



# The Unofficial Geographer's Guide to Finding & Applying for Federal Jobs

Approximately 20,000 federal jobs are listed each day on <http://www.usajobs.gov>. Here, you can search for jobs by job title, by agency, by location, and by salary.

## Pay and Benefits

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Despite rumors to the contrary, Federal jobs pay quite well. The following table shows possible grades and salary ranges for recent graduates. For detailed salary tables and a description of the federal grade system: <http://www.opm.gov/oca/07tables/indexGS.asp>

Degree	General Schedule (GS) Grade*	Possible Starting Salary **
Bachelors	GS-7 through GS-10	\$31,000 - \$54,000
Masters	GS-10 through GS-12	\$43,000 - \$73,000
PhD	GS-12 through GS-15	\$56,000 - \$120,000

\* Grade chosen for a particular position depends on agency policy. For instance, a Cartographer at one agency may be a GS-9, while at another agency it may be a GS-11.

\*\* Salaries vary across the country, and generally are higher in areas with high cost-of-living.

The federal government also has affordable health insurance (which you get to keep after you retire), a 401(k)-like plan with a generous matching contribution, life insurance, a public transit subsidy, and other benefits. Find details at: <http://www.opm.gov>

Vacation is accrued at 13 days (0-3 years of service), 19 days (3-14 years), and 26 days (15 or more years). You also accrue 13 days of sick leave each year. Most can carry over to next year.

Many agencies have adopted flexible hours, teleworking, and compressed work schedule options to allow employees flexibility. Some agencies even have fitness centers, daycare, and other amenities on-site.

## Job classifications

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Agencies that hire geographers include Commerce (Census Bureau, USGS, NOAA), Department of Defense, Department of State, Department of Transportation, HUD, Homeland Security, USDA, CIA, NASA, Department of Agriculture, Department of Justice, and others.

**Don't limit your search to the title of "geographer" ... The federal job classification system does not accurately describe job titles!!!** For instance, classifications like community planner, management analyst, surveyor, social scientist, analyst, wildlife conservation specialist, biologist, cartographer, homeland security specialist, economist, data specialist, intelligence analyst, or contract manager all may be related to geography or GIS. You must use a broad search on USAJobs, and check back often as jobs are posted daily.

## Application process

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Many potential applicants are afraid of the “red tape” involved in the hiring process, or fret long delays. In recent years, agencies have computerized and streamlined the hiring process. There is less paperwork (sometimes none, as some agencies now accept electronic applications) and the processing time has been getting shorter, ideally, 45 days or less. Secrets to responding to a vacancy announcement: 1) Be patient but persistent 2) Read the vacancy announcements carefully 3) Be sure to include **everything** the announcement asks for 4) Mail the application at least 5 days before the due date.

The first step is writing a brief cover letter, just like you would for any other job. The next step is completing form OF-612 (Optional Application for Federal Employment, available as a PDF on the USAJOBS website). Submit this **instead of** your resume. You may include additional pages as long as your name and SSN appear on each page. Include software skills, types of courses taken, papers presented, awards, honors, etc.

Next, you will have to write several narrative statements explaining how you have the **knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs)** to fit the position. The KSAs will be clearly stated in the vacancy announcement. For **each** KSA, write up to one page, single-spaced. Be specific. Relate your education, research, or work experience to the KSA. Read the vacancy announcement carefully to see if any additional material (such as a college transcript, additional narratives, or a questionnaire) is required.

Shortly after the closing date, you should receive a postcard or letter acknowledging your application was received.

Within 2-3 weeks of the closing date, you should receive a letter stating whether or not you meet the basic qualifications for the job. The agency’s Human Resource department (not the hiring manager) makes these decisions and narrows the choice down to 3-5 candidates.

While you are waiting, it’s a good idea to learn about the agency/office/bureau/division you will be working for. Search the agency’s web page for an organizational chart, which will help you become familiar with some of the key managers (division directors, bureau chiefs, deputy assistant secretaries, etc) and what they do. You may have to undergo security clearance, which may add a few weeks to the process.

If you make the short list (usually 3-5 candidates), the hiring manager may call you in for an interview. Government interviews are just like interviews anywhere. You should be yourself, be honest, be excited and enthusiastic, and explain how you can make a contribution. There is no reason to be nervous – it is not a police interrogation!!! Some agencies allow interviews by telephone. After your interview, it may take another two to three weeks before you will know if you get the job. Hiring managers have the right to hire any of the top three, or hire none. Or, project budgets can be cut, and the manager may no longer be allowed to hire anyone. If you don’t make it your first time, keep applying for similar positions. It often takes several attempts to land a federal job...but its worth it!