



Career Services

"Your journey to career success begins here..."

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Interviewing Strategies & Tips



This guide was created by Gwynedd-Mercy College Career Services and is designed to help learn and develop successful techniques for interviews. In addition to this guide there are several resources in our career library for you to refer to as well. Career Services also offers practice/mock interviews.

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Before the Interview

A job interview is an opportunity to showcase your strengths, experience, and interest in the position for which you're applying. An interview is also a chance for you to ask questions of the employer and find out if the position is a good fit for your career interests and values. The secret to a successful interview is found in the preparation stage. In order to be effective in an interview, it is essential that you do your research and take time to practice.

Before the Interview Checklist

- **Know what you have to offer.** Employers are interested in your self-awareness. Are you able to articulate your strengths, weaknesses and career goals? What have you learned from previous experience and how does this relate to the position for which you're applying? Do you know what you offer to a prospective employer and what makes you a strong candidate?
- **Know the position.** If you have not been given a position description, request one from the organization. What qualifications are they seeking? What particular strengths are they looking for in a candidate? Do you possess these? If so, make sure you highlight this during the interview.
- **Know the organization.** Do your research! Spend time exploring the organization's website and/or informational literature. What is the organization proud of? What is their mission/vision statement? What is the primary population they serve? Employers will expect you to know some background information on their organization, so be ready.
- **Know your interviewing strengths and weaknesses.** Take advantage of the Practice Interview service through the Career Center. You will be asked a list of general interview questions, and a Career Counselor will provide you with feedback on your performance and suggested areas for improvement. Don't let your first interview experience be with the interviewing committee!

First Impressions

First impressions are critical! Read these tips to make a good first impression.

- **Arrive early.** You should arrive at your interviewing destination approximately 20 minutes early. This should give you some time to organize your thoughts and observe the working environment.
- **Dress appropriately.** Depending on the type of organization, typical interview attire includes a well tailored professional suit. Avoid overdoing accessories, makeup, cologne or perfume. Review proper attire later in this packet.
- **Firm handshake.** Always extend a firm handshake to your interviewers. It's important!
- **Eye contact.** This shows confidence and engages the interviewer.
- **Smile.** Attitude matters! You want to come across as enthusiastic, friendly and approachable. Avoid negativity – verbally and via facial gestures.

What to Bring with You:

- Extra copies of your resume
- A typed list of at least 3 references
- Approximately 3-5 typed questions you would like to ask of your interviewer(s)
- A professional-style portfolio that contains a pen and paper (these are available in the College Bookstore)
- A portfolio which showcases your past experience (if appropriate)

Interviewing Tips:

- Make sure your answers are clear, articulate and concise.
- Pay attention to your non-verbal cues.
- Answer the interviewer's questions using examples from past experiences.
- Convey your strengths and primary assets which relate to the position.
- Avoid talking too much or getting off track on tangents.
- When addressing weaknesses, be sure to communicate how you are working to overcome them. Think of weaknesses associated with your personality type.
- Remember that it's okay to take a moment to think about your answer rather than blurting something out prematurely.
- Be aware of the experiences listed on your resume. Many interviewers ask questions specifically related to this information.
- Always ask questions of your interviewer(s) at the end. Avoid asking questions related to salary or benefits during a first interview.
- Remember to write down the names, positions and contact information of your interviewers or request a business card so that you can follow up appropriately with a thank-you note.

General Interview Questions

The next step is to think about questions that the interviewer might ask you and possible answers for those questions. Some questions may include:

- Why are you interested in this position and/or organization?
- Why did you choose the college you attended? Are you happy with that choice?
- What was your major and why did you choose it?
- What kind of grades did you have in college?
- Did other things you did in college take time away from your studies?
- What is your career objective now?
- What is your most significant accomplishment?
- Give me an example of how you handle working under pressure.
- Have you ever worked long hours?
- What is the toughest decision you have ever made?
- What is the hardest work you have ever done?
- Tell me about your leadership experience.
- Why do you want a career in this field?

- What will you do if we decide not to hire you?
- What is your major strength/weakness?
- What type of career opportunities do you expect?
- Where do you see yourself three years from now?
- How would you describe your personality?
- How do you plan on reaching your career goals?

More questions and how to answer them:

- **Tell me about yourself.** A common opener, this is an invitation to “sell yourself”. Develop a brief summation of your background leading into your interest and desire to work for the organization as well as your qualifications for the position.
- **What do you know about our organization?** Let your answer show that you have taken the time to do some research, but don’t be a know-it-all. “In my job search, I’ve investigated a number of companies and yours interests me for these reasons...”
- **Why do you want to work for us?** Your homework should include learning enough about the company to answer this question in regard to their interests. Indicate that you share a mutual feeling for the things they hold in high regard when this is the case.
- **What can you do for us that someone else can’t?** Toot your own horn and be confident when answering this question. Use your experience as ammunition to create a favorable impression.
- **What do you find most/least attractive about this position?** State three or four attractive factors; don’t dwell on least attractive factors too long.
- **Why should we hire you?** Talk about your experience/classes/internships, etc. and talk about what you can do for the company.
- **What do you look for in a job?** Keep your answer oriented toward opportunities at the organization rather than your own personal security.
- **What is your definition of the position for which you are being interviewed?** If you are unsure, ask the interviewer – he or she may answer the question for you. If you do attempt an answer, make sure you are very clear on what the position entails.
- **How long would it take you to make a meaningful contribution to our company?** Be realistic. Don’t promise the world too soon. Let them know that you would be ready to pull your own weight from the first day, and that you would be ready and willing to learn anything to help make a contribution as soon as possible.
- **How long would you stay with us?** Say you are interested in a career with the company as long as they continue to provide you the opportunity to meet your career objectives.
- **In your last position, what factors did you like the most/least?** Be positive. Describe more features that you liked than you didn’t like. Don’t cite personality problems...you want them to think you are easy to get along with.
- **Why are you leaving (did you leave) your last position?** Be brief and to the point. If you were laid off or terminated, say so. Otherwise, indicate that the move was your own decision, the result of your actions. Do not mention personality conflicts.
- **What do you feel this position should pay?** Salary is a delicate topic. In your homework, try to find out if there is a salary range attached to the position. Based upon the reasonable range that you identified in your preparation, say: “I know that the standard range for this type of position is \$(fill in 5 the blank) to \$(fill in the blank) and naturally I’d prefer to be at the high end.” You will have made it clear that you have done your homework and, while stating your preference for a high salary, you have not drawn any lines in the sand. You can

also try to get the interviewer to give the first answer. This puts you in a better position for negotiation. For more on this topic go to the “Salary Negotiation” section of this packet.

- **What are your long-range goals?** Relate your goals to the company. “In a firm like yours, I would like to....”
- **How successful do you think you have been?** Present a positive and confident picture of yourself. Be careful, however, not to overstate your case. It may cause the interviewer to wonder if you are trying to fool him/her or yourself.

Potential Questions to Ask of Interviewers

Do your homework. Don’t ask questions which you could have easily researched before the interview. However, prepare several questions in order to convey interest, maturity, and a grasp of the profession. Consider which of the following questions could be tailored to your prospective employer(s). Adapt content and style as appropriate.

- What are the company's strengths and weaknesses compared to its competition?
- How important does upper management consider the function of this department/position?
- What is the organization's plan for the next five years, and how does this department fit in?
- Could you explain your organizational structure?
- How will my leadership responsibilities and performance be measured? By whom?
- What are the day-to-day responsibilities of this job?
- Do you provide any training for new hires?
- Could you describe your company's management style and the type of employee who fits well with it?
- What are some of the skills and abilities necessary for someone to succeed in this job?
- What is the company's policy on providing seminars, workshops, and training so employees can keep up their skills or acquire new ones?
- What particular computer equipment and software do you use?
- What kind of work can I expect to be doing the first year?
- What percentage of routine, detailed work will I encounter?
- How much opportunity is there to see the end result of my efforts?
- Who will review my performance? How often?
- How much guidance or assistance is made available to individuals in developing career goals?
- How much opportunity will I have for decision-making in my first assignment?
- Can you describe an ideal employee?
- What is your organization's policy on transfers to other cities?
- Do you encourage graduate study outside of work time? If so, does your organization offer incentives?
(tuition reimbursement, for example)
- Why do you enjoy working for your firm?
- What makes your firm different from its competitors?
- How would you describe your corporation's personality and management style?

Behavioral Interviewing

Behavioral-based interviewing is a style commonly used by interviewers. According to Katherine Hansen of Quintessential Careers, “The premise behind behavioral interviewing is that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in similar situations...Employers use the behavioral interview technique to evaluate a candidate’s experiences and behaviors so they can determine the applicant’s potential for success.”

Behavioral-based questions typically start out with “Tell me about a time when you...” or “Describe a situation where you...” Behavioral-based questions are often related to skills such as innovation and creativity, teamwork, decision-making, critical thinking, conflict management, leadership, flexibility, communication and motivation.

Preparation is the key to successfully answering behavioral-based questions. Try using the following strategies to help you organize your past experiences (also known as “stories”) as potential answers.

- Make a list of skills or experiences which are relevant to the position being sought. Use materials from the employer and the job (job description, company reports, research, etc.).
- Think about situations that reflect those skills. Come up with 5-6 stories from college, class projects, jobs, internships, volunteer activities, and hobbies. One or two should focus on situations that did not go as planned or were difficult but turned out to be a learning experience.
- Practice telling your stories to others such as friends and family, or a career counselor.
- Make sure your stories are concise, well-told, and interesting. They should create word pictures of what you have done or learned that relates to the job for which you are interviewing.
- Don’t hesitate to market your accomplishments; this is not the time to be too modest!

Examples of Behavioral Interview Questions include:

Tell me about a time when you

- Worked effectively under pressure
- Handled a difficult situation with a co-worker
- Were creative in solving a problem
- Had to make an important decision with limited facts
- Were tolerant of an opinion that was different from yours
- Had to deal with an irate customer
- Were unable to complete a project on time

STAR Interviewing Technique:

One strategy for preparing for behavioral interviews is the STAR technique, as outlined below, adapted from “How to Interview Like you Mean it,” produced by Mr. Donald Asher.

Situation or Task

Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to accomplish. You must describe a specific event or situation, not a generalized description of what you have done in the past. Be sure to give enough detail for the interviewer to understand. This situation can be from a previous job, from a volunteer experience, or any relevant event.

Action You Took

Describe the action you took and be sure to keep the focus on you. Even if you are discussing a group project or effort, describe what you did – not the efforts of the team. Don’t tell what you might do, tell what you did.

Results you Achieved

What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn?

Example:

Situation or Task (ST): Advertising revenue was falling off for my college newspaper, *The Beacon*, and large numbers of long-term advertisers were not renewing contracts.

Action (A): I designed a new promotional packet to go with the rate sheet and compared the benefits of *The Beacon* circulation with other ad media in the area. I also set up a special training session for the account executives with a School of Business Administration professor who discussed competitive selling strategies.

Result (R): We signed contracts with 15 former advertisers for daily ads and five for special supplements. We increased our new advertisers by 20 percent [quantity is always good] over the same period last year.

Other Interview Styles

(From “You’ve Graduated, Now What?”)

Telephone Screening Interviews:

- Used when a company is considering you for a full round of interviews or when companies want to screen people quickly. In five minutes, the interviewer can often determine whether he/she wants to meet with you in person.
- Enthusiasm is the key. Smile when you talk into the phone (it makes a difference!)
- Make sure you are in a quiet room with no distractions.

Screening Interviews:

- Usually first interviews; conducted by a personnel specialist in a large organization.
- Short (5-10 minutes) interview to screen out those applicants who are clearly not appropriate.
- Interviewers generally ask about technical competencies and open-ended questions to assess personality and potential fit with the company. Sell your personality!

Non-directed Interviews:

- Rely on traditional, sometimes random questions - *“Tell me about yourself”* and *“What are your career goals?”*
- Remember that while you do not control the direction of the interview, you do control the content.
- Remain focused, share stories of skills and experience, and project enthusiasm.

Stress Interviews:

- Creates stress through questioning and situations to reveal how you may handle stress on the job.
- Examples include “rapid fire” questioning (little time to think) or using silence—the interviewer silently looks at you after you answer a question to see your reaction. If you get flustered or defensive, you lose.
- The interviewer may comment that you do not have enough experience. Your reaction is critical.
- Once you realize that the interviewer is deliberately putting you under stress, say to yourself, *“Aha, I know what you’re doing, and I’m not going to panic or get angry or become defensive.”*

Board Interviews:

- Two or more people interview you simultaneously, usually taking turns in questioning.
- Each interviewer may have his/her own separate agenda and the only person really listening to your answer may be the person who asked the question.
- Make eye contact with each of the interviewers at the table.

Series Interviews:

- Consecutive interviews (in one day) with several people in an organization. You may interview with someone from personnel, your potential boss, and some potential colleagues both inside and outside the department.
- Assumes several heads are always better than one. Combined, they see qualities that would make a candidate suitable or unsuitable for the position and come to agreement on the strongest candidates.

After the Interview

If the interview goes well and you have a strong interest, send a thank you note reinforcing your interest in both the position and the organization (send within 24 hours of the interview). Focus on the fact that you feel it’s a good match and support that by identifying at least one item you really connected on in the interview.

The approach should be that hiring you would be of mutual benefit and not simply good for you. You may also wish to follow-up with a phone call if the interviewers make that option available to you.

Sample of a Thank You Letter

Mr. Foster Walker
Director, Editorial Services
Atlantic Publishing
1220 Warwick Ave.
Newport News, VA 23607

Dear Mr. Walker:

I want to thank you very much for interviewing me yesterday for the Associate Editor position at Atlantic Publishing. I enjoyed meeting you and learning more about your publications. My enthusiasm for the position and my interest in working for Atlantic Publishing were strengthened as a result of the interview. I think my education and internship experience fits nicely with the job requirements, and I am sure that I could make a significant contribution to the firm over time.

I want to reiterate my strong interest in the position, and in working with you and your staff. You provide the kind of opportunity I seek. Please feel free to contact me at 999-111-2222 or doe.j@gmc.edu if I can provide you with any additional information. Again thank you for the interview, and your consideration.

Sincerely,

John Doe

Interview Do's & Don'ts

Do:

1. Research the company *before* the interview (their Web site, Google, business press, etc.).
2. Prepare a list of stories you can tell about yourself that show how you solved problems or contributed to a team effort.
3. Practice interviewing with a friend, or in mock interviews in your career center.
4. Discover how people dress on the job, and prepare to dress as they would on a day when an out-of-town big boss visits the office.
5. Consider removing piercings and covering tattoos.
6. Allow *plenty* of time to arrive at your appointment five minutes early.
7. Have a firm, business-like handshake (if in doubt, *practice, practice, practice*).
8. Sell yourself, be positive and confident, and don't hold back on representing your abilities.
9. Find out what happens next (how many interviews, when they'll make a decision, what you should do next).
10. Send a thank you note (by email *and* by mail) immediately after the meeting.

Don't:

1. Don't be late, ever!
2. Don't lie, oversell, or misrepresent yourself.
3. Don't dominate or take over the interview.
4. Don't initiate discussions of salary and benefits.
5. Don't try to be funny or entertaining; don't joke around.
6. Don't talk about politics, religion, or socially sensitive issues.
7. Don't use slang or student lingo.
8. Don't wear strong scents or too much jewelry.
9. Don't whine or malign; don't talk in negative terms about other people, employers, or the college experience.
10. Don't worry so much!

Proper Attire:

The importance of appearance can't be overemphasized. Some interviewers say that they form their opinion of a candidate within the first few minutes of the interview. If this is the case, then the first impression you make is crucial to the tone you hope to set for the rest of the interview. Don't skimp on your clothing budget – plan to get the best you can reasonably afford. Better materials look nicer and wear longer. Whatever you decide to wear, be sure it is clean, neatly pressed, and well tailored to you. A good fit can make even a bargain suit look great. It is always safe to go a little conservative too; you can make your fashion statement after you get “Employee of the Month”!

The following is a quick guide to a conservative well-put together business outfit. Remember to research the proper attire though; many companies may be more or less conservative than this.

WOMEN

- **Suit:** Solid colors give a more polished impression than a combination of solids and patterns. Blouses should be simple, without lots of ruffles, patterns, or busy details. Midsection should be completely covered.
- **Hemline:** No longer than mid-calf; just below the knee to no more than two inches above the knee is best. (Television shows are not the real world!)
- **Hosiery:** Grays, blacks, or other neutral tones that match your skin tone. Shoes ½ - 2 inch heels, closed toe pumps with little detail; must be shined and heels must be in good condition.
- **Purse:** Try not to carry a purse if possible. If you must carry one, it should match your shoes or be black or brown. Do not carry more than one purse and a portfolio with extra copies of your resume, paper for notes, and a pen.
- **Jewelry:** Don't wear large dangling earrings or chunky or noisy bracelets. Try not to wear more than two rings and a conservative necklace. Try to only wear 3 items of jewelry at once. (Rings, necklace, and earring for an example.)
- **Hair:** Clean and well groomed are the key components here. Go easy on the perfumed hair sprays and don't get too poofy!
- **Makeup:** Go for the natural look here. Avoid perfumes and leave your candy colored nail polishes at home. Try something a bit more subdued.

MEN

- **Suit:** Black, dark gray, navy, or brown are the best colors; pinstripes are fine.
- **Shirts:** White or light blue cotton shirts with long sleeves ending just below the wrist bone.
- **Ties:** Not too narrow nor too wide; select one with evenly spaced small patterns or stripes. Stay away from flashy or faddish ties (especially the battery powered ones).
- **Hair:** Avoid beards, goatees, sideburns, etc. If you do wear any of these, keep them well trimmed. Also, it is a good idea to get a hair cut a few days before the interview.
- **Socks:** Dark shades that match the color of your suit.
- **Shoes:** Black or brown shoes with leather soles coordinated with your suit color. Have shoes with shoelaces rather than loafers. Make sure shoes are shined.
- **Jewelry:** Only wear one or two rings. Earrings and other types of jewelry are best removed.

Salary Negotiation:

Salary is a touchy subject and must be handled with finesse. Try not to address the issue until the very end of the interview process. If the question arises early, politely ask if you can discuss that after you have completed the informational part of the interview. Remember, ask politely and do not refuse if the interviewer insists on negotiation at that time. Before the interview, as part of your research, find out what the mean, low, and high salary is for the position you are driving towards. Also find out if a person with your qualifications should accept a lower salary or demand a higher one. Another thing to include in your research is what type of benefits package usually comes with your position. For additional information go to www.quintcareers.com/salary_negotiation.html

A few things to keep in mind:

- Most salaries, except most entry-level positions, are negotiable.
- The employer only **wants** to pay the minimum the employee will accept.
- Salary has more importance than most consider. It's an indicator of your worth to others and also influences future income.
- Benefits can be an important consideration and should be used to compare offers.

The negotiation process:

Try to let the employer bring up the subject. You should refrain from actually asking about the salary until a job offer has been made to you. When it is time to address the issue, let the employer suggest the first figure. This puts you in a much better position for negotiating a higher salary without over-reaching the amount the employer is willing to offer. After the employer gives his/her figure you essentially have **three choices**:

1. Simply accept the figure.
2. Negotiate for a higher figure.
3. Ask if you may take some time to consider the offer.

In most cases, choice number two or three are the best options. Choosing number one may show that you are desperate for the job and that you are not very outgoing. If you choose number two, establish a range within the employer's but slightly higher. For example: If the company offers you \$30 – 35,000, and this is within the proximity of the salary that you found in your research, you may say something like, "Through my; research, I found that a proper salary for a person with my qualifications is in the range of \$33 – 38,000. Would this be an acceptable range?" This now puts your lowest acceptable offer in the employer's higher end.

After you establish these figures, justify them by reiterating the importance of the position, the duties of the position, and your qualifications for it. You are now within striking distance of a \$35 –36,000 salary, which is most likely much more than what you would have received if you would have simply accepted the first offer the employer made. Option number three can also be a desirable option. You may ask the employer if you may take up to 48 hours to "sleep" on the offer. During this time, you should take into consideration if the offer is reasonable for the amount of work involved, if you can do better elsewhere, and if you can afford to live on the salary. If you have other offers, now is the time to follow up those and let them know that they are 10 not the only ones considering you. Other options for negotiation:

While salary is generally a dollar figure, benefits are also a valuable source of income and should be factored into your decision-making. Some common benefits include medical, dental, life insurance, paid vacation, sick leave, retirement plans, education, etc. If there is a certain job that you would really like to accept, but they can't offer you the salary that you need, you should try

negotiating for extra benefits such as flex time, extended paid vacation, higher percentage of insurance costs shared by the company, or perhaps even a company car, if that is available.

If you come to the point where you do want the job, but the employer can not currently offer you more money or benefits, you can try to negotiate for a re-negotiation after three or six months. At that time, the employer will have seen that you are going to be a great asset to the company and will be more interested in investing more of his/her money in you. You can also see if the company can possibly upgrade the position slightly so that they could justify paying you a little more.

Additional Resources

- www.quintcareers.com/intvres.html
- www.quintcareers.com/job_interviews/
- www.jobhuntersbible.com
- <http://career-advice.monster.com/interview-tips/home.aspx>
- www.collegegrad.com/intv/
- www.careerjournal.com
- www.jobweb.org

