

Preparing for an exchange program

As you learned in your book on p. 26, to become an exchange student in a foreign country you must first go through an application process. Each exchange organization has its own way of deciding who is suitable – or not – for an exchange. But overall, the application process at the various exchange organizations tends to consist of very similar components, which you will learn more about below. Why are the components so similar from organization to organization? Because the organizations' aim is always the same: to select students who will be able to cope with life in a totally new situation and environment abroad.

It is obvious that an organization has a huge interest in finding the right students. Aside from nobody (e.g. host family, school, student, organization) wanting problems of *any* kind during an exchange, a major motivation in wanting to find suitable students is that each student is always a representative of his/her country. If a student behaves badly, it reflects

badly on his/her home country, which is not in the interest of intercultural understanding.

Regarding the application process, the first step is to submit a **curriculum vitae** (AE: *résumé*) with your application and a **letter** explaining your motivations for taking part in the exchange. If the organization likes your application, they will invite you for an **interview**, which often consists of different parts: First you may be asked to give a **short speech** on a certain topic, e.g. why you are interested in taking part in the program, what your reasons for going abroad are, and/or how you deal with conflicts and new situations. In another part of the interview you may be asked more **personal questions**, e.g. about your personality, interests and expectations.

If you do indeed get chosen for an exchange, your organization may ask you to **write a letter to your future host family** telling them about your life, friends and expectations. (Or, as you learned in the listening text on p. 26, this letter to your host family could be part of the actual application process, e.g. as a spontaneous test.)

The following tasks provide useful information and will help you to prepare for an exchange program application process.

1 Curriculum vitae

Fill in the curriculum vitae form (on PC, on paper) with your personal information.

Name: _____
 Address: _____

 E-mail: _____
 Phone number: _____

 Date of Birth: _____
 Place of Birth: _____
 Nationality: _____

 Names of parents and their occupation:

 Number of siblings and their age: _____
 School education:

 Graduation from school: _____
 Extra-curricular activities / hobbies:

 Social commitment/community service:

TIP

A curriculum vitae (CV) targeted at an exchange organization should include the following:

- name, contact details, date of birth, place of birth, nationality
- names of parents, jobs, siblings
- school education with a list of the schools (including addresses) you have attended so far
- expected final graduation and form of graduation
- extra-curricular activities in school, hobbies
- social commitment (e.g. volunteer work)


With your CV you need to send an application letter and a copy of your last school report.

USEFUL PHRASES

Abitur – school examination usually taken at the end of the 12th year and approximately equivalent to the American SAT exam or British A-levels;
Fachabitur – vocational baccalaureate diploma (school-leaving examination, enabling students to study at a Fachhochschule or certain subjects at university); **Gymnasium** – high school (AE), grammar school (BE); **Privatschule** – private school; **staatliche/öffentliche Schule** – state school

2 The application letter




Together with your curriculum vitae you need to send an application letter which gives the organization a good idea about your motivations for taking part in an exchange program. Exchange organizations receive a large number of applications, so you want to make sure yours stands out. Spelling mistakes should of course be avoided at all costs: They make you look lazy and irresponsible, which is exactly the impression you *don't* want to make. You want to be seen as responsible, well-prepared, and truly interested in your future host country, so think about that before you write your letter.

-  a) *Work in pairs and think about what the organization might want to know about you and what they might expect of a student going abroad.*
- b) *Make notes on the following aspects: your personality, your plans for the future, your expectations for the year abroad, and why you think you should be chosen for the program.*
- c) *Write the application letter and include the information collected in b).*

3 Interview

After the organization has decided to invite you for an interview you should be prepared to answer questions on topics dealing with difficulties or problems that might occur during your stay abroad.



-  a) *Choose one of these questions and make notes.*
1. How would you react if your host family had a different religious belief than you?
 2. How would you react if your host family belonged to a different ethnic or social background?
 3. What would you do if you didn't get along with your host family?
 4. What are your expectations for the year abroad?
 5. How do you think this experience will change your personality and expectations for the future?
-  b) *Work in groups of four and present your answer(s) to the other group members. Do they think your reaction, behaviour or expectations would be appropriate? Why, or why not?*
-  c) *Read the interview questions and think of possible answers. Then work in groups of four (two interviewers, two applicants) and act out interview situations. (You don't have to use all the questions!) At the end the two interviewers have to decide which one of the applicants will be selected for the exchange program. Explain your decision.*
1. What are your hobbies or accomplishments? What activities do you take part in after school?
 2. Which languages do you speak? Why did you decide to learn these languages?
 3. Which countries have you visited so far? How long did you stay there? With whom did you travel and what was the purpose of the trip?
 4. What is your favourite subject in school and why?
 5. How seriously do you take deadlines for handing in school papers, projects, etc.?
 6. What do you think of school dress codes/uniforms?
 7. How has your school education prepared you for an exchange program?
 8. What kind of books do you like? What was the last book you read? Which book are you reading at the moment?
 9. Have you assumed any leadership roles in school or in extra-curricular activities?
 10. What would you say are your strong character traits? Which are your weak ones?
How would these character traits affect you during your stay abroad?
 11. What do you do if somebody asked you to do something that you thought was inappropriate?
 12. Who is a role model for you and why?
 13. Please describe your home and community, e. g. your room, distance to school, location, population, economy, etc.
 14. Do you have responsibilities at home?
 15. What do your parents do?

16. Do you think you would get homesick? If yes, how do you think you would handle the situation?
17. How would you try to make new friends while abroad?
18. Would you go to church with your host family if they had a different faith?
19. What do you know about the school system of the country you have applied for? Can you explain major differences to our system?
20. What do you think a typical American/Briton/Australian/ ... is like? How do you know?
21. Do you think it is wise to disagree in a discussion?
22. Food and customs might be different from home. How would you cope with that? Would you need special foods?
23. What was the most difficult or challenging situation you have faced in your life?
24. What was the most beautiful day in your life?
25. What are the three most important issues confronting your country today?
26. Why did you apply for the exchange program?
27. How would this experience affect your personality and future?
28. What do your parents and friends think about you going abroad?
29. What do you think is the most important thing about representing your community and country abroad?
30. What makes you the perfect exchange student?



4 Rules

Which rules would you expect for your stay? Make a list which includes the do's and don'ts for your behaviour a) at school, b) at your host family's home, and c) in your free time.

do's	don'ts
	

5 Letter to your host family

After you have been given a place in the program the organization asks you to write a letter to your future host family in order to introduce yourself.

Write that letter to your host family, making sure to include the points listed below. But remember: Be polite without being stiff and awkward. It's important to come across as natural and friendly:

- your personality and free time activities
- your school, your favourite subjects
- your family situation
- your town and region, special attractions
- why an exchange year is important

You should also ask questions, send pictures and encourage them to write back.

Lösungen/Lösungsvorschläge

1

individuelle Lösung

2

a) Lösungsvorschlag:

- things the organization might want to know: hobbies, motivation for learning foreign languages, motivation for wanting to spend a year abroad, ever been abroad (with

family, friends), what I expect to get out of the stay, the longest period of time I've been away from home, whether I'm a reliable person and able to fit in/adapt

- things the organization might expect: reliable, open-minded, ready to adapt/fit in, curious about other cultures and lifestyles, ready to take on responsibility, willing to make new friends, diplomatic

b) *individuelle Lösung*

c) Lösungsvorschlag:

Address of the exchange organization

Address of applicant

Date

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is ..., I am ... years old and I come from Cologne. My English teacher at school gave me a brochure from your organization, knowing how interested I am in spending a year abroad with a host family. Having read your brochure on the various programs in all those different places, I have come to the conclusion that I want to apply for placement in

I am aware of the fact that you get a lot of applications, so I hope the information I provide you about myself will help to show that I am a serious and strong candidate for placement with your organization. (Please find attached my curriculum vitae, a letter of recommendation from my English teacher, my last school report and a photograph.)

As already mentioned above I am ... years old. My family and I live in a suburb of Cologne, where I attend the local *Gymnasium* (grammar school / high school). I have an older brother, Marcus, and a younger sister, Karoline. Marcus has already left school and Karoline also attends the *Gymnasium*. My parents both work, my mum as a teacher and my father as a sales manager with a local company. At home, my sister and I look after our cats and we help our parents with the daily chores.

At school I usually get good grades. My favourite subjects are English and History. Unfortunately my grades in English are currently not the best because last year I fell off a horse and I was in hospital for a long time.

There are several reasons why I would love to spend a year abroad:

First of all, I am more of an active learner than somebody who likes to learn alone in a room with a textbook. So I am convinced that I would benefit most from 'learning by doing', i. e. learning a foreign language in the country where it is spoken. Secondly, after school I would like to study Engineering, and since most of the recent literature is in English, I know how important English is – not just in daily life but also in the field of science and in the world of work.

I also think that the experiences I could make living with a host family and making new friends in another country would really help me to develop my personality. Sometimes I am a bit shy and I think that I could overcome my shyness by being around new people.

Also, I love to travel and to see new things, so being abroad would offer me the chance to explore a new country and to be part of a different lifestyle. I would be one of the locals, and not a tourist.

Improving my command of English, being part of a host family, getting to know a new way of life, and being a representative of my country are all important motivations for wanting to get to know ... and its people and go to school there.

Thank you very much for considering my application. If you find that I qualify for an interview, I would be more than happy to come in and learn more about your exchanges. I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Yours sincerely,

...

3

Allgemeine Hinweise:

As you can see from the questions, an interview needs to be prepared carefully. Any answer that makes you look lazy, irresponsible, childish, unprepared, high-maintenance, spoiled, ill-informed or not *at all* informed, etc., is a bad answer. There's never a reason to give a bad answer anyway: Even if one is caught off guard and genuinely doesn't know an answer, one should say so and be honest, while giving the situation the proper "spin", e. g. by saying "That's a good question, I hadn't thought of that" or "That's a question I'll need to think about". Sitting there dumb-founded is no good; the conversation must go on. Exchange advisers look for confident, spontaneous people who aren't flustered easily.

4

Lösungsvorschlag:

at school

do: homework, study for tests, watch the dress code, obey school rules, be punctual
don't: smoke, eat or drink during lessons / in the classrooms / in the restrooms

with your host family

do: offer help, respect their lifestyle
don't: steal, be late, bring friends home without asking, use the phone to make calls (abroad) without asking

in your free time

do: play an active part in a club, show an interest in what the family does, take part in family activities
don't: no drugs or alcohol

5

Lösungsvorschlag:

Dear _____,

First of all I'd like to thank you for reading my letter and giving me the opportunity to introduce myself. And of course thank you so much for making it possible for me to stay with you for a year / a term. I'm really looking forward to spending a year with you and I'd like to tell you a little bit about myself, my family and my everyday life.

My name is ..., I'm ... years old and I come from Germany. Together with my parents and siblings I live in a house with a small garden in a suburb of Cologne, which has a population of nearly one million. In Cologne there some great sights, for example the gigantic Cologne Cathedral and the Roman-German Museum.

My brother Marcus is 19 and has already graduated from school. Right now he is in the military/does compulsory community service, and afterwards he wants to study at the University of Düsseldorf, a city nearby. My sister, Karoline, is 11 and goes to the local high school with me.

The school my sister and I go to is about 5 km from our house. In winter I prefer to go by bus, but in summer I like to ride my bike to school. We've got subjects like English, French, Latin, German, History, Politics, Maths, Biology, Chemistry, RE, Art, Music and PE. Up to the 10th grade we don't have much choice in the subjects we take, and even in higher grades we have to stick to certain subjects in order to be able to do our final exams. I have about 6 to 8 periods a day. At school there's a cafeteria where we have lunch. That's also where I meet my friends. After school I go home to do my homework and prepare for tests. If time allows I meet my friends in town and hang out with them. Sometimes we go to the local ice-cream parlour, go shopping, or we meet at somebody's house to listen to music and talk. If there's a class test or a deadline for a project we'll study and work together. But shopping and listening to music is definitely more fun!

Usually I have to be home by 7 o'clock because we have dinner together, which is our chance to talk about the day. I really love being around my family and spending time with them. Of course, we sometimes have arguments and occasionally my sister and I have fights about silly things like who uses the bathroom first. But all in all we get along very well and I think that I can trust my

parents with everything. I'm not afraid of talking to them about a bad grade or about problems. They are very loving and understanding.

I think it's important to take on responsibility at home and outside of it. At home, each of us kids has certain tasks, and our parents really appreciate our help. At school, I take part in the Student Council, and in addition to singing in a choir once a week, I also do volunteer work at a local nursing home as part of a project called "Social competence". Besides taking part in this social program I love reading books, such as the Twilight saga or historical novels, and I like singing, listening to all kinds of music, swimming, and watching funny movies.

I hope I've been able to give you an impression of my character and my life here in Germany. I'm really looking forward to meeting you soon and I hope that we'll have a good time together. I'll do my very best to play an active role in your family and community.

If you find the time to write, I would really enjoy learning about you and your life in ...

Yours sincerely, / All the best,
...