

INTERVIEWING

From the Office of Career Development in University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Graduate College

Interviews are a chance for an organization to assess your qualifications for the job as well as an opportunity for you to learn about and evaluate the position. You must be able to make your résumé come alive and highlight your strengths in a short period of time.

Preparation | Types of Interview | Tips for Answering Interview Questions | Following Up

PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

Research the Employer - Practice - Attire - Logistics

Although there are multiple types of interviews, many interviews have a similar structure. After a short welcome conversation, the interviewer often provides a summary of the position and the organization. The major portion of the interview involves questions to learn about your background and experience as it pertains to this position. Your goals for the interview should be to:

- Present yourself as a polished, capable future colleague by providing great first and last impressions.
- Demonstrate your qualifications and the contributions you could make with honest and enthusiastic answers.
- Learn more about the position, organization, and workplace culture.

After the search committee questions, the interviewee is often given a chance to ask a few questions. During the conclusion, you should restate your enthusiasm for the position, mention any qualifications that you have not discussed, and thank the interviewers.

As you are preparing, consider how you will demonstrate your interest in the position and relevant experiences throughout the interview.

Research the Employer

Before any type of interview, dedicate time to research and planning. Learn more about the organization—it will improve your performance at the interview, enable you to ask smart questions, and, most importantly, help you assess the opportunity. You should research:

- History, philosophy, and mission of the organization
- Organization's website, including culture and structure
- Recent news/press releases
- Contributions to the industry or field
- Job description

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Practice

There is no substitute for practice. Find opportunities to use your interview skills. Come prepared to share your strongest experiences. Here are some tips for developing your interview skills:

- Anticipate the questions you might be asked and how you would respond.
- Recall 10-12 stories that highlight skills or experiences relevant to the position. Be sure to include those that demonstrate your communication abilities, leadership, and other soft skills.
- If you are expected to present a talk, practice it in front of an audience.
- Identify questions you want to ask the interviewers.
- Mock interviews can help you hone your skills.

ILLEGAL QUESTIONS

While it is illegal for employers to consider an applicant's race, color, religion, sex, age, or national origin when making an employment decision, you may encounter inadvertent questions about these topics. A few questions that you should not be asked include:

- Are you a U.S. citizen? (It is acceptable for an interviewer to ask if you are authorized to work in the U.S.)
- Where were you born? What is your native language?
- How old are you?
- Are you married? How many children do you have?
- Do you have any disabilities? (It is acceptable to ask if an applicant is able to perform the essential functions of the job.)

It is common for these questions to arise in social situations with well-meaning (but ignorant) interviewers. For example, during a campus visit lunch, a committee member might mention something about her children, then inquire if you also have children. When responding to such questions, assess the situation and do your best to understand the concern or reason for the question. Sometimes you may determine that you are comfortable answering the question. Other times, you may want to try to deflect the inquiry. In general, avoid responding with a combative tone. It is acceptable to volunteer information that would be illegal for interviewers to ask.

QUESTIONS ABOUT SALARY REQUIREMENTS

It is not uncommon to be asked about your salary requirements during at the time of application or interview. You may need to answer questions about your salary requirements at this time, but avoid negotiating. Here are a few tactics that might help:

- Research salary ranges before the interview so your responses are appropriate.
- Provide a range instead of a single dollar amount to give more options in the negotiation.
- Avoid committing to a specific dollar amount if asked.

The following sample phrases may be useful:

- “I applied for this position because I am very interested in this position, and I know I can make a positive impact once on the job, but I’d like to postpone discussing salary until we are both sure I’m right for the job.”
- “I expect to be compensated at a rate that is commensurate with my education and experience.”
- “My requirements are negotiable.”
- “What would you hope to pay someone in this position?”

Interview Attire

It is imperative that you are dressed professionally and that your hygiene is impeccable for job interviews. Appropriate interview attire can vary by the formality of a discipline. Even if professionals in this field usually dress casually, it is better to dress more formally for the interview.

Standard suggestions for interview attire:

- Women: Business suit or tailored dress (skirts should be just above the knee or lower); pantyhose; polished shoes.
- Men: Business suit with a pressed dress shirt and conservative tie, polished dress shoes and dark socks.

The best sartorial advice for both men and women is probably to wear appropriate and comfortable professional clothing. Key guidelines are:

- Clothing should be well-tailored and pressed.
- Hair should be neat.
- Shoes should be polished.
- Fingernails should be clean and trimmed.
- Cologne or perfume should be avoided.
- Avoid excessive jewelry or cosmetics.

Be aware of the setting and schedule for the visit. If you will likely go on a walking tour during your visit, choose shoes that will enable you to walk comfortably for several blocks. Clothing should also be climate appropriate.

Logistics

Minimize stress and present yourself professionally—the small details matter!

- Know the name and phone number of your contact. Request the schedule for your interview in advance if possible.
- Look up directions and parking in advance and allow sufficient travel time.
- Bring a professional notepad and pen as well as extra copies of relevant information, including your résumé/CV and references.
- You may also need to bring additional materials, if appropriate, such as slides or notes for a presentation or samples of your work.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Traditional - Behavioral - Case - Technical

Traditional Interviews

Traditional interview questions, often related to your professional or management style, allow employers to evaluate your fit within the culture of the organization. These questions tend to focus on how you would handle hypothetical situations. While most employers have shifted to behavioral-based interviews, you will likely encounter several traditional interview questions, such as, “Tell me about yourself,” “Why are you interested in working for us?” and “Where do you see yourself in the next five years?”

To answer a traditional interview question:

- Be prepared to sell your skills and experiences.
- Provide a specific example, even if they do not ask for one.
- Avoid rambling. Your answers should be structured, direct, and concise.

Behavioral-Based Interviews

Many organizations now use behavioral-based interviewing techniques, which require the job applicant to describe past experiences that relate to situations they might encounter in the new position. This approach is based on the belief that past performance is the best predictor of future behavior. Even if you don't have a great deal of work experience, companies expect you to be able to relate past experiences to this position. This interviewing format is less common for faculty jobs.

Behavioral-based interview questions generally start with any one of the following phrases:

- Tell me about a time when you...
- Describe a circumstance when you were faced with a problem related to...
- Think about an instance in which you...
- Tell me how you approached a situation where...

When your interview is behavioral-based, you should expect a structured interview with set questions, as opposed to a more conversational style. The interviewer is probably evaluating you against a profile of desired behaviors considered necessary for success. You may receive follow-up questions that probe for more details and attempt to evaluate the consistency of your answers. Many of the questions will have multiple parts, and the interviewer will generally take notes during your answers.

Case Interviews

Employers often use case interviews to assess candidates' ability to communicate ideas persuasively, solve problems collaboratively, and think strategically. You may be asked to participate in a case interview with other candidates or with one or more interviewers. In a case interview, you will be given a situation or problem and will be asked to provide a resolution. To be successful during a case interview:

- Listen and understand the prompt. Ask for clarification.
- Define the problem and identify what analysis is necessary to research a solution.
- Focus on creating value for the client and explain your reasoning.
- Do not jump to conclusions—take time to consider and organize your ideas.
- Be creative and experiment with options. Test your hypotheses.
- Summarize your thoughts and make a recommendation.

Technical Interviews

Job candidates for positions in IT, engineering, and science industries may encounter technical interviews. These interviews contain questions specific to the job itself in addition to numerical reasoning questions, coding challenges, word problems, peer discussions, puzzles, and brain teasers. Your answers allow the employer to evaluate the depth and breadth of your experience, how you approach problem solving, and your ability to communicate.

- Sell your skills and experiences. Know your audience before going into the interview.
- Practice whiteboarding. Be prepared to communicate your thought processes visually and verbally.
- Revisit core principles and basics. You will encounter questions that range from high-level to fundamental.
- Consider how you have communicated technical information in the past. Bring a portfolio or examples of your work.
- Ask questions. Make sure you understand the problem.

ANSWERING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

DO

- Smile! A pleasant and relaxed smile will keep both you and the interviewer at ease.
- Be brief and succinct and try not to ramble.
- Show you can listen and quickly organize your thoughts, including pausing briefly if needed.
- Make appropriate eye contact with the interviewer(s).
- Be positive—avoid negative words as much as possible.
- Demonstrate your enthusiasm for the position and articulate how you could contribute.
- Keep in mind that it is impossible to control all aspects of an interview. If you encounter a question you are unprepared for, do your best and then move on.
- View the interview as a give-and-take, two-way conversation where you are gathering valuable information to help you make the best career choice possible.

DON'T

- Speak too quickly or quietly as the interviewer may have difficulty understanding you.
- Display irritating habits such as tapping your pen, twirling your hair, looking away from the interviewer, moving your legs, or drumming your fingers.
- Use filler words such as "ummm," "like," "y'know".
- Display poor body language such as slouching or gesturing too much.

STRUCTURING YOUR RESPONSES

When answering traditional and behavioral interview questions, the best strategy is to present your skills and experience with a demonstrative example.

The CAR structure helps you to present your example in a concise and easily understood format:

- **Context:** Provide a brief overview of the situation and explain what the goal was. Include any necessary background, but be specific and succinct.
- **Action:** Describe the action you took to address the situation. This is likely the most detailed part of your answer. What specific steps did you take? If you were part of a team, what was your particular contribution?
- **Result:** Share the outcome of your actions—don't be shy about taking credit for your success.

Here are two examples:

Question: Tell me about a time when you had to cope with strict deadlines or time demands.

Answer One:

- Context:
 - I had to establish and adhere to strict deadlines in order to complete my doctoral dissertation. Few deadlines were externally imposed, and, as a result, I had to create my own strict deadlines for completion.
- Action:
 - I drafted a project plan in which I defined the tasks, milestones, and deadlines associated with degree completion. After I had drafted my project plan, I distributed a copy of my plan to my adviser as well as to the other members of my committee, asking for "sign-off" on my plan. Members of my committee appreciated my initiative, motivation, and organization and supported my efforts. I followed my

project plan carefully, and I regularly met my self-imposed deadlines. Meeting my goals was difficult and required great self-discipline and hard work, but I responded by prioritizing tasks and asking for support from my colleagues and family. Of course, as my writing progressed, it was sometimes necessary to adjust deadlines, and I kept the timeline up-to-date, and notified my committee of changes. However, while milestone dates sometimes changed, the ultimate deadline—completion—did not.

- Result:
 - As the result of my project management and adherence to deadlines, I was able to defend, deposit, and graduate on schedule.

Answer Two:

- Context:
 - During my internship this past summer, I was asked to complete a project in which I had to evaluate the content and usability of various online learning programs. In order to do this, I had to distribute the programs that met my initial criteria to an international team of reviewers to get their input and perspective. After I did this, I had to compile all of their data and opinions, synthesize this data, and create a report and presentation for my managers.
- Action:
 - Since each part of the project had to be completed in a specific order, I created a project plan in with structured deadlines for each phase of the project. I built in a bit of extra time for unexpected problems or delays since I knew I had to depend on other people for data. I sent this schedule to my team so they knew my time constraints and sent them reminders before the due date. I made certain that I consistently adhered to the schedule that I designed.
- Result:
 - I was able to complete the project, although I had to build a few additional days into my timeline since some of the reviewers were slow to send me their data. But I learned to be flexible, figured out how to motivate my team, worked efficiently on the portions of the project that depended only upon me, and was able to give an effective report and presentation to my managers on schedule. Plus I got a great evaluation at the end of my internship!

THANK YOU NOTES

Always send a thank you note to your interviewers following the interview to convey your appreciation for the opportunity. Some sources estimate that 90% of interviewees do not take advantage of this small but impactful gesture.

Thank you notes are another chance to convey your interest in the position. If you believe the position will be a particularly good fit for you, be sure to say this and explain why. You can also include additional information about yourself or clarify an issue that was not adequately addressed while interviewing.

If you return from an interview certain that you do not want this position, politely indicate that you have determined you are not interested.

Here are some other general tips:

- Send your notes in a timely manner, ideally within two days of the interview. Be brief and refer to the position by name.
- Send to everyone who interviewed you and add a personal touch. For example, mention something you learned during the interview that makes the position or company desirable.

The format of your thank you note is dependant on a few considerations:

- Email is appropriate if a decision is to be made quickly or if most correspondence has been via email, but an email can be perceived as less effort on your part. Consider sending an email and a note or letter.
- A mailed “Thank You” notecard with a handwritten message adds a personal touch, shows extra effort, and is always acceptable.
- Formal business letter can be typed, printed out and mailed.
 - [Sample Thank You Letters \(PDF\)](#)

FOLLOWING UP

During your interview, ask when you should expect to hear back from them. If you have not heard anything after this time, you may follow up with a polite communication restating your interest in the position and inquiring about the status of the search. Remain professional at all times and avoid becoming a pest.