

THE ADULTING VAULT

The USAJOBS Guide

How the System Actually Works, and Where Applications Die

Everything They Forgot to Tell You

Most people treat USAJOBS as a job board with a bad interface. It is closer to a structured examination with a job attached, and the part that decides your fate is not the part everyone spends their time on. Applications are overwhelmingly lost at the occupational questionnaire — a form most applicants rush through in four minutes because they assume the resume is what matters. It is not. This guide walks the whole pipeline: profile, search, announcement anatomy, the questionnaire, documents, submission, and what every status actually means when nobody will explain it to you.



Please Read This First

This guide is general educational information, not legal or career advice, and it is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or produced by any federal agency. Federal hiring rules change. The job opportunity announcement you are looking at is always the controlling document. Verify current requirements at usajobs.gov and opm.gov before you rely on anything here.

CURRENCY OF THIS GUIDE

This guide describes the USAJOBS application process and federal hiring mechanics as published by the Office of Personnel Management and the USAJOBS Help Center, current as of mid-2026. It is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or produced by any federal agency. Interfaces change and hiring rules are revised — the job opportunity announcement is always the controlling document. Verify at usajobs.gov before you rely on anything here.

Part One: What Actually Happens to Your Application

Understand the pipeline and every later decision makes sense.

Nothing happens while an announcement is open. Agencies generally begin reviewing after the closing date, which is why applying on day one confers no advantage and why silence for weeks is normal rather than ominous.

The seven stages

1. You submit. The system records receipt. No human has seen it.
2. The announcement closes. Only now does review begin.
3. A human resources specialist screens for minimum qualifications. This is a compliance check against the announcement, not a judgment of your talent.
4. Qualified applicants are rated — usually by their own questionnaire answers — and sorted into quality categories or numerical scores.
5. Veterans preference is applied where it applies.
6. The top group is placed on a certificate of eligibles and sent to the hiring manager. This is what "Referred" means.
7. The manager reviews, interviews, and selects. Then security, suitability and onboarding, which is where the months go.

THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT CONSEQUENCE

The specialist at stage three is verifying claims, not discovering talent. They are matching your application against a written standard and they are not permitted to infer, assume, or give you credit for something implied.

If the announcement requires one year of specialized experience and your application does not plainly show it, you are screened out — even when you obviously have it.

Who reads what

Stage	Who	What they are looking at
Minimum qualifications	HR specialist	Your questionnaire answers first, then your resume for evidence backing them.
Rating and ranking	HR specialist or system	Questionnaire scores, cross-checked against the resume.
Selection	Hiring manager	Your resume, for scope, impact and judgment. Frequently

Stage	Who	What they are looking at
		your essay responses too.

Notice that the questionnaire appears in two of the three stages, and the resume appears mainly as corroboration. That inversion is the thing almost nobody understands about federal hiring.

Part Two: Setting Up Properly

An hour once. It removes friction from every application afterwards.

Your profile

USAJOBS requires a Login.gov account. Set that up first, with a recovery method you will still have access to in two years — the number of people locked out of their own federal applications by a dead phone number is not small.

FILL IN COMPLETELY

- ☐ Citizenship status
- ☐ Veterans preference and eligibility, if applicable — this drives which announcements you can see
- ☐ Federal employment status — current, former, or never. Determines eligibility for status-only announcements
- ☐ Highest federal civilian grade held, if any
- ☐ Special hiring path eligibility — Schedule A, military spouse, Peace Corps, and others
- ☐ Geographic preferences and willingness to relocate or travel

THE HIRING PATH SETTINGS ARE NOT COSMETIC

They filter what you are shown and what you are permitted to apply to. A wrongly answered eligibility question can hide the announcements you were best positioned for.

If you qualify for a special appointing authority, set it here and confirm it every few months. Eligibility windows expire.

Documents to load in advance

You can store documents in your profile and attach them at application time. Do this before you need them — announcements close and packets assembled at midnight are packets with something missing.

Document	Who needs it
Resume, two pages or less	Everyone

Document	Who needs it
Transcripts, unofficial usually acceptable	Anyone where education is qualifying
DD-214, Member Copy 4	Anyone claiming veterans preference
SF-15 plus supporting documentation	Anyone claiming ten-point preference
VA rating letter	Disability-based preference or authority
SF-50, Notification of Personnel Action	Current and former federal employees
Most recent performance appraisal	When the announcement requests it
Proof of eligibility for a special path	Schedule A letter, PCS orders, and similar

Name files plainly — Smith_DD214_MemberCopy4.pdf. A specialist assembling a packet from twelve applicants does not want to guess.

Part Three: Searching Without Drowning

The search is the reason most people conclude the site is broken.

Search by series, not by keyword

Every federal position carries a four-digit occupational series code. Keyword searching returns thousands of irrelevant results because federal postings are organized by occupation, not by job title. Series searching returns a usable list.

8. Find any posting that resembles what you want to do. Note its series number.
9. Search that series directly.
10. Repeat for two or three adjacent series. Most people qualify for more than they assume.

COMMON SERIES WORTH KNOWING

Series	Occupation
0343	Management and Program Analysis
0301	Miscellaneous Administration and Program
1102	Contracting
2210	Information Technology Management
0201	Human Resources Management
0510	Accounting
0505 / 0560	Financial Management and Budget Analysis
1101 / 1170	General Business and Industry
0080	Security Administration
2003 / 2010	Supply Program Management and Inventory

Filters that matter

- Hiring path — the most consequential filter. "Open to the public" and "Federal employees" are different pools entirely, and applying to the wrong one wastes the application.

- Pay grade range — set a floor and a ceiling. Applying two grades above your evidence is a screening rejection.
- Location, plus remote and telework eligibility, which are separate settings.
- Department or agency, once you know who does the work you want.

Saved searches

Save every search you would run twice and set it to email you daily. Federal announcements frequently close within five to fourteen days, and some close early once an application cap is reached. Discovering a posting the day it closes is the most common avoidable loss on the entire site.

- ☐ Save three to five searches covering your target series and locations
- ☐ Set alerts to daily, not weekly
- ☐ Check whether an announcement has a cutoff on number of applications received

Part Four: Reading an Announcement

Twenty minutes here prevents a rejection you will never get an explanation for.

Section by section

Section	What to extract
Summary and Duties	The daily work. Useful for deciding whether you want it, and a source of vocabulary.
Requirements — Conditions of Employment	Clearance, drug testing, mobility, licensure. Deal breakers live here.
Qualifications	THE controlling section. Contains the specialized experience statement your whole application must evidence.
Education	Whether education substitutes for experience, and at what level. Sometimes the easier path.
How You Will Be Evaluated	How the rating works, and whether it is category rating or numerical.
Required Documents	Exactly what to attach. Missing one item ends the application, regardless of merit.
How to Apply	Deadlines, and frequently a link previewing the questionnaire.

SPECIALIZED EXPERIENCE IS THE WHOLE TEST

It reads: "one year of specialized experience equivalent to the GS-11 level performing the following," then lists three to six things.

Those things are your outline. Not a suggestion — your outline. Your application must visibly evidence every one of them, in language a specialist will recognize, with enough date and hours detail to prove the duration.

If you have not held federal employment, "equivalent to the GS-11 level" describes independence and complexity, not a job title. Work done with limited supervision, on problems without established answers, with consequences beyond your own team.

Worksheet: Announcement breakdown

Requirement, in their exact words	My evidence — which job, what I did, what resulted

Part Five: The Occupational Questionnaire

The most important chapter here. This is where applications die.

Most applicants spend hours on the resume and four minutes on the questionnaire, in the belief that the resume is what gets read. That is backwards. The questionnaire is the screening instrument. A human resources specialist uses your answers to determine whether you meet minimum qualifications, frequently before examining your resume in any detail — and then uses the resume to check whether your answers are supported.

A SINGLE WRONG ANSWER ENDS THE APPLICATION

If a question asks whether you have five years of specialized experience and you answer no — or answer vaguely — you are marked as not meeting minimum qualifications and the resume is never properly read.

These are not preference questions. They are gates.

Preview it before you start

Most announcements include a preview of the questionnaire, usually linked under Required Documents or How to Apply. Open it before you write anything. It is the closest thing to an answer key you will ever be given, because it tells you exactly what the agency is scoring.

11. Open the preview and read every question.
12. Note which competencies appear repeatedly — those carry the most weight.
13. Draft your resume so that it evidences those specific competencies, in those specific words.
14. Then complete the questionnaire.

How to answer

Questions usually offer a scale from no experience through to expert, along the lines of: I have not performed this task; I have performed it under supervision; I have performed it independently; I have trained others or am consulted as an expert.

THE TWO FAILURE MODES

Failure	What happens
Underselling	Modest applicants select "under supervision" for work they led independently. They score

Failure	What happens
	below the cutoff and are never referred. This is by far the more common error.
Overselling	Applicants select "expert" everywhere. The specialist checks the resume, finds no supporting evidence, and adjusts the rating downward or removes the applicant entirely. Some agencies treat egregious inflation as a suitability issue.
THE RULE THAT RESOLVES BOTH Answer at the highest level you can substantiate, and then make sure the resume substantiates it. Every claim of independent performance or expert-level work should have a corresponding line in your resume that a specialist can point to. If you claim it and it is not evidenced, it does not count and it may cost you more than the point you were claiming. Before submitting, read the questionnaire and the resume side by side and check that they agree.	

The free-text boxes

Some questionnaires ask you to describe where you performed a task. These are not optional, they are not throwaway, and blank or one-word answers are treated as an absence of experience. Give the employer, the role, and a concrete example in two or three sentences.

Worksheet: Questionnaire audit

Question / competency	Level I claimed	Where my resume proves it

Part Six: Builder or Upload

Both are capped at two pages. They fail differently.

	USAJOBS Resume Builder	Uploaded document
Required fields	Prompts for all of them — hours per week, dates, series and grade. Hard to omit one.	Entirely on you. Omissions are the most common cause of self-inflicted rejection.
Formatting	Standardized. Plain and unattractive, and it parses perfectly.	Yours, which means yours to get wrong. No tables, columns, text boxes or graphics.
Speed	Slow to build, fast to reuse. Stored in your profile.	Fast if you already have the file.
Tailoring	Editable per application, and you can hold several versions.	Easiest to tailor per announcement.
Best for	First federal applications, and anyone unsure about required fields.	Applicants confident about the compliance fields.
IF IT IS YOUR FIRST FEDERAL APPLICATION, USE THE BUILDER Not because it produces a better document — it does not — but because it will not let you omit a required field, and omitted fields are the most common reason qualified people are ruled ineligible. Once you have built one, export it and use it as the template for uploaded versions.		

Either way, the resume must carry

- ☐ Employer name
- ☐ Start month and year
- ☐ Hours per week
- ☐ Salary or pay grade
- ☐ Duties with results
- ☐ Job title
- ☐ End month and year
- ☐ Series and grade (federal roles)
- ☐ Supervisor and contact permission
- ☐ Two pages or fewer

The Federal Resume Guide in this collection covers the two-page rules, compression method, and three complete worked examples.

Part Seven: Submitting

Where mechanical errors cost qualified people the job.

The sequence

15. Select the resume version for this announcement.
16. Attach every document under Required Documents. Every one.
17. Complete the questionnaire deliberately.
18. You are handed off to the agency system — usually USA Staffing or Monster Government Solutions. This is normal.
19. Finish the process in that system. Leaving before it completes means you have not applied.
20. Return to your USAJOBS profile and confirm the application appears with a submitted date.

STEP SIX IS NOT OPTIONAL

The handoff between USAJOBS and the agency system is where applications silently fail. People complete the questionnaire, close the tab, and believe they have applied. Go back and look. Your application list should show the announcement with a date. If it does not say applied, you did not.

Status can take a few hours to appear. Some agencies email a confirmation; many do not, so absence of an email means nothing.

Before the deadline

- Announcements close at a stated time in a stated time zone. Note both.
- Some close early when an application cap is reached. Do not plan to submit on the final day.
- You can usually update an application while the announcement is open. Once closed, nothing can be added — including a document you forgot.

Final check

- ☐ Resume is two pages or fewer, confirmed in the actual file
- ☐ Every required document attached, and each opens correctly
- ☐ Questionnaire answers are supported by the resume

- ☐ Application shows as submitted in your profile
- ☐ Announcement number and closing date logged for your own records

Part Eight: What the Statuses Mean

The vocabulary nobody explains, decoded.

Status	What it means	Typical duration
Received / Applied	Submitted successfully and sitting in the queue. No human has looked at it. Review does not begin until the announcement closes.	One to six weeks
Reviewed	A specialist is evaluating applicants against the qualification requirements and assembling the referral certificate.	Two to eight weeks
Referred	You cleared screening, ranked among the best qualified, and your application is on the certificate sent to the hiring manager. A genuine achievement — often a handful out of hundreds.	Weeks to months
Not Referred	Either you did not meet minimum qualifications, or you met them and ranked below the cutoff. Two very different problems.	Final for this announcement
Referred, then Not Selected	You made the certificate and were not chosen. Frequently for reasons unrelated to you.	Final for this announcement
Selected	A tentative offer follows, then background and suitability checks.	Weeks to months

SILENCE IS THE NORMAL CONDITION

Four to six months from closing date to start date is ordinary. Some take longer. A status that has not moved in six weeks is not a signal about you.

The only correct response to waiting is to keep applying. Applicants who stop after a promising status lose months.

Part Nine: When It Says Not Referred

Diagnose which of the two problems you have, because the fixes differ.

Problem one: did not meet minimum qualifications

Something in your application failed the compliance check. Almost always one of a short list.

- A questionnaire answer said no, or said less than you could substantiate
- Hours per week missing, so experience could not be credited
- Dates without months, so duration could not be calculated
- A required document missing
- Specialized experience present in your history but not visible in the words you used
- You applied above the grade your evidence supports

Problem two: qualified but below the cutoff

You met the standard and others scored higher. This is a rating problem, not a compliance problem, and it usually traces back to the questionnaire — either undersold answers, or answers the resume did not visibly support.

You may request feedback

You have the right to ask the agency why. Many will decline or answer generically; some will tell you exactly what was missing. The ones who answer are worth more than the application was.

Ask the human resources specialist named in the announcement, in writing, briefly: "I applied to announcement [number] and received a Not Referred status. If you are able to share whether this was a minimum qualifications determination or a rating outcome, it would help me apply more effectively in future."

Referred but not selected

This one stings more and means more. You cleared every hurdle and were among a small group sent to the manager. Common reasons, none of which are about your qualifications:

- An internal candidate was already known to the office
- The certificate was canceled, or the position was withdrawn or frozen
- Someone on the certificate had veterans preference
- The manager selected on fit or a specific skill after interviews

- The requirement changed between posting and selection

WHAT BEING REFERRED ACTUALLY TELLS YOU

Your resume and questionnaire are working. The compliance and rating stages are solved. That is the hard part and most applicants never get past it.

Reuse that exact application for similar announcements rather than rewriting it. Being referred once means the package clears the gate.

Part Ten: Running a Federal Search

The strategy, given how long everything takes.

Volume with tailoring

Because timelines run in months and outcomes are opaque, a federal search needs a pipeline rather than a favorite. Applying to one perfect announcement and waiting is how people lose a year.

- Three to five tailored applications a week is a sustainable rate
- Keep a master resume containing everything, and cut each targeted version from it
- Reuse questionnaire answers across similar series — the competencies repeat
- Track every announcement number and closing date. Calls come months later and you will not remember which version they read

Application log

Date applied	Announcement #	Position / series / grade	Agency	Status	Last update

Other routes into the same jobs

Route	What it is
Direct hire authority	Agencies fill hard-to-staff occupations without the usual rating and ranking. Faster and far less crowded.
Agency hiring events	Frequently use on-the-spot appointment authority. Bring your documents.
Term and temporary appointments	Shorter commitments that often convert, and that build the federal experience competitive announcements ask for.
Special appointing authorities	Veterans, military spouses, and individuals with disabilities may be appointed without competition. Covered in the Military-to-Federal and Military Spouse guides.
Contractor to federal	Supporting an agency as a contractor builds directly relevant experience and internal visibility.

THE STRATEGIC POINT

Applicants who only chase public competitive announcements compete against the largest possible pool for the smallest share of openings.

An hour spent working out which alternate route fits your situation is worth more than ten applications.

Closing

The federal system is not arbitrary, and it is not a black box. It is a rules-based process that publishes its own criteria and then applies them literally. Once you know that the questionnaire is the screen, that the announcement is the specification, and that the resume exists to corroborate both, the whole thing becomes navigable.

What it will not become is fast. Plan the months, keep the pipeline moving, and treat silence as the default rather than as information.

THE SIX THAT MATTER MOST

Preview the questionnaire before you write anything. It is the closest thing to an answer key you will get.

Answer at the highest level you can substantiate — then make the resume substantiate it.

Search by occupational series, not by keyword.

Go back and confirm the application shows as submitted. The handoff is where applications silently fail.

Save searches with daily alerts. Announcements close in days, sometimes early.

Keep applying while you wait. Four to six months is normal, and stopping costs you a season.