

# Interviews

How to prepare, common questions, interview formats, and how to follow up

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## Interviews: Are You the Right Fit?

An interview is an employer's opportunity to determine if you're a fit for the organization and the role. It's your opportunity to show you have the confidence and enthusiasm to do a great job for *this* organization and in *this* position out of other qualified candidates.

A good interview is a conversation, with both parties learning more about one another. Talking about yourself, promoting your strengths and experiences, and conveying your interest to an organization may be unfamiliar, but with preparation and practice you will develop the skills and confidence to handle any interview question or format.

**Career advisors at the Lazarus Center are available for practice interviews.** Call or visit our office to schedule. We also offer several mock interview days during the school year with alumnae and company representatives as interviewers.

## Prepare for Your Interview – Background Research

Employers hire candidates who take the time to learn about them. You likely researched the organization while writing your cover letter; now it's time to dig more deeply.

**Research the organization's mission, leadership, number of employees, products, services, programs, and customers or clients.** Read the "About Us" section, past press releases, and annual reports. Explore the organization's structure, profitability, and competitors. Follow organizations if they are active on social media.

### Sources for researching employers:

- **LexisNexis.** Find articles from major media sources about a company and its leaders. Accessible via the databases directory of [Smith College Libraries](#).
- Register for and use **The Vault's Career Insider** for extensive industry guides and company profiles. To use, login to [Handshake](#) and click on the **Vault** link on your home page to find **Career Insider**.
- Speak with Smith alumnae who work at the organization. Informational interviews can give insight into the organization's culture. See the Lazarus Center's [Networking](#) page to learn more.

### Research the salary range for the field and location

Use [salary.com](#), the [ETC Salary Calculator Center](#), [GlassDoor.com](#), professional organization websites for the field, and informational interviews to determine a reasonable salary range.

### Find out with whom you'll be interviewing and the format of the day

Read staff bios and view your interviewer's LinkedIn profile. Get parking or public transit directions, and do a "dry-run" to the site the day before. If you're unsure who will be interviewing you, contact the recruiter or HR representative a few days in advance to ask.

## Interview Formats

**While in-person interviews are most common,** employers in many fields screen applicants by phone, and increasingly, employers rely on Skype interviews to make hiring decisions.

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Strategies when interviewing by phone or Skype:

- Be in a quiet place where you can concentrate and won't be interrupted.
- Sit upright or stand; have your resume, paper, and pen close by.
- Write down the names of the person(s) with whom you're interviewing; refer to them by name.
- Smile – this conveys enthusiasm.
- For a Skype interview, be mindful of the background your interviewer will see. The room's lighting should be in front of you (illuminating your face); backlighting will diminish picture quality.

**Skills Testing.** Depending on the field, you may be asked to make a presentation or teach a class, answer a case question, demonstrate software or foreign language skills, write a short piece, or answer math questions with or without a calculator. Ask what to expect before you get there.

**Case Interviews** are often used by consulting firms and sometimes other organizations. An interviewer poses a business question and asks the candidate to explain the steps she would take to solve it. During a case interview, the interviewer is most interested in your process: she or he is looking for problem-solving and numerical skills, logical reasoning, good judgment, and the ability to.

**Group Interviews** with hiring committees are common in government, education, and social service agencies. Make a connection by remembering and using people's names. Scan the room and make eye contact with even the less-engaged members. All are part of the hiring decision.

**Follow-up Interviews and Meals.** Second, third interviews, or fourth interviews may last all day and include meetings with several staff. Expect questions to be more detailed (and technical, depending on your field). If you have a meal with staff consider it part of the interview. Order food that's easy to eat, and avoid alcohol even if your interviewer orders a drink. Brush up on etiquette beforehand.

Some employers pay for follow-up interview travel, lodging, and food expenses. Find out if the organization will make and pay for all your arrangements or if you're expected to pay and be reimbursed. Be sure to keep all receipts, and be conservative about expenditures.

## What to Wear

### **Be remembered for what you said, not what you wore**

Observe people in the field and dress a little dressier than they do for your interview. When in doubt, dress conservatively. Avoid short skirts, tight or revealing tops, splashy patterns, distracting jewelry. Leave your backpack, water bottle, and student attire behind. During winter, try to borrow or buy a dress coat.

### **Different fields have different norms for interview attire:**

- **Business formal attire** – a black, navy, or dark gray skirt or pants suit; button-up shirt; minimal jewelry; skin-toned hose; dark, close-toed, conservative shoes. (Finance, consulting, corporate settings, government.) For creative fields you might add a more colorful or subtly patterned shirt, a scarf, or unique jewelry that does not distract. (Media, advertising, public relations.)
  - **Business casual attire** – tailored skirt or pants; button-up blouse, blazer or sweater set; conservative shoes; accessories that add interest but do not distract. (Non-profits, NGOs, teaching.)
  - **For all fields** – clean and pressed well-fitting clothing; shined shoes or boots; well-kept bag.
  - **Impeccable grooming and hygiene, always:** Clean and neatly groomed hair and nails, no perfume, subtle make-up, fresh breath (but no gum or mints during the interview), and deodorant are a must.
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## Practice What You'll Say

Once an employer has invited you to interview, s/he's clearly interested in your qualifications. The interview is your chance to show your fit with the organization, demonstrate enthusiasm for working there, and give a sense of who you as a person. People hire people, not resumes.

### **Review your resume, cover letter, and the job description**

Think of questions you may be asked about your experience, the organization, and the field. Sample questions are on pages 6-7.

### **In the workplace, past behavior is the best predictor of future performance**

Think of and practice *specific* examples that demonstrate the skills the employer seeks – from jobs, internships, class projects, sports teams, campus organizations, travels, and interests. Behavior-based questions often start out with the phrase, "Tell me about a time when you..." For example:

"Tell me about a time you used your communication skills and creativity skills to solve a problem."

### **Use the STAR approach when answering behavioral and many other questions**

Break down the example you want to talk about into components:

**Situation:** What was the context and the problem?

**Task:** What specifically needed to be done? How were you involved?

**Action:** What did you do to resolve the problem? What and how did you contribute?

**Result:** What was the outcome? What did you learn?

**Example:** "Tell me about a team sport you play," is designed to assess your teamwork skills.

**Answer:** "I spend a lot of time on the rock climbing wall at Smith. It's challenging individually, and I have to communicate and work closely with a partner. I have to pay attention to what she's telling me she needs in order to get to the next step on the wall, and I also have to help guide and coach her. I can see things she can't, and vice versa. I've learned a lot about communication and support through a sport I once thought was an individual activity."

### **Prepare questions for the interviewer**

Listen carefully during your interview and make note of specific questions to add to these general ones:

- What distinguishes a great candidate from a good candidate for this position?
- What is a typical day like in this position?
- What would you add to or subtract from the background of the person who held this position before?
- What are some of the immediate challenges facing the organization? What will be the role of the person you hire in facing these challenges?
- How would you describe the culture of the organization?
- To whom would I report in this position? Who would my co-workers be?
- What opportunities for professional development do you offer?
- What are the next steps in the hiring process? Do you have a general time frame in mind?

### **Practice your responses out loud and often**

Use phrases like, "Let me give you an example..." and "For instance, when I..." Don't memorize answers.

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**If you are an international student, be prepared to answer questions about visa status**

Be aware of Optional Practical Training (OPT) or Curricular Practical Training (CPT) rules that apply to you and change of visa status procedures. U.S. interview techniques may differ from one's home country, so feel free to practice with a Lazarus Center career advisor. Consult the International Students & Scholars Office regarding visa and OPT/CPT regulations.

## **Interview Day Tips**

**Arrive 10-15 minutes early.**

**An interviewer isn't just looking for "the right answer,"** s/he's looking for a candidate who fits with the culture of the organization. Be authentic rather than rigid and rehearsed, and show enthusiasm for organization. This builds the "likeability factor" and rapport employers look for.

**Bring along extra resumes in a professional folder, a list of references, and a pad and pen.** If you must take notes during the interview, do so sparingly. Review or make notes before or afterwards.

**Demonstrate professional demeanor and speech.** Stand up when the interviewer comes to greet you, shake hands firmly, smile, and maintain eye contact. During the interview, sit up straight. Minimize distracting gestures and filler language such as "like," "um," "uh," and "you know."

**Be prepared for a little "small talk"** at the beginning of the interview – about your trip to the interview, current events, the weather, what's happening on campus. The likeability factor starts now.

**Emphasize the positive.** Don't volunteer information about your weaknesses but be prepared for questions about them. Never speak negatively about former experiences, professors, or supervisors. Instead, emphasize what you learned and how that applies to the position you're interviewing for.

**Get to the point.** If asked, "Tell me about yourself," focus right away on job-related qualities and your interest in the position. An interviewer asking "How did you choose Smith?" wants to hear how you make important decisions, not every detail of your college search.

**Do not ask about benefits or salary during your interview.** If asked about your salary expectations, be ready with the range you've researched: "I'm aware that the typical range for this kind of position is xxx to yyy, and I'd like to be at the higher end of the range given my related skills and experience." This answer is positive and assertive but leaves room for negotiation.

**Have a strong closing for your interview.** Suggestions:

- Thank the interviewer for her/his time, and shake everyone's hand before you leave. Make eye contact, and convey confidence.
- If your interviewer ends the interview with, "Is there anything else we should know about you?" have a succinct summary of your qualifications ready. Restate your interest in the position.
- Ask about the next steps in the hiring process.
- Ask for the business card of each person who interviewed you. You'll need this for your thank-you notes.

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## Common Interview Questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why do you want to work for my organization?
- What strengths would you bring to this position?
- What's your greatest weakness?
- What questions do you have for me?
- How did you hear about my organization? What do you know about this position?
- How do you keep up with trends in this field? What's the most recent article you read?
- Tell me about your internship at xxx. What did you enjoy most about it?
- What do you find most and least attractive about this position?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- How long do you think you'll be in this position? Can you commit two years?
- How will your liberal arts education be relevant to the work you would do for us?
- How would a former co-worker describe you?
- What is your major accomplishment?
- What kinds of decisions are most difficult for you?
- Tell me something about yourself that is not on your resume.
- What was the last book you read, film you saw, or off-campus event you attended?
- Describe your personality in three words.
- Why did you choose Smith? In retrospect, how do you feel about that decision?
- What would your last supervisor say about your work?
- What would a close friend say is your greatest weakness?
- What are your salary expectations?
- What is your math proficiency?
- Tell me a joke.
- Are you following us on Twitter?
- Describe your experience using xxx software.
- What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
- How do you determine or evaluate success?
- What do you expect from your next supervisor?
- What major problem have you encountered and how did you deal with it?
- What other organizations are you interviewing with?
- Why shouldn't I hire you?
- Why should I hire you?
- How do you define leadership?

## Common Behavioral Interview Questions

- Give me an example of a team project you completed.
- What would your marketing plan be for xxx product?
- Tell me about the most difficult customer you've ever dealt with.
- What is the most challenging team you've ever been part of? What was your role?
- Describe a situation in which you persuaded someone to see things your way.
- Tell me about a time you failed.
- Give us an example of when you've shown your leadership skills.

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## Common Behavioral Interview Questions (continued)

- Describe a time you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.
- Describe a time you used good judgment and logic to solve a problem.
- Convince me you can adapt to a wide variety of people, situations, and environments.
- Tell me about a decision you had to make quickly and without much information.
- Describe a specific instance that you conformed to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Tell me about an important goal you set in the past and how you attained it.
- What would you do if you saw a co-worker doing something unethical?
- Describe the most significant or creative presentation you have ever given.
- Tell me about a time you went above and beyond what was expected of you to get a job done.
- Give me an example of a time you were able to communicate successfully with another person even when that individual might not have liked you (or vice versa).
- Describe a situation that required you to act under pressure.

## Handling Illegal or Inappropriate Questions

**In the U.S. it is illegal for interviewers to ask** about age, ethnicity, religion, race, citizenship, military record, sexual orientation, marital status, arrest record, and/or disabilities. If you are asked about one of these topics, you can politely refuse to answer, or ask why the question is relevant so that you could address what you think is the underlying issue.

For example, the question “Is that an engagement ring on your finger?” may be the interviewer’s clumsy way of asking if you can handle the nights, weekends, and travel the job requires. Reply: “I’m aware of the time commitment needed for the position, and I assure you I’m quite willing to put in the hours needed to do an excellent job.”

## After the Interview

### Reflect on the conversation

Every interview can be a learning and professional development opportunity. After an interview, take 10-15 minutes to consider (and ideally, write down) how you felt about the conversation. What went well? What questions were most difficult? What did you learn during the conversation? What would you approach differently next time and why?

### Send a thank-you note (hand-written and/or emailed) within 12 hours

Restate your interest in the opportunity and briefly highlight a key point or two about what you learned during the interview, about particular skills you feel are relevant, or perhaps an item you wanted to mention during the interview but forgot to do so. The note should be short (1 paragraph) and specific to the recipient.

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## Sample Interview Thank You Email

Subject: Thank you for today's interview

Dear Ms. Easton:

Thank you for speaking with me this morning about the public relations and development program assistant position at Artists for Humanity. I enjoyed hearing about the communications initiatives you're launching at AFH and your interest in using new media to develop and broaden the organization's audience and fundraising base.

I am excited about the prospect of contributing my public relations and technology skills to AFH's important mission. With my strong communication, organizational, and database management experience, I believe I would be an asset to your public relations and development team.

The writing samples you requested are attached. If I can provide further information, please contact me.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Jones

ATTACHMENTS: R. Jones writing sample 1.pdf, R. Jones writing sample 2.pdf