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Interview Techniques

a guide
to help
you prepare
for an interview

Interviewing

Interviews are two-way conversations.

Employers and graduate/professional schools will ask:

- ✓ What do you want to do?
- ✓ What do you have to offer?
- ✓ Why do you want to work/study here?

Candidates want to:

- ✓ Understand the opportunity.
- ✓ Show how their skills, abilities, and experience connect with the organization's needs.
- ✓ Demonstrate enthusiasm and desire for the opportunity.

Types of Interviews

Screening

These 20–30 minute interviews provide initial information about your qualifications. They may take place on campus, at a job fair, or over the telephone. First impressions are the key to success. Be prepared to show that you want the position and have the background to be successful.

Site/Follow-up

These interviews often occur at the employer's site and can be 1–8 hours in length. These interviews may include aptitude tests, tours of facilities, conversations with several groups of people or individuals, and possibly a meal. An invitation to this type of interview is an indication of their interest in you for a position.

- Respond promptly to invitations to these interviews.
- Ask how much time you should plan to be with them and with whom you will meet.
- Some employers will invite you to more than one site interview.

Preparation for the Interview

Know Basic Information

- products, services, programs
- location(s)
- size (employees, sales, number of students)
- the position and its activities and qualifications
- why you want a position at this place
- what you have to offer the position

“Be prepared! Find out as much as you can about the company beforehand. Take a look at the corporate website, if there is one, or get hold of a company brochure. Demonstrating knowledge of the basic company facts (number of employees, how long the company's been in business, products/services it provides) will impress.”

Qualities of Exceptional Candidates

- consistently read current news to know if recent events have or could affect an employer, industry, or profession
- consistently read professional journals to stay up-to-date with trends, events, and products
- identify the employer's competitors and ask them about the employer's reputation
- identify current customers/students and ask them about the employer's reputation
- ask current employees/faculty what it is like to work/study at the site

Know What You Can Contribute

- Identify three or four categories of skills, qualities, and experiences that make you a good candidate for the position.
- Identify specific examples and stories for each category that prove or demonstrate your ability.
- Prepare an introductory statement of 20-30 seconds that mentions the three or four categories. Use this to respond to questions such as: “Tell me a little bit about yourself.” and “Do you have anything else to add?”
- Prepare to tell what you have demonstrated or gained from past experiences (saying that you had fun or enjoyed an experience is not enough).
- Prepare questions that show you are seeking a partnership to benefit both you and the employer.

Interviewing Ideas

Passion!

Many people have the skills – show you have the excitement and enthusiasm.

“It’s Not Bragging if it’s True”

Promote yourself. Give enough information so that interviewers can make a decision.

Leadership

The ability to look around, see what needs to get done, make something happen.

Maturity

The ability to suspend your own agenda to meet the agenda of others.

Success Patterns

The greatest predictor of future success is past experience and success.

Demonstrated/Gained

You are not rewarded for your positions or degrees; you are rewarded for what you have demonstrated or gained from experience.

Skills and Qualities

Both are important. Skills are activities you can do – like tying your shoe. Qualities are what you are like – enthusiastic. Make a list of your 150 positive skills and qualities.

Professional

How you conduct your search is a demonstration of how you will do your work. Attend to details, follow-up, be courteous to everyone, be someone they want to work with! Dress professionally, arrive on time, stand to shake hands, say “thank you” in the first 12 words of meeting someone, use names, listen carefully, learn and use professional etiquette.

Conversation

Interviews are two-way conversations, not oral exams. It is OK to ask for clarification or more information. Give short answers and ask if they want more specifics, examples or details.

Fact/Opinion/Behavioral

Fact questions are easy – “What computer applications have you used?”

Opinion questions are common – “What skills do you have?”

Behavioral questions use past situations to predict what you will do in the future – “Tell me about a time when _____.”

Expect 10% of questions to be fact, 30% to be opinion, and 60% to be behavioral.

“Appearance is crucial – some surveys suggest that potential employers will make their minds up about you in the first 30 seconds of meeting, so *dress the part.*”

– <http://www.thebigchoice.com>

The Interview

Three Questions

In some way, employers will ask three basic questions:

1. What do you want to do?
2. What do you have to offer us?
3. Why do you want to work here?

100% Responsibility

If you leave the interview and the interviewer does not know something important about you, it is your fault, not theirs – even if they don't ask the right questions.

Career Outline

Identify three to five key ways that show you are fit for the position – interests, skills, experiences, qualities, preparation, etc. For each area, have a story that provides proof or evidence.

S.T.A.R.

Most people are visual and remember best what they see. Create word pictures with stories. To create concise useful stories, give the **S**ituation, the **T**ask, your **A**ction, and the hopefully positive **R**esult. Be specific and be prepared to give details.

Summary Statement

Write and practice a 20-second statement that summarizes your three to five key points. Use this to answer: "Tell me a little bit about yourself." and "Do you have anything to add?"

Good Questions

Your questions may be more important than your answers. Show your interest, understanding, and desire by asking about the position, expectations, and opportunities.

"What characteristics do successful people in this organization share?"

"What is the most challenging? Rewarding?"

"What are the goals/direction/commitment of this organization?"

What to Bring to Interviews

Bring a portfolio. In the left-hand pocket, bring extra copies of your résumé, a copy of your academic transcript, copies of letters of recommendation, and a list of your references with phone numbers and e-mail addresses. On the notepad on the right, list your three to five key points and your questions.

End

Summarize your three to five key items, let them know you want the position, and ask when you can follow up on the interview. "I would appreciate the opportunity to work with you." "I would appreciate continuing in your selection process." "This is what I want to do, please offer me this position."

Thank You

Write a thank-you note within two working days of the interview.

Situation

Task

Action

Result

5 Point Agenda

“... a predetermined analysis in which you select your five most marketable points and repeatedly weave these points throughout the interview process.”

“Television and radio have filled our world with 30- and 60-second commercials short, concise commercials that quickly get their points across. News reports use the same principles, limiting stories to one- to three-minute segments.”

During a job interview, utilizing the right words that effectively get your message across concisely will build the employer's confidence that you can do the job.”

—Robin Ryan

Example

Events Planner

“The association needed a person with strong computer and desktop publishing skills and previous events planning experience. As a new college grad, the applicant created her 5 Point Agenda from her internship and part-time jobs:

Point 1 – Proficient IBM and Macintosh computer skills.

Point 2 – Desktop publishing using PageMaker, creating brochures, programs, invitations, flyers, press releases and training materials.

Point 3 – Assisted with numerous special events, conferences, lunches, and receptions.

Point 4 – Responsible for catering, food preparation, audiovisual set up, transportation, budget and expense reimbursements.

Point 5 – Acquired service bids from several contractors, caterers and hotels.”

60 Second Sell

Summarizes and links together the 5 Point Agenda for use in interviews.

Events Planner Example

“I have assisted with numerous special events during the last two years – planning conferences, receptions, lunches, and dinners. I’ve been responsible for all the details, the facilities, catering and lodging arrangements, equipment and food set-ups, taking care of the transportation needs, plus handling expenses and vouchers. I have learned to make any budget work. By being resourceful, I was able to work within budget limitations. I have had a great deal of experience comparing and selecting service contractors such as caterers and facilities.”

“My computer strengths have been most beneficial to my previous employer. I have extensive IBM and Macintosh experience and easily use PageMaker to create brochures, flyers, program schedules, invitations, and training materials. It is both the experience in event planning and my computer skills that would be assets to you in this position.”

From *60 Seconds & You're Hired* by Robin Ryan. Available in the Career Center.

S.T.A.R.

Prepare to talk about skills and abilities using specific examples. Most people are visual and remember best what they see. Telling a story makes it visual!

S is for **Situation**—the event or circumstances of the story
(I wanted to study abroad).

T is for **Task**—the specific goal you were working toward
(I needed to pay for the travel and other costs of the program).

A is for the **Action** that you took
(I got a part-time job during the spring semester and worked up to 70 hours per week at two jobs during the summer in order to earn the money I needed).

R is for **Results**—what happened. Hopefully this is a positive thing
(I earned enough for my trip and was able to stay for an extra week of travel)!

Practice

Common themes sought in interviews include: motivation, logical thought, leadership, maturity, preparedness, open-mindedness, sensitivity and compassion, goals, and strengths. Practice by selecting one of these themes and creating a **S.T.A.R.** story to be used in an interview.

Caution

Employers may not always ask for positive examples. They may ask to hear about your worst class, most difficult customer, or a conflict situation.

Suggestion

Whenever possible, offer concrete or qualitative results or outcomes. Numbers give an idea of the size of the project.

Difficult Interview Situations

“What is Your Greatest Weakness?”

Employers want to know you are mature enough to see where you need to grow and develop. You want to show them you are a life-long learner. Focus on your weaknesses for the position, not personal character flaws. Or, focus on skills you have and are working to develop.

Be Positive

No matter how bad the job, employer, class – be positive! Negative comments make you look immature and unable to accept responsibility. Talk in terms of challenges and what you have demonstrated or gained.

That’s Not Fair!

Interviewers may ask illegal questions – intentionally or unintentionally. You can decide how or if you will answer. Such questions are often an attempt to get other information. Responding with, “If you could help me understand how this relates to this position I could better answer your question.” may be a helpful strategy.

Drawing a Blank

You can ask for a moment to think about your answer. You can ask to come back to the question as well: “I am unable to think of an example at this moment; could we come back to this?”

Interviewing Tips

Tips to Good Interviewing

- Be on time.
- Be genuine and candid.
- Be prepared. Do your research. Know how you can be an asset to the position.
- Be focused. Know yourself and your goals.
- Be inquisitive. Develop questions before the interview.
- Be enthusiastic. Show interest in the company and industry.
- Be specific. Offer examples from your experience.
- Be honest. Admit it if you don't have an answer.
- Be concise. Organize your thoughts and get to the point quickly.
- Be imaginative. Offer a different perspective.
- Be creative. Use storytelling techniques to make your answers memorable.

“Go to a trusted buddy and say, ‘If I were going to develop the world’s most perfect handshake, would I make mine a little firmer, a little more gentle, a little shorter, longer or what?’ Then shake her or his hand to demonstrate.”

– Venturi Staffing Partners

What Employers Don't Like in Interviewees

- Poor personal appearance
- Lack of planning for a career – no goals
- Lack of confidence and poise – nervousness
- Evasive, making excuses for unfavorable events
- Condemnation of past employers or teachers
- Limp handshake
- Persistent attitude of “What can you do for me?”
- Overbearing – over aggressive – egotistical
- Lack of interest – passive, indifferent
- Overemphasis on compensation
- Lack of tact, maturity and courtesy
- Failure to look interviewer in the eye
- Failure to ask questions about the job
- Lack of preparation – failure to learn about the company in order to ask intelligent questions

A Strong Ending

- Restate what you have to offer the position. “Before we end, I would like to remind you that the things I could bring to this position are ...”
- If you are interested in the position, let the interviewer know! “I would appreciate the opportunity to work with you.” or “I would appreciate continuing in your selection process.”
- Ask when you can call to learn the results of the interview.
- If you did not receive one, get a business card.
- Thank the interviewer, shake hands, and smile!

Interview Questions—Preparing the Right Answer

These sample behavioral-based interview questions are followed with characteristics of good responses. Think through and write out your own answers with specific examples.

Question

Sooner or later we all deal with interpersonal conflict or personal rejection at work or school. Give me an example of a time when you had to cope with these demands.

What has been your experience in working with conflicting, delayed or ambiguous information? What did you do to make the most of the situation?

Tell me about a time when you were willing to disagree with another person in order to build a positive outcome.

Tell me about a time when you had to work very hard to reach your goals and be specific about what you achieved.

Tell me about a situation when you had to stand up for a decision you made even though it made you unpopular.

Give me an example of a time when one of your insights or innovations was particularly well-received by others.

Characteristics of Response

Cope through positive action or problem solving skills. Show calmness under pressure. Use criticism and other negative results to learn and show change. Show your conflict management skills.

Show comfort with lack of structure or creating own structure, accepting of delays, and comfort in depending on others—delegation. If frustration occurred, comment on how you learned from this experience and provide an additional example showing coping skills.

Firm, clear directions. Concern for other's feelings. Socially mature—tactful and makes point. Able to handle conflict arising around misunderstanding or disagreement. Positive result.

Specific target dates. Takes initiative in setting goals. Description of steps taken to accomplish the goal. Learning that occurred if unsuccessful. Self-motivation.

Demonstrate commitment with high effort and accomplishment. Show self-direction and motivation. Willing to sacrifice. Show success or what was learned from failure.

Public recognition in the form of an award or special comment given. Willing to ask “what if” and risk going on with idea. Use brainstorming with others effectively. Impact of creativity on the project. Strength beyond the initiation of idea-development.

Commonly Asked Questions at Interviews

Variations of commonly asked interview questions appear in many publications available in the Career Center. Here are sample questions:

1. What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
2. Tell me about a time when you demonstrated your best skills.
3. Tell me about a time when you excelled in an academic course.
4. What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
5. Tell me about a time when you worked with a difficult customer or team member.
6. Why should I hire you?
7. What qualifications do you have that show you will be successful?
8. In what ways can you contribute to our company?
9. What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
10. What academic subjects did you like best? Least? Why?
11. Tell me about your participation in extra-curricular activities.
12. Do you have plans for continued study? (Graduate students may be asked: Why did you decide to pursue an advanced degree?)
13. In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable?
14. In what part-time or summer jobs have you been most interested? Why?
15. Why did you decide to seek a position with this company?
16. What two or three things are most important to you in a job?
17. Will you relocate? Does relocation bother you? Are you willing to travel?
18. Tell me about a major problem you encountered and how you responded.
19. Tell me about a time when you learned from a mistake.
20. How did you choose Gustavus Adolphus College?

“I judge candidates by the questions they ask, someone focused on succeeding in the job and not how much money I will pay them.”

– Washington Mutual HR manager

Questions to Ask Employers

1. What could I do immediately to make a contribution in the position?
2. What characteristics do the most successful people in this position share?
3. When will you make a decision regarding this position? If I have not heard from you by that date, may I call you?
4. Do you have any concerns about my candidacy for this position?

After the Interview

1. Before leaving the interview find out how follow-up will happen: “If I have not heard from you within a week, may I call to find out where you are in the decision making process?” (Asking permission to follow-up is very courteous and also makes them more willing to respond to your future call.)
2. Write a thank you note within two working days of the interview. Be sure to get a business card or write down the names of the people that interview you.

If you do not get an offer:

- Let the interviewer know that although you are disappointed, you are still interested in working for the company.
- Be sure to thank them for their time and interest. Re-emphasize the fact that if future openings occur, you would be interested.
- Find out if there are, or might be, other openings they could suggest or other persons you could contact.
- Many times the person selected ends up turning the job down or does not work out. Keep the communication line open, positive, and professional. This keeps your name in their mind for the next opening or future opportunities.
- Ask if you could contact them every three or four months to find out about future job openings.
- Stay positive. Congratulate yourself. You did get the interview, which means the employer was interested in you.
- Learn from the experience. Ask the interviewer what you can do to make yourself a more attractive candidate for the position in the future.
- Keep trying. This is not the time to stop. Forge ahead. Act to stay in control of your job search.

If you do get the offer:

- Say thank you.
- You are not required to accept or decline immediately. In fact, it is a good practice to never accept immediately, but ask for at least 24 hours even if you plan to say yes.
- Ask how much time you have to make a decision about the offer.
- Assess the offer in terms of your needs, benefits, and long-term career and life goals. Talk it over with people you respect. Make a list of the pros and cons of the offer. Compare yourself to the job, not the job to other jobs.
- Identify any questions or concerns you have about the offer or position and get answers to your questions.
- Contact other employers with whom you have interviewed to learn where you are in their processes. Let them know you have an offer and your timeline for making a decision.
- If you are not 100% sure about accepting the offer, get advice. The Career Center is eager to discuss offers with you and assist you in making a decision.
- Let the employer know your decision in a timely manner.
- Get information on where and when you should report for your first day.

NOTE: Once you have accepted a position it is inappropriate to continue to search for and interview for other positions.

Interview Preparation Activities

- Watch videotapes in the Career Center on interviewing.
- Write out answers to common interview questions.
- Practice by giving answers into a tape recorder, to a mirror, or to a friend.
- Become comfortable meeting professionals (associations, career days).
- Attend an interviewing workshop.
- Participate in a practice interview.
- Participate in Mock Interview Night.

Interviewing Reminders

- Be on time!
- Dress appropriately—if you have questions, ask Career Center staff.
- Give a strong handshake and use the interviewer's name.
- Smile, be positive, polite, and maintain an alert posture.
- Have extra résumés, references lists, and transcripts with you.
- Express how you fit the position and that you want the opportunity.
- Ask when you can follow-up on the results of the interview.
- Obtain business cards from interviewers.
- Write thank-you letters or notes within two working days of the interview.

Practice Interviews

The Career Center offers Practice Interview Program for candidates to gain experience and confidence in interviewing. Practice interviews are for candidates preparing for any type of interviewing: internships, graduate/professional schools, or employment.

Schedule practice interviews at least one week in advance by calling or coming into the Career Center. Candidates are asked to provide a résumé and indication the type of interview for which they are preparing. Candidates should attend the practice interview in professional dress. All practice interviews are videotaped.

Interview workshops, videotapes and books are also available in the Career Center.

“**Mock interviews** help students become comfortable with the interviewing process. These trial runs let you see how you would do at a real interview and provide feedback that can help you improve your skills. Call the Career Center at 933-7586 to make an appointment.”

– Allison Anderson
The Gustavian Weekly
March 12, 2004
Volume 127, Number 14

Practice Interviews are available in the Career Center by appointment. Appointments must be scheduled one week in advance.

Mock Interview Night

Mock Interview Night happens once a year on the first Thursday in October.

On Mock Interview Night alumni come to campus to conduct interviews and give feedback to candidates seeking internships, admission to graduate and professional schools, and employment. Candidates must have their résumés uploaded to eRecruiting to schedule mock interviews and are expected to wear professional dress to the interviews.

Mock Interview Night is held in October.
Sign-up is available on eRecruiting in September.

Dress Code

Searching for career opportunities such as internships, admission to graduate/professional schools, fellowships, or employment are the time to dress most conservatively and most professionally. The following are offered as helps to candidates in planning their professional wardrobe.

Professional Dress for Men

- Suits and ties. Suits mean the jacket and pants are of the same fabric.
- Shirts – white is a good choice and ties in conservative colors and design. The shirt should be professionally pressed.
- Dark socks.
- Polished dark shoes.

Professional Dress for Women

- Suits. Both pants and skirts are acceptable, skirts are more conservative.
- Professional dresses in conservative colors.
- Skirt length in the vicinity of knees.
- Shoes with a low heel (not flats and not 4-inch heels)

Business Casual for Men

- Wrinkle-free casual pants (like Dockers). Button shirt with or without sweater and/or tie.
- No tennis/sports shoes, sweatshirts, sweatpants, or jeans.

Business Casual for Women

- Dress slacks or skirt with shirt, blouse, or sweater.
- No tennis/sports shoes, sweatshirts, sweatpants, or jeans.

The Career Center also encourages candidates to learn and use professional etiquette. Several campus groups sponsor etiquette dinners and candidates are encouraged to participate.

Career Center Resource Library

The Career Center Resource Library has a variety of resources to help students explore potential career fields. These resources include books, videotapes, CD-ROMs, computer-assisted guidance systems, and handouts providing information on choosing a major, planning or changing your career, effective job search strategies, experiential opportunities, and much more.

Interviewing Resources to Check Out of the Career Center Resource Library

Books

The Quick Interview & Salary Negotiation Book, J. Michael Farr, 1995

The Wharton MBA Case Interview Study Guide Vol. II, Wharton MBA Consulting Club, 1997

15 Questions: More Practice to Help You Ace Your Consulting Case, Wet Feet Press, 1998

Information Interviewing: How to Tap Your Hidden Job Market, Martha Stoodley, 1997

How to Say It: Choice Words, Phrases, Sentences & Paragraphs for Every Situation, Rosalie Maggio, 1990

Life Scripts: What to Say to Get What You Want in 101 of Life's Toughest Situations, Stephen M. Pollan & Mark Levine, 1996

Videos

What Now? Interviewing Techniques, 53 minutes

Dialing for Jobs: Using the Phone in the Job Search, 35 minutes

Developing a Teacher Interview Portfolio, 30 minutes

Interviewing Strategies for Elementary and Middle School Teachers, 43 minutes

Interviewing Strategies for Secondary Teachers, 43 minutes

CD for Windows and Windows 95

Adams Job Interview Pro

Other Resource Library Items

Books

Job Interview Tips for People with Not-So-Hot Backgrounds, Carly and Ron Krannich, 2004

Best Answers to Tough Interview Questions, Bernard Haldane Associates, 2000

Videos

Interviewing Tips From a Recruiter, 22 minutes

How to Interview Like You Mean It, ? minutes

First Impression, 22 minutes

WorkSmart, 18 minutes

Many items in the Career Center Resource Library are available for checkout.



Career Center

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HOURS:

Monday–Friday
8 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

Quick Questions

2–3:30 p.m.
(when classes are in session)

Resource Library

Available during all office hours