

Standing Out – Tool #8: Acing the Interview

If you have followed all the advice and tips in this toolbox, we would like to think that you should get an interview. But the truth is, 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 from veterans higher than from civilians), how long the position has been posted, and maybe even the weather. However, by following best practices and preparing thoughtful and targeted resumes and cover letters for positions that really would be a good fit 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 you and for the organization. The employer is selling the job to you, and you elaborate 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
- Your communication (written and verbal) skills
- Your interpersonal and relationship-building skills
- Your leadership qualities
- Your organizational and planning skills
- Your problem-solving and analytical skills
- Your work ethic, maturity, and determination

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

Preparing for an interview

Adequate and professional preparation is fundamental for mastering a job interview. In order 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. Know about the person who will conduct the interviewing.

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 so that you are already familiar with what they and the division do. Employer research is essential prior to the interviewing process. 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.

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. 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 preparation 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.

Example: Some common interview questions

- ⇒ Why are you interested in this job?
- ⇒ What is your greatest strength?

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

Example: 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.

After doing your 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).

Some physics graduates report being asked physics-based content questions to assess their knowledge, some interviews include puzzler questions like “*How would you move Mount Fuji?*”, and others include skills tests or writing samples. A great way to find out what to expect 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!

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 might bring to the team if you have a particularly insightful question. Below are some possible question topics:

- Extent to which you would work independently or as a member of a group
- The top priorities for the position
- What the interviewer enjoys most about working at the company
- Recent project that the team has been working on
- The typical work day start and end times
- How often you would have the opportunity to travel to other locations (only if travel is in the job description)
- Possibilities for advancement within the company over time
- The opportunity for training

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.

Special tips for phone interviews⁵

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

1. Do your homework.

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

2. Find a suitable interviewing place.

Find an appropriate interviewing location that is quiet and free of distractions. Also, if you need to be on a cell phone, 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, as well as paper and pen to take notes, and a glass of water.^[1]

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 business attire

and having 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 he/she 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 he or she 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

More tips for face-to-face interviews⁶

1. Dress professionally for your potential job title.

Knowing how to dress appropriately for a job interview can be a challenge for physics students who have spent the past four years in a student lounge doing homework or in a lab doing experiments. If you do not have clothing for an interview, consider making an investment purchase of an “interview outfit.” If that is not an option, consider borrowing a set of clothing from a friend or relative. Some career offices 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.

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.

Table 2: General guidelines for “what to wear”

- ⇒ Jeans, t-shirts, athletic shoes, and flip-flops are generally not appropriate for any interview situation.
- ⇒ 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.
- ⇒ For men, dress slacks with a belt and a shirt with a collar are the minimum expectations. For women, slacks, skirts, or dresses are appropriate. The range is from formal business attire to casual business attire.
- ⇒ Business casual is not the same as just casual.
- ⇒ In general, dress conservatively.
- ⇒ Be sure that whatever you select is clean and wrinkle-free.

If you are not sure about your attire, consult with someone who has a job like the one for which you are interviewing; sometimes faculty members may not be your best resource for 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.

Exercise - Tool #8: Preparing for an Interview

The best preparation for an interview is practice! You have already identified your skills (your “Tell it” bullet points) and listed some of your experiences (your “Share 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 these questions, 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 #3!).

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

- ⇒ What would you bring to this position?

Behavioral 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 made a mistake? How did you handle it?

- ⇒ Give an example of how you worked on a team.

- ⇒ What do you do if you disagree with someone at work?

Personality / Work Habits Questions

- ⇒ What are your strengths and weaknesses?

- ⇒ How would your friends describe you?

- ⇒ What type of work environment do you prefer?
- ⇒ What are some of your short- and long-term goals?
- ⇒ What tools or habits do you use to keep organized?

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 your career professionals on campus as well!