

# INTERVIEW BASICS

## Before the Interview - Preparation & Research!

Preparation is the key to successful interviewing. There are three important steps to help you effectively prepare and research for an upcoming interview:

### 1. Assess yourself

- What skills do you have and like to use?
- What interests you and keeps you motivated? How would you describe your ideal job?
- What are your goals? What gives you personal satisfaction in a job?

You may not be asked specifically about these components, but having them available will allow you to integrate them into your interview answers. For example you might say, "My attention to detail and familiarity with ABC Company's spreadsheet software saved us over \$2500 last year, for which I was named employee of the month."

### 2. Assess the employer

Collect as much information as possible about the employer. You can get information from:

- People in the field (friends, neighbors, associations, professors)
- Literature from the organization found on their website
- Information produced by outside resources such as [glassdoor.com](http://glassdoor.com), and [salary.com](http://salary.com)

#### Consider the following:

Positions and career paths | Issues and trends | Organizational structure | Organization history | Work environment | Management style | Salary ranges | Philosophy and culture | Organization future plans

### 3. Assess how your skills and interests fit with the employer

Once you have collected information about the employer, this knowledge of the position/organization will help you see if there is a "fit" with your skills, interests and goals. At your interview, employers are trying to see both what's in it for them as well as what's in it for you. It is important to make a good match, so identify the following: Why do you want to work in this industry? What draws you to this particular position? What is it about this organization that appeals to you? Being able to answer these questions with clarity, enthusiasm, and excitement will demonstrate your motivation and prove that the position isn't just a good fit - it's an excellent fit.

**Exercise A:** Go into the interview knowing several good reasons why you are the best candidate for the position. Remember, no one has the same "mix" as you. With this in mind, make a brief list that focuses on what makes you uniquely qualified for the position and integrate these into your interview.

- **Who you are:** personality, traits, strengths, and characteristics.
- **What you know:** educational background, certifications, and research conducted
- **What you know how to do:** experience from class projects, work, volunteer, or leisure activities

**Exercise B:** Get it down on paper to really see how you fit and get concrete ideas of what to mention so the employer sees the fit (you may have already done this to tailor your resume and cover letter to the specific position!).



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## Before the Interview - Practice!

Practice is the key to fine-tuning your interview skills and anticipating its process. There are two important elements to consider in practicing for the interview:

### 1 - Anticipate and practice answers to the employer's questions!

#### ***Tell me about yourself.***

This is a favorite question to start with in many fields. It is very beneficial for you to have an answer prepared, as it helps you begin the interview feeling relaxed and prepared, instead of caught off guard, trying to quickly come up with an appropriate answer to an abstract question! Talk about what brought you to this point.

Include relevant details such as: certification/educational experiences, research you have done on the field/career/position, work/intern/volunteer experiences that have guided you here, and other information that is relevant. The answer should be concise (2 minutes at most), which is why it is so helpful to plan the answer in advance.

#### ***What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?***

It is helpful to decide which strengths and weaknesses you are going to use for each interview. Prepare 2-3 of each. You may be asked what friends or former supervisors would say your strengths and weaknesses are, but the answers will not likely change much!

**Strengths:** Aim for confidence without arrogance. Choose some things that are relevant to the position and also try to find some things that may set you apart from the competition. If every candidate is going to say they are organized, try something more creative – or at least give some concrete examples of what “organized” means for you.

**Weaknesses:** Prepare in advance so you don't get caught feeling unprepared. On a related note, keep the answer pretty concise – you don't want to dwell too long on the negative. Choose a weakness that is not completely central to the position. We don't want the employer to be concerned (i.e. I am not good with people, and you are applying for customer service), but not one that is completely irrelevant (i.e. I am not a very good cook).

You may choose to mention a weakness that the employer has already noticed. If you got to the interview, it is probably not too big of a deal and this can be a good chance to address it and prove that it is not going to be a problem (i.e. lack of previous experience dealing with a certain aspect of the position description). Do choose a real weakness. The employer wants a weakness or they wouldn't have asked. Really, they want to see self-awareness. A self-aware employee is easy to supervise and will likely do well!

### 2 - Make sure you have a list of questions prepared to ask the employer!

- What are opportunities for professional growth?
- How is an employee evaluated and promoted?
- Can you describe the typical first year assignments?
- What are the organization's plans for future growth?
- What makes your organization different from competitors?
- What are the organization's strengths and weaknesses?
- How would you describe the organizational culture?
- What opportunities exist for cross training?
- Why do you enjoy working for this organization?
- What qualities are you looking for in your new hires?

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## During the Interview

Learn as much as possible about your interview logistics. Areas to consider are as follows:

**1 - Location:** Make sure you know exactly where to go. If you need to, make a trial run in advance.

**2 - Format of the Interview:** Make sure you know about the length and number of interview(s). Make sure you know what type of interview it will be - virtual, in-person, panel, etc.

**3 - Interviewers & Job-Specific Information:** Know names of contacts, the organization, and the job title for which you are applying.

**4 - Arrival:** Arrive to the interview site about 15 - 20 minutes before the interview, but do not "walk in the door" until 5 - 7 minutes prior to the interview. You want the interviewers to know you can follow directions, but not that you are overly eager.

**5 - What to Bring with You:** Copies of your tailored resume, references, transcripts (if requested), and any other documents they have requested as a part of the application process (ie. proof of certification).

**6 - Dress appropriately:** It's best to dress conservatively and to be overdressed rather than underdressed. Wear clothing that is appropriate for the organization with which you are interviewing. A conservative look is best for most interviews. Convey an image of professionalism and confidence. And know that you may end up being the best dressed person in the room...and that's okay.

**7 - Be Aware of Body Language & Eye Contact:** Always offer a firm handshake and confident eye contact, making sure to maintain appropriate eye contact throughout the entire interview. Know that your body language can speak volumes. Make sure you are sitting up straight and are slightly leaning forward. You don't have to be stiff, but watch that your hand gestures are not too wild! Careful with fidgeting! The body language of the interviewers shows their engagement as well.

**8 - Be a Good Listener:** Answer the questions they're asking. If you're unsure of what was asked, it's alright to ask that they clarify the question or rephrase it again in other words. If you are caught off guard for an answer, pause and think - you don't have to respond immediately. Think of the interview as a conversation. The more dialogue, the better.

**9 - Be Yourself:** Answer questions truthfully. Be authentic, real, and genuine. (And don't forget to breathe and smile!). The goal of an interview is to get them to like you!

**10 - Watch out for Employer Pet Peeves:** Employer pet peeves include: arrogance, poor oral communication and presentation styles, lack of interest, lack of employer knowledge, early questions about salary and benefits, poor eye contact, unprepared for interview and/or making excuses, egotism or over-confidence, tardiness or not showing up for the interview, and abrasive attitude.

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## After the Interview

**1 - Post-Interview Reflection:** After the interview write down your impressions, observations, any important time lines, and note the names of people you met (obtain business cards when possible). Reflect on the good. Take a few moments to note what went well and what didn't go so well so you can be better prepared for the next interview.

**2 - Thank You Note:** Follow-up with thank-you notes to all the people who interviewed you. It's best if they're written the day of or the day after the interview and sending them via regular mail or email are equally acceptable. Be sure the names are properly spelled. In your note, it's not a bad idea to repeat your strengths and interest in the position. Reaffirm your interest, qualifications and any important points which were discussed. This piece is very important! A little sincere gratitude goes a long way. Roughly 50% of interviewer's decisions are positively influenced by a follow-up or thank you note.

**3 - Be Transparent:** If you discover that you are no longer interested in the position, it is a professional courtesy to inform the employer of your decision to withdraw from the selection process. You may thank him/her for the opportunity to learn more about the organization, but that the position does not meet your goals and/or interests at this time.

**4 - Be Persistent and Don't Give Up:** If you do not get the job, remember that you will find a position in which the needs of both you and the employer will be met. Look upon your interviews as a learning experience -- an opportunity to learn more about yourself and about the people and organizations in your field!