

# Interviewing



Once you get to the interview stage of the application process, you have succeeded in convincing an employer to invest time in meeting you. When you developed your resume and cover letter, you already:

- analyzed the job description;
- identified and conveyed your skills and accomplishments most relevant to the position;
- researched the employer; and
- explained what attracted you to the organization.

But there is more to do before the interview so you are prepared to answer questions on the spot and articulate what makes you a truly compelling candidate.

## Preparing for an Interview

Don't let your first interview be your first time actually answering interview questions! Consider the following strategies when preparing:

- Write out answers to questions you think the employer will ask. See samples in this chapter.
- Practice saying your responses out loud. Answering potential questions in front of a mirror can make you more aware of your facial expressions and gestures.
- Practice with friends or family, or schedule an appointment with a Career Counselor at the Career Center.
- Ask for feedback on the content and organization of your answers (completeness, level of detail, how easy to follow) and your presentation style (pace, voice quality/tone, energy, posture, eye contact, hand gestures).
- Film or record your responses and review your performance. Ask yourself, “Did I look/sound confident, relaxed, and enthusiastic?” “What does my body language say?” “How were my pace and volume?”

Find out what type of interview you will have. Types of interviews include:

- **One-on-one:** Just you and one interviewer, the most common type of interview
- **Panel:** You are interviewed by more than one person at the same time
- **Group:** A group of candidates is interviewed by a panel or one interviewer
- **Meal:** You are interviewed while eating, usually over lunch
- **Working:** You are put to work and observed
- **Phone or Video:** Often used as a screening tool before inviting you to an on-site interview
- **On-Site or Second Round:** After you have made it through a screening interview, this is a more extended interview at the employer site that may include a series of different types of interviews, a site tour, and a meal.

## Feeling Nervous?

It is normal to feel nervous about interviews. In fact, being a little nervous can motivate you to prepare and do your best. But worrying about being nervous usually just makes you more nervous! Try focusing instead on being self-confident. To harness your nervous energy, think about five things (qualities, skills or experiences) you would like the employer to know about you and practice presenting these points.

## Preparing for a Phone or Video Interview

In a screening interview, an employer is generally looking for clear interest, a positive attitude, solid communication skills, and evidence that your qualifications and experience make you a good fit for the position.

### General Tips:

- Schedule the interview for when you can give 100 percent of your attention and take the call in a quiet place with good reception/wifi.
- Be prepared with lists of points you want to make, your skills and accomplishments with specific examples, and questions to ask.
- Keep a copy of your resume and the position description nearby.
- Have your calendar available in case you need to set up another interview.
- Listen actively and avoid interrupting the interviewer; ask for clarification if you need it, and think out your responses before answering.
- Speak clearly and slowly enough so that the interviewer can understand you without difficulty.
- Project enthusiasm in your voice to show you are excited about the possibility of getting the position and appreciate being considered.

### Phone Tips:

- Stand up during your phone interview; this will help with your energy.
- Show enthusiasm for the position—be sure to smile—it will come through in your voice.
- Avoid saying “uh,” “um,” “er,” or “you know.” These fillers are more noticeable on the phone.
- Dress in business casual attire to help put you in an interview mindset.
- Have the company website open on your computer to reference.

### Video Tips:

- Look directly at the camera, not the screen, to maintain eye contact with the interviewer.
- Dress from head to toe as though you were having an in-person interview.
- Pick a place with a neutral, uncluttered background.
- Run through a practice video interview with a friend to get used to the technology.
- Pay attention to your body language – maintain good posture and relax your shoulders.

## Preparing for a Second Round Interview

Getting a second round interview means you are being considered seriously for a position. The employer will have a chance to gain a more complete picture of what you offer. They will also see how well you fit in with the company culture and with other team members.

Begin preparing by reviewing how you did in your first interview. Which aspects did you handle well, and which did you struggle with? Use this information to plan what you will continue to do and what you will try to improve in the second one.

Also, gather new information you can bring into the second interview by continuing to research the company and industry. If you haven't done so yet, consider setting up informational interviews (see p. 2) with staff members who aren't on the hiring committee. You may have the best luck if you can find alumni working at the company.

### Before the Interview:

- Confirm the date, time, location, and name of the person you should ask for when you arrive.
- Allow plenty of time to get to the interview site and **arrive at least 10 minutes early.**
- Make any necessary travel arrangements. If traveling out of the area, ask whether the company will make reservations for you.
- Keep any receipts. Some medium and large sized companies may help with expenses.
- Try to find out in advance what the agenda will be and with whom you will be interviewing.
- Have ready extra copies of your resume, transcripts, references, and all employer forms that you have been asked to complete.
- Come up with at least five questions to ask the employer; see p. 36 for sample questions.
- Alert references that they may be contacted.

## What to Wear to Interviews

- How you should dress will vary somewhat depending on the industry and specific company culture, but it's better to dress up than to be too casual.
- Unless otherwise directed, dress conservatively. Men should wear a dark suit and conservative tie. Women should wear a dark suit. Avoid miniskirts, trendy outfits, or loud colors.
- Make sure your clothes are cleaned and pressed.
- Wear dark polished conservative shoes with closed toe and heel. Men should wear long, dark socks and women should wear dark or nude colored nylons or trouser socks.
- Minimize jewelry, makeup and fragrance. Women should wear no more than one pair of small earrings. Men and women should wear no additional body piercings.
- Style your hair neatly and keep it off your face.
- Search the Career Center website for "Interview Attire" to see samples of appropriate attire.

### At the Interview:

- Turn off your cell phone, and do not chew gum.
- Be respectful to everyone. Job offers have been denied based on how applicants have treated administrative staff.
- Build rapport in the first 5 seconds. When your interviewer comes into the waiting room and calls your name, walk toward that person with confidence, make eye contact, extend your hand for a handshake, and say, "Hello, I'm (insert your name here)." This should help set the tone for a successful interview.
- Do not put your belongings on the interview desk.
- If a panel interview is part of the second-round interview, be sure to maintain eye contact with everyone on the panel as you answer questions.
- Be prepared to answer the same question several times since you will probably meet with several people over the course of the day. Stay enthusiastic and consistent in your responses.
- Remember that you are always being evaluated. In group activities and during meals, your ability to work with people and your "fit" in the organization are being assessed.
- Keep in mind that the interview is a two-way street. Be observant. What is the atmosphere like? Are employees friendly?
- Be sure to ask when you can expect to hear from the employer again.
- If you receive a verbal offer on the spot, it's usually better to think about the offer before accepting or declining. If you are not ready to make a decision, ask for written confirmation and tell the employer when you expect to make a decision.

### After the Interview:

- Within two days of the interview, send a thank-you note/email to the person in charge of the interview process with copies to the others involved. Mention what you appreciated from the day's activities and reiterate your interest in the position and the organization.
- A week after sending the thank-you, you may contact the employer to show your continued interest and ask if there is any additional information you can provide.
- If the employer does not respond within the expected time frame, you may phone or email the person who interviewed you to ask about your status.

## Thank You Letter: How to Say It

Dear Mr. Brown:

Thank you for the opportunity to spend last Thursday at your manufacturing facility in Sunnyvale. The discussion we had was very informative, and I really enjoyed the tour of your plant and the informal conversation with your engineering staff. I was impressed with the effective manner in which Consolidated Engineering has adapted the management-by-objective system to their technical operations. This philosophy aligns well with my interests and training.

The entire experience has confirmed my interest in joining the team at Consolidated Engineering, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,  
James S. Moore

## Types of Interview Questions

Depending on the position you apply for, you may be asked questions from any of three different categories:

- Traditional Questions
- Behavioral Questions
- Technical or Case Questions

Since most interviews consist of a mix of different question types, practice responding to questions from both the traditional and behavioral categories, and add in some technical or case questions if you are entering a field that is known to use them.

### Traditional Questions

Straightforward questions about your experience, background, and personal qualities.

#### Examples:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why are you interested in this position/industry/organization? (What do you know about us?)
- Why should we hire you? (What can you offer us?)
- Describe your ideal job.
- What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- Tell me about an accomplishment that you are proud of.
- What have you learned from your failures?
- What motivates you to do good work?
- How do you prefer to be supervised?
- How would a former supervisor describe you? How about your friends?
- Why did you decide to attend UC Berkeley?
- Why did you choose your major?
- Which classes did you enjoy most/least and why?
- What do you see yourself doing in five years?
- Do you plan to return to school for further education?
- What other positions are you interviewing for?

### Behavioral Questions

Frequently used questions based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. For example, if you have shown initiative in a club or class project, you are likely to show initiative in a job or internship.

#### Examples:

##### Interpersonal Skills

- When working on a team project, have you ever dealt with a strong disagreement among team members or a team member who didn't do their part? What did you do?
- Tell me about the most difficult or frustrating individual that you've ever had to work with and how you approached the situation.
- Tell me about a time when you had to be assertive.

##### Communication Skills

- Tell me about a time when you had to present complex information. How did you get your point across?
- Describe a time when you used persuasion to convince someone to see things your way.
- Tell me about a time when you used written communication skills to convey an important point.

##### Initiative

- Provide an example of when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty to get a job done.
- Tell me about a project you initiated.

##### Creativity/Innovation

- Describe a time when you provided a creative solution to a problem.
- What is the most creative thing you have done?

##### Leadership

- Tell me about a time when you influenced the outcome of a project by taking a leadership role.
- Describe your leadership style and provide an example of a situation where you successfully led a group.
- Provide an example that demonstrates your ability to motivate others.

##### Planning & Organization

- Tell me about an important goal of yours. How did you reach it?
- Describe a situation when you had many assignments or projects due at the same time. What steps did you take to finish them?
- Provide an example of what you've done when your time schedule or plan was upset by unforeseen circumstances.

##### Flexibility

- Describe a situation in which you overcame a "personality conflict" in order to get results.
- Describe a time where you were faced with issues that tested your coping skills.
- Describe a time when you received constructive criticism.

##### Decision-making

- Provide an example of when you had to make a difficult decision. How did you approach it? What kinds of criteria did you use?
- Describe a time when you had to defend your decision.
- Summarize a situation where you had to locate relevant information, define key issues, and determine the steps to get a desired result.

## Behavioral Questions: Planning Your Responses

Respond to these questions with a specific example where you have demonstrated the skill the interviewer is seeking. It's helpful to remember "CAR" to compose a thoughtful response. Here's how it works:

**CONTEXT:** What was the problem, need, or concern? Include obstacles you had to overcome.

**ACTIONS:** Describe steps you took, incorporating skills you employed. Focus on what you did as an individual rather than the group as a whole. Own your accomplishments.

**RESULTS:** Quantify the results you achieved if possible and relate them, your skills, and actions to the organization's needs.

Show up to interviews ready with several stories that demonstrate your relevant skills and accomplishments. Develop them by anticipating the skills that are important for the position and reviewing your past experiences. Accomplishments can be found in all parts of your life:

- Academics, such as class projects (How did you work with others? Lead others?)
- Sports (Will your goal-orientation transfer to your career? What did you learn about being a team player?)
- Activities (Have you published a story, given a speech, or marched in the Cal Band? Were you a leader?)
- Volunteer, work, or internship experiences (When did your performance exceed expectations? Achieve something new? Make things easier? Save or make money?)

### Behavioral Questions: How to Say It

Question: Describe a time when you worked in a team. What role did you play?

**CONTEXT:** Last semester, I was part of a team of five people for a group project in my Introduction to Marketing class. We were given an assignment to develop a marketing strategy for a new line of toys for Mattel. As part of the project, we were required to create a 15-page marketing plan by the end of the last day of class.

**ACTION:** I was the team leader, in charge of coordinating all of the group meetings and delegating tasks. I took the initiative to create a meeting schedule so that our group met every Wednesday afternoon, emailed the agenda to each group member prior to our meetings, and kept an Excel spreadsheet of all of the tasks. I also worked on making the team cohesive and supportive of each other by mediating conflicts. To do so, I facilitated discussions, listening to each member, and helping them to work towards a compromise.

**RESULT:** As a result of my efforts, we finished the project one week ahead of schedule and were chosen as the group with the "most innovative" marketing plan. Also, the number of conflicts between members significantly decreased and we were able to agree upon a marketing plan that satisfied everyone.

## Case and Technical Questions

Case and technical questions are especially common in business fields such as finance, consulting, and accounting, as well as in engineering, physical science, and computer science fields. Technical questions ask about discipline-specific knowledge; they may be related to concepts that you learned from your coursework, industry knowledge (e.g., familiarity with financial markets), or specific skills (e.g., programming languages).

Because both technical and case questions can vary so widely from one setting to the next, the best approach to effectively prepare for them is not to "learn" a particular set of interview questions and then hope that your interviewers ask you them. Instead, aim to get really good at answering strategy-based questions you've never seen before. This can be attained through lots of PRACTICE. Explore our "Case Interview Resources" on the Career Center website for further tips and tools.

A general principle that applies to case questions, however, is this: often, you won't know the answer, but you need to make an attempt. The interviewer is evaluating how you approach a problem just as much as your answer. Logical and reasonable thinking is preferred over a one-line response. Keep in mind that there is often no RIGHT or WRONG answer; each candidate has their opinion and perspective on a question.

You can also log in to Handshake to access sample questions in the Vault Guides for consulting and try asking company representatives, alumni, or peers who have had interviews in your target field about the types of questions you can expect. For more in-depth information about case interviews, it would be wise to review case interview books (e.g., *Case in Point*) and consulting-focused websites, and look for opportunities to participate in case competitions on campus through student organizations.



## Difficult Questions

When encountering a difficult question, pause for a moment and ask yourself, “What is the interviewer really hoping to learn about me?” Examples of questions that students often find tricky:

### Tell me about yourself.

This commonly asked question seems so broad. Keep in mind your audience and purpose. Keep your comments focused on information that will help the employer determine your qualifications and/or interest in the position. This can include what you have gained from your education and/or experiences, your future career aspirations, and your enthusiasm for beginning a job in your field of interest.

### What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

View this as an opportunity to point out strengths that relate to being successful in the position for which you are interviewing. Back up your statements with examples of experiences in which you have demonstrated your strengths. Strategies for addressing a weakness (only mention one) include choosing one you have overcome, or selecting an area/skill that you have not had much time to develop or an area that is not that important to the demands of the work. Be genuine with your answers and avoid cliché answers such as “I work too hard” or “I’m a perfectionist.” Employers are impressed by people who can be honest, recognize areas for improvement, and overcome personal challenges.

### What are your salary expectations?

If you are asked this question during an interview, assume that the employer is deciding whether or not they can afford you, or wondering if you will undersell yourself. Research location-appropriate industry salaries. See “Offers & Negotiations,” p. 37, so you can quote your findings and say, “I’m comfortable with a salary that’s in this range.” If the interviewer persists, make sure that they name a figure first. You can do this by saying, “I’m sure you have a range in mind. What are you willing to offer?”

### Tell me about your participation in this religious/political/cultural/LGBT activity?

Employers may inquire about anything that appears on your resume, so if you do include information about being affiliated with religious, political, cultural, or LGBT activities, be prepared to talk about them. While it is important to be honest about your experiences, you should also be cautious, and if possible, avoid discussing controversial topics during your interview. Before answering these types of questions, be sure to spend some time researching the company’s culture to determine what would be an appropriate response and if the employer is a good fit for your values; discuss what you gained from the experience rather than your personal beliefs or opinions.

## Difficult Question: How to Say It!

**Question: What is your greatest weakness?**

**Sample Answer (make sure to use your own weakness and your own words!):**

One area that I have been working on is feeling more comfortable with public speaking. While I have given presentations in class on several occasions, I noticed that I do get more nervous than I would like when speaking in front of large groups of people. For this reason, I took the initiative to join the Debate Society at Cal to get more experience with public speaking. I recently participated in a regional debate competition where I helped my team win second place. Because of my experience in the Debate Society I have felt less nervous and more confident about speaking in public and feel that this position would be a good fit for me because I could continue to develop my communication skills.

## Questions to Ask Employers

Bring at least five questions to all interviews to ask employers. Asking thoughtful questions shows your interest in the position and demonstrates that you have researched the company. Avoid questions that you can find the answers to on the company’s website; focus instead on questions that show you have gone above and beyond to learn about the employer through news articles, company reports, talking to company representatives, etc. It is usually appropriate to ask questions at an interview, and typically the interviewer will invite questions at the end of the interview. Here are some questions to consider as you develop your list:

- What kind of training do you offer new employees?
- When and how are employees evaluated?
- What are the best/most difficult aspects of working in this group/organization?
- What’s the biggest challenge facing this group/organization right now?
- How would you describe the culture of this organization?
- What do you see as unique about your organization compared with your major competitors? What are your plans for expansion in terms of product lines, services, new branches, etc.?
- How would you describe this organization’s management style? How are decisions made?
- What are some typical first-year assignments?
- How does this position fit into the overall organizational structure?
- **Always ask:** May I have your business card(s)? This will give you proper contact information for thank-you letters and follow-up communications.
- **Always ask:** What are the next steps in the hiring process? This will give you a timeline, peace of mind, and clues for any possible follow-up actions.
- **Don’t ask:** As a general rule, questions about salary and benefits are best left until an offer has been extended. See Offers & Negotiation chapter for more information.