

Interview Guide

Interviews provide an opportunity for a potential employer to get to know you, and for you to get to learn more about a potential employer. Usually, employers will ask questions to determine if you possess the qualifications and skills to perform a specific role, and if you possess the qualities that will make you a good fit for their organization. In your interview, you need to answer questions directly and concisely, connect your skills and experiences with the job requirements, maintain a high degree of professionalism, and ask intelligent questions. The key to succeeding in the interview is preparation.

Prepare, Prepare, and Prepare Some More

If you don't spend time preparing and practicing for your interview, you don't stand a chance. Don't panic though—the preparation process will get easier as you go along.

Know Yourself

This is perhaps the most important part of preparing for any interview. You need to know and have a deep understanding of your skills, interests, achievements, areas of expertise, strengths, and weaknesses. Conducting a thoughtful self-assessment of who you are, what you have done, and what you want to do will help you feel more confident in your interviews. Once you know yourself better, you need to be able to relay that information clearly and concisely in response to interviewer questions. You should have “talking points” for EVERYTHING on your resume that provide illustrations and/or specific examples of your skills, interests, achievements, areas of expertise, strengths, and weaknesses.

Do Your Research

Be sure that you have carefully read the job description multiple times and know exactly what your potential employer is looking for in terms of skills, experience, qualifications, and expertise. Since you will know yourself well, knowing what your potential employer wants enable you to answer questions in a way that directly connects you to the job description.

- You also need to do some in-depth research on your potential employer. You should know things like:
- Where does the job for which you are interviewing fit in a certain department/division, and how does that department/division fit into the larger organization.
- For a non-profit organization, what is its mission, what are its sources of funding, who sits on its board, what communities does it serve, what partner organizations does it work with.
- What does the organization (and any subsidiaries) do (products made, customers served).
- What were the organizations earnings in the last quarter, what new business lines has it recently expanded into (or is planning to expand into).
- Who are the organization's competitors and how does it differentiate or “brand” itself.
- Where has the organization been (its history), where is it now (its current state), and where is it going (its future direction).
- Has the organization been in the news over the past week, past few months, past year; if so, why.

Lastly, if you don't regularly keep up with “the news,” you should strive to consistently review a few select news sources for at least a week or two in advance of your interview. Being conversant about current events locally, nationally, internationally, and with regard to your potential employer is critical.

Develop an Interview Strategy

O.K. now that you know yourself well and you know your potential employer well, you need to think about how you can demonstrate to the interviewer(s) that you are the best candidate for the job. What important skills, abilities, successes, qualifications, and facts that connect you directly to job description do you DEFINITELY NEED to be sure the interviewer knows. Believe it or not, you should be able to talk about these things regardless of what actual questions the interviewer asks you. This is called “controlling” the interview, and one of the most effective strategies to do this is the *STAR Method*.

STAR stands for **Situation, Task, Action, Result** and is a relatively simple process that enables you to focus on specific experiences and craft mini-narratives that demonstrate you are prepared for the job.

- **Situation:** Describe a situation you encountered in some prior experience.
- **Task:** Discuss the tasks you were assigned (or developed on your own) to address the situation.
- **Action:** Talk about how you actually executed those tasks (emphasize the skills you used or developed).
- **Results:** Discuss the outcomes of your actions, whether successful or not as successful as you would have liked; emphasize and quantify achievements as much as possible; talk about what you learned and how you intend to improve in the future, particularly if you are telling a story about something that didn't end successfully.

By having *STAR* narratives prepared for many or all of the experiences listed on your resume, you will be able to answer lots of different questions about virtually any of your past experiences, while continually keeping the interviewer focused on your qualifications for the specific position at hand. Remember that when crafting a *STAR* narrative about a difficult situation with a previous employer or manager, you should always speak about them in positive terms (no one wants to hire someone who they think will speak badly about them in the future). You should focus on the difficulty of the situation, what YOU learned and how YOU developed from the situation rather than on negative aspects of a particular past manager or coworker.

Practice

Usually towards the end of an interview, most interviewers will give you the opportunity to ask questions. Preparing and asking good questions is critical. Often, not asking any questions or asking really uninformed questions can disqualify you as a candidate.

You should ask questions that reinforce your interest in the position, demonstrate your knowledge of the organization, or address “inside information” that only an interviewer might be able to provide about the position. You should not ask questions to which you could have easily found an answer on their website or in their recruiting materials. However, clarifying questions about things online or in print are acceptable. Avoid questions that cast doubt on your candidacy (“Do I really have to work a lot of overtime?”) or that deal with salary, benefits, or perks (unless the interviewer already brought these things up).

Prepare Your Own Questions

Most people are not innately good at interviewing, and even those who might have natural talent still need to research and strategize for specific positions. Practicing with Career Services, friends, roommates, family, airplane seatmates, etc. will help you hone your interview skills to maximize your success for the real thing.

Career Services schedules practice interviews on demand with Pitzer students. After scheduling a practice interview, it is very helpful to submit a copy of your resume and a copy of a specific job description to your practice interviewer to make the experience as real and substantive as possible.

Look and Be Professional

For nearly every interview, you will want to dress neatly and conservatively from head to toe. This often requires some advance planning to buy essential wardrobe items (or get them shipped from back home), drop off and pick up dry cleaning, wash and/or iron your clothes, shine your shoes, and take care of your own personal hygiene. Dressing professionally allows the interviewer to focus on YOU and not your appearance. While professional attire may not be the most comfortable for you, be sure that your professional wardrobe is as comfortable as possible. Comfort leads to confidence. If the blisters on your feet from your brand new dress shoes are throbbing, or your too-tight collar is cutting off circulation to your brain, you won't perform as well in the interview room.

Leave enough time in the days leading up to your interview to get your wardrobe ready, and on the day of your interview to get yourself ready. Set your alarm to give you enough time to get ready before the interview. Getting ready may also include eating and hydrating before the interview. Map out a plan for how you will get to your interview location on time, given distance, traffic, class schedule, etc. Also be aware that "on time" should be about 15 minutes early (this will give you time to visit the restroom one last time, have a few minutes of down time to mentally prepare, or start early if your interviewer is ready to go).

Types of Interviews

Screening Interview

This is an initial interview to determine if an employer wants to invite you to a more in-depth, formal interview. Screening interviews are often conducted by phone or in a group format with other candidates.

Telephone Interview

As a first step to determine if you are a candidate worthy of a more substantive or in-person interview, an employer may conduct a telephone interview. In addition, if either you or the interviewer is unavailable to meet in person for a first or second round interview, these interviews may be conducted by phone. Some people find phone interviews to be more difficult than in-person interviews because it is more difficult to make a personal connection with the interviewer.

You should strive to conduct your phone interview over a landline, or ensure that your cell phone reception is strong where you will be during the interview. You should also ensure that you are in a quiet place without any background noise or interruptions. You should ensure that your voicemail message is professional and straightforward in case you miss a call from the interviewer.

The best strategy to do well in a phone interview is to treat it like an in-person interview. You should still dress professionally, sit up straight, smile when you talk, and attempt to connect with the interviewer over the phone. Treating the phone interview less formally and seriously WILL come across during the interview.

Video Interview

Employers are often employing Skype or other internet video chat instead of telephone to conduct interviews remotely. Since Skype is the "industry standard," you should look into downloading it and creating a free Skype account to share if an employer asks. Some best practices for Skype interviews include:

- Create a professional sounding Skype username (similar to how you should use a professional email handle).
- Ensure you have a strong internet connection so the video isn't choppy and the connection isn't dropped.
- Ensure your webcam and microphone are in good working order (test them before).

- Conduct the video interview in a clean, quiet room without distracting (or inappropriate) posters on the wall, an unsightly mess behind you, roommates walking around in the background, etc.
- Be sure that no one will walk-in on your interview (perhaps a do not disturb sign), turn off your cell phone ringer and/or landline ringer, turn off instant messaging apps and close non-essential programs on your computer.
- Dress professionally (both top and bottom) and try to avoid distracting print patterns or jewelry that may become pixelated or noisy on the screen.
- Look directly at the camera and maintain the same type of professional demeanor and posture that you would sitting in the same room as your interviewer (looking at the interviewer on the screen means you are looking away from the camera and thus, away from the interviewer).

On-Campus and First Round Interviews

Whether these interviews happen on campus or not, they are more substantive than initial screening interviews, but less in-depth than second or final round interviews. Typically between 30 and 60 minutes in length, these interviews often follow this format:

- **Get Acquainted Phase:** the interviewer(s) will greet you and make a bit of small talk; they may ask about some experience on your resume to get to know you better as a person; the interviewer(s) will be building up their impression of you as a candidate and assessing your fit within the organization.
- **Employer Information & Questions Phase:** the interviewer(s) may provide some brief, informative information about the organization, department, and job; they will ask more in-depth questions about your past experiences, skills, education, and achievements; they may ask specific and/or hypothetical questions; be sure to keep your answers thoughtful and concise (remember STAR and avoid rambling!).
- **Candidate Questions Phase:** this is your chance to ask relevant questions of the interviewer; use questions that you prepared before your interview and questions that might occur to you during the course of the interview; remember, avoid asking basic questions that could have been answered with research before the interview; also, avoid redundant questions and don't ask so many questions that you extend the interview far beyond the scheduled time; you SHOULD ask about the employer's decision making timeline and next steps.

Second and Final Round Interviews

If you successfully navigate a screening interview and first round interview, you may be invited in for second round (often final) round interviews. These interviews may last an entire day and can entail multiple interviews with different individuals, group or panel interviews, meals, and social events. Often, these interviews will happen at the employer's offices or "on-site." Keep the following in mind:

- During the entire day, everyone will be observing and evaluating you, including during any meals or social events; you should act professionally and treat everyone respectfully, from the reception desk staff to senior managers.
- You will be asked questions that evaluate your skills, experiences, education and achievements; you may also be presented with scenarios or problems and asked how you would approach solving them; interviewers will also be evaluating how you fit as a member of a team within the organization.
- You may be asked the same question multiple times in different interviews; you can adjust your answers depending on the individual interviewer, but you should try to be as consistent as possible (everyone will compare notes about you at the end of the day).

- In a panel or group interview, be sure to both answer the individual who asks a question and engage the entire group with your responses.
- During meals or social events, you should almost always avoid drinking alcohol (and definitely if you are not 21); if you are 21 and it is appropriate to have an alcoholic beverage in the context of the event, you should definitely limit your consumption.
- You should ask for an interview agenda in advance so you can know the names and roles of your interviewers, can conduct research on what they do, and prepare good questions.
- If your interview is at the employer's offices, you should observe how people interact with each other and what the office environment and culture is like; this is your opportunity to determine if you would like working at the organization and with your potential managers and co-workers; don't be afraid to ask for a more expansive tour of the organization if not already offered.
- Sometimes, salary and benefits may be discussed during the second or final round interview; you should let an interviewer initiate this discussion and avoid giving an exact amount that you are looking for; do your research in advance so that if an interviewer presses you to share an exact amount, you can provide an informed number; often, this discussion won't occur until you receive an offer some time after the interview; if you have questions about offer negotiation, please visit Career Services.
- If you have to make travel plans to interview at an employer's offices, confirm what costs the employer will reimburse you for and save all your receipts to submit to the interview coordinator.

Interview Questions

Traditional or Common Interview Questions

At the most basic level, an interviewer wants to know how you are going to add value as an employee and how well you will fit in at the organization if you get hired. Here are some common questions you might get:

- Why did you choose your College or major?
- Why are you interested in working for this organization? Why are you interested in this specific position?
- What do you know about this position (or organization)?
- What are your short and long term career goals?
- Tell me about yourself.
- Walk me through your resume.
- How would a friend (or professor or past manager) describe you?
- What are your greatest strengths? What are your chief weaknesses?
- What school activities have you participated in? Why did you choose them and which did you enjoy the most?
- What kind of boss do you prefer?
- Do you think your grades are a good indication of your academic achievement?
- In what ways do you think you have grown the most over the past two to three years?
- Tell me about a time you failed. How did you deal with it?
- What value will you add to the job if we hire you?
- What motivates you?
- How do you evaluate success?

- What qualities should a successful supervisor possess?
- What things frustrate you the most and how do you cope with them?
- How do you deal with pressure?
- Are you willing to travel?
- In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable working?
- What have you done that shows initiative?
- Tell me about a project you worked on.
- Are you planning to go to graduate school?
- What do you like to do in your spare time?
- What book(s) are you reading or have recently finished?
- How do you keep up with the news?
- What are your goals outside of work for the next three to five years?
- What three factors are most important to you in your job?
- If you were hiring someone for this position, what qualities would you look for?
- In what part-time or summer jobs or internships have you been most interested? Why?
- What will you do if you don't get this job?
- How do you work as a member of a team?
- How do you hold your colleagues (and/or your manager) accountable?
- Why should I hire you?

The list of possible questions is endless, but most are designed to get you talking about your past to assess how you will perform in the future as an employee. When asked about your past experiences, emphasize your skills and achievements providing specific examples of what you did. Remember to know yourself and use the STAR method when appropriate, to talk about specific scenarios. Also, be sure to be honest in your answers and avoid embellishment or making things up. In talking about areas of “weakness” or past failures, be sure to emphasize that you are self aware and always actively working to improve.

It is essential to actively listen to the interviewer's questions and directly answer the question asked. While actively listening, strive to discern any hidden meaning or concerns underlying a question so you can tailor your answer appropriately (for example, is an employer worried that you might not like sitting at a desk all day or that you might not be willing to work for more than a year at the organization before going back to school).

Behavioral Interview Questions

At the most basic level, an interviewer wants to know how you are going to add value as an employee and how well will you fit in at the organization if you get hired. Here are some common questions you might get:

Behavioral interviewing is designed to minimize personal impressions that can affect the hiring decision. By focusing on your actions and behaviors rather than subjective impressions that can sometimes be misleading, interviewers may feel they can make more accurate hiring decisions. Instead of asking you how you WOULD behave in a particular situation, the interviewer will ask you to describe how you DID behave. In behavioral interviews, an interviewer will often question you and probe deeper beyond your initial answers

to a question; the interviewer will ask you to provide details and will not allow you to theorize or generalize about things.

Often, behavioral interview questions are combined with more traditional or common interview questions. Here are some examples of behavioral interview questions:

- Describe a major problem you have faced and how you dealt with it.
- Tell me about a time you resolved a crisis.
- Tell me about a time you changed someone's mind. How?
- How do you prepare for confrontations?
- What role do you usually take on team activities or projects?
- Tell me about a time you had to be assertive?
- Can you give me an example of time you had to deliver bad news?
- Describe a time when attention to detail was important to your work?
- When were you most proud of your work and why?
- Give an example of when you had to use your hands to accomplish a task or project.
- Describe a time when you had to make a difficult decision.

Case Interview Questions

Case interviews are not about your experiences, but about your ability to solve a problem presented to you using your analytical abilities, critical reasoning skills, and logic. Case interviews are commonly used by consulting firms or other organizations that place a premium on understanding how you take apart and solve a complex problem.

There is not standard list of case interview questions. Typically, the case interview consists of presenting you with a set of "facts" that you might encounter in a real-life work situation. The interviewer(s) will observe how you analyze, conclude, and act or recommend actions to be taken. The "facts" presented can range from a brief snapshot to 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 who makes further inquiries of the interviewer(s) to clarify the "facts," develop and present a framework for thinking about the issues, and then come to conclusions within your framework.

If you need help preparing for a case interview, please visit Career Services.

Interview Follow-Up

Focus on Improving Your Skills

Immediately after your interview (in the car, bus, train, plane, cafeteria, coffee shop), begin evaluating how the interview went. Think about and record the following in your notebook or on your digital device:

- Who did you meet (names and titles)? (You should have asked for business cards from everyone you met with)
- What does the job entail?
- Why can you do the job?
- What questions were most difficult to answer?

- How could you have answered certain questions better?
- How could you have improved other aspects of the interview?
- Did you do enough research?
- What was said during the last few minutes of the interview?
- What are the next steps?

By being honest with yourself and actively thinking about how you did, you will be more likely to improve your interviewing technique for future interviews.

Write and Send Thank You Notes

Within 24 hours of your interview, you should send a thank you note to each interviewer with whom you met. You may send the note as an email or as a brief typed and signed letter. You may also send a small handwritten notecard, but be sure that the notecard's design is professional and your writing is legible. Generally, an email or typed letter are preferred, and e-mail is almost always the best way to ensure your thank you note is received promptly. You should send a note even if the interview went poorly or you decided after the interview that you are no longer interested in the position.

Your note should be brief, reiterate your interest in the position, and reference specific qualifications (or topics of conversation during the interview) that you want the interviewer to remember.

Email Example

Dear Mr. Oliver,

I am writing to thank you for meeting with me yesterday for the Vice President of Student Activities position. I greatly enjoyed our conversation and was especially interested to hear your plans for committing large new budgetary expenditures to support student clubs. After reviewing my interview notes, I am confident that my accounting skills, communication abilities and leadership experience will allow me to add significant value in this newly created position. I appreciate your time and look forward to another opportunity to further discuss my candidacy.

Thank you again.

Sincerely,
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