

Interviewing Guide

There are a number of concrete steps you can take to increase the probability that a job interview will be successful-i.e., that you will receive an offer or will be invited to return for additional interviews. Being well prepared will increase your self-confidence and peace of mind which will in turn improve your performance in the interview.

First, a word about interviews in general. Remember that while interviews can occasionally be adversarial, more often an interviewer wants to find an outstanding candidate for the job as much as you want to find a fulfilling job. Put another way, he or she needs to hire as much as you need to be hired. It helps to think of the process as one where both parties are hoping for a positive outcome.

Throughout your life you will be interviewed by some people who are skilled interviewers and by others who are not. There is no one "right" way to interview, and no matter what the format, it is your responsibility to do the best you can in each situation.

Because interviewing is an unrehearsed conversation between two strangers, the discussion can take as many paths as there are people. For that reason, it is crucial to be comfortable with the *unfolding* of the process. That comfort comes in large measure from advance preparation. The only thing you can know for certain is that every interview is unique!

Preparation

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of being well prepared for a job interview. Your degree of preparation speaks volumes about your interest level and conscientiousness. In addition to increasing your confidence, solid preparation will help you to give articulate answers and ask pertinent questions.

In order to make the best case for your candidacy for a particular job, you need to be prepared with information about yourself AND about the job, company, and field. It is difficult to make a case for a match if you only have information about one side of the equation.

Researching Yourself

Many people incorrectly assume that they know themselves well enough and that they don't need to spend time thinking about themselves before an interview. It is important to think about yourself specifically in a job setting and to reflect on how your experiences have prepared you for work in that setting. It is also important to be able to articulate to a stranger what he or she is interested in knowing about you. It may seem awkward at first to talk about yourself if you are not accustomed to it. If you are not shy about discussing

your talents and accomplishments, it may take some practice to sound confident but not arrogant. If you tend to be humble, it may take practice to avoid sounding overly self-deprecating.

To think about yourself, consider the following topics:

- Long-standing as well as brand-new interests and hobbies
- Talents and abilities that you have and would like to use in a job setting
- Skills that you would like to develop or improve
- Activities and tasks that you would like to avoid in a job setting
- Lifestyle, salary, location
- Kinds of people and environments that you prefer
- Current career and educational goals
- Past experiences that you would like to highlight and what you have learned from them. These could be ANY kind of experience including work, volunteer, academic, athletic, artistic, and travel. Think broadly.

Reviewing the sample interview questions in this publication will also help you to "research" yourself and discover what is most important for you to communicate to a potential employer.

Researching a Company or Organization

To research an organization or a company, begin by reading their own promotional literature. Call the organization or company and ask if they would send you their annual report or any other literature. Your company research can also begin by using the Internet, perhaps the best source these days for researching companies

With regard to the specific position for which you are interviewing, try to have a basic grasp of the duties that it would involve, as well as how that position fits into the overall organization. Think about how that position contributes to the success of the company, and gear your comments to show how your background and talents would enable you to maximize that contribution.

First Impressions

Most interviewers will admit (and research supports) that they have largely made up their minds about a candidate within the first five minutes of meeting him or her. Important "first impression" indicators? A firm handshake, sustained eye contact, a warm smile, good posture, and introducing yourself in a relaxed and confident manner.

Even before you can make a first impression, you must arrive on time. If it means getting somewhere an hour early because you are uncertain about the traffic, parking availability, or public transportation connections, do it! You can always find a coffee shop or a lobby in which to wait and review your thoughts. You'll want to arrive at the location of your interview about 10 minutes ahead of your scheduled appointment.

A few basics about superficial presentation bear repeating. A well-groomed, professional appearance is essential. Anything else will detract from the best possible presentation you can make. Decide what to wear well before the day of your interview, allowing time for dry cleaning or pressing as necessary. If your outfit is new, wear it once before your first interview. Make sure that all buttons and zippers work. You *don't* want to give your clothes a second thought as you go to the interview. You *do* want to feel comfortable and confident in whatever you choose to wear.

A good way to determine suitable attire is to look at what people in your particular field are wearing. Men and women should generally plan to wear a fairly conservative suit in a fairly conservative color. In some creative fields you may have more leeway in terms of formal vs. casual attire, but it is always safer to err on the conservative side. Long hair should be kept in place with barrettes, a headband, or a ponytail unless your style is one that stays put. Very long hair should be pulled back. In any case, leave at home the wild ties, attention-grabbing jewelry, strong scents, and gum.

You should always bring along extra copies of your resume, something to write on, and something to write with. An expensive portfolio is not necessary—a clean folder and pad of paper will suffice. You may also want to consider bringing additional items that you have produced and that you think would support your presentation. These might include writing samples, published articles, spreadsheets, software programs, photos, and videos. Writing samples are the most common item for people (particularly students and recent graduates) to bring to an interview. If you have questions about something else, ask a Career Center counselor. If possible, you should be willing to leave anything you bring, so make sure you have good-quality, clean copies.

Heart of the Interview

The age-old advice to "be yourself" is still the best general thought to keep in mind as you prepare for an interview. People can get into all kinds of trouble trying to be someone they are not. If you obtain a job offer through impersonation, it will be a shock for both you and your employer when the real you is revealed.

When you think about being yourself, however, concentrate on being your "best self." This thought extends from the suit you wear to the examples from your past that you choose to highlight. An interview is a brief period of time in which to make an impression. You want yours to be a *positive* one. Present the highs and not the lows, the enthusiasm and not the doubt. No one denies that most people have negative experiences, low moments, and uncertainty about major decisions, but in 30-45 minutes, there simply is not time to discuss them. By focusing on positive elements, you will help to make the tone of the entire interview a positive one.

If you are asked to describe a failure, a weakness, or a negative experience, try to finish your response on an upbeat note. You can do this by mentioning a lesson learned, how you have grown from a difficult experience, or what you are doing to improve a weakness. You can also discuss a failure that you later turned into a success or a

weakness that sometimes works as a strength for you. This approach will communicate that you are a positive and forward-thinking person. If you must bring up something negative, be brief, and return the conversation to a positive subject as soon as you are able.

Among the most tempting negative subjects are previous bosses and boring tasks. While your assessment may be quite true and perfectly justified, *choose something else* to talk about. You don't want to give the impression that you are a negative person. You may leave someone with the mistaken impression that you might speak about a future manager in the same way or that you are unwilling to dig in and do the mundane part of a job.

Without being too rigid about it, you will want to have three or four key points in mind that you make sure to discuss in the interview. These might be personal characteristics, skills you have learned, or experiences that you have had, that would help show that you could perform well in the job. Thinking beforehand about what these points should be for a particular interview will make it easier to include them in the discussion.

You will also want to have in mind *specific* examples and anecdotes from your past to illustrate important points about yourself. Generalities are usually weaker than specifics in trying to prove a point. For example, instead of saying only that you can see a project through from start to finish, elaborate by describing how you had an idea for a particular magazine and led the effort to have it published. When generalizing about your strong sales skills, describe how you sold more t-shirts than anyone on your softball team had ever sold. Remember, however, that during the interview, you may want to bring up an achievement you hadn't considered as one of your examples, simply because it would make the strongest answer to a question.

A prospective employer's impression of you will be considerably enhanced if a genuine air of enthusiasm accompanies your responses. If you are competing against a group of candidates who all have little or no direct experience in the field, enthusiasm might be the deciding factor. If you are not enthusiastic about a position, it will be difficult to feign interest in the interview. If you are sincerely enthusiastic, don't be afraid to communicate it.

If you are puzzled about the qualities and characteristics an employer seeks, put yourself in his or her shoes for a moment and imagine what kind of person they would like to hire. When reviewing your resume and thinking about your past, focus on stories that demonstrate flexibility, adaptability, creativity, initiative, leadership, and responsibility. These are general traits that most employers seek in the people they hire. You will also want to give examples that show progress, growth, and achievement.

Feel free to take time to think before you answer, particularly when asked a thoughtful question. Five or ten seconds may seem like an eternity, but it is perfectly acceptable to take that time before beginning to speak. In fact, taking a few moments is preferable to beginning an aimless answer or blurting out something you will later wish you hadn't

said. If you are unsure about the meaning of a question, repeat it aloud or ask a clarifying question.

You may have to say "I don't know" in an interview, if you don't have the information requested at hand or if you simply don't know the answer to a question. If it is appropriate, offer to find out and get back to the interviewer later in the day or early the next day. Otherwise, be honest; some questions are designed to stump you, and it is riskier to make up an answer than to tell the truth.

If you feel that you have made a mistake, or said something you wish you hadn't, you can address it directly. You may say something such as, "I would like to rephrase my answer to the previous question..." This may be particularly important if you are so disturbed by what you said that you do not think you will be able to give focused answers to the remaining questions.

If you are being interviewed by more than one person, be sure to address all of the people in the room when you are answering questions. Even if one person is doing most of the talking, or if interviewers are alternating questions, it is polite and professional to maintain eye contact with each person.

Communicating information about yourself is your responsibility. It is not up to the interviewer to drag it out of you. The interviewer will often signal the end of the interview by asking if you have any questions. If you feel you haven't discussed some key points, take the initiative and say, "Before I ask my first question, there are a couple of points I would like to mention."

If you have prepared for your interview, there is only a slight chance that you will be completely surprised by a question posed to you. Of course, the possibility exists, and some people may indeed try to shock you, but those experiences are few and far between. If that happens, try to remain calm and poised; it may just be a test of your composure.

It is natural to feel nervous before an interview. Your goal is to eliminate unnecessary nervousness by being well prepared. A good night's sleep, a healthy breakfast, and plenty of travel time can also have a soothing effect on your nerves. Remember, the ideal is to be comfortable with the unfolding of the process. If you can truly enjoy the interview, you will communicate self-assurance and positive energy.

Follow-Up

Before leaving an interview you should be clear as to the next step. Your interviewer will usually tell you when you can expect to hear from them. If he or she says nothing, you may ask, "How should we proceed from here?" or "When might I expect to hear from you?"

As soon as possible, take notes about what happened. If you are going to another interview in the same day, this is particularly important, because you don't want to

confuse any details. This information will become crucial if you are invited back for a second interview. Be sure to note what you learned about the company or the field, impressions of the people with whom you met, what you would like to find out more about, your responsibilities as far as any follow-up call, and when you can expect to hear from them. If you did not receive business cards from the people you met (or see their names on a diploma on the wall), you may call the company directly when you get home and ask the receptionist for the correct spellings of their names and titles.

As always, writing a *prompt thank-you note* is a must. The note can be brief and should not exceed one page. Your correspondence will serve to accomplish the following: you can express your appreciation, reconfirm your interest in the job, underline how you think your background and skills would fulfill the responsibilities of the position, and demonstrate that you listened carefully.

- **Behavioral or Situational Questions:** In order to hear more than generalities from a candidate, interviewers may ask questions about specific experiences from your past. Examples are: Tell me about a time when you demonstrated initiative. Describe an example of your leadership ability. Tell me about an experience that you have had working on a team when the group could not proceed due to an interpersonal conflict-how did you respond and what role did you play on the team? Interviewers will assume that your answers to these questions will reveal interesting information about you and may be reliable predictors of your behavior in future situations.
- **Role Play Questions:** Some interviewers like to ask you to role play, posing a question such as "Imagine that you were the Director of Marketing and the CEO presented the following problem to you, how would you handle it?" The variations are endless. Remember to think for a moment or two before you begin to answer.
- **Industry-specific Questions:** Even for entry-level positions, some interviewers will want to get a sense of how much you know about the industry. For example, they might ask a question like, "Can you explain the difference between an investment bank and a commercial bank?"
- **Current Events Questions:** Sometimes in an effort to be conversational or to actually gain information about your political views, an interviewer will ask for your opinion on an upcoming election or a current event of particular interest. Be wary of expressing strong political opinions when you don't know about the political culture of the organization or the orientation of the person interviewing you. It is best to be brief and to say something nonpartisan. Of course, if you are interviewing for a political position, for example with the Democratic or Republican National Committees, they will certainly want to confirm that your views are in line with those of their party. In that case, you may well have an in-depth political discussion.
- **Illegal Questions:** Most employers know that it is illegal to ask about age, ethnic background, national origin, marital status, family planning, or sexual, religious, or political preference. Try to think about why the question was asked and respond directly to that concern without answering the question. For example, if

you are asked if you plan to marry or how many children you plan to have, you may choose to answer, "If you are concerned about my ability to travel, I can assure you that my family responsibilities will not interfere with my ability to do the traveling that is necessary for this position." If you think that your answer will help you, you may choose to answer the question directly. You should take the incident into account when evaluating the organization and also let a Career Center counselor know about it.

- **Case questions:** Generally asked by consulting companies, case questions will be discussed in detail in the final section of this handout.

Your Questions for the Interviewer

For many, the question "Do you have any questions for me?" is one of the most feared. Again, preparation is the key to reducing that fear. A list of sample questions is at the end of this section but is by no means exhaustive. You could conceivably come up with an entirely original list of excellent questions very specific to a company or a field.

The first part is easy—you should always have a couple of questions to ask. Having none would communicate lack of interest. Furthermore, it is not an entirely innocent question from an interviewer. Usually it is another way for him or her to measure your interest in the organization, knowledge of the field, maturity, professionalism, and communication skills.

In order to make sure that you have a couple of excellent questions to ask, you must prepare more than two! An interviewer may answer some of your questions during the course of the conversation, and you don't want to be caught short. In order to prevent a last-minute "blank," you may want to write out a list of at least five to bring with you to the interview. Be sure to list your top questions first.

It sounds obvious, but you should ask questions that you want to know the answers to. Otherwise, your questions may sound canned or someone may feel that you are simply going through the motions.

A general guideline to follow is to ask broad questions first and then move to the more specific. For example, ask a question about a new division of the company, or the changing mission of the organization before asking about the specific responsibilities of the open position or the training provided.

It is very important to consider who will be answering your questions. You obviously won't want to ask all of the same questions of the CEO and a human resources representative. Think about asking someone higher up in the organization about the group's strategy or future plans or overall mission. If you are talking to someone whose responsibilities are closer to those of the position in question, ask more about a typical day and common challenges.

Another general hint for formulating questions is to bring up a current event, piece of proposed legislation, or demographic trend, and ask about the impact on a particular company's strategy, their business in a certain part of the world, or their competitors.

It is best not to ask about salary, vacation, and benefits until you are offered the job. There will be time for detailed questions and negotiation later in the process if you receive an offer. Concentrate on asking questions that will help you to learn more about the responsibilities of the position and the culture of the organization. Use the suggestions below to help you brainstorm for your own questions.

Interviewing Tips

What is An Interview?

It is a dialogue allowing you to expand on the information described in your resume and an opportunity for the interviewer to provide more details about the job, ascertaining how you fit the job requirements.

The interviewer will ask you questions designed to gain information about your personality, background and qualifications. You will ask questions concerning the job and the organization. During this conversation you have the opportunity to present yourself in a positive and confident manner.

Before the Interview

Attend An Interview Workshop

[See our workshop schedule.](#)

Take A Personality Inventory

Analyze how your strengths, personal and academic experiences, as well as your interests can be transferred to the position for which you are applying.

Research

Investigate the basic facts about the job responsibilities and the services/products of the organization. Obtain the interviewer's name and title.

Review Potential Questions

Decide what points you will use to answer commonly asked interview questions. Practice out loud to be able to communicate your qualifications concisely. Also think about questions you may want to ask the employer. (see sample questions below)

Find Out Time And Place

Be sure you have the correct time and clear directions to the interview.

Check Appearance

Your attire should be neat, professional and appropriate for your intended field.

During the Interview

- 1) Greet your interviewer by name, with a firm handshake and a smile.
- 2) Be self-confident, alert and interested.
- 3) Do not smoke or chew gum.
- 4) Sit comfortably, maintain good body posture.
- 5) Maintain good eye contact.
- 6) Listen closely to what the interviewer is saying.
- 7) Be articulate; do not use slang.
- 8) Avoid rambling; think before answering.
- 9) Ask well-thought-out questions.
- 10) Concentrate on your positive attributes.
- 11) Ascertain needed follow-up action.
- 12) Express thanks to the interviewer.

After the Interview

Evaluate The Interview

Consider where you did well and with which questions you had difficulty. Practice those areas in which you need improvement.

Send A [Thank You Letter](#)

Be sure to use the correct name and title of the person who interviewed you. Emphasize your interest in the position. Mention any facts you may have omitted in the interview.

Follow Up

If you do not get a response soon after the date which the interviewer indicated, it is a good idea to telephone and inquire about the position.

Continue Job Search

Job hunting is an ongoing process. Begin working on preparing for your next interview.

Questions Posed by Interviewers

- Tell me about yourself (in two minutes).
- Why do you feel that you will be successful in ...?
- Why did you decide to interview with our organization?
- Are you willing to relocate?
- Why did you choose your major?
- Tell me about your scholastic record.
- What courses did you like best? least? Why?
- Tell me about your extra-curricular activities and interests.
- What have been your most satisfying and most disappointing school or work experiences?
- What did you learn from your part-time or summer job experiences?
- What supervisory or leadership roles have you held?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Do you have plans for graduate study?

- How do you spend your spare time?
- Why should we hire you?
- Describe briefly your philosophy of education or nursing (etc.).
- Tell me about your practice teaching or clinical experiences (etc.).
- Why did you choose to become a teacher, nurse,...?
- How would your last supervisor describe you?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years?
- Do you think your grades are a good indication of your academic achievements?
- How do you work under pressure?
- Why do you want to leave your current job? (If employed full-time.)
- Describe one or two achievements which have given you the most satisfaction.
- In what ways would you contribute to our organization?

Reply Hints for Some "Tough Questions"

"Tell Me About Yourself"

A common opener, this broad question can "throw" many interviewees. It is in fact a "sell-me" invitation. Develop a brief summation of your background leading into your interest and desire to work for the organization as well as your qualifications for the position.

"Why Should We Hire You?"

From your research, you should have gathered information on entry level opportunities within the organization and the necessary qualifications for those positions. From your own self-analysis you will have gained insight into your strengths and accomplishments. Mention key functions of the job and discuss your skills in relation to these functions. Use experiences from previous jobs, internships, and activities as examples to support your answer.

"What Are Your Long Range Goals?"

This question is popular because it gathers a lot of useful information: maturity, foresight and realistic outlook, degree of preparation in career planning, and commitment to the organization and profession. --In your research determine what position you could reasonably reach in five years. Speak to others who have successfully advanced themselves in the organization or profession. Express your desire and capability to grow within the organization. While you may be unsure of your future plans, demonstrate your knowledge of potential career paths.

"What Is Your Greatest Weakness?"

Everyone has a weakness but remember not to answer in a negative way. Turn your weakness into a positive (for example) "Because I tend to procrastinate, I have learned to work well under pressure and to always get work done on time."

"Tell Me About Your Schooling"

The key to this question is to keep your reply positive. Speak well of your alma mater. You are a product of your school's educational programs. Be prepared to address questions about low grades, major changes, etc.

Sample Questions to Ask Employers

- How and when will my performance be evaluated on this job? How is success measured in this department/organization?
- What are the career paths in this department/organization?
- What are the day-to-day responsibilities in this job? Is a written job description available?
- Does the management encourage the policy of promotion from within the organization?
- Describe typical first year assignments on the job.
- Tell me about your training or orientation programs.
- What are the challenging facets of the job?
- What are the organization's plans for future growth or change?
- What makes your firm, hospital, school system, ad agency, etc., different?
- What are the organization's strengths, and what challenges does it face?
- How would you describe your organization's personality and management style?
- What are your expectations for new hires within their first three to six months on the job?
- Describe the work environment.
- What is the overall structure of the department where the position is located?
- What qualities are you looking for in your new hires?
- What characteristics does a successful person have in your organization, hospital, agency, etc.?
- **Nursing** may wish to ask about orientation, promotions, shift differentials, chain of command, malpractice policies.)
- **Education** may wish to ask about in-service training and opportunities for professional development; textbook selection procedures; approaches to curricula; parental involvement in school-related issues or PTA; median age/turnover of faculty; master's degree requirements.)