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Career Development

Workshop 3: How to Prepare For and Conduct Interviews

Information for

Interview Candidates

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Preparing for an Interview

Congratulations! You got an interview. Once you've got an interview scheduled, what do you do next? Common advice is to *do your homework*, but the term *homework* is a misnomer. In class, it means answering an assignment for which there are right answers. But in real life, particularly in an interview, you have to prepare much more extensively. No grading on a curve. No winging it. Either you get the job (pass) or you don't (fail). Here are some ways to begin that preparation successfully.

Common Questions You Will Need to Answer

No matter the level or profession you are interviewing for, you can expect the inevitable questions to arise. Assume they don't remember your resume, and prepare yourself to answer the following:



- Why should we hire you?
- What are your skills?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What happened in your last job/internship/etc?
- Give examples of when you took initiative, overcame obstacles, exerted leadership, set and met a goal, tried something and failed, motivated other people, anticipated potential problems and developed responses to prevent them.
- Talk me through your resume.
- Do you have any questions for us?

For every question, come up with a quick response. Practice answering with a smile on your face and in a strong, yet understanding voice. Often when we are thinking, we look away and unconsciously frown. By practicing even in a mirror, you will overcome that nervous response. Think of a television anchor or host you admire, imagine how that person would answer, and imitate that tone and pitch until it suits you.

In addition to answering the basics, you have to do a self-evaluation so that you can explain what makes you qualified as a professional match for the company. Prepare examples for why they should hire you -- citing your talent, proven track record in accomplishing goals, working cooperatively with your team and contributing to the organization. Don't be overly modest. Don't talk as a team -- say "I" instead of "we." Remember to breathe, smile and make eye contact; this will help you be more relaxed.

Interviews Are Two-Way Streets

Remember: an interview is not a *test*. There is no right answer. Essentially, you're telling a story about yourself and the way you have approached work and relationships. The word interview means that which you can see between the two of you. It is not a one-way street. You can ask what happened to them in their career. Try to fully engage with the interviewer by following up on something they said earlier or commenting on something hanging on their walls. If you want the job, you have to create a bond.



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In addition to presenting yourself, you must show that you know about the organization and position for which you are applying. Start by visiting the company's website and becoming familiar with its content. Note the "careers" or "about us" section to get an idea of who is already employed there and what they might be looking for from future employees. Next, do a more comprehensive online search of the company and read annual reports, press releases and any other relevant articles. Use this material to come up with questions to ask the interviewer about the future of the company and how the position you're applying for fits in. [Guide to researching companies.](#)

And of course, don't overlook the simple things. These may seem like silly reminders, but don't underestimate how important it is to:

- Find out the location and know exactly how to get there, including where to park
- Allow plenty of time to get there -- don't be late
- Find out how they dress, and use this as your guide for grooming yourself
- Print and bring along multiple copies of your resume and any work samples (i.e. publications)
- Prior to the interview, check in with people that you are planning to list as references
- Gather the contact information of anyone you should send a thank you note to, and do so as soon as possible after your interview

Dressing for an Interview

In an interview your attire plays a supporting role; your conduct, your interpersonal skills, and your ability to articulate intelligent and well thought out responses to questions are the most important elements. Appropriate attire supports your image as a person who takes the interview process seriously and understands the nature of the industry in which you are trying to become employed.

Be aware that in the medical and clinical research fields, patient contact and image presented to patients is important and will be judged more critically. Your attire should be noticed as being appropriate and well-fitting, but it should not take center stage. If you are primarily remembered for your interview attire, it is probably because you made an error in judgment! Dressing nicely and appropriately is a compliment to the person you meet, so if in doubt, err on the side of dressing better than you may need to.

Never confuse an interview or business function with a social event. Do not dress for a party or date. Trends in fashion may change some things, like the width of lapels, the cut of pants, or the colors of blouses available in stores. Basic professional attire does not change with the whims of fashion. A good suit should last five to ten years, depending on its quality, how hard you wear it, how well you care for it, and if it continues to fit you well. You can express fashion's whims in your off-the-job clothes, and to some extent in your accessories.

Additional Interview Attire Specifics for Men

Suit: A two-piece matched suit is always the best and safest choice. Don't combine a suit jacket with pants that don't match. Not a suit environment? Even if you would or could wear jeans on the job, or the work environment is



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outdoors and very non-suit, wearing a suit to the interview shows you take the interview seriously as a professional meeting. Dressing well is a compliment to the person(s) with whom you meet. If you think the industry in which you're interviewing would frown on a suit, or the interview will involve going to a work site where a suit would be inappropriate, look for advice through professional organizations, your professors who have been employed in that industry, and/or by asking the employer directly and politely. One alternative is to wear pressed pants (like khakis) and a dark jacket; less formal than a suit, but still business-appropriate for both men and women.



Conservative colors / fabric: Navy and dark gray are safe and are the most conservative for men. Black for men was once considered severe or overly formal, and may still be considered so in very conservative industries, although it is commonly worn by many. Other color trends may come and go; avoid the extremes. Choose a solid or very subtle weave pattern or plaid (the kind that look solid across a room). Wool, wool blends, or very high quality natural and synthetic fiber blends are acceptable fabrics for a conservative men's suit.

Cost / quality: You are not expected to be able to afford the same clothing as a corporate CEO. Do invest in quality that will look appropriate during your first two or three years on the job. One good quality suit is sufficient for a job search if that is all your budget allows. You can vary your shirt and tie.

Ties: Tie styles come and go. Select good quality silk ties. Avoid fashion extremes, like character ties, in interviews. Notice what men in your industry wear on the job, at career fairs, at information sessions, when they meet with clients.

Shirts: Long-sleeved shirts, even in summer. Choose white or light blue solid, or conservative stripes. A dark shirt might be acceptable in a non-conservative industry. Avoid being trendy.

Socks: Dark socks, mid-calf length so no skin is visible when you sit down.

Shoes: Leather, lace-up or slip-on business shoes, preferably black or cordovan. Invest in a good pair; even if you don't wear them daily on the job, you'll need them for other occasions and you should expect to get lots of years out of good shoes.

Belt: Black or cordovan leather, to match your shoes.



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Facial hair: If worn, should be well-groomed. Observe men in your industry if you are unsure what's appropriate or are considering changing your look.

Jewelry: Wear a conservative watch. If you choose to wear other jewelry, be conservative. Removing earrings is safest. For conservative industries, don't wear earrings. Observe other men in your industry to see what is acceptable.

Details: Everything should be clean and well pressed. Suits typically have tacking stitches to hold vents — on the jacket back and on sleeves — in place before the garment is purchased. Cut them off if your retailer / tailor doesn't. And that tag stitched on the outside of your sleeve is not meant to stay there like a Tommy Hilfiger label — cut it off! Carefully inspect clothes dangling threads, etc.

[Examples of Potential Men's Interview Dress](#)

[Dress for Success for Men -- For the Job Interview](#)

Additional Interview Attire Specifics for Women

Don't confuse club attire with business attire. If you would wear it to a club, you probably shouldn't wear it in a business environment.

Pant Suits: Wear a two-piece matched suit. Tailored pants suits are appropriate for women. Pants suits can be an excellent choice for site visits, particularly if the visit involves getting in and out of vehicles and/or the site is (or includes) a manufacturing plant or industrial facility. If you wear pants, they should be creased and tailored, not tight or flowing. If you are pursuing a conservative industry and are in doubt, observe well dressed women in your industry on the job, at career fairs, at information sessions, etc.

Skirt Suits: Wear a two-piece matched suit. Much of what you see on television shows that masquerades for professional attire is actually inappropriate for a work environment. Your skirt should cover your thighs when you are seated. Showing a lot of thigh makes you look naive at best, foolish at worst. A skirt that ends at the knee when you're standing looks chic and professional.



Longer skirts are professional too; just make sure they are narrow enough not to be billowing, but not so narrow that you can't climb stairs comfortably. Don't purchase a skirt or decide on a hem length until you sit in the skirt



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facing a mirror. That's what your interviewer will see. Ask yourself whether it will be distracting or reinforce your image as a person who looks appropriate for a business environment or gathering. High slits in skirts are not appropriate. A small back, center slit in a knee-length skirt is appropriate. On a calf length skirt, a slit to the knee to facilitate walking and stair climbing is appropriate.

Color / fabric: Navy, dark gray, brown and black are safe. Other color trends may come and go; avoid the extremes. Women generally have more options with suit color than men. For example, while women could look conservative in a slate blue or light gray suit, these colors would be inappropriate for men. Choose a solid or very subtle weave pattern or plaid (the type that looks solid across a room). Wool, wool blends, and high quality blends and synthetics are appropriate for women's suiting.

Shirt / sweaters: Underneath the suit jacket, wear a tailored blouse in a color or small print that coordinates nicely with your suit. A fine gauge, good quality knit shell is also appropriate underneath your suit jacket. Don't show cleavage. (Remember that television shows are trying to attract viewers, and don't represent reality of the professional environment.)

Jewelry / accessories: Wear a conservative watch. Jewelry and scarf styles come and go. Keep your choices simple and leaning toward conservative. Avoid extremes of style and color. If your industry is creative, you may have more flexibility than someone pursuing a conservative industry.

Cosmetics: Keep makeup conservative. A little is usually better than none for a polished look. Nails should be clean and well groomed. Avoid extremes of nail length and polish color, especially in conservative industries.

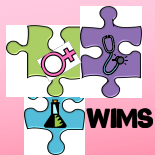
Shoes: Should be leather or fabric / micro fiber. Shoe styles and heel heights come and go. Choose closed-toe pumps. Regardless of what is in style, avoid extremes; no stilettos or chunky platforms. Make certain you can walk comfortably in your shoes; hobbling in uncomfortable shoes does not convey a professional appearance.

Hosiery: Should be plainly styled (no patterns), sheer is most conservative (not opaque), and in neutral colors complementing your suit. Avoid high contrast between your suit and hosiery color.

Purse / bag: If you carry a purse, keep it small and simple, especially if you also carry a briefcase. Purse color should coordinate with your shoes. You may choose to carry a small briefcase or business-like tote bag in place of a purse. Leather is the best choice for briefcases; micro fiber or fine wovens are also acceptable. Avoid purses that look like beach/pool totes, partyish, or little-girlish.

[Examples of Potential Women's Interview Dress](#)

[Dress for Success for Women -- For the Job Interview](#)



During the Interview

Being well-prepared for an interview should help ease day-of jitters; however, there are a few things to keep in mind for the big day.

Do	Don't
Do plan to arrive about 10 minutes early. Late arrival for a job interview is never excusable. If you are running late, do phone the company.	Don't chew gum during the interview.
Do greet the receptionist or assistant with courtesy and respect. This situation is where you make your <i>first</i> impression with the employer.	Don't rely on your application or resume to do the selling for you. No matter how qualified you are for the position, you will need to sell yourself to the interviewer.
Do greet the interviewer(s) by title (Ms., Mr., Dr.) and last name if you are sure of the pronunciation. (If you're not sure, do ask the receptionist about the pronunciation before going into the interview.	Don't tell jokes during the interview.
Do shake hands firmly. Don't have a limp or clammy handshake!	Don't be soft-spoken. A forceful voice projects confidence.
Do wait until you are offered a chair before sitting. And do remember body language and posture: sit upright and look alert and interested at all times. Don't fidget or slouch.	Don't act as though you would take any job or are desperate for employment.
Do make good eye contact with your interviewer(s).	Don't say anything negative about former colleagues, supervisors, or employers.
Do show enthusiasm in the position and the company. Do have a high confidence and energy level, but don't be overly aggressive	Don't ever lie. Answer questions truthfully, frankly and succinctly. And don't over-answer questions.
Do show off the research you have done on the company and industry when responding to questions.	Don't answer questions with a simple "yes" or "no." Explain whenever possible. Describe those things about yourself that showcase your talents, skills, and determination. Give detailed examples.
Do ask intelligent questions about the job, company, or industry. Don't ever <i>not</i> ask any questions -- it shows a lack of interest.	Don't respond to an unexpected question with an extended pause or by saying something like, "boy, that's a good question." And do repeat the question outloud or ask for the question to be repeated to give you a little more time to think about an answer. Also, a short pause before responding is okay.
Do close the interview by telling the interviewer(s) that you want the job and asking about the next step in the process.	Don't answer cell phone calls during the interview, and do turn off (or set to silent ring) your cell phone.
Do try and get business cards from each person you interviewed with -- or at least the correct spelling of their first and last names. And don't make assumptions about simple names -- was it Jon or John -- get the spelling.	Don't inquire about salary, vacations, bonuses, retirement, or other benefits until after you've received an offer. Be prepared for a question about your salary requirements, but do try and delay salary talk until you have an offer.
Do immediately take down notes after the interview concludes so you don't forget crucial details.	



The Nine Worst Job Interview Body Language Gaffes

The jobs website CareerBuilder.com recently asked more than 2,500 hiring managers across the country [what body language mistakes were most likely to cost job candidates their shot at employment](#). The behaviors ranged from the obvious (playing with your hair) to the subtle (not smiling).



1. **Lack of eye contact:** 67% of hirers said it can ruin your chances

It makes an interviewer not only think you're insecure but wonder if he's making you uncomfortable. "They're thinking, 'Do I have something in my teeth? Why aren't they looking at me?'" says Rosemary Haefner, of the website Careerbuilders.com.

2. **Not smiling:** 38%
3. **Fidgeting too much:** 33%



"Some nervousness is to be expected," Haefner says. "So don't stifle yourself so much that you're uncomfortable."

4. **Bad posture:** 33%
5. **Weak handshake:** 26%
6. **Crossing your arms over your chest:** 21%

This projects overconfidence, as if the candidate is thinking, "Oh, I've got the job," Haefner says. Other red flags of overconfidence include being vague and not answering questions directly or fully.



7. **Playing with your hair:** 21%
8. **Touching your face:** 21%
9. **Using too many hand gestures:** 9%

Answering the Tough Questions

Mental fear of the unknown is often what produces the physical symptoms of nervousness. In addition to preparing yourself physically, you need to prepare yourself mentally. The best way to prepare mentally is to know what may be coming. Fear of the unknown can only exist when there is an unknown. Take the time to understand some of the standards when it comes to interviewing questions.

The following are some of the most difficult questions you will face in the course of your job interviews. Some questions may seem rather simple on the surface such as "Tell me about yourself," but these questions can have a variety of answers. The more open ended the question, the wider the variation in the answers. Once you have become practiced in your interviewing skills, you will find that you can use almost any question as a launching pad for a particular topic or compelling story.



Others are classic interview questions, such as “What is your greatest weakness?” - questions most people answer improperly. In this case, the standard textbook answer for the greatest weakness question is to provide a veiled positive such as: I work too much. I just work and work and work. Wrong. Either you are lying or, worse yet, you are telling the truth, in which case you define working too much as a weakness and really do not want to work much at all.

The following answers are provided to give you a new perspective on how to answer tough interview questions. They are not there for you to lift from the page and insert into your next interview. They are provided for you to use as the basic structure for formulating your own answers. While the specifics of each reply may not apply to you, try to follow the basic structure of the answer from the perspective of the interviewer. Answer the questions behaviorally, with specific examples that show that clear evidence backs up what you are saying about yourself. Always provide information that shows you want to become the very best _____ for the company and that you have specifically prepared yourself to become exactly that. They want to be sold. They are waiting to be sold. Don't disappoint them!

1. Tell me about yourself.

It seems like an easy interview question. Its open ended. I can talk about whatever I want from the birth canal forward. Right? Wrong. What the hiring manager really wants is a quick, two- to three-minute snapshot of who you are and why you're the best candidate for this position. So as you answer this question, talk about what you've done to prepare yourself to be the very best candidate for the position. Use an example or two to back it up. Then ask if they would like more details. If they do, keep giving them example after example of your background and experience. Always point back to an example when you have the opportunity. Tell me about yourself does not mean tell me everything. Just tell me what makes you the best.

2. Why should I hire you?

The easy answer is that you are the best person for the job. And don't be afraid to say so. But then back it up with what specifically differentiates you. For example: You should hire me because I'm the best person for the job. I realize that there are likely other candidates who also have the ability to do this job. Yet I bring an additional quality that makes me the best person for the job - my passion for excellence. I am passionately committed to producing truly world class results. For example . . . Are you the best person for the job? Show it by your passionate examples.

3. What is your long-range objective?

Make my job easy for me. Make me want to hire you. The key is to focus on your achievable objectives and what you are doing to reach those objectives. For example: Within five years, I would like to become the very best accountant your company has on staff. I want to work toward becoming the expert that others rely upon. And in doing so, I feel I'll be fully prepared to take on any greater responsibilities which might be presented in the long term. For example, here is what I'm presently doing to prepare myself . . . Then go on to show by your examples what you are doing to reach your goals and objectives.



4. How has your education prepared you for your career?

This is a broad question and you need to focus on the behavioral examples in your educational background which specifically align to the required competencies for the career. An example: My education has focused on not only the learning the fundamentals, but also on the practical application of the information learned within those classes. For example, I played a lead role in a class project where we gathered and analyzed best practice data from this industry. Let me tell you more about the results . . . Focus on behavioral examples supporting the key competencies for the career. Then ask if they would like to hear more examples. Enhance your career opportunities by getting the training you need, find top degrees and schools near you!

5. Are you a team player?

Almost everyone says yes to this question. But it is not just a yes/no question. You need to provide behavioral examples to back up your answer. A sample answer: Yes, I'm very much a team player. In fact, I've had opportunities in my work, school and athletics to develop my skills as a team player. For example, on a recent project . . . Emphasize teamwork behavioral examples and focus on your openness to diversity of backgrounds. Talk about the strength of the team above the individual. And note that this question may be used as a lead in to questions around how you handle conflict within a team, so be prepared.

6. Have you ever had a conflict with a boss or professor? How was it resolved?

Note that if you say no, most interviewers will keep drilling deeper to find a conflict. The key is how you behaviorally reacted to conflict and what you did to resolve it. For example: Yes, I have had conflicts in the past. Never major ones, but there have been disagreements that needed to be resolved. I've found that when conflict occurs, it helps to fully understand the other person's perspective, so I take time to listen to their point of view, and then I seek to work out a collaborative solution. For example . . . Focus your answer on the behavioral process for resolving the conflict and working collaboratively.

7. What is your greatest weakness?

Most career books tell you to select a strength and present it as a weakness. Such as: I work too much. I just work and work and work. Wrong. First of all, using a strength and presenting it as a weakness is deceiving. Second, it misses the point of the question. You should select a weakness that you have been actively working to overcome. For example: I have had trouble in the past with planning and prioritization. However, I'm now taking steps to correct this. I just started using a pocket planner . . . then show them your planner and how you are using it. Talk about a true weakness and show what you are doing to overcome it.

8. If I were to ask your professors to describe you, what would they say?

This is a threat of reference check question. Do not wait for the interview to know the answer. Ask any prior bosses or professors in advance. And if they're willing to provide a positive reference, ask them for a letter of recommendation. Then you can answer the question like this: I believe she would say I'm a very energetic person, that I'm results oriented and one of the best people she has ever worked with. Actually, I know she would say that,



because those are her very words. May I show you her letter of recommendation? So be prepared in advance with your letters of recommendation.

9. What qualities do you feel a successful manager should have?

Focus on two words: leadership and vision. Here is a sample of how to respond: The key quality in a successful manager should be leadership - the ability to be the visionary for the people who are working under them. The person who can set the course and direction for subordinates. The highest calling of a true leader is inspiring others to reach the highest of their abilities. I'd like to tell you about a person whom I consider to be a true leader . . . Then give an example of someone who has touched your life and how their impact has helped in your personal development.

10. If you had to live your life over again, what one thing would you change?

Focus on a key turning point in your life or missed opportunity. Yet also tie it forward to what you are doing to still seek to make that change. For example: Although I'm overall very happy with where I'm at in my life, the one aspect I likely would have changed would be focusing earlier on my chosen career. I had a great internship this past year and look forward to more experience in the field. I simply wish I would have focused here earlier. For example, I learned on my recent internship . . . then provide examples. Stay focused on a positive direction in your life and back it up with examples.

In reviewing these responses, please remember that they are only to be viewed samples. Please do not rehearse them verbatim or adopt them as your own. They are meant to stir your creative juices and get you thinking about how to properly answer the broader range of questions that you will face.

More Examples of Answers to Tough Interview Questions

[The 25 most difficult questions you'll be asked on a job interview](#)

[How to answer 10 tough interview questions](#)

[The 10 Toughest Interview Questions – and How to Answer Them](#)

[The 10 toughest job interview questions answered](#)

Additional Information for Residency Interviews

[The Residency Interview: Making the Most of It](#)

[Medical Residency Typical Interview Questions](#)

[Residency Interview Questions You Will Be Asked](#)

Additional Information for Postdoctoral Interviews

[Interviewing for a Postdoc Position](#)

[Postdoctoral Fellowship Typical Interview Questions](#)

[Academic Interview for Science and Engineering PhDs](#)



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