



# Job Interview Guide

## What is the purpose of a job interview?

At this point, you have sufficiently attracted the employer's attention and they want to talk with you to establish your viability as an employee. An interview is an opportunity for you to demonstrate to the employer that your knowledge, skills and abilities are a good match for the job. It is also a chance for you to show them the personality behind the resume.

## Before, During, and After Your Interview

### **Before the Interview:**

Being prepared will help you be confident and being confident will ensure you are at your best.

- **Do your homework.** Look into the company as a whole and the job opening in particular. Know specifics. For example, if you believe in sustainability and a company boasts several sustainability initiatives, be prepared to discuss them. Review the job description so that you fully understand the requirements of the position and tailor your answers to match those requirements. Many times the job description is removed from the website after the application deadline. Print or save the job description when you apply so you have it to review before the interview.
- **Practice, practice, practice.** When practicing, write down answers to potential questions and practice speaking your answers. Record yourself if possible and pay attention to your body language and nonverbal communication. Schedule a mock interview with an advisor in the Career and Employment Center and get feedback on ways to improve your delivery.
- **Develop a compelling story.** Your story helps people understand who you are and what you are trying to accomplish. It will help the employer understand your uniqueness, passion and the qualities you would bring to the position. When developing your story consider what traits you bring to every position. Why are those traits important to you? What are your passions and goals? What have you learned through your experiences? Once you have developed your story, practice telling it to others. If you have trouble developing your story, ask friends and family for feedback. They often see things you cannot see.
- **Prepare a small list of your own questions.** While researching the company, find a few things that intrigue you and prepare questions. Interviewers will pick up on the fact that you did your research and are interested in the company. This also demonstrates your desire to make sure you will be satisfied in the position. Some good questions to ask are "What have past employees done to succeed in the position?" or "What do you enjoy most about working here?".
- **Nail the small things.** One of the worst first impressions is showing up late. Get a good night's sleep and eat a healthy meal before the interview. Pick out and prepare your outfit ahead of time which includes ironing. Map out any driving directions and be sure of where you are expected to park; a detour in the wrong place might cost you your first impression.

## During the Interview:

Your interview begins when you walk in the door. Arrive 5-15 minutes early. Mentally go over the information you prepared before the interview. Be kind and confident with everyone you meet in the interview process including administrative personnel. You never know whose opinion will count in the hiring decision.

- **Be specific.** Whenever possible, reference specific examples. If you describe yourself as dependable, have an anecdote ready that demonstrates your dependability. Being specific will help keep you from over-explaining and rambling. Eliminate verbal fillers such as “like”, “uh” and “um”.
- **Be confident.** Remember, the employer asked you to come in for an interview; they want to get to know you and what you have to offer. Are you going into the interview thinking you can do the job well or are you questioning why you were called for an interview? A positive mindset will positively affect your answers. Be confident with your spoken and non-verbal communication. Do not fidget or slouch.
- **Be concise.** Match your qualifications to the interviewer’s questions. Focus on how you would fit as an employee and keep your answers on topic. While the time can vary depending on the question, 30 seconds to 2 minutes are appropriate response lengths.
- **Be patient.** Give yourself a reasonable amount of time to think answers through. This will help if the interviewer asks a “curve ball” question. Stay calm and give yourself time to think.

At the end of the interview, ask the interviewer for their business card. This will allow you to conduct effective follow up because you will have the interviewer’s name (spelled correctly), address, and e-mail address.

## After the Interview:

Following up is an important step in establishing yourself as a good candidate. Most likely, the interviewer will have a number of potential candidates and following up can help you stand out.

- Send a thank you e-mail as soon as you can, preferably the same day. This e-mail should summarize what you discussed and should reiterate why you are the right candidate. Remember to thank the interviewer for their time. Try to make your e-mail the first thing an interviewer sees when they come to work the next day. Remember to be specific; mention particular parts of the interview.
- If you know the hiring process is ongoing and a snail mail letter will make it on time, consider sending a thank you card via postal mail as soon as you can. Again, reaffirm your interest in the job.
- Unless the employer gives you a specific timeframe, wait about a week and call the interviewer. If given a specific timeframe, call at that time. Ask if there is any additional information you can provide to help in the decision making process.

A common misconception about follow up is that you are “bothering” the interviewer or “being too pushy.” You are showing your interest and demonstrating a thorough, comprehensive attention to detail. Be mindful of the timelines and instructions given by the interviewer and follow-up accordingly.

## **Types of Interview Questions**

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Though it will benefit you to practice answering many different types of questions, interviewers use several questions frequently enough that you should take special care to prepare.

### **Common Questions:**

#### ***Tell me about yourself.***

Be concise. This question is intentionally open-ended; not only is the interviewer interested in what you say, they are also interested in how you say it. Try to pick the most important parts of your life rather than covering everything you enjoy. Pick a few aspects of your interests and personality and tie those to the job. However you answer, do not answer, “What do you want to know?” Be assertive and confident.

#### ***Tell me about your previous boss/job.***

Stay positive. Discuss your responsibilities and consider mentioning accomplishments you are most proud of. Interviewers ask this question to get a read on how you might interact with employees in their organization and to see how you manage conflict. Avoid saying, “I hated that job,” or, “My boss was rude.” Instead, focus on what you learned from your experience. If you enjoyed your last boss or job, remember to be specific with your explanation. If you did not get along with your boss or did not like the job, give an example of how you managed conflict in order to work effectively.

#### ***What is your biggest strength/weakness?***

Be realistic but upbeat. Every question is an opportunity for you to show your skills. For example, you might say you struggled in the past with public speaking. Rather than stopping there, talk about how you are addressing the weakness. For example, a candidate who is not strong with public speaking might mention that they recently volunteered to run meetings to help themselves be more comfortable when addressing a crowd. However you answer, do not say, “I don’t have any weaknesses.”

## Behavioral Interviewing Questions:

These questions often begin with, “Tell me about a time when...” They give you the opportunity to show how well you think on your feet, describe applicable skill sets, and most importantly, provide the most relevant information in answer to their question.

When faced with questions like these, an effective way to answer is by using the STAR technique. **STAR is an acronym for Situation or Task, Action, and Result** (also known as CAR or SAR). First, describe the situation or task you were given. Then, define the actions you took to solve the problem. Many times we work within a team, but use this time to state what you specifically did in this situation. Finally, relate the results and how they affected you and the organization. Remember to be specific and use details: It is not just what you say but how you say it. To that end, prepare a few anecdotes that best show your strengths as an employee. If possible, refer to numbers, statistics, or other quantitative measures of your performance. For example:

### ***Tell me about a time when you worked effectively under pressure.***

**Situation or Task:** “As an intern for the Register Mail newspaper, I wrote for the Sports page, covering high school sports. Last year, I covered the women’s division one state basketball tournament. Because the tournament ended at 7:30 PM and the paper went to press at 10:00 PM, I had to finalize interviews with the winning team, record all relevant scores, and write the article all within 2 and 1/2 hours.”

**Action:** “First, I established a schedule breaking down my available time. I identified the top scorers for the winning team and interviewed them, making sure the coach knew I wanted an interview with her, as well. Sticking to my schedule, I wrote the story on my laptop, referencing the data I gathered ahead of time. Finally, I e-mailed the article to the sports editor and had time to call and make sure he approved of my coverage.”

**Result:** “Getting that article done on time gave me a lot of confidence and proved to me how much I enjoy working under deadline pressure. We received 11 letters from our readers commending the coverage. I learned that establishing a schedule and sticking to it is crucial for good time management. “

Prior to the interview, use the following chart to prepare your answers for these types of questions:

Trait or Competency listed in the job description	Situation or Task	Your Action	The Result

## **The “Curve Ball” Question:**

Some interviewers will ask questions that seem, at first glance, to have little to do with the job. (For example: “What song best describes your work ethic?”) By design, there is almost no way to prepare for these questions. Remember, they are not meant to antagonize you. Rather, interviewers ask them to see how you problem solve and think on your feet. Stay calm and make sure you understand the question.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

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### ***What is non-verbal communication?***

Non-verbal communication encompasses everything from how you shake hands to how you sit in a chair and it plays a major role in the impression you give an interviewer. While this may seem daunting, remember, it is easy as P.I.E.:

- **Poise.** Posture, how you hold your body, sends a strong signal. Sit upright in your chair; avoid slouching. Gestures such as crossing your arms send a defensive signal to interviewers. In the same way, a weak handshake gives a poor impression.
- **Interest.** Make eye contact. However, interviews are not staring contests: Unbroken eye-contact can come off as “creepy,” so make sure the eye contact feels natural. If you lean in your seat, lean forward. Avoid fidgeting as it can make you appear distracted.
- **Expressiveness.** Remember to be yourself, despite any nervousness. It is important to smile and laugh when appropriate. By doing so, you appear at ease and confident.

### ***What should I wear?***

When picking an outfit for the interview, know how other employees at the company dress. Is this a startup where people dress business-casual (for example: khakis and collared shirt for men, slacks or a skirt and a blouse or collared shirt for women)? Or are you expected to wear a suit and tie? When in doubt, it is better to err on the side of formality. By dressing formally, you show you respect yourself, the interviewer and that you are taking this opportunity seriously. Also be mindful of your accessories and cologne or perfume. You want the interviewer to remember you because of your answers not because of the strong smell or noisy jewelry.

### ***What should I bring to an interview?***

Bring copies of your resume and work history with you in case you get the opportunity to share it during your interview. If it would be relevant, bring a portfolio containing samples of your work. Having a pad of paper and pen will allow you to jot down relevant information such as names, titles, and other facts you need to refer back to after the interview. Do not, however, use the pad as a crutch to answer questions as this can come across as lack of preparation. With your pad, gather new information, do not bring in prepared answers.

### ***What can I expect during a phone interview?***

Employers frequently refer to phone interviews as “phone screenings” because they serve to narrow the pool of applicants. However, doing well in a phone interview goes a long way toward getting you the face-to-face interview.

- Be prepared. If you apply to a company, have a working knowledge of what they do and how you would fit. Review your work history and skill set so you can discuss them in relation to the open job just as you would do for an in-person interview.
- Be confident. You will likely have a scheduled time for the interview. However, if it is an unscheduled interview, you are not obligated to begin the interview right when the interviewer calls, especially if you are not in a location with good phone reception where you can concentrate. It is acceptable to ask the interviewer if you could call them back or schedule a later time.
- Be professional. No matter how casual the interviewer sounds, remember: You are being evaluated as a candidate.

**Please Note:** This Reference Guide was created by Career and Employment Center (CEC) staff at Madison Area Technical College. It is intended to be a guide and may not be all-inclusive to meet your specific needs. If preparing for a class, be sure to follow the directions given by your instructor. For additional assistance or to make an appointment, contact us: [careerandemployment@madisoncollege.edu](mailto:careerandemployment@madisoncollege.edu) or (608) 243-4598 or at Truax Gateway A1003.