

Tool #9: Acing the Interview

If you have followed all the advice and tips in this toolbox, you are many steps closer to an interview. Yet which applicants receive interviews depends on many different factors—the mood of the person reviewing the applications, whether the employer already has someone in mind for the position (perhaps an internal candidate), the method by which applications are ranked (for example, the US federal government ranks applications veterans higher than civilians), how long the position has been posted, and many more. However, by following best practices and preparing thoughtful and targeted resumes and cover letters for positions that are good fits for you, you can increase your odds of getting an interview. And by doing all of this work in advance, you have already completed most of the preparation for an interview.

An interview is an opportunity for you and an employer to determine whether or not the position is a good “fit” for both of you. The employer is selling the job to you, and you sell yourself by elaborating on the contents of your resume and cover letter. The interview is your time to impress on the employer that you are the best candidate for the position. Regardless of the industry, most employers are interested in your:

- Knowledge of the industry
- Communication (written and verbal) skills
- Interpersonal and relationship-building skills
- Leadership qualities
- Organizational and planning skills
- Problem-solving and analytical skills
- Work ethic, maturity, and determination

Depending on the job, other capabilities will be assessed more rigorously.



Types of Interviews

A great way to find out what to expect in professional interviews is through **informational interviews** and **your professional network**—ask people in similar jobs what questions they were asked in interviews and ask those who do hiring what questions they ask! Below are a few types of interviews that you may encounter.

Screening Interview: This is often the first round of the interview process and will involve basic information regarding your eligibility for the position, your ability to express your ideas clearly and your potential fit with the organization. These interviews may be in-person or over the phone and typically last 30 minutes or less.

Phone/Virtual Interview: More employers are taking advantage of technology to conduct their interviews. Don’t make the mistake of taking these interviews less seriously than you would an in-person interview. Dress professionally, have a quiet environment and prepare as thoroughly as you would for an in-person interview.

On-site (In-person) Interview: On-site interviews are excellent opportunities to see what your potential work environment will be like and allows a company to have multiple personnel interview you. Expect to spend at least two to three hours, if not an entire day. You will likely interact with human resources staff as well as technical hiring managers and possibly organization leadership. Your day may also include a presentation and an opportunity to interact with other candidates.

Case Interview: Case interviews test your ability to problem solve and think on your feet to solve the kinds of issues the organization is faced with. The employer will provide you with basic information regarding the problem and you will need to develop a logical solution. Be sure to think out loud during this process to give the employer a glimpse into your thought processes. These types of interviews are common in the consulting industry.

Technical Interview: A technical interview may stand on its own or be combined with a screening or on-site interview. The interviewer will provide you with one or more technical questions which should be solvable based on your previous coursework or experiences. As with case interviews, be sure to talk through your thought processes and show your work. The interviewer will be more interested in your approach and communication style than in you actually getting the right answer.

Preparing for an interview

Adequate and professional preparation is fundamental for mastering a job interview. To feel collected and confident going into an interview, remember the following general tips. More specific details about phone interviews and face-to-face interviews follow. Remember, what you do *before* the interview has a major impact on the overall interview experience.

1. Research your interviewer and the organization.

When you are contacted about scheduling an interview, be sure to ask who you will be interviewing with as well as which division you are interviewing in (if applicable). Before the interview, carefully research these people and that division so that you can refer to people by name and be familiar with what they and the division do. Employer research prior to the actual interview is essential. Know something about what the company does or produces, its mission statement, strategic goals and recognition they have received, and more. A typical interview question is, “*What do you know about our company?*” Review the organization’s website, research them on sites such as LinkedIn or glassdoor.com, and talk to others who are familiar with the organization and their interviewing process. If the organization has been in the news recently, you should know about it. If they conduct research, review recent papers or products.

2. Do mock interviews.

Taking part in a mock interview with the career professionals on your campus, or even your roommate, will give you an opportunity to practice answering possible interview questions out loud, enabling you to feel more comfortable and prepared when the big day arrives. There are also websites that allow you to record your interview and get feedback from third parties. Ask your interview partners to be conscious of your nonverbal communication, including your facial expressions, posture, eye contact, and body language. A mock interview gives you the opportunity to practice your verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

3. Know your main strengths and weaknesses.

Be prepared with answers to common interview questions. Questions like “*What are your main strengths and weaknesses?*” can be challenging, but with practice and some strategy, they become much easier. For example, rather than blurting out that you are terrible at computer programming when asked about your weaknesses, you might tell the interviewer that your computer programming skills need improvement but you recently started taking a class and your skills are quickly advancing. You should not point out your shortcomings with no solution for the problems in sight. On the other hand, also prepare for questions like, “*What do you do well?*” and “*What do you prefer not to do?*” Whatever the question may be, be prepared to give a positive response.

4. Have specific examples in mind that demonstrate your skills and abilities.

After completing a skills assessment, you should have several stories in mind that demonstrate different aspects of your skills and abilities. Practice articulating these stories in response to common interview questions such as, “*How well do you meet deadlines?*” or “*Tell me about a time when you had to work with a difficult person.*” Interview questions where you are asked to “tell a story” are called behavioral-based interview questions. The logic is that how you behaved in the past will predict how you will behave in the future. Be sure to include these points in your answer: a specific situation (what needed to be done), action (what you did), and result (what happened).

Common interview questions

- ▶ Why are you interested in this job?
- ▶ What is your greatest strength?
- ▶ Why are you the best candidate?
- ▶ What is your greatest weakness?

Behavioral-based interview questions

- ▶ Tell me about a time you had to think creatively to solve a problem.
- ▶ Give me an example of something you have done that shows initiative.
- ▶ Have you ever had leadership responsibilities? If so, give an example.

5. Prepare questions for your interviewer.

It is important to prepare a few questions for the interviewer about the position or company. This demonstrates your interest and professionalism and can even show the interviewer what you may bring to the team if you have a particularly insightful question. Below are some possible question topics:

- The extent to which you would work independently or as a member of a group
- Top priorities for the position
- What the interviewer enjoys most about working at the company
- Recent projects that the team has been working on
- How often you would have the opportunity to travel (if travel is in the job description)
- Possibilities for advancement within the company over time
- Opportunities for training
- The supervisor's management style
- How you will receive feedback on your job performance
- Next steps/timeline for the process

What *not* to ask:

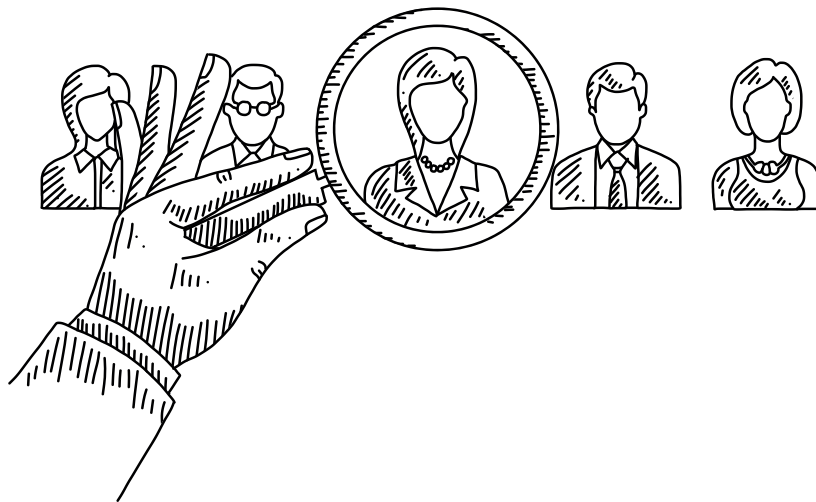
- Anything about salary, benefits, vacations, holidays, or sick days. These things can be discussed after you get an offer.
- Overly-personal questions of your interviewer

6. Remain calm!

Keep in mind that you cannot prepare for every question, and that sometimes interviewers intentionally ask questions to see how well you respond to stressful situations. Feel free to relax, take a deep breath, and pause for a few seconds to think about a question before responding. It is also perfectly acceptable to say "I don't know," but follow it with what you would do to find a solution.

7. Be aware of illegal questions.

Employers cannot legally ask you direct questions about your race, ethnicity, citizenship, marital status, whether you've had or plan to have, children, sexual orientation, religion, age, disabilities, military service, or membership in organizations. Some states also limit the ability of employers to ask about criminal records. Employers are allowed to ask indirect questions such as "Are you eligible to work in the United States without sponsorship?" or "Will you be able to fully perform the functions of the job?" If you are asked a question you believe to be illegal, you can deflect and refocus the conversation on more relevant topics or politely say, "I prefer not to answer that question."



Special tips for phone or virtual interviews

Phone or virtual interviews are just as important as in-person interviews. In many cases, this is the key step to being selected for an in-person interview. Sometimes these interviews even take the place of in-person interviews. If you get a phone or virtual interview, take it seriously.

1. Do your homework.

Before the phone/virtual interview, review the details of the job to which you are applying and learn as much as you can about the group, division, and company.

2. Find a suitable interviewing place.

Find an appropriate interviewing location that is quiet and free of distractions. If you need to be on a cell phone or wireless network, choose a place that has excellent reception. You do not want to ask “Can you hear me now?” throughout your entire interview. Have your resume at hand, paper and a pen to take notes, and a glass of water.

3. Be positive and enthusiastic!

Even though you are not face-to-face with your interviewer, they can still tell a lot by your voice and the way you speak. It is important to show enthusiasm over the phone, especially because the interviewer cannot see your face. Also, maintain a professional attitude by wearing professional attire (if video enabled) and have good posture. Believe it or not, this can affect your demeanor in a way that the interviewer can hear.

4. Have good phone etiquette.

Do not interrupt the interviewer! Be sure to pause for a few seconds after the interviewer has asked a question because they may want to keep talking. Think about your answers and make sure you speak clearly and slowly. Using hand gestures can help you sound more natural and be able to have a more fluent and regular conversation, even if there is no one to see them. If you tend to ramble, make an effort to provide a brief answer to each question first, and then let the interviewer know that you would be happy to expand on the question if they would like to hear more.

A Phone Interview Story

I experienced my first phone interview for a position as an SPS 2013 Summer Intern. I honestly did not have any idea of what sort of questions to expect. However, I searched the organization’s website and read about the position, and I read what I was asked to before the interview took place.

At the time we agreed the interview would take place, I went to an empty room, free of distractions, where I had good reception on my cell phone. The phone interview lasted about 30 minutes, and even though I was really nervous at the beginning, my nervousness calmed throughout the interview. I was asked to talk about myself, what my interests were, what work/computer programming experience I had, which books I was currently using in my courses, and the reason why I believed I was apt for this internship position. That afternoon I received an email saying I was selected to be the SPS Career Pathways Summer Intern.

In retrospect, I wish I was more professionally prepared and informed about what sort of questions to expect. I feel more confident now that I know how to be better prepared, what to do and not to do, and what/who to research. I encourage you to take phone interviews very seriously, do adequate investigation, and prepare your elevator speech.

- Ro Avila, SPS Summer Intern 2013, Career Pathways Project

Tips for face-to-face interviews

1. Dress professionally for your potential job title.

Knowing how to dress appropriately for a job interview can be challenging—make sure to ask someone with experience in a related job what to wear. If you do not have suitable clothing, consider purchasing an interview outfit. If that is not an option, borrow a clothing from a friend or relative. Some career offices also have an interview closet with clothes that students can borrow.

Your attire should be an illustration of your confidence and desire to succeed. An informational interview is a way to observe workplace clothing, but for an interview, your appearance should clearly indicate your purpose: to get the job.

General guidelines for “what to wear”

You want to make a great first impression. That’s why you want to dress professionally for a job interview, regardless of the work environment.

- ▶ A suit or equivalent is generally the best option though the range can be from formal business attire to casual business attire. Make sure your clothing fits you well.
- ▶ You don’t want to be the most informally dressed person there.
- ▶ Jeans, t-shirts, athletic shoes, and flip-flops are not appropriate for any interview.
- ▶ Shoes should be dress or nice casual. Remember that you may be invited to walk around a workplace, so be prepared with shoes that look nice but allow you to walk around confidently and comfortably.
- ▶ Business casual is not the same as casual.
- ▶ Your attire can influence how you are perceived by others. Again, you don’t want to be the most informally dressed person there.
- ▶ Be sure that whatever you select is clean and wrinkle-free. A dry cleaner can iron for you.
- ▶ Be mindful of your accessories and personal grooming. Jewelry should be understated and not distracting. Your hair should be neat and well groomed. Nails should be trimmed and clean. Deodorant is advised but avoid perfume or cologne – you’d hate for your interviewer to have an allergic reaction!
- ▶ **You do not want your appearance to distract from your skills.**

If you are unsure about your attire, consult someone who has a similar job to the one for which you are interviewing; sometimes faculty members may not be your best resource for learning about interviewing outside of academia. There are numerous websites available that describe “professional attire.” Take the time to do some research. Not only will you look professional, your employer will realize you took your job interview seriously. **It is always better to be overdressed than underdressed.**

2. Be on your best behavior at all times.

Even if you are buying coffee a block away or chatting with your future supervisor’s secretary before your interview, treat everyone with respect. Every interaction counts!

3. Turn off your phone.

Turn off your phone before you enter the facility. Do not wait until the interview begins.

4. Bring materials.

Be sure to have:

- Extra copies of your resume (particularly if you have made any updates since your initial application)
- List of references
- Pad of paper (or equivalent) and writing implement
- Transcript (unofficial is OK)
- Writing sample (a 2-3 page class assignment is usually sufficient)

5. After the interview

After every interaction you have with interviewers, be sure to thank the people you have met for their time. A thank you letter is not just a chance to express your gratitude, it's also another chance to show your writing skills and share any information you may not have mentioned during your interview.

Best practice is to send a tailored thank you email to each person you met or talked with within 24 hours of your interview. Following that up with a hand written note is an extra wow!

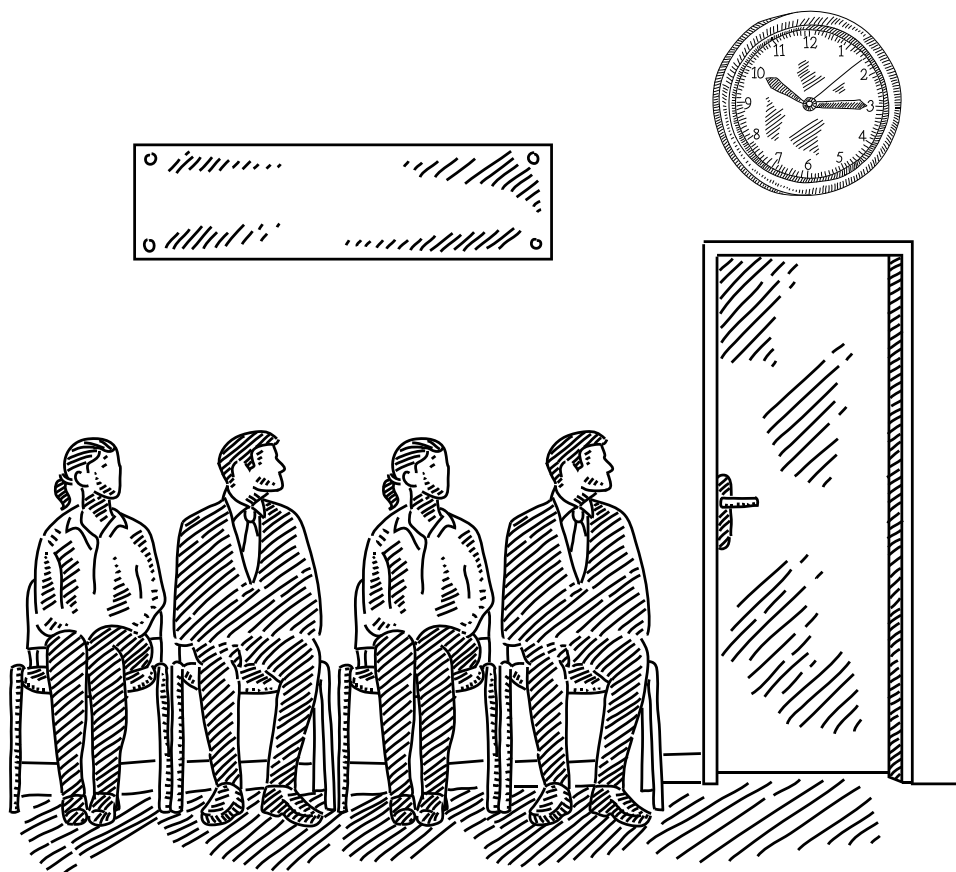
Hopefully at the end of the interview, you received information regarding timeline and next steps. If the deadline for a decision passes and you have not heard anything, it is absolutely appropriate to send a polite email to your primary point of contact to ask about the status of your application.

6. Evaluating Offers

The goal of an interview is to get a job offer. Once you have received an offer, resist the temptation to jump at the first one. Take time to evaluate it. Once you accept an offer, you should cease all other job search activity and not renege on your acceptance.

You may wish to negotiate with your prospective employer on your salary and other benefits. When entering into these discussions be sure to have done your research on the fair market value of the position in the geographical location where you will be working. Cost of living can vary dramatically in different areas. Be sure to take advantage of the knowledge of career professionals at your school as they can help you navigate the evaluation process.

If you receive another job offer while you are waiting to hear back, you can let the employer know that another offer has been extended to you and you would like to have their decision so you can make an informed choice. If you choose to accept the other offer, please contact any pending decisions to withdraw your name from consideration.



Sample Interview Questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why are you interested in working for this company?
- Tell me about your education.
- Why have you chosen this particular field?
- Describe your best/worst boss.
- In a job, what interests you most/least?
- What is your major weakness?
- Give an example of how you solved a problem in the past.
- What are your strengths?
- How do others describe you?
- What do you consider your best accomplishment in your last job?
- Where do you see yourself in three years?
- Think about something you consider a failure in your life, and tell me why you think it happened.
- How do you think you will fit into this operation?
- If you were hired, what ideas/talents could you contribute to the position and our company?
- Give an example of where you showed leadership and initiative.
- Give an example of when you were able to contribute to a team project.
- What have you done to develop or change in the last few years?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Behavioral-based Questions

(from www.thebalance.com/behavioral-job-interview-questions-2059620)

- Give an example of an occasion when you used logic to solve a problem.
- Give an example of a goal you reached and tell me how you achieved it.
- Give an example of a goal you didn't meet and how you handled it.
- Describe a stressful situation at work and how you handled it.
- Tell me about how you work effectively under pressure.
- How do you handle a challenge?
- Have you been in a situation where you didn't have enough work to do?
- Have you ever made a mistake? How did you handle it?
- Describe a decision you made that was unpopular and how you handled implementing it.
- Did you ever make a risky decision? Why? How did you handle it?
- Did you ever postpone making a decision? Why?
- Have you ever dealt with company policy you weren't in agreement with? How?
- Have you gone above and beyond the call of duty? If so, how?
- When you worked on multiple projects how did you prioritize?
- How did you handle meeting a tight deadline?
- Give an example of how you set goals and achieve them.
- Did you ever not meet your goals? Why?
- What do you do when your schedule is interrupted? Give an example of how you handle it.
- Have you had to convince a team to work on a project they weren't thrilled about? How did you do it?
- Give an example of how you've worked on a team.
- Have you handled a difficult situation with a co-worker? How?
- What do you do if you disagree with a co-worker?
- Share an example of how you were able to motivate employees or co-workers.
- Do you listen? Give an example of when you did or when you didn't listen.
- Have you handled a difficult situation with a supervisor? How?
- Have you handled a difficult situation with another department? How?
- Have you handled a difficult situation with a client or vendor? How?
- What do you do if you disagree with your boss?

Exercise - Tool #9: Preparing for an Interview

The best preparation for an interview is practice! You have already identified your skills (your well-developed bullet points) and listed some of your experiences (your “Show it” stories), and an interview is the place where you can really highlight these in detail.

Although you will not know for sure what questions you will be asked in an interview, there are some common types of questions you can prepare for by thinking through your responses and saying them out loud. Use the space below to write down notes about how you might answer the samples interview questions from the section above along with the additional questions below based on your bullet points and stories, and then have a friend ask you the questions so you can practice responding verbally.

Opening Questions

Tell me about yourself (remember your elevator speech, Tool #4!).

Why are you interested in this position (and/or working for this company/organization)?

What would you bring to this position?

Skills Questions

Describe your experience with (relevant software/equipment/subject matter). What have you used it for?

What skills would you bring to this position/company/organization?

Describe the most challenging written technical report or presentation that you have had to complete.

Give me an example of a time when you applied analytical techniques to define a problem and come up with a solution.

What are you doing to stay up-to-date with the latest technology?

Tell us about a time when you used your engineering skills to solve a real-life problem.

Don't forget to schedule mock interviews with professors, alumni, and your career professionals on campus.

Practice a few replies here:

