Interview Guide

Center for CAREER Development

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Congratulations… you've been invited to interview for a position! Whether this is your very first formal interview or you just want to brush up on your interviewing skills, this guide covers preparation tips and more nuanced advice for specific types of interviews.

We encourage you to read the basic principles of interviewing section below, then review the section(s) of this guide that you believe will be most helpful in helping you present your best self to prospective employers.

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Basic Principles of Interviewing

1
Preparation is key

- Set aside time to prepare for each interview.

- Practice answers to common questions.

- Understand the types of interviews and questions – specific to the industry or job function for which you are interviewing.

- Develop three-to-five go-to stories you can share in your interview that speak to both general career readiness competencies (see page 3) and specific skills and traits of the position for which you are interviewing.

2
No matter the specific questions they ask, interviewers are looking for the same general things

- Do you have the skills, knowledge and experience to perform the job and contribute to the organization?

- Are you motivated and enthusiastic about the position and the organization?

- Would you work well within the culture of the organization and with your prospective team members, clients and coworkers?

- Can you manage your time well, attempt to resolve problems on your own, accept responsibility for your mistakes and ask for help when needed?

3
The most successful interview candidates are skilled communicators

- Highlight your strengths and experiences as they align with the position.

- Convey an understanding of the role and conviction of your enthusiasm for the work and the organization.

- Emphasize your fit: how your personality aligns with the culture of the organization.

- Demonstrate skills, professionalism and initiative throughout the interview process including the initial contact, multiple rounds of interviews, tailored outreach and followup.

Career Readiness: Competencies Employers Value Most

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), a preeminent professional organization in the career development field, established a set of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace. Outlined below are the three most valued competencies per a recent survey of employers.

https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness

CAREER READINESS

Critical Thinking/ Problem Solving

Exercises sound reasoning, analyzes issues and makes decisions

Obtains, interprets, and uses knowledge, facts, data; demonstrates originality and inventiveness

Teamwork/ Collaboration

Builds relationships within diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, religions, lifestyles and viewpoints

Works within a team structure, and negotiates and manages conflict

Professionalism/ Work Ethic

Demonstrates personal accountability and effective work habits, while cultivating a professional work image

Demonstrates integrity and ethical behavior, acts responsibly and is able to learn from mistakes

What this Means for Interview Preparation

Preparing for an interview is more than memorizing answers to a list of potential questions. It is being able to look at your experiences – in the classroom, on the field, in a club or on your own – through the lens of common competencies in the professional workplace and specific to the position for which you are interviewing.

The Interview Process

Interviewing is more than just being ready to answer questions. There are several steps to take before, during and after your interview to increase your likelihood of getting an offer:

BEFORE

- Generate a list of likely interview questions based on the knowledge, skills and responsibilities on the position description. For example, if the position description states applicants, "Must have strong organization skills with exceptional attention to detail," you should practice answering the question, "Tell me about a time you had to be highly organized and detail-oriented."

- Write out potential answers and record yourself answering them. Knowing your experience is not the same as articulating it. Use the interview rubric (p. 11) to gauge how you're doing.

- Self-identify to your interview coordinator if you have visual, hearing or mobility disabilities that require accommodation for the interview. Otherwise, there is no need to make any such disclosure at this time. Future accommodation conversations could take place once you have received an offer.

- Plan to pay for travel expenses - do not assume employer will pay or reimburse you. If not given instructions, politely ask the interviewer if travel expenses are covered.

- Prepare a list of questions to ask your interviewer(s) that:
  » yield more information about the role, expectations and the organization's culture.
  » elicit insights about the work environment and how you would contribute to their work, rather than focus on benefits/rewards you might receive (save those for when you receive an offer).
  » convey to the interviewer that you are thoughtful about this organization and how you can support its mission/growth.

DURING

- Ask if you can take notes and/or refer back to notes you prepared in advance.

- Consider what the interviewer needs to know about you by the time the interview ends to be confident that you are the right fit for the role and organization.

- Ask thoughtful questions that demonstrate you were listening throughout the interview.

- Leave the interview knowing these three important pieces of information: how to get back in touch with your interviewer; the next step in the recruiting process; and the anticipated timeframe before the next step.

AFTER

- Send tailored thank you notes to your interviewers that:
  » Summarize strengths and elements of the conversation that will help interviewer remember you
  » Introduce traits/qualifications that perhaps you were not quite able to convey initially
  » Express continued interest in the role and the organization

- Understand that recruitment processes are not standardized, and that you may have to decide on one opportunity before hearing back from another. There is a line between being proactive and being a pest that if crossed could undermine your chances of getting an offer. Contact the Center for Career Development for advice on professionally asking for an expedited interview process or for more time to weigh your options.

- Express thanks and politely ask for feedback if you are not selected to move forward. Not all interviewers will share a concrete assessment, but every bit helps you do better next time, or may help the organization keep you top-of-mind when new roles open up.

Interview Formats

Reaching a wider applicant pool, reducing bias, saving time and money and modeling a work setting are among the reasons for several different interview formats. Some of the most common formats and tips for success in each are outlined below.

Contact the Center for Career Development to reserve a room for a virtual or phone interview:
https://careerdevelopment.princeton.edu/news/reserve-virtual-interview-room

PHONE SCREEN/INITIAL INTERVIEW

Typically a 15-60 min. one-on-one conversation to gauge interest, clarify qualifications and occasionally discuss salary expectations.

Tips for Success

- Arrange for a quiet space at a table or desk with strong cell phone reception.
- Ensure your phone is fully charged.
- Know if the interviewer is calling you or if you will be calling in.
- Have a copy of your resume, key notes, questions to ask your interviewer and paper and pen nearby. Use these as guides, but avoid reading/shuffling pages.
- Dress like you would for an in-person interview to help project a confident voice.
- Listen carefully. It takes extra attention to focus on the call, avoid distractions and gauge length of responses.

RECORDED VIDEO/TIMED TEST

Typically a 30-60 min. self-directed assessment of interest, skills or personality. Generally not designed to start-and-stop, so it's important to set proper time and space aside.

Tips for Success

- Get comfortable talking out loud and focusing on your laptop camera. Set your camera at eye level.
- Consider the lighting and background.
- Review instruction and listen to prompts carefully.

Timed Test

- Commonly used for coding/software development, but may be used more broadly to assess personality, work styles or general aptitude.
- Take practice tests when available in advance to feel comfortable with process.
- Ensure your laptop is fully charged and your internet connection is strong and steady.

VIDEO CHAT

Often used to save employers time and expense, video chat interviews are typically 30-60 minutes in length. They may be one-on-one or multi-party.

Tips for Success

- Arrange for a quiet space at a table or desk.
- Use a laptop, tablet or desktop, not cell phone.
- Ensure your device is fully charged and your internet connection strong and steady.
- Review interview instructions and download/install necessary apps ahead of time.
- Consider your lighting and background.
- Position the computer and yourself so you are looking straight at the camera – not up or down at the screen.
- Get comfortable with talking out loud and focusing on your computer's camera.
- Have your resume, questions and key notes handy, out of camera sight. Use these as guides, but avoid reading/shuffling pages.
- Maintain your focus - your every move can be seen.

IN-PERSON

Used for on-campus recruiting and later rounds on site. Can range from 30 mins. to a full day, involving multiple interviews, group activities, meals and tours.

What to Wear

- A business suit is the most common attire.
- Depending on industry/site, you might wear business casual attire or need special clothing (e.g., lab coat, closed-toe shoes).

What to Bring

- A padfolio with printed copies of your resume, a notepad, pen and questions to ask.
- The name/contact info of the person(s) you are meeting.
- Your prox or other photo ID.

What to Do

- Arrive early and anticipate a security screening.
- Turn off your phone.
- Greet everyone politely and professionally.
- Stay energized, especially in back-to-back interviews.
- Observe work space setup, demeanor of staff and demographics /diversity of workforce.

Types of Interview Questions

Interviewers use a variety of techniques aligned with organizational culture and job function specifics to gauge the interests and qualifications of applicants.

Resume-Based and Traditional

These are general questions prompting you to elaborate on the information provided in your resume. All interviews typically include at least one or two of these questions even if the interview is based primarily on a different question type.

With these questions, expect to:

- Tell the interviewer something about yourself they can't read in your resume.

- Talk about your strengths and areas in which you could improve.

- Express what appeals to you about doing this job and/or working for this organization.

- Share how you might handle hypothetical situations in the workplace.

Topics Typically Covered

- Accomplishments
- Highlights of what you bring to role
- Skills
- Overview of experiences
- Interest in the role
- Clear storytelling

Behavioral or Situational

These are based on the premise that how you handled situations in the past – solving a complex problem, dealing with a difficult person or catching a mistake – suggests how you will respond to similar situations in the future.

To prepare for questions, reflect on your experiences and the context around them. Create a mental "library" of stories that capture you at your best or at a moment of significant learning. The key to answering these storytelling questions is through the **STAR** approach:

SITUATION	TASK	ACTION	RESULT
• Context for your story: when it took place, who was involved, where it occurred and what it was for.	• What had to get done? • What goal did you have to reach? • What obstacles were in the way?	• Steps you took. • How you took them. • Why you took them.	• What happened? • Was it the result you wanted/expected? • What might you change if faced with the same situation

Tips: Be concise and include a clear beginning, middle and end to your stories. Set the stage (situation and task) quickly, and focus the bulk of your story on the actions and results. If the story involves being part of a group, be careful not to overuse "we" - focus most of your response on your **individual** role/contributions.
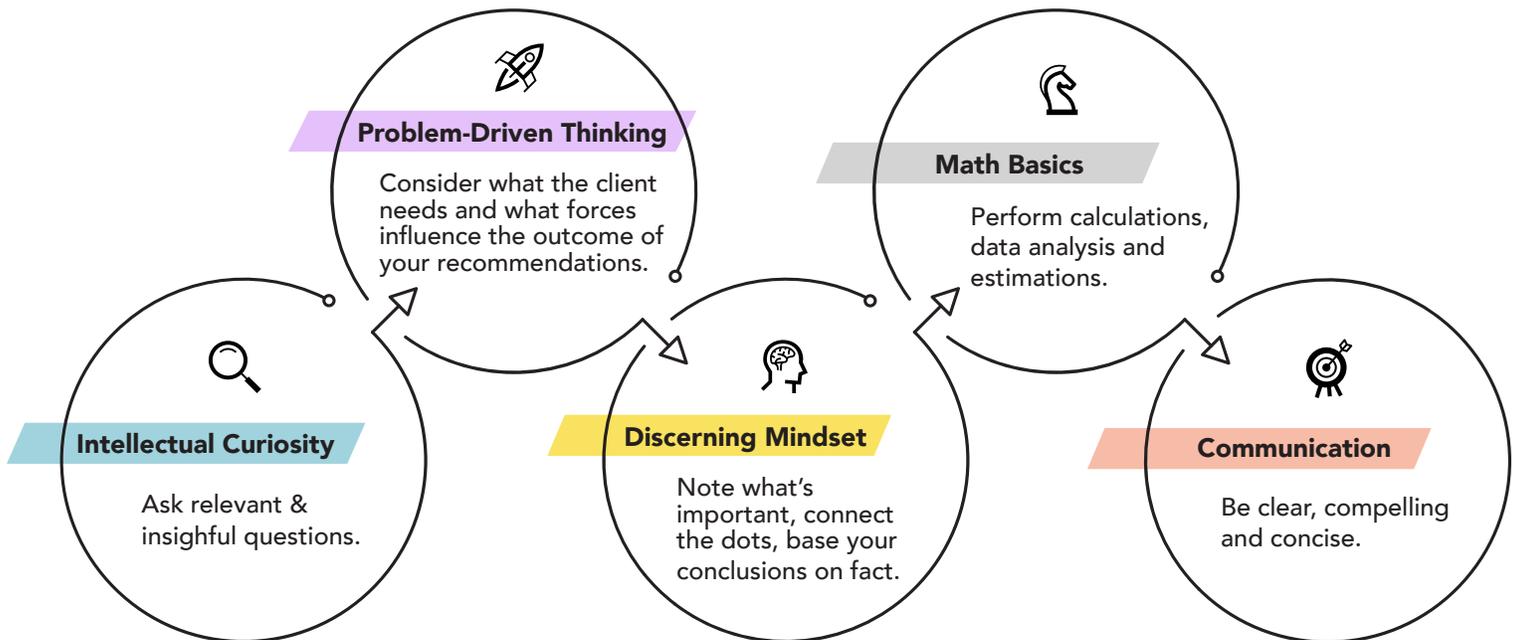
Case Study

Most commonly used in consulting, these interviews assess analytical skills, critical thinking and problem-solving through the examination of a real business issue and the expectation that you can develop a solution on the spot.

Case interviewing is not about having the "right" answer, it is about having the best answer you can with the information you are given.

As part of this process, you are expected to

- Think out loud
- Gather pertinent information
- Make logical assumptions
- Develop a recommendation or solution
- Treat your interviewer as your client

Problem-Driven Thinking

Consider what the client needs and what forces influence the outcome of your recommendations.

Math Basics

Perform calculations, data analysis and estimations.

Intellectual Curiosity

Ask relevant & insightful questions.

Discerning Mindset

Note what's important, connect the dots, base your conclusions on fact.

Communication

Be clear, compelling and concise.

Brain Teaser

For analytical and technical roles, interviewers seek to assess an applicant's logic, math, critical thinking and creativity, as well as the ability to perform under pressure. Brain teasers often don't have a right answer - it's the logic the candidate applies to finding an answer that counts!

There are different types of brain teaser questions and several websites that provide examples of each.

- **Visualization:** How many tennis balls fit in an airplane?
- **Quick math:** What is the sum of the numbers from 1 to 100?
- **Why things are the way they are:** Why are manhole covers round?
- **Explain a concept:** Explain the internet to someone who has just come out of a 30-year coma.
- **Solve a mystery:** You have a 3-cup jug and a 5-cup jug. How do you measure one cup of water?
- **Manage an unlikely problem:** How would you test a calculator?

Decoding Interview Questions

While each interview is different, there are common questions interviewers ask. Understanding why they ask them and what kind of information they're really looking for are the keys to standing out as a valuable candidate.

What They Ask	Why They Ask It	How to Respond
"Tell me about yourself."	It gives you chance to ease into the interview and provide context to the experiences outlined in your resume.	Briefly summarize the past few years in 2-3 themes related to the role and organization. Provide context around your work, like how much time went into a project or the level of autonomy and responsibility you had.
"Why do you want to work for this organization?"	To listen for more than a quote from the firm's website or generalities about the industry as a whole. Not being able to convey sentiments pertinent to the organization may signal you're not really interested in working there.	Share what intrigues you from conversations you had with alumni or others who work there or from what you read. Note admiration for the organization's growth or your desire to support its mission.
"Tell me about your senior thesis."	Independent research like senior thesis is uncommon in undergraduate education elsewhere, so interviewers may be intrigued by the process as well as the content of your study.	Speak concisely about why you chose this topic and summarize the major steps you took and research sources you used. Quantify the length or scope of your project and plans to publish and/or present your findings to a broader audience.
"Tell me about a conflict you had with a supervisor or other person in a position of authority."	Disagreements happen, so interviewers want to know how you handle them. Avoiding conflict may mean you lack the courage of your own convictions, but just blaming the other party doesn't put you in the best light.	Be honest. Provide some detail and context, but focus primarily on the resolution and lessons learned rather than belaboring the conflict itself.
"Why did you change majors/career paths?"	This might be a sensitive topic (e.g., poor GPA, didn't get a return offer), but the interviewer just wants to know you can connect what you've done in the past with what you want to be doing in the future.	Craft a narrative of how the transition came about, what draws you to this new opportunity and some takeaways from previous roles that are transferable to this new setting.
"What are your greatest strengths?"	A way to assess your familiarity with the nature of the job or organization by the strengths you highlight. It is also a test of your confidence – if you don't believe in yourself, neither will your interviewer!	Reflect on what you've been recognized for by supervisors or peers. Provide examples: If you say you have strong time management skills, highlight how you plan out your day, week, and semester.
"What is your greatest weakness?"	No candidate is perfect, but interviewers want employees who can honestly assess what they still need to learn and can demonstrate a plan to learn it.	For example, there may be a certain technology they use that you haven't; demonstrate a situation in which you previously had to learn a new technology quickly to complete a project or task.
"Describe how you handled a team or group project when one member wasn't carrying their weight."	Collaboration is essential in most work environments, but it doesn't always go smoothly. Interviewers are looking for how you position yourself in the group, how you communicate with your peers, and how you embrace or resolve conflict.	Frame the story with the context of the group's goals and your individual role in the group. Display empathy for the team member who held up the project or take ownership if it was you. Outline how the issue was resolved and lessons you learned from the experience.

What They Ask	Why They Ask It	How to Respond
"Where do you see yourself in 5 years?"	The interviewer wants a sense of how you view career progression and perhaps if you understand how advancing at their organization works.	Be honest about future goals, but be vague enough so as not to imply you're already planning your exit. It's also OK to say that you're not quite sure what the future holds, but that you see this experience playing an important role in helping you make that decision.
"Tell me about your hobbies and interests / something not on your resume?"	We (your interviewers included!) are all more than our work. This question helps the interviewer get to the core of your personality.	Strike a balance between personal interests and professional context. Share hobbies from which you derive joy and satisfaction, that complement your career interests or that broaden your perspective/outlook.
"Can you describe a time when your work was unfairly criticized?"	As with other negative questions, interviewers are trying to gauge both your reaction and your response. Most roles are colleague- or client-facing, so accepting and responding to criticism is not uncommon in the workplace.	Describe the situation, the critique and the circumstances around it. Demonstrate recognition of why the critique occurred and how it might have gone differently or what you learned. Avoid harsh criticisms or personal judgements of others.
"What other organizations are you interviewing with?"	In corporate environments especially, it is not uncommon for interviewers to want to gauge the competition or be on par with others' recruitment timelines.	You are under no obligation to disclose your job search details to an interviewer, though providing some context is good to avoid sounding defensive. You can talk in generalities about exploring a range of opportunities or share a specific response timeline to an offer you received if the current interview is for a position you want more.
"What are your salary requirements?"	Organizations know what they can/want to offer. The question is designed to gauge if you researched the average salary for that type of role in that type of organization, and know your own worth in relation to that average.	Prior to your interview, check O*NET, Payscale, Salary.com or other sites to triangulate a salary range. Provide that range and your justification based on the value you'll add to the organization with the experience, education and skills you bring to the organization.
"Do you have any questions for me?"	This is to gauge if you have done research about the organization and to assess your listening skills within the interview.	Ask questions to which you genuinely want an answer. Use your questions to convey your enthusiasm for the role/organization. Ask for your interviewer's business card/ contact information, what the next step in the hiring process is and the expected recruitment timeline.
"Is there anything else you'd like us to know?"	Just like the opening "Tell me about yourself" question, this one is intentionally open-ended, giving you the chance to make one last pitch for your candidacy.	Ahead of time, think of 3-4 key points you want to get across about yourself during your interview. Use this question as the opportunity to convey key points that hadn't yet come up or to recap your interest in and qualifications for this role.

Researching the Organization

"Why do you want to work here?" is one of the most common interview questions, yet job seekers often struggle to come up with an answer. Preparation is key to being able to answer this question effectively.

Before your first – and every – interview, review the job description and highlight how your skills and experiences match. Gather background information about the organization. Some pieces are more difficult to find then others, but it's crucial to build a solid understanding of the organization so you are prepared to both answer and ask questions about the organization – the signal of your genuine interest in the opportunity.

- Search Vault, Glassdoor, LinkedIn and similar sites for an organization's profile, industry record and background information on your interviewer.

- Visit the organization's website and look at it from the perspective of a potential customer or client.

- Locate articles in trade or business publications for a third-party view on the organization.

- Connect with alumni who work at this organization.

Download this page to use before your next interview.

TOPICS TO COVER

Mission and history of the organization

Products/services this organization provides and its clients/customers

How this organization stands out from its competitors

In the news (e.g., mergers, acquisitions, product launches, new leadership, etc.)

Civic engagement, employee development or other programs that appeal to me

Traits that characterize the environment, pace of work, staff and clientele

Background info on my interviewer(s)

Interview Rubric

No matter how much you have thought about answers to interview questions, the best preparation is practicing your answers out loud. Whether with a career adviser, friend or by recording yourself and viewing it later, use the rubric below to assess and enhance your performance so you are confident going into that interview.

	1= Needs Improvement	2 = Developing	3 = Good	4 = Excellent
Verbal Communication	Too fast or too slow; Too many fillers and slang; Too loud or too quiet - not natural	Some fillers; Adequate speed/pitch/volume, though may need improvement; Frequent use of casual language	Adequate speed, pitch and volume; Minimal fillers; Minimal use of informal or casual language	Natural speed, pitch and volume; Speaks clearly, articulately and concisely
Nonverbal Communication (not every component is available through virtual interviews)	Poor posture; Poor eye contact; Limp handshake; Fidgeting; Checks phone; Plays w/ objects on table; Extremely nervous	Little eye contact, facial expression or emotion; Some slouching; Appears a bit nervous/ uneasy but mostly maintains composure	Natural eye contact, facial expression and posture; Demonstrates confidence and professionalism	Relaxed but calm, professional demeanor; Shows confidence, sincerity and excitement
Listening & Interpersonal Skills	Frequently interrupts interviewer; Minimally engaged in the conversation	Occasionally interrupts interviewer; Starts answering before fully listening to entire questions	Adequately engages in conversation and listens carefully	Actively listens and engages in conversation; Asks questions when clarification or more info is needed
Answering Questions (in general)	Does not answer the question; Rambles for a lengthy amount of time	Answers the question minimally	Answers with relevant examples, transferable skills and attributes	Offers solid, relevant examples; Keeps the needs and interests of interviewer in mind
Behavioral Questions (STAR)	Does not answer; Lacks specific examples that demonstrate the intended behavior	Answers with an example describing the behavior but does not elaborate	Answers with a relevant example using the STAR method	Uses STAR to answer with thorough stories; Connects answers with the position
Preparation and Interests	Unprepared; Does not display enthusiasm for the position; Offers generic answer or vague interests	Indicates minimal preparation; Offers brief answer to indicate interests	Demonstrates knowledge about the position and organization; States some interests	Demonstrates thorough preparation and knowledge of the position and organization; Provides personal, thoughtful, interests
Asking Questions (at the end of the interview)	Does not ask any questions	Asks questions that suggest a lack of research on the role or organization before the interview	Asks questions clearly prepared in advance based on research on position and/or organization	Questions go beyond surface knowledge of the position and/or organization