

# The Art of Interviewing

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## Interviewing

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Whether you are interviewing for an internship, career, or entrance into a graduate program, the interview process can be very stressful. It is the first (and sometimes only) impression you have to make on the company or organization you wish to work for. Preparation is the key to a successful interview. It can be the determining factor to whether or not you get an offer.

This handout is your guide to the interview process. It addresses the types of interviews employers use along with the most common questions they ask. Being aware of your own skills, goals, strengths and weaknesses will be essential. Remember, you are the best fit for the position but does the interviewer know that?

### Types of Interviews

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The **Screening** Interview - This initial interview is conducted to narrow down the competition. It is usually with a Human Resource representative. He or she is determining whether you meet the minimum qualifications for the position and if you would be a good fit for the department and/or company.

The **Traditional** Interview – The traditional interview consists solely of the interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer will ask general questions, mainly looking for the answer to “why are you the best candidate for this position?” A strong connection is important during this stage in the interview process, so try and build rapport with the interviewer.

The **Panel** Interview - The panel interview is very similar to the traditional interview except you will be interviewed by several people rather than one person. It may be company policy to conduct panel interviews. Organizations find this type of interview to be more reasonable and time efficient.

The **Behavioral** Interview – This increasingly popular interview is used to provide the employer with a sneak peak at your ability to perform effectively in the company. Interviewers are looking for what you did in the past that can be beneficial to them in the future. Interviewees are asked how they have reacted or would react in certain situations to measure problem solving skills, conflict resolution, time management, etc. This type of interview is the perfect opportunity for you to give an example or story from past experience, providing actions and results, relevant to the prospective position.

### What are employers *REALLY* looking for?

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Regardless of the job or position, employers are generally seeking the same characteristics from the persons they are looking to hire. It would be rare and unusual to find a company or organization that didn't care whether or not their employees were responsible, hardworking individuals.

**Skills** most often sought by employers when interviewing job candidates:

- Communication Skills – The ability to speak, listen and write effectively
- Analytical/ Research Skills
- Computer Skills and Technical Literacy
- Adaptability – The ability to multi-task and manage multiple priorities
- Interpersonal Skills
- Leadership Skills
- Multicultural Awareness
- Organization and Planning Skills
- Problem Solving and Reasoning Skills
- Creativity
- Teamwork

So you meet all the qualifications for the position and have a solid set of skills, but do you have the right personality? Many employers hire someone they feel a connection with during the interview.

**Personal Values** employers look for:

- Dependable
- Flexibility
- Hardworking and dedicated
- Honesty and Integrity
- Loyal
- Motivated
- Positive Attitude
- Professional
- Responsible
- Self-Confident
- Self-Disciplined
- Willingness to learn

## Types of Interview Questions

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In order to obtain the right type of information that the employer needs to assess a candidate, they will ask a variety of types of questions. For each type of question, consider why the interviewer is asking the question and respond accordingly. Sometimes it is not the answer but the way you answer that matters.

**Closed-ended:** Questions that limit your response to a very short but definite answer such as yes or no. They are typically used to validate information.

Example: Do you have a college degree?

**Open-ended:** Questions that encourage discussion by allowing a person to explain their answer. They cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Open-ended questions are often used to promote critical thinking and reasoning.

Example: Tell me about a typical day at your current (past) job.

**Behavioral:** Experienced based questions that ask for examples of your behavior in previous work environments.

Example: Give me an example of a time when your supervisor criticized your work. How did you react?

**Situational:** Questions that ask for a response to a hypothetical (job related) situation.

Example: Assume a co-worker comes to you in confidence when they see another employee stealing from the company. What would you do?

**Forced-choice:** Questions that compel the respondent to select one of two (or more) opposing choices. The best way to answer these questions is to justify saying "both".

Example: Which do you prefer, money or the job?  
Do you prefer to work alone or with others?

**Probing:** Follow-up questions used to gain more information to a particular response.

Example:	Tell me more.	What was your role?
	What were the results?	If that doesn't work what will you do

## Steps to Success: Preparing for the Interview

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Preparing for the interview is the most important step and will require a vast amount of work on your end. Staying organized will keep you on track and help in your preparation.

### STEP 1: Obtain Information

You will want to collect as much information as possible when you schedule your interview. If you don't have a full job description, request that one be sent to you. Ask the names and titles of those with whom you will be interviewing. It is also acceptable to ask the estimated length of the interview. If they say a ½ hour then you will most likely be going through a screening process. If you are given an hour or longer, this will be a full interview. Repeat the day and time of your interview before terminating the phone call to clarify.

Important: Before returning the call to schedule an interview, prepare for the conversation you will be having with the receptionist. Always be polite and professional. Generally speaking, this phone call is the beginning of your interview.

### STEP 2: Self-Assess

It would be unwise to enter an interview without knowing who you are as a person and a professional. **Analyze** your strengths, weaknesses, abilities and skills. **Be prepared** to discuss the goals you have established for yourself and your career. An employer is going to want to see that you've thought about your future, short and long term.

Having the job description in hand will allow you to focus on the skills the employer is looking for and gives you an idea of what they will be asking about. Ask yourself: How can I prove that I have acquired these skills? What story or experience can I share with the employer that demonstrates my proficiency and ability to work effectively in this position? Provide examples from your educational background, leadership positions, previous employment, internships, extracurricular activities and/or volunteer events. Write down all of your experiences and the skills associated with them to formulate strong responses.

More than likely the employer will be seeking some skill you haven't fully developed. Don't panic! Commonly the person hired isn't necessarily the most qualified, but rather the best fit for the company with a strong willingness to learn. If they ask you about a particular computer program for example, and you have little knowledge of it, be honest. Prove to the employer that you can easily acquire this skill by saying "but I am eager to learn" or "I have been working to improve this skill."

### **STEP 3: Research**

It is vital that you conduct research on the employer for which you wish to work. Attempt to **become familiar with the policies, procedures, products and services of the company or organization.**

#### **Utilize the Internet**

Search information regarding the employer. If you don't know their web address, use a search engine such as Google, Yahoo or Bing. Their website will more than likely contain the mission, goals, history and other prominent information about the business. Look for any recent developments that may be occurring in the organization. Also, try to find information on the person(s) you will be interviewing with. Maybe he or she is an active volunteer within the community or an avid tennis player. Knowing these facts and being able to incorporate them into the interview may spark a connection.

- Hoover's Online – provides up to date information on over 50,000 companies (public and private) [www.hoovers.com](http://www.hoovers.com)
- Business.com – offers research, news and contacts for 10,000 public companies and 44,000 private
- Occupational Outlook Handbook – supplies descriptions of jobs, working conditions, training needed and average salary. <http://www.bls.gov/oco/>

Important: While you surf the internet for information on the interviewer, he or she may be searching for you! Is your networking site (Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn) appropriate? 70% of all Human Resource Personnel say they investigate these websites as part of the initial background check.

#### **Visit the company**

Before your interview, stop in and visit the company. You should be able to retrieve a copy of the annual report, a newsletter or other handouts they offer the public.

#### **Network**

It's a good idea to talk with others in the field. If possible, try to speak with present employees at company with which you will be interviewing. These connections will be more valuable than any information you find online.

Don't forget, libraries are also great resources! Check out the Employment Resource Center at the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library.

### **STEP 4: Anticipate Questions and Prepare Answers**

You will be asked different questions at each interview you attend. The key however, is to be prepared to answer the most common questions. Fortunately, the most common questions are about you. That should be easy then, right?

#### **Q: Tell me about yourself.**

**A:** This question is usually one of the first to be asked by the employer. A good, prepared response will set a positive tone. The best way to answer this question is to give the interviewer a *brief* overview of who you are. This might consist of sharing accomplishments, work history and personal characteristics you feel would be beneficial to the employer and the position. This is your time to shine. Be remarkable without an ego.

**Example:** "I maintained a strong grade point average while working part-time throughout my college career. I gained a vast amount of leadership experience as a student government representative; something that I feel will be an asset to this management position. I feel that the hard work and commitment I continuously put forth enables me to accomplish my goals."

#### **Q: What are your strengths?**

**A:** It should be fairly easy for you to answer this question. What are you best at? Explain to the interviewer why these skills and/or characteristics will benefit the organization.

**Example:** "My work ethic. I am organized, punctual and determined. I prioritize tasks and stay focused. I also enjoy learning new ways in which I can improve my productivity."

**Q: What are your weaknesses?**

**A:** The most important thing to remember when answering this question is that you are not flawless. You *must* be able to recognize the flaws that you have and be honest about them. Give the interviewer a small weakness, immediately followed by ways in which you are improving. **Explain** why this is a weakness rather than finding excuses for why you do this.

**Example:** "Direct contact with individual clients was a rare occurrence in my past positions. Unfortunately, I am not very familiar with customer service but I am looking forward to gaining experience in this area. I work well with others and possess a strong set of communication skills. I can only imagine that these skills will be helpful in this type of environment."

**Q: What are your short-term and long-term goals and objectives? How will you prepare to achieve them?**

**A:** It would be wise to answer this question keeping in mind the company's goals as well as your own. Are they compatible? Think about how your goals have changed as you matured in your career and gained more experience. Hint to what you really want out of this job you are interviewing for.

**Example:** "My goal is to continue to thrive personally and professionally. I am looking forward to growing within this company and in the field. I have an eagerness to learn and the growth of knowledge I receive is what will prepare me for the future. My never ending determination is what will allow me to achieve my goals."

**Q: Why should I hire you?**

**A:** Commonly this question will come at the end of the interview. It is your opportunity to wrap together all of the points you have been touching on throughout the interview. Reiterate your strengths, skills, experience, etc.

**Example:** "I'm a hard worker committed to this field of business. I have a very good understanding of what this position entails and I would bring a quality perspective to this job. My experience would make a great asset to you and this company."

**Q: What salary/wage are you expecting to earn?**

**A:** This is not a very common question to be asked during the initial interview, but it is one that needs to be addressed for the chance that you will be asked. Salary can ONLY be brought up by the employer. NEVER ask what you will be making if you are hired. To answer this question successfully, research positions comparable to the one you are applying for. Look for people who have similar qualifications, how long they have been with the company, etc. You are better off underestimating the business or organization when answering this question because you don't want to state an amount higher than what they were anticipating on giving you. It is suitable however, to ask about company progression and the likelihood of advancing and/or receiving promotions.

**Example:** "According to (resource), the starting annual salary for account managers in a company this size is \$45,000. I feel that anywhere from \$40-45,000 is appropriate."

**STEP 5: Practice! Practice! Practice!**

There is nothing more important than being prepared for the interview. The only way to do this is practice, practice, practice. Nothing is more painful for the employer or yourself to sit through an awkward interview of stumbled lines and loss for words. We aren't suggesting that you memorize your answers word for word but being ready to answer those tough questions and provide examples when asked will be most beneficial to you.

Role Play: Ask a friend or relative to be the interviewer. Have them ask you questions and provide suggestions on how to improve your answers. Use 3x5 index cards if needed in the beginning to jog your memory and prevent you from going blank.

Record: Voice record or videotape yourself answering interview questions. Listening to yourself will enlighten you to be aware of the trouble spots. What questions did you hesitate to answer? How many times did you say um, like, etc. Videotaping is an even better tool because not only can you hear yourself answer but you can see yourself. Were you fidgeting? Did you look nervous? Were you making eye contact with the interviewer?

### Common Interview Questions

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- Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?
- Other than those related to your occupation, what specific goals have you established for yourself?
- What is your greatest accomplishment?
- What challenges are you looking for?
- What interests you about this position?
- What do you know about our company?
- How would a friend, co-worker or professor describe you?
- How do you evaluate success?
- What qualifications do you have that you feel make you successful?
- What qualities should a manager possess in order to be successful?
- What type of relationship should exist between a supervisor and subordinates?
- What kind of work environment do you most prefer? Is there a work environment that makes you uncomfortable?
- Provide 2 or 3 things most important to you in your job.
- Do you have a geographical preference? Are you willing to relocate?
- Why did you leave your last job?
- Are you willing to travel?
- Give a major problem/conflict situation you've encountered and how you dealt with it.
- Can you work under pressure? How do you handle stress?
- If you were unfairly criticized by your supervisor, what would you do?
- What have you learned from participation in extracurricular or volunteer activities?

### Common Interview Questions for Teachers

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- Describe your personal philosophy of teaching/ education.
- What are the most valuable qualifications of a good teacher?
- Describe teaching successes and failures.
- What situations, obstacles, and moments have you experienced in life that led you to teaching?
- How would you go about planning a lesson?
- What methods would you use to assess student learning?
- What is the last educational book you've read?
- What do you think provides the greatest pleasure in teaching?
- How would you manage your classroom? Describe general discipline procedures.
- Give an example of difficult discipline situation you've experienced. How did you handle it?
- Tell me about a time when a student or class taught you something.
- What do you know about our school district? Why do you want to teach here?
- Describe your most memorable teacher.
- What are some favorite books you hope to share with children? Name and authors.
- What type of reading program did you use in student teaching?
- What would you do if students could not answer your questions?
- How would your cooperating teacher describe you?
- How would you encourage writing skills?
- How do you feel about team teaching?
- How would you evaluate your students' attitudes and feelings regarding your class?

## Questions to ask the Interviewer

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More than likely, the interviewer will ask if you have any questions. You're not an expert and you don't know everything, so ask something! Make sure the questions you ask are appropriate and meaningful. They could even be job-related concerns.

- Can you give me a description of the job responsibilities?
- What are the anticipated results of this position?
- Why is this position available?
- What will be most challenging for me in this position?
- What are the department/company goals? How frequently are they set?
- What sort of expansion is planned for this department?
- How often are employees in this department promoted?
- Are there opportunities for advancement within this position?
- What are the greatest qualities/characteristics of this company?
- How does the organization measure and evaluate performance?
- Are there reinforcements for successes and failures?
- What is the relationship like between this department and the other departments of the company?
- Who will I be working for?
- How many employees are in this department/company?
- What type of training is available for this position? What is the policy on training?

## Can they ask me that?!

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State and federal regulations ensure that employers are not asking illegal questions on job applications and in the interview. Beware of the techniques some interviewers will use to have you volunteer the answers. All the questions asked in an interview need to be concerned with the job and/or position you are interested in. Is the employer asking questions that have to do with your current job or the one you are applying for? If yes, then its fair game. If no, you may want to re-think your feelings toward working for this employer.

### Illegal Questions

- What is your nationality (race, ancestry)?
- What is your religion?
- Are you married? / Do you plan on getting married?
- Do you have children? / Do you plan on having children? / What are the ages of your children?
- How old are you? / What year were you born? / What year did you graduate High School?
- How tall are you? / What do you weigh?
- Are you disabled?
- Do you have any existing medical conditions?
- Do you have any problems with drugs or alcohol?
- Have you ever been arrested?

### Legal Questions

- Do you have the legal right/are you authorized to work in the United States?
- Are you able to work with our required schedule?
- You may be required to travel or work overtime on short notice. Will that be a problem?
- Have you ever been convicted of a felony?
- Do you use illegal drugs?
- Are you capable of performing the specific duties required for this position?

## The Interview

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The big day is here and it is only natural to feel a little nervous. If you have practiced however, all you need to worry about is making that first impression.

**Appearance:** DRESS TO IMPRESS! Professional, conservative and simple. Generally speaking, coat and tie is appropriate for men and a suit for women. Clothes should be clean and pressed. Shoes (closed toed for both men and women) should be polished. Avoid heavy or chunky accessories and too much makeup. Come well groomed and naturally scented (meaning: forget the cologne or perfume; you never know if someone is sensitive to smells).



**Resume:** Although the organization already has your resume, you should always bring additional copies with you. Make sure these copies are the same version of the one you originally sent. Bring the resumes in a portfolio or professional folder to keep them clean and presentable.

**Arrival:** Give yourself plenty of time on the day of your interview. Allow for unexpected traffic delays and/or parking issues. Plan on arriving at the office 10 minutes before your scheduled interview time. Do not go into the office earlier than that. Most likely there will be a receptionist or secretary. Introduce yourself and wait patiently. Remember that your interview begins the moment you walk in that door so be kind to everyone you meet. While waiting, take deep breaths and rehearse opening statements in your mind.

**Introduction:** When it is your turn to begin the interview, walk into the room feeling confident and energized. Make sure you are smiling. Give the interviewer a firm handshake and repeat his/her name when saying hello. It is also polite to wait for an invitation before sitting down.

If you can, look for clues around the interviewer's office that reflect personal interests or his/her education. You can comment positively on what you see and hopefully it will initiate a conversation. Employers have been known to hire those they feel a connection with.

**Communicate:** Your resume is flawless and you look like a professional, now all you need to do is impress the interviewer with your ability to communicate effectively. To do this, you must be confident. You have all the answers, now you just need to know when and how to present them. An interview is a two-way street, listen as much as you speak and don't be afraid to take control. You want to be assertive with presenting your qualifications.

Make eye contact with the employer throughout the interview. This shows him or her that you are focused and attentive. When communicating, be brief and to the point. As hard as it may be, speak slowly. You'll want to make sure your words are enunciated correctly and clearly without "umms" or "ahhs". If you need clarification of a question, paraphrase it to the interviewer. Do not rush your responses but rather take time to gather your thoughts. If you want to give more attention to a certain point you are making, say the interviewer's name or use your hands to emphasize what you are saying.

Lastly, always beware of body language (your own and the interviewers). Are you smiling, shaking your head in agreement, or frowning? Are you fidgeting or tapping your feet? If the interviewer looks confused at something you are saying, rephrase it for them or ask "Did I answer that question correctly?"

## Interview Do's and Don'ts

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Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Smile &amp; relax</li><li>• Be confident, honest, energetic</li><li>• Arrive on time and come prepared</li><li>• Go Alone</li><li>• Listen carefully to each question</li><li>• Make eye contact</li><li>• Send a thank you letter</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Slouch or cross your arms</li><li>• Interrupt the interviewer</li><li>• Be defensive when answering</li><li>• Speak negatively about past employers</li><li>• Chew gum</li><li>• Show nerves (tapping, fidgeting, etc)</li><li>• Bring your cell phone with you</li></ul>

## Pre-employment Checks

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It is very common for employers to perform background checks and tests on potential job candidates. These pre-employment ordeals are legal and often fall under the employment/hiring conditions of the organization. Background checks and tests do need a purpose and must be validated for the job being hired for. They CANNOT be used to discriminate against race, gender, nationality, religion or disability. The number of checks an applicant goes through varies depending on employer and field of work.

### Assessments

- Personality – evaluates certain traits of an individual to measure the likelihood of engaging in conduct. These are especially important to companies that strive on customer service, leadership, training, and development.
- Cognitive – assesses thinking and reasoning skills, reading comprehension, memory, and accuracy.
- Talent – helps to predict performance levels and maintainability of job-seekers. Gives the employer a good idea of the candidate's qualities in relationship to being a match for the company

### Drug Testing

To find the presence of drugs or alcohol in a person's system, employers may use a number of drug tests. Samples can be taken from urine, hair, saliva or sweat. Although many drugs are out of your system within a week, some can stay in your body for more than 30 days. Second-hand smoke from marijuana and crack cocaine can be detected through hair samples and will cause a positive reading on your drug test. Don't forget to mention all medications you are taking before testing. Many over-the-counter medicines such as aspirin, ibuprofen, Midol, Vicks 44, Sudafed, and antihistamines have been known to falsely come up as positive on drug tests.

### Background Checks

Analyzes credit reports, driving records, and criminal history. For certain occupations, these checks may extend to speaking with people you know.

### Physical Ability/Exams

Measures the strength and ability to perform certain tasks required for the job. It also provides the employer with a good indication of the candidate's level of energy and stamina.

## After the Interview: The Follow-up

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The interview is over! But you're not finished. Now it's time to follow-up. Within a couple days of the interview, send a business-like thank you note. (If you participated in a panel interview send one to each interviewer.) Thank them for their time and say that you appreciated meeting with them. This is also an opportunity for you to strengthen their memory of you by restating your qualifications for the position. If you have not heard from the employer within a week or two, or by the time they told you, you may contact the company to inquire about the status of your application.

If you are not offered the job, don't be discouraged. Look it as one step closer to reaching your goal. The perfect job is waiting for you, go get it!

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\*Available at the Office of Career Planning