

Academic and Career Advising

Interview Preparation Guide



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Interview Preparation Guide

HOW TO BEST DEMONSTRATE YOUR PROFESSIONALISM, SKILLS, AND CULTURAL FIT IN AN INTERVIEW

Developing an interview style that is comfortable to you is important. The interviewing process is one where if one of you fails, both of you fail. It takes time, money, and resources to continue the candidate search, so communicate how you are the one candidate who qualifies for the position!

Use this guide as a resource to:

- Develop your interviewing style
- Prepare for potential questions
- Prepare to talk about yourself and to ask relevant questions
- Prepare for a virtual interview

INTERVIEW BASICS

- **Research the company** before the interview, learn its mission and vision, and absorb as much information as possible to be able to demonstrate your knowledge of the company and its services/products/etc.
- **Arrive 15 minutes early:** Do a trial run to the location if you are not familiar with it, prepare for road conditions and weather: this is your first impression with the employer. For virtual interviews, make sure to check your technology equipment a head of time, properly set up your interview space, and sign into the virtual online platform early.
- **Dress professionally**
- **Bring multiple copies of your résumé** in case your interviewer(s) do not have a copy with them. For virtual interviews, make sure you can easily locate your résumé on your computer in case you are asked to share it and have a hard copy out next to your computer to reference during the interview.
- **Greet everyone you meet** with strong eye contact, a firm handshake, and a smile—including those you meet in the parking lot, elevator, and front desk. For virtual interviews, make eye contact and greet everyone participating in the interview individually by name. It is important to make a connection early in the interview.
- **Ask relevant questions** (See interview questions list.)
- **Actively listen** to the interviewer to project sincere enthusiasm and understand the employer's needs.
- **Indicate your readiness** to learn and your ability to be coached.
- **Send a thank you** email or note after the interview.
- **Avoid** criticizing yourself, your current/former employers, or interrupting the interviewer.
- **Do not** discuss past experience that has no relevance, project arrogance, or discuss compensation until your final interview.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Step 1: Research the Employer

Employers report (again and again!) that job seekers do not take the time necessary to research the position and organization before the interview process. **Set yourself apart by gaining enough information and devising relevant questions for the employer that will create an exchange of ideas and allow you to connect your skills to those desired by the company.**

Gather the following information about the employer before the interview.

Please note: Not all pieces of information listed here are relevant for every field/industry. For example, the current stock price is not relevant for an interview with a school district or not-for-profit, but it is very important if you are interviewing for a financial role within a publicly traded company.

Company Information

- Names of interviewers
- Recent mention in the news (Set up a Google Alert to be notified when the organization is in the news)
- Others you know in the organization
- Potential markets, products, and services
- Competition
- Current stock price
- Growth potential
- Mission, philosophy, values
- Locations
- Company size (sales, number of employees)

Industry Information (Online news sources, social media outlets)

- Trends
- Controversial issues
- Important people or companies
- Industry “buzz words”
- Salary information

Position Information

- Job description
- Supervision involved
- Level of teamwork vs. individual work
- Training Procedures
- Professional development opportunities

You can gain this information from LinkedIn, the company’s website, glassdoor.com, google searches, etc.

After collecting this information, spend some time developing a broad range of questions to ask the interviewer. Think in terms of the goals of this business, as well as management style, potential for growth, and opportunities for career advancement.

Step 2: Get to Know Yourself

Successful candidates prepare by getting to know themselves and being able to relate their qualifications, experiences and education to the position.

Interviewers will want you to use concrete examples to explain yourself. They are looking for comfortable candidates who can supply an answer for each question. **Take time to analyze your academic, professional, and extracurricular activities to determine how they can illustrate your strengths, values and interests.**

It is common for an interviewer to ask you to describe difficult situations or times when you have failed. Interviewers asking situational based questions allows the employer to envision you in the role handling a situation for their company in the same manner. By considering moments of less-than-your-best job performance you can frame your weakness around an instance (rather than a personal limitation), and then identify ways you worked to improve that area of work.

It is also a good idea to research potential interview questions for the specific type of position you are applying for to better prepare answers. For example, google common interview questions for customer service representative position.

Step 3: Practice and Prepare

Thinking about and writing down your answer to potential interview questions is important as you gather your thoughts. Even more important, though, is to practice getting these answers out of your brain and into the world.

Practicing is the best preparation method to ensure you are asking thoughtful, pertinent questions demonstrating you've done research on the company/position, sincerely conveys your interest, and creates opportunity for clarifying questions on the company/position you may have.

Scheduling a mock interview with Career Development is one option to receive instant feedback.

While it may seem awkward to talk about yourself, it is imperative to strengthen your ability to do so in order to guarantee interviewing success. Practice with friends, in front of a mirror, or record a practice interview using your phone's camera to become familiar with speaking clearly and positively about your abilities. You should do these steps for virtual interviews too. Practice and prepare by setting up your interview space. Find a space with a neutral background or one that appropriately represents you as a candidate, make sure no windows are in front or behind you, and have good lighting in the room. Choose a background that free of clutter making sure it has only professional-looking items. To achieve the best virtual background effect, Zoom recommends using a high-contrast, solid-color backdrop. It is best to avoid distractions and interruptions during your interview. If you share a space with others,

leave a sticky note on the door letting your family or friends know you are in an interview. Practice a Zoom meeting with a family member or friend to check your space and test your video and audio.

DRESS FOR SUCCESS

Interview Attire for Everyone

- Hair— clean and neat
- Shoes— polished and comfortable
- Hands— neatly trimmed nails
- Details— no missing buttons or hanging threads
- Smell— no perfume or cologne, do not smell like smoke
- Cover any tattoos

Ladies

- Suit—navy or dark grey
- Suit skirts—barely above or at the knee
- Slacks—touching the top of your shoes, but not fall below the heels
- Blouse or sweater should be coordinated under the suit
- Sit down in front of a mirror: Are buttons gougung? Is skirt too short? Is bra showing?
- Do NOT show cleavage
- Pantyhose—neutral with NO patterns
- Shoes—conservative, closed-toe, low pump, should be easy to walk and stand
- Accessories—conservative jewelry (less is more); small, solid color purse
- Make-up—light and natural

Gentlemen

- Suit—navy or dark grey, clean, and pressed (Single-breasted, 2-button preferred)
- Suit should fit well (Do not look like you are wearing your big brother's suit)
- Pinstripes are fine, but not too bold
- Shirt—long sleeve (white or light blue)
- Accessories: Belt, Blue or grey tie (no yellow, red, purple, etc.)
- Socks—Dark black, mid-calf so no skin is visible when you sit
- Shoes—Black dress shoes (no loafers, brown shoes, etc....)
- Limit the aftershave/cologne

For virtual interviews same dress for success rules apply. You still want to dress professionally from head to toe. Dress as if you were going into an in-person interview. This will give you confidence and put your mind in the right setting to have a successful interview. And you never know, you may need to get up from the computer during your interview. It is also a good idea to test out your outfit beforehand on your camera to make sure is fits well with your chosen background.

DURING THE INTERVIEW: BODY LANGUAGE & VOICE

- Greet the interviewer with a firm handshake—practice it, if need be, before your big day. If there is more than one interviewer, be sure to greet each interviewer and shake their hands before you sit down. For virtual interviews, make eye contact by looking straight into the camera, introduce yourself, and maintain good posture. If there is a panel of interviewers be sure to greet each person by name and make a connection right away.
- Use your non-verbal communication skills and body language to communicate understanding, interest, and a sense of enthusiasm. This is especially important for virtual interviews since your interactions are through technology. Use your face to show you are engaged and don't forget to smile! 😊
- Sit up straight throughout the interview and lean forward slightly to communicate your interest.
- Work through your nerves before the interview and do your best to avoid tapping, shaking, or facial tension, which are all signs of anxiety.
- Maintain appropriate eye contact by avoiding a glassy stare. Break eye contact to think before answering a question. A break in eye contact is natural and important.
- Relax and take the time needed to answer the interview questions thoroughly. It is okay to pause before you deliver an insightful, thoughtful answer. For virtual interviews, it is important to explain any long pauses (i.e. I am taking some notes) since the interviewer's view of you is limited and signal when your answer is complete.
- Minimize the use of filler words: "you know," "um," "like," and "yeah."
- Use the interview as a learning experience and take notes after you are finished to help improve your skills.
- Speak clearly with a warm, confident and relaxed tone; slow your words down to avoid nervous chatter and control your volume.
- It is best to avoid all distractions and interruptions during a virtual interview, but they can happen, especially if you share a living space with others. Get a head of it by letting the interviewer know. If an unforeseen interruption happens communicate it with the interviewer because they won't have a visual to what is happening.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS: THE SOAR TECHNIQUE

The SOAR Technique is a way to answer questions concisely and completely. SOAR stands for:

- **Situation** – introduce the situation or problem you have encountered
- **Obstacle** - share the obstacle that the situation presented or obstacles you overcame
- **Action** - identify the actions you took to complete the task or overcome the obstacle
- **Result** - reveal outcomes, goals achieved, and lessons learned

Sample Interview Question: Tell me about a time when you delivered exceptional customer service.

Situation: “While working for a catering hall, I was responsible for booking reception rooms for special events. Two weeks before her son’s wedding, a mother called to cancel her reservation. The wedding was postponed due to a death in the family.”

Obstacle: “This customer was obviously upset about these sad circumstances and I wanted to do as much as I could to ease her mind about the reception arrangements.”

Action: “I knew it wasn’t too late to book another event for that room, so I checked with the manager regarding the possibility of refunding her deposit. We were able to return her full deposit, and I assured her that we could book another room when her family was ready to make plans.”

Result: “The woman wasn’t expecting to receive any money back and was pleasantly surprised that canceling the room wasn’t impossible. My manager complimented me for taking the initiative with this customer.”

CLOSING THE INTERVIEW

- Express your interest in the position by simply asking the interviewer what the next step should be.
- Ask your interviewer for a business card (so you will have the correct contact information for your thank you note or email).

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- Always email or mail a thank you within 24 hours to each person you interviewed with. Use the thank you note to restate your interest and include any important or forgotten points. Find a connection with each interviewer to mention in the thank you note.
- Regardless of how well your interview went, continue with your job search and contact as many other companies as possible. You do not have an official job offer until it is in writing.

Practice Interview Questions

Use the questions below to practice answering with the SOAR method. Takes notes in the margins to help you remember your examples.

RÉSUMÉ-BASED QUESTIONS

The interviewer will want to ensure that you can answer specific questions about the experiences listed in your résumé.

1. Tell me more about your position at [Company Name].
 - Describe your most important accomplishments and give specific examples of your responsibilities. Also tell the employer about the impact that you had on your previous place of employment.
2. Tell me more about your involvement in [Professional Organization].
 - Explain to the interviewer what motivated you to join that specific organization and be honest if you are a passive member or if you have taken on a leadership role within some aspect of the group. Include anything you have learned or value gained from being a part of the association.
3. Tell me about your previous supervisor/manager at [Company Name].
 - Be able to quickly provide the name of your past employer and offer positive examples of their style.
 - Keep in mind that it is a small world out there and there is always a chance that your interviewer will have a connection with your former employer.

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOURSELF

Read the following questions and think of answers that you could provide. *There is no way to know what specific questions you will encounter during an interview. **You can't prepare for everything, but you can prepare for anything by thinking through each of these and practicing answering questions about yourself out loud.*** It is one thing to think about the answers, it is quite another to get the words out of your mouth!

1. Tell me about yourself. (*Hint: Your answer should focus on education, experience, and passion/interests that match what the company and position need—just like your résumé objective*)
2. What does "service" mean to you?
3. Name three of your strengths and three of your weaknesses.
4. What qualifications do you have that will ensure your success in this field?

5. Describe three things that are most important to you in a job.
6. What have you done since your graduation from college/since you left your last job?
7. How would a co-worker, friend, previous boss describe you?
8. Tell me about a conflict you had with a co-worker or supervisor and how you resolved it.
9. What are your interests outside of work/school?
10. What qualities do you admire most in others?
11. How would you describe your own work style?
12. Why should we hire you?
13. Why do you want to work here?
14. What do you think warrants a person's progress in an organization?
15. What interests you about our product/service?
16. How would you improve upon our product/service?
17. What do you think would be your greatest contribution to our operation?
18. Tell me about a time when you have had to problem solve/time manage/multi task?
19. When can you start work?
20. What did you do to prepare for this interview?

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR CAREER GOALS

1. What do you see yourself doing 1, 3, 5, or 10 years from now?
2. What are your short/long term salary requirements?
3. How will employment with us contribute to your career plans?
4. What do you expect from a job/supervisor?
5. What are your short/long term career objectives?

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR EDUCATION

1. How does your education prepare you for this position?
2. Why did you choose Waubonsee?
3. Why did you choose your major/field of study?
4. Tell me about your academic strengths/weaknesses.
5. What have you read recently in your field?

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE

1. What have you learned from past jobs?
2. What were the biggest pressures of your last job?
3. How did your job description change for your last job while you held it?
4. Why did you/do you want to leave your last job?
5. What did you like most/least about your last job?

BEHAVIORAL QUESTIONS

1. How have you handled situations with upset/dissatisfied customers?
2. Tell me about a particularly tough problem that you had to solve and why it was so difficult.
3. Give an example of a time when you went above and beyond to get a job done.
4. How would you motivate a poorly performing employee?
5. What is the biggest risk you have ever taken?
6. Give an example of a time when you did not back down in the face of adversity.
7. Tell me about an unpopular decision you have made.

8. When do you feel overwhelmed?
9. How would you handle it if a coworker complained to you about the company?
10. If a manager gave you ten things to do by 5 p.m. and you realized there was no way to finish them all, how would you prioritize them?
11. Tell me about a time when you "bent" the rules and when it is OK to do so.

QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO ASK

1. How would you describe a typical day in this position?
2. Can you describe your ideal candidate for this position?
3. What is the average stay in this position?
4. Outside of my department, who else will I work with?
5. How does one advance in this organization?
6. How often do the training programs begin and what do they consist of?
7. What are the things you like most/least about working here?
8. What is the next step of the hiring process?
9. When can I expect to hear from you?