

# Preparing for Success

## An Overview of Interviewing Strategies

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## **Introduction**

An interview is a meeting between two or more individuals either in person or possibly over the phone which gives the interviewer the opportunity to “look over” applicants, to ask information, and to determine what assets the applicant can offer to their organization. In other words, who will make the best applicant. It also gives the applicant a chance to ask questions they may have about the organization. The interview can be the single most important tool for colleges, employers, or scholarship committees to make their final selections from a group of applicants. Usually the panel of interviewers has selected a small pool of applicants to interview based on the applications, letters, or resumes of individuals that have proven to be the best or most interesting according to the predetermined selection criteria. The interview becomes your final hurdle in securing your spot!!

It is extremely important to be aware that the interviewer is basically interviewing to “screen out” or “narrow down” applicants and everything you do and say during an interview is being observed and evaluated. For this reason, many people are very apprehensive when entering an interviewing situation. However, when properly prepared, a successful interview can be enjoyable and will be your chance to shine and get an advantage over other applicants.

There are a variety of types of interviews you may experience in your life. Some examples are: a job interview, a college admissions interview and a scholarship interview. These are the three types of interviews most commonly encountered by high school students across the United States each year. The following tips will provide a brief overview of how to prepare and present yourself for a successful interview.

## **Before the Interview**

### **I. Research:**

Always research the school, company, or scholarship prior to the interview. It will be extremely important as well as impressive to the interviewers when you can give them information on their own organization. It will also give you the necessary information to answer specific questions they may have of you. Knowing a university's philosophy or a company's mission statement can better prepare you to answer some tough questions and shows the interviewer that you have done your homework.

For example: Put yourself in their shoes. If you were on a scholarship committee set up in memory of a former student athlete it would be to your benefit to be able to explain a little about that person and when the scholarship was originated, as well as how your personal characteristics, achievements and/or goals correlate to that person. Make the information you find useful and relevant to you.

Remember: "if you fail to prepare, prepare to fail"

### **II. Dress the Part:**

Deciding what to wear for an interview is sometimes a tough decision. First impressions are lasting and when the interviewers look at you for the first time, they begin forming an opinion of you. Be it positive or negative, right or wrong. Obviously for a college or scholarship interview, men should wear a coat and tie and women a conservative business suit. For a job interview, the rule of thumb is to dress one level higher than what you would typically wear on the job.

For Example: If you were going to a job interview as a mechanic and showed up in a coat and tie, the first impression of the interviewer may be "This guy doesn't want to get his hands dirty" or "He obviously hasn't spent much time around a garage". In this situation, you may be best off wearing a clean pair of jeans and a nice golf shirt.

Whatever the situation, neat and clean are a must. Common sense would

tell you to shower, wash and brush your hair and teeth and present yourself as well groomed.

When it comes to flashy clothes, make-up, perfume/cologne and jewelry, less is better. Stay away from clothes and styles that make a personal statement as well as flashy attention grabbing hair and jewelry. You should not be wearing anything that could possibly draw the interviewers attention away from what you are saying. You want to present yourself as a total professional. Having an interviewer distracted by looking at your hair, rings or even thinking about what fragrance cologne you have on, will all take away from your interview. When you walk out of the room, you want them to remember what you said, not how you looked or even smelled.

Students in the past have said, “But, my tongue ring is who I am and if they don’t like it than too bad”. That may be true, however, you are being interviewed (most likely) by people considerably older than you and who may not have the same attitude regarding freeness in expression and style that you do. Avoid exposed tattoos, non-natural colored hair, heavy or black make-up, exposed body piercing, and even more than one earring in each ear for girls, no earrings for boys. It’s easier to avoid the issue than it is to hope the interviewer understands your personal expressions on fashion. Conservative is always your safest bet.

### **III. What to Bring and When to Be There:**

The day you receive the call to set up the interview time or at some point prior to the interview, ask if there are any specific materials you will need to bring (i.e., social security card, drivers license, birth certificate, official transcripts, etc.). It will also benefit you to bring an updated resume/application, employment history and portfolio of accomplishments if you have one. Gear your resume, essays, and objectives to coincide as directly as possible to the position, major, or scholarship for which you are applying.

A day or two before the interview, take a practice run to your interview location to make certain you know where you are going and to time out how long the drive will take. Always allow extra time for extenuating circumstances and traffic problems. You should arrive at your interview approximately 10 minutes early and NEVER late. Being late can end your chances before you’ve even had the opportunity to interview. When you arrive you may want to go to the restroom to look in the mirror. Check to make sure there is none of your lunch still in your teeth, make sure your hair is all in place and check your zipper. Knowing that you look your best when all eyes are on you will only boost your

confidence.

#### IV. Time to interview:

1. Shake Hands – Before you go in to meet your interviewer(s), check your hands. If you are the type of person that gets sweaty hands when you're nervous, wipe them off. If your hands are always cold, warm them up. You want your handshake to be firm, warm and friendly while looking the interviewer(s) in the eyes during introductions. Avoid the "Death Grip" or "limp fish" handshakes and don't stare down your interviewer(s). A good firm handshake suggests to the interviewer(s) that you are assertive, confident, friendly, and that you want to be there. During your initial contact with the interviewer(s), they form their first impression. Make it positive; you may not get a second chance.

2. Smile – Don't be afraid to smile during an interview. Smiling indicates a pleasant personality and that you can get along with others including co-workers and supervisors. Laughing (when appropriate) can also help portray a positive image and can show that you are genuine and at ease with the interview. Never chew gum!

3. Make Eye Contact – Make eye contact with all of the interviewer(s), but don't stare. Avoiding eye contact gives the impression of deception and/or lack of confidence or proper interpersonal skills. Appropriate eye contact shows sincere interest and honesty. It also is a great sign of your confidence in your ability and the answers you are giving.

4. Body Language – Sit Straight/No Slouching – Body language is extremely important. Slouching may give the interviewer(s) the impression that you are not interested or lazy. Don't put up physical barriers between you and the interviewer(s) such as crossing your arms. Sit facing them squarely and open. Also, be aware of nervous habits you may have such as twirling your hair, tapping your fingers or bouncing your knee. All of these can be extremely distracting. Be attentive and don't look all around the room. Concentrate on the interviewer(s) and give them your undivided attention. This displays good manners.

5. Answer All the Questions Asked in a Clear and Distinct Tone – Answering all questions indicates confidence and preparation for the interview. Speak clearly in a moderate pace and volume. If you know you talk fast or quiet when you get nervous, practice slowing your speech to a moderate pace and/or speaking louder. When you don't understand a question or you are not sure what the interviewer(s) is looking for, ask for clarification. It's also perfectly acceptable to pause and think for a few seconds before giving your answer to a difficult question. You could

possibly pause and say, “That’s a very good question” or “I’ve never really thought about that”. If you don’t know the answer to the question, don’t make one up. It’s okay to ask the interviewer(s) if you can get the information needed back to them at a later date.

6. Avoid Simple “Yes” or “No” Responses – Any time you can give an example using your personal experiences to answer a question asked, do it. Don’t make the interviewer(s) have to pull information out of you; this is your time to brag! Don’t keep your accomplishments and successes a secret. Make yourself stand out from the rest of the candidates. If you don’t tell them how great you are, they may never know. Try to provide as much insight into your answers as possible. An interviewer will remember an example you give to them far longer than they will a yes or no response. On the contrary, be careful not to ramble. Have you ever tried to talk for one minute with out stopping? Try timing yourself sometime and see just how long one minute is. You should be able to answer most questions and give examples within one minute in a thorough yet concise manner, thus staying within the range of the interviewer(s) realistic attention span.

7. Keep the Interview Positive at All Times – You want the interviewer(s) to remember you in a favorable light, right? Well then only give them positives with which to work. Don’t complain about your training or current/former jobs or schools. Don’t criticize a past employer or give excuses. Remember, the person(s) interviewing you may be that person’s relative or best friend. No one wants to hire a complainer. Show examples of how you are a team player and are able to get along with co-workers, classmates or supervisors.

8. Convince the Interviewer You Want the Position – Display an assertive and upbeat attitude (but not overpowering). Use power words and employability characteristics (see list to follow this section). Ask questions when appropriate to demonstrate enthusiasm and a sincere interest in the position.

9. Before You Leave the Interview – Know the interviewer(s) name(s) and write them down. It’s okay to ask what is next in the hiring process. They should be able to tell you when the decision or next round of interviews will take place and when you should expect to hear from them. Thank them for their time and show them that you appreciate the opportunity. Doing this shows good manners and a mature attitude.

10. After the interview – Use the name(s) of the interviewer(s) to send a follow-up letter. Address a letter specifically to each interviewer and send it out the day of or the day after the interview so they will

receive it in a timely manner. Thank them for their time and make the offer for them to feel free to contact you if they believe any additional information would be helpful in making their decision. Take this as one final opportunity to make a good impression and separate yourself from the rest of the applicants. Re-emphasize your interest in the position and briefly point out some skills you feel match the profile for their search.

## **Examples of “Employability Characteristics”**

The following is a list of “Strengths”. You should be able to pick five characteristics that you demonstrate and give real life experience examples of each. This is not an all-inclusive list. Feel free to add more! Remember to keep it positive. Even if you are asked to identify a weakness, you could turn it into a positive. For example, “I take my work too seriously”, or “I am a perfectionist and won’t give up on a project until it is done to the best of my ability even if it involves putting in extra time on my own.”

Perseverance	Punctual
Dependable	Responsible
Enthusiastic	Team Worker
Honest/Loyal	Cheerful
Sense of Humor	Organized
Artistic/Creative	Patient
Sincere	Reliable
Versatile/Flexible	Open minded
Cooperative	Confident in my ability
Trustworthy	Accurate
Take Pride in Your Work	Observant
Enjoy learning New Things	Poised
Energetic	Congenial/Pleasant
Serious About my Work	Conscientious/Hard Worker
Thoughtful/Willing to Help	Perceptive
Efficient/Productive	Industrious
Sensitive	Athletic/Health Conscience

Persuasive

Curious/Interested

Expressive

Analytical

Imaginative

Calm

Cool-Headed

Tactful

Diplomatic

Economical

## **Sample Interview Questions**

Below is a list of sample interview questions that interviewers frequently ask. It's important to realize that interviewers not only want to question you about your academic background and experiences, but also want to get to know you personally. You should practice answering each of these questions out loud, first by yourself and then with a friend asking you. Also, try to put all of the interviewing techniques mentioned above into practice when rehearsing your responses to the questions. You may even want to video tape yourself to watch and critique later. The first 10 questions have brief explanations to get you in the mindset for what interviewers are really asking.

### 1. Tell me something about yourself.

This question is an icebreaker. Please keep in mind that the interviewer(s) know nothing about you but what is written on your application and resume. Give them some information about your educational background, work experience, hobbies, and interests. Do not go into personal information concerning relationships, etc.

### 2. Why did you choose this particular field of work (course of study)?

This question gives you an opportunity to sell yourself. Your interests, abilities, and skills should support your decision to pursue this job (major).

### 3. Tell me something about your previous employment or school.

Again, this is an opportunity to speak about the skills you have developed, the interests you have and the great job you did for your previous employer.

### 4. Why did you leave your last job?

The employer is trying to uncover any problems you may have had at your last place of employment. Try to avoid any negatives and give

an answer that shows the employer you are trying to better yourself.

5. What do you do in your spare time?

You want your employer to see you as an active, involved individual. Try to focus on activities that are interactive and avoid activities such as watching television as your favorite past time, it may make you appear lazy.

6. How do you handle criticism/feedback?

No one enjoys criticism, but it is a necessity for improvement. You want the employer to know that you can handle criticism and that you see it as an opportunity to make you a better employee.

7. What are your strengths or greatest assets and how can you use them to your advantage on the job or in school?

Strengths are the employable characteristics which make you a marketable employee or student (remember the employability characteristics page from earlier? You have to learn to brag about yourself and be ready to tell an interviewer how great you are. Be sure to give real life examples to back up what you tell them!

8. Do you have any weaknesses? What area do you need the most improvement? What measures are you taking to improve?

All though we all have great assets, none of us are perfect. We are all human and we all have weaknesses. Stop and think about what you could use. Show the employer that you are self-reflective and you really know yourself. When you mention your weakness, turn it into a positive factor.

9. Why do you want to join our company or attend our school?

This is your opportunity to flatter the employer or school by telling them what a great company or college they have or for which they work. Show them that you have done your homework and let them know what you have learned. Research, research, research!!

10. Why should I pick you? What can you do for us? What sets you apart from the other candidates I'm interviewing?

Sell yourself, let the interviewer(s) know that you are the best person for the position based on your strengths and background. Show

them how you fit in and why you want to work for them or attend their school.

11. If I contacted your references, what would they say about you?
12. What community or extra-curricular activity have you benefited from most and why?
13. What advice would you give to a younger student (employee) who would like to emerge as a leader in your school (business)?
14. Tell us about a project for which you had to organize a group of volunteers. How did you do it? What were the results? Would you do anything different?
15. Describe how you have completed a creative project.
16. Give us an example of a task you participated in as a team player, not as a leader. What did you do to contribute toward a teamwork environment?
17. Use three adjectives to describe: A) Yourself B) Your best friend C) Your Favorite teacher D) The teacher whom you dislike the most (remember to keep it positive i.e. she was hard but I learned a great deal) E) A parent or role model
18. Describe a time you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.
19. Give us an example of a specific school (work related) policy with which you disagreed. How would you go about trying to change it?
20. Can you think of a situation when you had to use your oral communication skills to get a point across that was important to you?
21. Give us an example of a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
22. What do you consider your greatest accomplishment? What methods did you use to achieve your results?
23. In your last job (year in school), how did you get along with your fellow employees (students)?

24. This job (program at school) involves a lot of pressure. How do you handle pressure?
25. Where do you hope to be (what are your goals for) five years/ten years from now?
26. If your work was completed and you found yourself with down time on the job, what would you do with it?
27. What are your salary expectation?
28. Are you willing to put in overtime when necessary?
29. What has been your most satisfying experience in your training or past employment?
30. What motivates you to do well on the job (in school)?
31. What characteristics do you feel are essential for being a good employee (student or specific position you are applying)? ...a good Supervisor?
32. Give an example of a time you had to deal with a difficult person/client/customer and how you dealt with it? What was the outcome?
33. What have you learned about yourself in your training/experience?
34. What is your definition of integrity? Industrious?
35. What work related achievement are you most proud of?
36. In your academic preparation, what courses did you find most challenging? the least? Why?
37. Are you willing to relocate?
38. How long do you expect to work for us?
39. What hours are you available to work?
40. Do you prefer working with others or by yourself?
41. How well do you work with limited supervision? Constant supervision?

42. What other interests do you have?
43. What can you tell me about our company (college)?
44. Who do you admire most and why?
45. What controversial current event do you have a strong opinion on and why? (always stay up on current events especially for college and scholarship interviews. When you take a stand, don't be surprised when the interviewer takes the opposite stand to see if they can sway your stance. Don't back down, they're testing your willingness to stand for something)
46. What is the most important current event in the international, national, or state news? Why?
47. How much responsibility do you like?
48. Do you work well under pressure? Time constraints?
49. Can you tell us who our competitors are?
50. What books or magazines have/do you read?

Again, this is just a sample of questions that people have actually been asked during interviews over the years. Also, of course, it is always important to stay up to date on your content area or area of specialization in order to address questions related specifically to your area of expertise.

## **What to Ask an Employer During an Interview**

When an interviewer asks if you have questions, never answer “no”. Such a response may tell an employer that you are not really interested in the job.

The following are examples of questions you may find appropriate to ask a prospective employer during a job interview.

1. Do you offer any educational or training opportunities?
2. What opportunity will I have for advancement? How long do promotions generally take?
3. Is there any opportunity for overtime or bonuses for outstanding work?
4. Who will be my immediate supervisor?
5. What are the specific hours?
6. What would be my specific job duties for this position?
7. What benefits do you offer?
8. Is there a probationary period? How long? Are benefits granted before or after the probationary period?
9. What is your interviewing process? Do you usually call people back for a second interview?
10. When will you make a final decision regarding this position?
11. May I contact you regarding your decision or will you contact all of the applicants with your decision?

## **What to Ask a School During a School Interview**

1. What are the admissions requirements?
2. What is the average class size?
3. What is the student/teacher ratio?
4. When do I schedule for class? Is it computerized or do I meet with an academic advisor?
5. How many credits do I need to be considered to be a full time student?
6. What support services are offered? Tutoring? Study Groups?
7. Do you offer a study abroad program?
8. Are Freshman permitted to have cars on campus?
9. Am I guaranteed housing?
10. Do Freshman have to live on campus?
11. Where/When can I purchase books?
12. How much access do students have to computers?
13. What services does the placement office offer when I am approaching graduation?
14. What is the placement rate for students graduating from the \_\_\_\_\_ program?
15. What are the parking arrangements?
16. What Financial Aide, Grant, Scholarship, Loan opportunities am I

available for?

17. When will I be notified if I am accepted?

## Prospective School Information Sheet

Date of school visit:

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Name of School:

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Location/Address:

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Contact Person and Title:

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Contact's phone number and e-mail address:

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Program(s) of interest:

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Schools Entrance Requirements:

My Scores/Information:

SAT's \_\_\_\_\_

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ACT's \_\_\_\_\_

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SAT II's \_\_\_\_\_

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Median GPA \_\_\_\_\_

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