

Staying Cool in the Hot Seat

A Guide to Interviewing

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An Introduction

Congratulations! You have an interview! After the initial elation wears off and you have called all your friends, relatives, and significant others, the terror strikes: what will I say? What are they going to ask me? Will I make a fool out of myself? What will I wear?

The best way to overcome these fears is to prepare for anything! Interviewing techniques and interviewers vary greatly:

- Some do all the talking
- Others don't talk at all or talk very little
- Some are relaxed and casual
- Others are aggressive
- Some ask intelligent questions
- Others don't know what to ask

You can control some aspects of an interview, but not all. This booklet focuses on strategies and helpful tips that will enable you to interview with confidence.

First Things First

The most important thing to remind yourself of as you begin the interviewing process is that it is a two-way street. That is, you want to find the right employer just as much as the employer wants to find the right employee. Really, both of you are looking for the best fit. In the end, if an offer is not made to you, or if you decide not to accept an offer (yes, that does happen), it is probably the best decision for both parties because most likely, the fit was not there. So while there is pressure on you as the interviewee, to do and say the right things, remember, the employer should also be putting his/her best foot forward. You are not the only one squirming under the microscope slide! Check them out as well



Kinds of Interviews

There are four general categories of interviews. They are: screening, or initial interviews; phone interviews; selection interviews; and informational interviews.

Screening or Initial Interviews are usually the first in a series of interviews. Employers use preliminary interviews to determine whether there might be a match between them and the candidate. The interviewer closely examines the candidate's qualifications, background, and interest. They are short, usually about a half hour to an hour in length and consist of the following elements:

- Welcome and introduction
- Small talk
- Getting acquainted questions
- Description of the job and the organization (or asks the candidate to tell what he or she knows about the organization)
- Questions from the interviewer
- Questions from the candidate
- Closing



But remember, each interview is unique and different, interviewers have different styles.

Phone Interviews are typically used when it is not convenient to meet in person. The employer arranges a time with the candidate and places the call. Prepare for a phone interview just as you would for a preliminary interview. Remember to smile as you would in a face-to-face interaction. A smile can be “heard” over the telephone and it communicates enthusiasm and friendliness.

Selection Interviews, while containing some of the same elements as preliminary interviews, tend to be substantially longer. They may include dining with the employer and touring the facilities. You will probably meet lots of people during an on-site interview including supervisors, colleagues, support staff or clientele. You will be expected to speak in more depth about your academic record, related skills and strengths, work experience, knowledge of the organization, and career and life goals. If you must travel to participate in the on-site interview, you will incur travel lodging, and dining expenses. Be sure to inquire beforehand how expenses are to be handled to eliminate any misunderstanding. If you are to be reimbursed, you must save all receipts to document your expenditures.

The fourth major type of interviews is the **Informational Interview**. These are set up by you to obtain more information about a particular job or career field; **NOT** for the purpose of getting a job or internship with a particular company. The interview itself gives you the opportunity to speak with someone who actually works in the field or in the organization you have contacted. From the interview you can gain firsthand information about work responsibilities, work structures, career paths, etc.

There are several benefits of informational interviewing:

- It offers a great opportunity to network and build contacts for your future job search
- By working hard to make a good first impression, you increase your chances that the employer will be able to help you in the future
- It also provides you with a great opportunity to practice your interviewing skills leading ultimately to increased confidence with the entire process

How Do I Set It Up?

You may want to begin with people you already know (family, friends). They may know people who work within organizations or occupations that interest you. Another resource to tap into is your school's alumni network, the AmeriCorps alumni network (the AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Alums LinkedIn groups are a great place to start), as well as staff connections you have made through previous jobs.

Once you have identified people you want to contact, the easiest way to set up an appointment is by phone or email. When setting up an appointment, you want to be as specific as possible about why you want to meet. Be sure to explain to the person that you want to gather information, that you are not seeking a specific job. If you have trouble contacting the person you need to speak with, do not give up hope. You may need to take the initiative and call several times. Another way to set up an interview is to first write a letter and indicate that you will follow up with a telephone call to set up a time to talk.

What's next?

After you have confirmed your appointment, take some time to brainstorm questions you may want to ask your interviewee.* Arriving at the interview destination prepared and ready to go with a list of questions will create a great first impression. You may even want to send your interviewee a sampling of the type of questions you will be asking so that he or she can prepare for your meeting. For a sampling of questions to ask see page 11 in this handbook or make an appointment with a staff member in the Service Learning & Career Development Center for other ideas.

*Please remember that you will be doing the bulk of the questioning during this type interview. Be prepared to ask good question and do not rely on the person you are interviewing to control the conversation; they will be expecting you to do this!

Like other types of interviews, **don't forget to send a thank-you note** expressing your gratitude for your interviewee's time and energy.

Desired Traits

Predictors of Success

There are many things you can do throughout a job search and interview process that can help you be successful. One of the most important is exhibiting the skills and characteristics an employer is looking for. Below is a list of skills* gathered from research completed by the National Association of Colleges and Employers:

- Ability to communicate clearly and concisely
- Honesty/Integrity
- Teamwork skills (works well with others)
- Strong work ethic
- Analytical skills
- Flexibility/adaptability
- Interpersonal skills (relates well to others)
- Motivation/initiative
- Computer skills
- Detail-oriented
- Organizational skills
- Leadership skills
- Self-Confidence
- Well-mannered/polite
- Friendly/outgoing personality
- Tactfulness
- Creativity
- GPA (3.0 or better)
- Entrepreneurial skills/risk-taker
- Sense of humor

*Please keep in mind that you **do not** have to possess all of these skills/characteristics to be successful! This list is merely here to get you thinking about your candidacy the way an employer might.

Knock-Out Factors

On the other hand, there are a number of traits that may keep you from being successful in the interview process:

- Poor planning
- Lack of qualifications outlined in job description
- Inability to express oneself clearly (both oral and written)
- Insufficient evidence of achievement
- Failure to research or showing a lack of interest the organization
- Unwillingness to relocate
- Appearing overbearing, overaggressive, conceited
- Seeming to be interested only in money and benefits
- Failure to follow-up after interview



Getting Ready

Or Six Steps to Interview Success

If you thought you worked hard to get an interview...think again, now you will want to work just as hard to be successful in that interview. By being well prepared, you increase your chances of doing well in the interview. Employers look for people who seem comfortable with themselves and the interview process. Here are six things you should do before you go to the interview:

1. Get the Facts — When the phone call comes, do not be afraid to ask for specific details. Make sure you have all the information you need. Who will interview you (make sure you have the correct pronunciation and spelling of their name), how long the interview will last, and what the interview format will be are all good questions to ask in advance. Be clear on where you are to go on the day of the interview. If you will be traveling, make sure plans are clear. Additionally, be sure to get the name of a contact person and a phone number you can call in case you have additional questions. This person is also a good resource if you need to reschedule or cancel your appointment (not a step to be taken lightly).



2. Research the Organization – This is an essential part of the pre-interview process. Knowledge of the organization, its products or services, structure, locations, and needs will be key to your interviewing success. You will be using what you know about the organization to help you predict their questions and style of interviewing, to formulate your responses to their questions, and to ask good questions. There are several ways to find out about an organization:

A. Their Annual Report

Any public organization has to provide an annual report to the public. These reports can usually be found in the public library, the Internet, and certainly from the organization itself. The report can give you important information regarding production, profit, trends, or other issues facing the organization.

B. Internet

Most organizations have their own web site. In many cases, considerable information about organizational programs, staff structure, clients, etc can be found on an organization's web site.

C. Connections in your Network

If you know someone who works in the organization, this is a great chance to get the inside scoop. Check to see if someone in the AmeriCorps or your school's alumni network works in the organization. You may be able to try out some of the questions that you will ask the actual interviewer. Additionally, this person may be able to provide you with "a day in the life" type of information.

D. **Your School's Resource Library**

If you have attended a post-secondary school, your school's career development center may help you learn more about the organization with which you are interviewing. In particular, some of the internship books and directories have extensive descriptions of various organizations.

Regardless of how you conduct your research, your knowledge of your prospective employer will greatly enhance your performance in a job interview. Such knowledge is more than just an edge over people who do not do their homework, it is imperative to getting a job.

3. Know Yourself — This is the time to think about your strengths and skills and how they fit with the needs of the organization. By doing your research about the organization in step number two (2), you will not have to think about this in a vacuum.

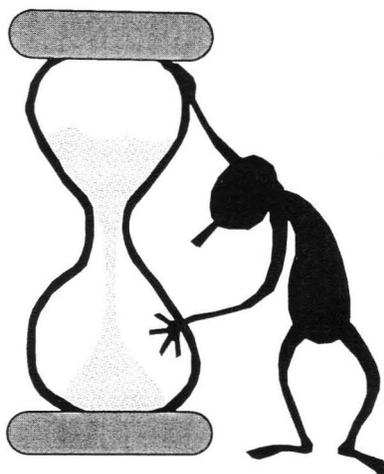
- What are your personal and job values (e.g., job security, working conditions, flexibility, advancement opportunities)? What is important to you in a job?
- What are your transferable skills and abilities (e.g. writing, organizing information, managing events, leading a group)? Be able to explain how your skills can meet the employer's needs.
- What is your work style (e.g., personal traits like being persevering, responsible, adaptable, self-reliant)? What may distinguish you from other job candidates is your ability to explain how your positive work traits influence the way you use your skills.
- What are your weaknesses? Often employers will ask you to identify your weaknesses. It is true that everyone has room for improvement, so take time to identify your areas of weakness. Choose a weakness that is specific enough that you can explain the steps you have taken and will take in the future to overcome the weakness you mention. Do not leave room for the employer to raise further questions about your abilities.
- Try to anticipate what questions they may ask and how you would respond to them. (See Appendix A for sample questions)

4. Develop Questions — Think ahead about questions you want to ask them. No doubt, at some juncture in the interview, the interviewer will ask you if you have any questions for them. Have some really good ones. These are ones you could not have gotten the answer to by doing the research in step 2. Come up with interesting thought-provoking questions which will make the interviewer feel you are sincerely interested in the organization's future and your work there. (See Appendix B) This is *not* the time to ask questions about salary and benefits, wait until the employer specifically mentions it.

5. Practice – Try out some of your responses to questions on friends and relatives. Hear the words come out of your mouth and see if they sound o.k. Practice interviews can help you to feel more confident as you try different answers, ask different questions of the interviewer and start to feel comfortable in an interview style that suits you. Also, if you have attended a post-secondary school, consider contacting your school's career development center to see if you can talk with them about interview skills and setting up a **mock interview**.

6. Handle The Last Minute Details – What will you wear for the interview? Plan ahead and make sure you have the appropriate attire clean and pressed. No one has ever gotten a job because of their wonderful outfit, however, many people have gotten removed from a process because of inappropriate attire. Know where you are going and plan for plenty of time. Produce extra copies of your resume and, if you have one, make sure your job search portfolio is together and looking it's best.

If you have followed these six steps, you will be more prepared for your interview than the average candidate. Please keep in mind that you cannot anticipate every part of an interview, but preparation and handling the unexpected with grace will help you to be a successful candidate.



The Interview

The day has finally arrived. This is your chance to shine. You are prepared and raring to go.

A typical interview will usually begin with a firm handshake and a few minutes of “small talk.” At this juncture, the employer is attempting to put you at ease and to establish rapport.

Soon after, the interviewer will usually get right down to business and begin asking questions. Remember, the employer has to be on his/her toes. The interviewer has to make you feel comfortable so they can elicit the best responses from you, ask intelligent questions, remember your answers and think of the next question; so, the sooner you seem comfortable and turn the interview into a conversation, the better it will be for everyone.

While you can't be prepared for every question and every contingency, remember, you have done your homework and you are ready. Here are a few tips to guide you through the interview.

- Don't be afraid to be yourself, to let your enthusiasm show. While you want to be on your “best behavior,” you don't want to be somebody you are not because the employer will have a false sense of who you are. Remember, you wouldn't want the organization to misrepresent themselves.
- Be prepared to answer many of the same questions over and over since you will be meeting many different people.
- Avoid words like *just* and *only*. Don't minimize what you have done. You didn't just lead a student group through the rewriting of their constitution, you carefully guided the group.
- Don't hang out your dirty laundry. That is, don't volunteer negative information that was not asked for. For example, you don't need to say you are not familiar with a certain computer program if you are not asked. If asked, respond honestly, but put a positive spin on your response by letting the interviewer know that you are very comfortable with computers and you are confident that you will be able to learn their system easily.
- The corollary is, volunteer positive, relevant information that the interviewer may not have asked for.
- There will be tough questions that you didn't expect. If you need a moment to think about how to respond, take it. You are better off taking 30 seconds, breaking eye contact, and developing a well thought-out response rather than starting, getting to the middle of an answer and realizing you are giving a poor answer. If you don't respond to a questions as well as you would have liked



let it go and move on. Don't keep dwelling on it in your head or else it will affect the rest of your interview.

- Avoid using words like *um*, *uh*, *like*, and *you know*.
- Sit up, maintain comfortable eye contact (you don't need to stare them down), and above all smile and try to be at ease.
- Do not smoke, drink alcohol, or answer your cell phone during the interview (in fact, leave your cell phone at home so it is not a distraction).
- At meals, avoid ordering messy or expensive foods.

Finally, the interviewer will pause, take a deep breath, and say, "Do you have any questions for me?" It is now your turn to ask the employer all of the great questions you have prepared as well as those that came up during your interview. Use this time to ask open-ended, neutrally phrased questions. Make your questions relevant to the position for which you are interviewing and specific to the employer's needs. This is not the time for asking "yes" or "no" questions. Asking about something positive you've recently learned about the employer is a good way to end this portion of the interview. If you interview with several different people from the same organization there is nothing wrong with asking each of them the same or similar questions, it might be interesting to hear the answers.

At the end of the interview, if the interviewer does not give you a sense of when you might be hearing from him/her, don't hesitate to ask what the next step might be. If you are juggling interviews and potential offers, it is helpful to know what the process is.



After the Interview

Interviews themselves can be a stressful and draining process. But, there are some important things you **must** do following the interview.

1. Write a thank you letter

This is a necessary and effective way to thank the employer for their time and consideration. It does not need to be a big affair but you want to make sure that it is sincere in tone. This may be your last chance to demonstrate to the employer how your skills fit with their needs. See the Service Learning & Career Development Center's handbook, "Writing For Work" for examples of thank you letters.



2. Evaluate the interview

By evaluating the interview, you give yourself the opportunity to learn from your mistakes and strengths.

This is a time to reflect on your interview experience. It is important to ask yourself how you did. What were some of the strong points of the interview? In what way could your performance be improved? Feel free to set up a time with the staff at the Service Learning & Career Development Center to go over the interview and do a mock interview.

3. This is a good time to think about fit

Is this still a place where I would like to work? Were their values in synch with yours? Did people seem to be enjoying working there? Remember, interviewing is a two-way street. Do not be afraid to take stock of the organization. You can bet that they are evaluating your performance, so do not be afraid to do the same with the organization or person who interviewed you.

4. Do something nice for yourself

The interview itself requires much preparation and work. Wind down by taking some time to do something you enjoy (reading, exercise, movies, or food). It is a great way to relax after a hard day's work. You deserve it.

A Sampling of Questions

A Sampling of Questions to Ask During Your Informational Interview

- What is the employment outlook in this field?
- What kind of education does one need?
- How does your college major/minor inform your current work?
- What kind of professional development opportunities are available in this field?
- What attracts you to this work?
- What attributes does one need to be successful in this work?
- What is the down side of work in this field?
- What are typical pathways can one take to get into this kind of field and where can one go from here?
- What other kinds of organizations might hire someone to do this kind of work?
- Could you describe a typical work day?
- What are the normal salary ranges for entry into this type of work?
- What type of objections might employers have to my background?
- How did you go about finding this job?
- What might be the best way to approach prospective employers?
- What are the newest developments in the field?

Appendix A

Questions You May Be Asked

- ◆ Tell me about yourself.
- ◆ What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- ◆ Why should I hire you over other candidates?
- ◆ What kind of professors did you like?
- ◆ Do you work well under pressure? How do you handle it?
- ◆ What have you done to show initiative and innovation?
- ◆ What supervisory or leadership roles have you had?
- ◆ What interests you about this specific position?
- ◆ What have been your most satisfying and disappointing experiences?
- ◆ Why did you decide to interview with us?
- ◆ Why are your grades low? Do they reflect your ability?
- ◆ What do you know about this organization?
- ◆ What qualifications do you have that make you feel you would be successful?
- ◆ What are your own special abilities?
- ◆ What is not on your resume that you would like to tell me?
- ◆ What have you learned from the jobs you have held?
- ◆ In what school activities have you participated? Why?
- ◆ How did you spend your vacations while in school?
- ◆ What are your long range/short range goals? How do you plan to achieve them?
- ◆ What do you see yourself doing five years from now?
- ◆ Why did you choose the career for which you are preparing?
- ◆ What major problem have you encountered, and how did you deal with it?
- ◆ What have you learned from your mistakes?
- ◆ What would be your ideal job?
- ◆ Why did you select your particular major?
- ◆ Why did you select your previous job?



Behavior-Based Approach to Answering Interview Questions



Behavior-based interviewing is built on the premise that past behavior predicts future behavior and as such, allows you to focus on how you have successfully applied your skills. To be successful using a behavior-based approach, you must have analyzed your experiences and know how to relate them to the current position the company is seeking to fill. This is the time for you to make use of all of your great transferable skills identified on your résumé. A great way to accomplish this is by using the **S.T.A.R.** approach to answering questions.

The **S.T.A.R.** answer states a **Situation** or **Task** you were given, describes the **Action** you took and explains the **Results** of that action. Here is a sample **S.T.A.R.** answer to the question:

“Describe a problem or challenge you’ve encountered; how did you deal with it?”

- **Situation or Task**
Interest in being a disc jockey for the student-run radio station was falling off and I couldn’t fill the schedule.
- **Action**
I designed a promotional flyer and sent it to faculty asking them for names of students who might enjoy working at the radio station. I called students the faculty recommended and sent them a humorous but persuasive piece on the “Top 10 reasons for working in radio.”
- **Results**
I had 30 students sign up for training, 28 completed the training and now I have more than enough people for all the slots.

As you can see, the **S.T.A.R.** answer to this question gives the interviewer a concrete example of how you were able to put your skills to good use. It shows the interviewer initiative (a problem was identified and steps were taken to fix it), strong communication (faculty and students were contacted), creativity (publishing a humorous and persuasive document), and ultimately a positive end result. For more help with the **S.T.A.R.** method of answering interview questions see the staff in the Service Learning & Career Development Center.



Appendix B

Questions for the Employer

- ___ Could you show me where this position fits within the organization?
- ___ Is this a new position?
- ___ What characteristics do you most like to find in people on this assignment?
- ___ What have been some of the best results produced by people in this job?
- ___ May I talk with the person who last held this job?
- ___ What are your expectations for new hires?
- ___ How would you describe your organization's personality and management style?
- ___ What are the organization's strengths and weaknesses?
- ___ How is an employee evaluated?
- ___ What are the organization's plans and goals?
- ___ What attracted you to this organization?
- ___ What are the challenging facets of the position?
- ___ Describe opportunities for training and professional development.
- ___ Are there opportunities for advancement within the organization?



A Quick Word About Salary and Benefits

Ideally, it is best to have the interviewer initiate discussion on salary range and benefits. Before the interview, you will want to research salary and benefits for the position you are interviewing so you can have a range in mind if the interviewer asks.* Otherwise, wait for a firm offer to begin discussion about exact salary and the benefits package.

*If you need assistance finding this information contact the Service Learning & Career Development Center staff, we'd be happy to help.