How can you make your interview go well?

Preparation is the key!

Why Prepare for an Interview?

The person who gets hired for a position is not necessarily the one who can do the best job, but the one who knows how to get hired. Securing a job takes time, commitment, initiative and practice.

A good interview is a significant part of the process. The interview is a short period of actual time that demands careful preparation. The success of an interview can be directly related to the preparation time that has been invested.

An article in the Wall Street Journal reported that one in five interviewers decided on a job candidate in the first five minutes and two-thirds of them need only fifteen minutes.

Clearly this means that your entrance, appearance, and the first words you speak are critical.

How do I Prepare?

Know Yourself

Begin by developing a good understanding of your education, experience, skills, interests, and abilities. Be able to translate these characteristics about yourself to show how they would benefit the company/organization to which you are applying. There are exercises and tools available to help you as you consider your skills, interests, and abilities. One example:

Think of three major accomplishments and answer the following questions:

• What did I actually do from start to finish?
• What special skills or abilities did I use?
• What knowledge or training did I gain as a result of this accomplishment?
• How would these characteristics transfer or relate to the job for which I am interviewing?

Practice Interviewing

Once you have reflected upon your skills and abilities, it’s time to practice articulating them. Go through the following list of interview questions and answer them based on your self-knowledge. You may not be asked these exact questions, but having thought through them will definitely help you answer other related questions. The following are several ways to practice for an interview.

• Have a friend interview you.
• Conduct a mock interview.
• Write out the answers to the interview questions.

These steps are not meant to give you ‘pat’ answers. This preparation is meant to help you give organized and concise answers that reflect thought.
Potential Interview Questions?

Questions often asked in an interview include the following:

- What are your career plans? Short range? Long range?
- Why are you interested in this organization?
- How did you choose your major and university?
- Tell me about yourself?
- How would a friend or professor describe you?
- What are your greatest strengths? What are your chief weaknesses?
- In what school activities have you participated? Why? Which did you enjoy the most?
- What qualifications do you have that you feel will lead to success in your career?
- What have you learned from some of the jobs you have had?
- What kind of boss do you prefer?
- Are you willing to travel?
- What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?
- What kind of books have you read?
- Have you any plans for graduate study?
- Discuss a special project you did.
- What can you contribute to this job if you were to be hired?
- Where do you see yourself ten years from now?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What are your long-range and short-range objectives and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?
- What goals other than those related to work have you established for yourself for the next five years?
- What rewards in this field are most important to you?
- What major problems have you encountered and how did you deal with them?
- What qualities should a successful supervisor possess?
- How do you work under pressure?
- In what significant ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?
- What three factors are most important to you in your job?
- Are you willing to relocate?
- If you were hiring a recent graduate for this position, what qualities would you look for?
- In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable working?
- When have you been the most productive, what were your motivations?

How do I answer Interview Questions?

The list of possible questions in an interview is endless, but they often come down to asking the same thing in different ways. Remember that questions about your past are really about your future. Try to understand the real intent of any question. When asked about past experience, emphasize skills and achievements. Give specific examples of what you did. The following are a few of the most typically asked questions and some suggestions for effective responses.

“Tell me about yourself.”
Talk about your job related skills. In your mind consider the question in relation to the job for which you are applying. Do not ask for clarification. This is a typical opener through which they may gain insight into you. Personal, job related, or academic experiences are all fine as long as they relate directly to how you will perform the job.

“Why do you want this job?”
Be honest about your skills and experience. Rely upon research you have conducted on the employer.

“What do you know about this position or employer?”
It is crucial here to have done your homework. You must know about the employer, but it is even more important to know about the position itself.

“What are your strengths?”
Be sure to identify your strengths by using specific examples.

“What are your weaknesses?”
Here you are trying to provide a weakness that will not effect your ability to do the job. Either identify a weakness that doesn’t directly relate to the work or identify a weakness that does and explain how you are working on it.
“Where do you see yourself in two years? Five? Ten?”
Rely on your research about the organization to describe how you plan to develop your skills within the typical career ladder of this organization. Avoid identifying goals which will not benefit the employer.

“We have interviewed 10 candidates equally qualified to you. Why should we select you over the others?”
Again, the most powerful information you can offer is a restatement of your best skills to perform the job. Realize that your enthusiasm and desire for the position are also important.

“Do you have any questions?”
Prepare questions ahead of time. Asking intelligent questions reflects the depth of your research and the clarity of your thinking. When you say, “No, my questions have all been answered,” you forfeit an opportunity to sell yourself to the employer through the caliber of the question you ask.

“What salary are you looking for?”
Do not inquire about the salary during the initial interview. Delay salary negotiation until the employer is convinced they must have you. Ask to discuss salary when you are both certain you are right for the job. If pressed for an amount it is best to talk about the salary range.

Questions to ask the Interviewer
- To whom will I report? Will I get the opportunity to meet that person?
- Where is the job located? What are the travel requirements, if any?
- How regularly do performance evaluations occur? What model do they follow?
- In researching the position, I discovered that your company/department has been working on a ________ project. Can you tell me more about this?
- What will the first assignment be?
- Can you give me an idea of when you expect to make a decision?
- What have been some of the best results produced by people in this job?
- Could you tell me about the people I would be dealing with?
- What qualities are you looking for in the candidate who fills this position?
- What characteristics do the achievers in this company seem to share?
- Please describe the duties of the job for me.
- What kinds of assignments might I expect during the first six months on the job?
- What products or services are in the development stage right now?
- Do you have plans for expansion?
- What are your growth projections for the next year?
- How do you feel about creativity and individuality?
- Is your company environmentally conscious? In what ways?
- In what ways is a career with your company better than a career with your competitors?
- Is this a new position or am I replacing someone?
- What is the single largest problem facing your staff/department right now?
- What kind of training can I expect in the first three months?
- What do you (the interviewer) like best about your job/company?
- Has there been much turnover in this job area?
- Do you fill positions from the outside or promote from within first?

The Interview Day

Time/Place
Be sure to confirm the time and place of your interview. Obtain directions, and give yourself adequate travel time including traffic and parking. Arrive 15 minutes early, but do not go to the actual office until 3-5 minutes before the actual interview.

Dress
Professional business attire; good grooming.

Bring
Small portfolio/briefcase with interview information (name, address, phone), several copies of your resume.
Type of Interview Formats

Screening Interview
Initial interview, basic questions, maybe individual or group.

Second Interview
Follows screening interview, more in-depth, often interviewed by more than one person, office tour, job offer may come.

Phone Interview
Interview takes place over the phone. May be a conference call with several people asking questions.

Panel Interview
Panel of interviewers ask you questions, similar to screening or second interview with more than one interviewer.

Stress Interview
Involves questions similar to traditional interview, using different techniques to evaluate your answers. May put pressure on you by changing the pace and/or subject to see how you react. Involves more reading between the lines on the part of the employer.

What to Expect in an Interview

Get Acquainted Phase
This is the time for small talk. The interviewer may ask you about some interest area on your resume. The purpose is to set you at ease and develop rapport.

Employer Questions Phase
During this phase of the interview, the employer may give a brief, informative description about the organization, department, and job. You will then be asked a series of questions about your education, skills, and experience. You may be asked specific and/or hypothetical questions. Answer thoughtfully, concisely, and do not ramble!

Interviewee Questions Phase
This is your opportunity to ask the employer relevant questions. You should come prepared with several questions that will demonstrate your familiarity with functions of the organization. If questions have occurred to you as a result of the interview, ask them. However, do not ask about salary or benefits in the first interview. There will be a time for that later. Do not ask redundant or basic questions that you should have known or researched prior to the interview. You will want to ask about the decision making timeline and when you can expect to hear from the employer.

Closing the Interview Phase
The employer will let you know when s/he is ready to wrap up by verbal and non-verbal signals. Closing a file or pushing back a chair are two of the cues. As you finish, reiterate your interest in the position, smile, make eye contact, and shake hands.

What to do after an Interview

Send a brief thank you note within 24 hours of the interview. (See Thank You Letter section) It should be typed. Use a professional business letter format. Re-emphasize your interest.

If you have not heard from the employer in 2 weeks, you may call to inquire about your status and to find out when you can expect an answer.
Behavioral Interviewing

“Tell me about a time when you were on a team, and one of the members wasn’t carrying his or her weight.” If this is one of the leading questions in your job interview, you could be in for a behavior interview. Based on the premise that the best way to predict future behavior is to determine past behavior, this style is gaining wide acceptance among recruiters.

Today, more than ever, every hiring decision is critical. Behavioral interviewing is designed to minimize personal impressions that can affect the hiring decision. By focusing on the applicant’s actions and behaviors, rather than subjective impressions that can sometimes be misleading, interviewers can make more accurate hiring decisions.

Behavior vs. Traditional Interviews

If you have training or experience with traditional interviewing techniques, you may find the behavioral interview quite different in several ways:

- Instead of asking how you would behave in a particular situation, the interviewer will ask you to describe how you did behave.
- Expect the interviewer to question and probe (think of “peeling the layers of an onion”).
- The interviewer will ask you to provide details, and will not allow you to theorize or generalize about several events.
- The interview will be a more structured process that will concentrate on areas that are important to the interviewer, rather than allow you to concentrate on areas that you may feel are important.
- You may not get a chance to deliver any prepared stories.
- Most interviewers will be taking copious notes throughout the interview.

The behavioral interviewer has been trained to objectively collect and evaluate information, and works from a profile of desired behaviors that are needed for success on the job. Because the behaviors a candidate has demonstrated in previous similar positions are likely to be repeated, you will be asked to share situations in which you may or may not have exhibited these behaviors. Your answers will be evaluated for accuracy and consistency.

If you are an entry-level candidate with no previous related experience, the interviewer will look for behaviors in situations similar to those of the target position:

- “Describe a major problem you have faced and how you dealt with it.”
- “Give an example of when you had to work with your hands to accomplish a task or project.”
- “What class did you like the most? What did you like about it?”

Follow-up questions will test for consistency and determine if you exhibited the desired behavior in that situation:

- “Can you give me an example?”
- “What did you do?”
- “What did you say?”
- “What were you thinking?”
- “How did you feel?”
- “What was your role?”
- “What was the result?”

You will notice an absence of such questions as, “Tell me about your strengths and weaknesses.”

How to Prepare for a Behavioral Interview

- Recall recent situations that show favorable behaviors or actions, especially involving course of work, work experience, leadership, teamwork, initiative, planning, and customer service.

- Prepare short descriptions of each situation, be ready to give details if asked.

- Be sure each story has a beginning, a middle, and an end; i.e. be ready to describe the situation, your action and the outcome or result.

- Be sure the outcome or result reflects positively on you (even if the result itself was not favorable).

- Be honest. Don’t embellish or omit any part of the story. The interviewer will find out if your story is built on a weak foundation.

- Be specific. Don’t generalize about several events; give a detailed accounting of one event.
• A possible response for the question, “Tell me about the time you were on a team and a member wasn't pulling his or her weight” might go as follows: “I had been assigned to a team to build a canoe out of concrete. One of our team members wasn’t showing up for our lab sessions or doing his assignment. I finally met with him in private, explained the frustration of the rest of the team, and asked if there was anything I could do to help. He told me he was preoccupied with another class that he wasn’t passing, so I found someone to help him with the other course. He not only was able to spend more time on our project, but he was also grateful to me for helping him out. We finished our project on time, and got a ‘B’ on it.”

The interviewer might then probe:

“How did you feel when you confronted this person?”

“Exactly what was the nature of the project?”

“What was his responsibility as a team member?”

“At what point did you take it upon yourself to confront him?”

Don’t Forget the Basics
Instead of feeling anxious or threatened by the prospect of a behavioral interview, remember the essential difference between the traditional interview and the behavioral interview: The traditional interviewer may allow you to project what you might or should do in a given situation, whereas the behavioral interviewer is looking for past actions only. It will always be important to put your best foot forward and make a good impression on the interviewer with appropriate attire, good grooming, a firm handshake, and direct eye contact. There is no substitute for promptness, courtesy, preparation, enthusiasm, and a positive attitude.

**STAR Method**
Interview questions can vary, but you can be sure employers will ask you questions regarding your education, work experience, extracurricular activities, career goals, interests in the company and any other information you can supply them that will make you stand out from the rest.

The most common interview method used by employers is the behavioral-based interview model. Basically, the premise behind this model is that past behavior is an indication of future behavior as to how you will solve problems or deal with delicate interpersonal matters. This is how you are evaluated as a potential new employee. The model of how to respond to behavioral-based interview questions is the **STAR method**, which is an acronym for **Situation or Task, Action and Result**. It’s a simple three-step process that will enable you to focus on specific experiences to support your responses.

1. **Situation or Task**: Describe a task or project for which you had responsibility.

2. **Action**: Talk about the approach you took to deal with the situation.

3. **Result**: Discuss the outcome of your action, making sure to mention accomplishments or improvements made as a result of your action. Emphasize the most relevant and impressive aspects of your background and qualifications (including paid and volunteer work). Stress that the skills you have developed in the past are transferable to the employer's organization. Speak in positive terms about previous experiences and employers. If possible, include an example (either extracurricular or in a work situation) of your ability to work as part of a team.

**What a STAR response might look like:**

**Q**: Tell me about some things in your job that you have done beyond what has been required.

**A**: “Last summer, I was head lifeguard at a large public pool that employed 20 lifeguards (SITUATION). As head lifeguard I was in charge of training all the lifeguards (TASK). Although it wasn't required, I decided to put together a written training handbook to make it easier to have consistent training from summer to summer (ACTION). As a result, training new employees is more efficient and thorough (RESULT).”
Case Interviews: Cracking the Mystery

The case interviewing style is particularly common among management consulting firms, law firms, counseling and social work organizations, police departments, and other organizations that place a premium on understanding your thought process. Most likely, the case will be the final part of a screening or hiring manager interview.

"Suppose . . ."

The case interview consists of presenting you with a typical set of "facts" that you might encounter in a real-life work situation and observing how you analyze, conclude, and act or recommend actions to be taken. The facts presented can range from a brief snapshot ("Suppose a client came anxiously into your office, hoping to find a solution to a desperate cash-flow problem caused by an unusually severe seasonal slowdown in his business") or an elaborate maze of information including charts, graphs, numbers, and correlations—some relevant and some perhaps not.

Your job is to become the professional in the situation, making further inquiries to clarify the facts, developing and presenting a framework for thinking about the issues, and then working within the framework to come to conclusions.

Framework?

What do we mean by a framework? In the cash-flow situation stated above, the framework might be an exploration of the bigger picture ("What has your sales history been over the past two years?")—then a look at potential causes, the testing of hypotheses, and finally consideration of short- and long-term remediation possibilities.

If the case presented requires formulating actions in order to implement a strategy, the framework you use might be a two-by-two matrix, in which you classify possible actions in terms of their relevance to the strategy (high or low) and their difficulty of implementation (high or low). The high-impact, low-difficulty quadrant would be the first area to address.

The interviewer is generally more interested in how you explain your assumptions, your reasons for selecting the framework you use, and how you say you would go about operating within that framework than in whether you arrive at a "correct" answer (Tip: There usually is none). Your objective should be to show how you think, and that you think in a clear and reasoned manner.

Naturally, if you have access to the particular framework favored by a given organization for dealing with its clients, you will have an edge. You might, for example, find out that consulting firm X always assumes that a prospective client's set of facts is incomplete or distorted in some important way and that the first task is to challenge the would-be client's own assumptions. Discussing the organization with your networking resources will help you to formulate an appropriate framework.

Tips to help you Crack the Case every Time:

- Listen carefully to the material presented. Take notes if you want to, and be sure to ask questions if you are unsure about details.
- Take your time. You're not expected to have a brilliant solution to a complex problem on the tip of your tongue. If you need a minute or two to collect your thoughts and work through your answer, say so.
- Offer a general statement or framework up front to serve as an outline for your answer. Although the framework can be something as elaborate as a 3C (customer, company, competition) model, it need not be anything more than something like: If you're asking about declining profits, then I'd want to check into factors affecting cost, and factors affecting revenues. On the cost side..." As you proceed with your answer, draw on the outline of your framework.
- Hone in on key issues. Many interviewers will be checking to see if you operate by the 80-20 rule, which means you should first address the broader issues that will get you 80 percent of the way to a good solution.
- Orient your answer toward action. Theory is good for the classroom, but it won’t fly in a boardroom. Clients want to know what steps they can take to solve a problem, not pie-in-the-sky philosophy.
- Think out loud. The interviewer is looking as much for evidence of a logical thought process as for a brilliant conclusion to the case problem.
Making a First Impression
When you walk through an employer’s door you will instantly generate some sort of impression based on your appearance and posture. The decision to hire you or not may be influenced by that initial impression, so it is crucial that you make it a good one.

Women
- Wear a skirt suit or pantsuit in conservative colors (grey, blue, black).
- Avoid bright colors, bold prints, plunging necklines, skirts more than 2 inches above the knee, sleeveless tops, capri pants, or clothes that are too tight.
- Make sure clothes are clean and well pressed.
- Nylons must be worn. Avoid patterns or dark colors.
- Closed toe shoes, neat and clean are appropriate. Avoid backless shoes, sandals or high heels.
- Make up should be worn in a professional manner.
- Avoid heavy mascara or eyeliner. No overly bright colored eye shadow, lipstick, or blush.
- Hair should be neat, clean and reflect a businesslike appearance. Pull long hair back to keep it in place.
- Jewelry should be understated and not excessive. Facial jewelry should be kept to a minimum as well as multiple earrings, rings, bangle and anklet bracelets.
- Perfume, if worn, should be subtle.
- Hands should be clean and fingernails should be well-kept and short.
- Avoid backpacks and overly trendy handbags.

Men
- Wear a dark suit or dress pants and a blazer.
- Make sure clothes are clean and well pressed.
- Dark dress shoes, neat and clean, are appropriate. Avoid sport shoes and boots.
- A dress shirt, clean and well pressed is necessary. The best color is white.
- Ties should be coordinated with the suit coat. Avoid bright colors or designs.
- Hair and fingernails should be clean and neatly groomed.
- Beards and mustaches must be closely trimmed, neat and clean.
- Cologne, if worn should be subtle.
- Facial jewelry should be kept to a minimum as well as multiple earrings and rings.
- Avoid backpacks or briefcases in bright colors.

Adapted from the following resources:
- Interviewing Guide. Career Services, Pitzer College, Claremont, CA.
What to Avoid in an Interview

There are a number of factors that can turn an interviewer off and negatively affect the outcome of your interview. Things to consider include the following:

- Poor personal appearance
- Overbearing attitude, over-aggressive, conceited, “know it all”
- Inability to express oneself clearly, mumbling, not projecting voice
- Poor diction, grammar, or enunciation
- Lack of planning or direction for career, no purpose or goals
- Lack of interest or enthusiasm, passive, indifferent
- Lack of confidence and poise, nervousness
- Overemphasis on money and benefits
- Unwilling to start at the bottom, expect too much too soon
- No interest in continuing training or education, no drive or ambition
- Lack of tact
- Lack of maturity
- Lack of courtesy, poor manners
- Condemnation of past managers/employers
- Poor eye contact
- Radical or extreme views
- Sloppy application and resume
- Inability to expand on ideas
- Limp handshake
- Too loud or too hard to understand
- Excessive hand motions or body movement
- Arriving late with no explanation
- Discussing personal problems
- Making reference to wanting job only for a short time
- No interest in the department’s/organization’s success
- Cynical attitude
- Appearing or sounding lazy
- Inability to take criticism
- Failure to express appreciation to the interviewer
- Asking no questions about the job or the organization

Adapted from:
Sweaty Palms, The Neglected Art of Being Interviewed
H. Anthony Medley
Thank You Letter

“Follow up letters do count.” Two candidates for senior posts lost out recently because they didn’t send letters after job interviews. Recruiter Dussick Management Associates says, “The companies had hoped that letters would provide clues to the applicants’ communication skills.” - *Wall Street Journal*

The first thing you do upon leaving the interview is breathe a sigh of relief. The second is to make sure that “out of sight, out of mind” will not apply to you. You do this by starting a follow-up procedure immediately after the interview.

Sitting in your car, on the bus, train, or plane, do a written recap of the interview while it’s still fresh in your mind. Answer these questions:

- Whom did you meet? Names and titles.
- What does the job entail?
- Why can you do the job?
- What aspects of the interview went poorly? Why?
- What is the agreed-upon next step?
- What was said during the last few minutes of the interview?

Probably the most difficult and most important thing to do is analyze what aspects of the interview went poorly. A person does not get offered a job based solely on strengths. On the contrary, many people get new jobs based on their relative lack of negatives as compared to the other applicants. So, it is mandatory that you look for and recognize any negatives from your performance. This is the only way you will have an opportunity to package and overcome those negatives in your follow-up procedure and during subsequent interviews.

The next step is to write the follow-up letter to the interviewer to acknowledge the meeting, and help keep you fresh in her/his mind.

1. It is important to keep the letter neat and professional. The following are some guidelines.
   - The letter should be as brief as possible. In most cases one-half to three-quarters of a page is sufficient.
   - The letter should be as brief as possible. In most cases one-half to three-quarters of a page is sufficient.
   - The paper should be standard 8 1/2-by-11 inch letter white. A heavy bond is most suitable for any business.
   - Be professional in format. This is a formal letter, and should not be informal in structure or content.
   - Use titles such as Ms. or Dr. unless you have been specifically told to be less formal.
   - Spell out all words; do not abbreviate.
   - Have someone proofread your letter to ensure that the names of those who interviewed you are spelled correctly and that it contains no typos.

2. Make four points clear:
   - You paid attention to what was being said in the interview.
   - You understood the importance of the interviewer’s comments.
   - You are excited about the job, can do it, and want it.
   - You correct any negative impressions or clear up confusing issues that surface during the interview.

3. Use the right words and phrases in your letter. The following are some words and phrases you might want to use:
   - Thought -- “Upon reflection,” and, “Having thought about our meeting....”
   - Recognize -- “I recognize the importance of....”
   - Listen -- “Listening to the points you made...”
   - Enthusiasm -- Let the interviewer catch your enthusiasm. It is very effective, especially as your letter will arrive while other applicants are nervously sweating their way through interviews.
   - Impressed -- Let the interviewer know you were impressed with the people/product/service/facility/market/position, but do not overkill.
• Challenge -- You feel you will be challenged to do your best work in this environment.

• Confidence -- There is a job to be done and a challenge to be met. Let the interviewer know you are confident of doing both well.

• Interest -- If you want the job/next interview, say so. At this stage, the company is buying and you are selling. Ask for the job in a positive and enthusiastic manner.

• Appreciation -- As a courtesy and mark of professional manners, you must express appreciation for the time the interviewer took out of her/his busy schedule.

4. Your follow-up letter will be addressed to the main interviewer. Whenever possible and appropriate, mention the names of the people you met at the interview. Draw attention to one of the topics that was of general interest to the interviewer(s).

5. Mail the letter within 24 hours of the interview. If the decision is going to be made in the next couple of days, hand-deliver the letter or make a strong point by sending it through overnight mail. The follow-up letter will refresh your image in the mind of the interviewer.

6. If you do not hear anything after five days, which is quite normal, put in a telephone call to the company/representative. Reiterate the points made in the letter, saying that you want the job/next interview, and finish your statements with a question: “Ms. Smith, I feel confident about my ability to contribute to your department’s efforts and I really want the job. Could you tell me what I have to do to get it?” Then be quiet and wait for an answer.
May 1, 2001

81 Hope St.
Wishville, CA 91444

Ms. Romelle Aluce
Director, Western Region
Feed the Homeless, Inc.
3211 Sepulveda
Los Angeles, CA 90324

Dear Ms. Aluce:

I enjoyed meeting you and your committee last Friday. Please extend my appreciation for the interview to Sue, Lolly, Bob, and Chris. I was impressed with all of your staff, your obvious interest in providing quality programs, and your beautiful new facility. Feed the Homeless is really going somewhere! I would like to be a part of your team.

Having thought about our meeting, I agree with your assessment of the political environment which does not adequately address the needs of the city's hungry. Both my involvement with the mayor’s task force on the homeless and my fund raising expertise give me the confidence to meet the challenges of your organization.

I recognize the importance of your finding the right candidate to “fit” the job. I am convinced that I have the skills, energy, temperament, and most of all the desire to perform the development officer position with enthusiasm and competence. You offer an environment that would challenge me to do my best work.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you. I hope to hear from you soon. You can reach me at (909)633-6666 or Ann@AOL.com.

Sincerely,

Ann Example