “I really enjoyed my time at British Glass. I developed new skills along with experiencing a work environment.”

Not only did Iona learn how to use software to make websites, control databases and social media platforms, and found out how glass is produced and tested, she also got an insight into the different jobs within the company. The placement “exceeded my expectations”, says Iona.