

A Guide to

# INTERVIEWS



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An interview is like a final exam. Your success depends on how thoroughly you have prepared for this test of your ability to handle the subject. And the subject is you. How well you can relate your skills, interests, and potential to the needs of the employer will dictate your success.

Although interviewing is always stressful, it should not be approached with such fear that you are nearly immobilized by anxiety. Many factors are at play on the hiring scene, and you should expect to encounter many “no’s” before the right “yes” comes along.

**There is no one sure way to prepare for an interview.** Therefore, this guide should be used as a tool and a foundation from which to begin preparing.

#### **PURPOSE:**

- To supply the employer with information about you that is not contained in your resumé, application or cover letter. It is not an interrogation, but instead should be a conversation.
- To enable the employer to evaluate your personality, communication skills, attitudes, values, vitality, motivation, and interest, based on the requirements of the position and the organization.
- To enable you to gain further information about the employer and position.

#### **FOCUS ON:**

- What you have done and what you can do for the employer.
- How you can help the employer accomplish the objectives of the organization.
- How the employer can help you achieve your objectives either directly or indirectly.

#### **TYPES OF INTERVIEWS:**

- **Informational Interview:** You are seeking information about employers in an informational interview. This is one of the best ways to find out about an organization or type of job. It provides you with the **opportunity to learn about a career field**. You experience a brief and enlightening look at a specific career field through discussion and direct observation. **It is not intended as a job interview**. However, you can ask for further referrals to increase your networking. Informational interviewing serves as a source of career information that can provide you with the knowledge you need to make career decisions.
- **On-Campus Interview:** The focus is on initial impressions and reactions of the applicant. If favorable, an invitation will follow for an in-depth interview at the company.
- **Human Resources Interview:** This is usually a pre-screening type of interview held at the company.
- **In-depth Interview:** This is done by the hiring authority such as department head, manager, or supervisor. It can last from 30 minutes to a full day including lunch and dinner.
- **Group Interview:** Usually used to measure reaction to a variety of individuals and situations or to have a certain group of involved representatives from the employer make a collective decision. In education, this would be a search committee or board of education.

## PREPARATION:

1. Thorough **self-examination** is necessary. The interviewer will focus on getting to know your personal characteristics and will be looking for a pattern of behavior. Therefore you must have a good idea of . . .
  - What **skills** you have to offer.
  - What you have accomplished.
  - What you do with your time.
  - Who you are, **your personality, values, and attitudes**.
  - Where you want to go with this job; what are **your goals**.
2. Thorough **research of the company**. You must know enough about the company to justify why you are seeking employment, and to formulate intelligent questions about the organization.
  - What are the products, services, size and clientele?
  - What is the relative size of the firm in the industry?
  - What functions are involved in the position for which you are applying?
  - What is the organization/industry's potential for growth?
  - How is the organization structured?
  - Who is their competition?

Sources of information: Employer brochures, annual reports, directories, newspapers, business and trade journals, professional associations, employees in the organization, etc. **No excuse will be acceptable to an employer for not knowing this information.**

3. **Plan your presentation:** Be prepared to talk about your background, accomplishments, skills, abilities, and goals. **Make a list of your best "selling points"** and bring it to the interview. Make sure that you make these points known. Do not wait for the employer to ask questions which lead to this information; be prepared to sell yourself. Anticipate questions from the interviewer, and prepare from your experiences to cite examples that demonstrate your skills and strengths.
4. **Prepare questions for the employer.** Remember that you are also looking for the right organization, people, and working environment. **Asking intelligent questions is just as important as how you answer their questions.** Do not wait until the end of the interview when you are asked if you have any questions. Promote a two-way conversation throughout the interview by interjecting (*not interrupting*) questions and responses. Lead the interviewer to your area of knowledge by asking related questions.
5. **Be prepared with references.** Three references are typically requested by employers. Have the correct name, title, work address, telephone number, fax number, and email address of those people whom you have asked to serve as a reference for you. Give each person who will act as your reference a copy of your résumé so that he/she is aware of the type of position for which you are interviewing. You might want to ask your references for letters of recommendation. Excellent references are hard to come by; so do not risk losing one due to retirement, relocation, or illness.
6. **What to bring.** Bring copies of your **résumé, reference list,** and an **unofficial transcript** with you to the interview. You should also have **a pad of paper and pens/pencils.** Carry contact phone numbers in case you are detained along the way and need to call the interviewer to inform him/her of your delay. Do not forget **a list of job-related questions.** Before the interview, make sure that you verify the date, time, and place, have directions and decided on a route of travel.

7. **Portfolios.** These are typically used by writers, artists, designers, advertisers, etc. However, students in any major can use portfolios to demonstrate skills, abilities, and accomplishments. They can include writing samples, artwork, project summaries, and materials from an event that you organized, and a letter of recommendation.
- 8a. **What to wear (*suggestions for men*).** A conservative, dark, two-piece, single-breasted suit is appropriate. Any pattern in the fabric should be subtle. White, long-sleeved dress shirt and a conservative tie will look professional. Black dress shoes that are polished and black dress socks are recommended. Conservative jewelry should be worn – one ring and watch only (*consider removing earrings & body piercings, if distracting or inappropriate*). Hair should be neat; keep sprays and gels to an absolute minimum – no “wet” looks. Use very little cologne or none at all.
- 8b. **What to wear (*suggestions for women*).** A conservative, dark-colored suit or dress with a jacket is best with a business blouse or tailored shirt. Knee-length or an inch above is the highest your hem should be. Shoes should be comfortable and simple with low heels and in a dark color that matches or complements your clothes. Hosiery should be a natural color or the color of your shoes. Jewelry should be kept to a minimum; simple gold or silver accessories – no flashy fashion jewelry (*consider removing body piercings, if distracting or inappropriate*) Handbags should be conservative and match your shoes; not too large/overstuffed. If you are carrying an attaché case, carry a very simple and small handbag or none at all. Use very little cologne/perfume, or none at all.

#### **ADDITIONAL TIPS**

- Be on time and courteous to everyone you encounter.
- Be sure to neatly and accurately complete the application, bringing with you specific names, dates, etc. you will need.
- Look like a winner; you’re the show, dress for the role.
- Give a firm handshake (*limp, cold fish need not apply*).
- Offer a quick and genuine smile.
- Be alive and enthusiastic and show genuine interest.
- Do not be afraid to show a sense of humor.
- Be confident, but not cocky.

#### **TYPICAL INTERVIEW FORMAT:**

1. **Introduction.** Informal ‘breaking of the ice’ type of conversation. Remember that first impressions are often the most important. Don’t just smile and nod.
- The interviewer is assessing your appearance, energy level, facial expression, and your body language.
  - You should be sizing up the interviewer and looking for clues on how best to respond. Establish the interview flow and tempo. Fifty/fifty does not mean that they talk for the first 30 minutes, and you talk for the next 30 minutes.
2. **Information exchange.** The recruiter may begin by discussing the organization. A lot of time may be spent on discussing the position or they may begin by asking you questions about your background and credentials as they relate to the needs of the employer. Don’t be afraid to ask questions at this point. Don’t interrupt the interviewer; interject your response or question at the first opportunity.

3. (You) **Highlight** – your achievements, career objectives/goals, knowledge of the organization, personal skills, job qualifications, activities and interests, reasons for career choice, and special skills.

**Find Out** – what kind of **training** they offer, what is the typical **career path**, what are the functions and **responsibilities** of the position, what is the managerial line-up of the organization, does this position match or lead to your goals, will you fit into the organization, etc.

(Employer)

**Find Out** – what kind of person you are, do your interests and abilities relate to the position, can you communicate effectively, why you are interviewing for the position, what you want to do and why, what you have done that indicates your potential.

4. **Closing.** This is a very important stage. The recruiter will be assessing your overall performance. **Never say**, “You’ve answered all of my questions.” Always have several additional questions ready.
- Begin by asking questions in terms of how you can help the employer, and then relate this information to your experience, skills, and interests.
  - Summarize what you understand to be significant.
  - Be sure of the sequence of follow-up. Will the employer contact you? When? Are you expected to provide any additional information? If uncertain, ask!
  - Be definitive as to the next steps.
  - Ask for the interviewer’s business card, and the correct spelling of the names of additional people with whom you met and interviewed.

You must **remain enthusiastic and courteous**. Shake the recruiter’s hand and say something like: “Thank you Ms. Smith, for the opportunity to speak with you. I am extremely interested in this position, and I am looking forward to hearing from you.” Being forthright is a quality that most employers will respect.

## TYPICAL QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS ABOUT RESPONSES

Suggestions about responses are provided for your assistance only. You should decide how you would answer each question.

- **What can you tell me about yourself?**  
Do not go into a detailed autobiography. Mention a few things about you that relate to the job opening; education, training, work experiences that demonstrate what you can do for the employer. Mention some strengths/skills, as well as positive, personal traits.
- **What are your long-range goals?**  
Relate your answer to the employer and the position for which you are applying. A response that shows that you have given some thought to your future and indicates that the position for which you are applying fits in with your future plans will be best.
- **What have you gained from your summer jobs/extra-curricular activities?**  
Here is a chance to identify skills you have acquired that are needed in the position for which you are applying. Don’t simply list skills, but briefly give examples of how you developed and used the skills. Such things as leadership ability, organizational ability, problem-solving skills, ability to work with others, and communication skills are valuable to all employers.
- **What kind of work do you most enjoy? Dislike?**  
Focus on those aspects of the job for which you are applying that you would enjoy. If possible, give examples from previous experiences to show that you do enjoy that kind of work. In the case of dislikes,

be honest, but express a willingness to do what is required on the job. “I don’t enjoy routine paperwork, but I realize how important it can be. So, when I have to, I get it done thoroughly.”

- **What courses did you enjoy the most? Least?**

Pick one or two courses that you enjoyed. Discuss what you gained from them and relate that to the requirements of the job. In the case of dislikes, pick one or two courses that are not related to the position for which you have applied, mentioning that you did fine in the courses even though you did not find them interesting.

- **What are your strong points? Weak points?**

Describe strengths that relate to the position for which you have applied. Further emphasize your qualifications by giving a brief example to support your answer. As for weaknesses, try to focus on something you have improved or resolved early (*ie. impatience to execute a plan*). Also, something that can be considered both a weakness and a strength, depending on the degree of activity (*ie. determined to complete a deadline can be a strength or a weakness if obsessive and negatively impacts other projects*). If possible, mention what you did or currently doing to overcome the weakness. Do not leave the employer remembering the weakness, but your success in overcoming it.

- **Do you think your grades are a good indication of your ability?**

This can be tricky. Some employers are concerned about ‘grade inflation’. If your grades are good, it is probably best to say that they are representative. It would also be helpful to mention briefly what you have gained from your education. If your grades are low, focus on the most positive aspect (*e.g., that you did well in your major or during your last year or two*). Mention also what you have gained from your education and from other experiences (*working part-time, extra-curricular activities, etc.*).

- **It seems that your past experience (or your education) doesn’t relate to this position.**

This is the time for some assertiveness. Point out your transferable skills and how your experience/education fits with the employer’s needs. Indicate how the things you have done will enable you to make a contribution to the employer. Give examples to show the similarity between your past experience and the things you do on the job.

### **Other Frequently Asked Questions:**

- Why do you want to work for us?
- What are you looking for in a job?
- What skills do you have for this particular position?
- How would you describe your personality?
- What interests you most about the position? Least?
- How would you describe the essence of success?
- How would you describe a challenging job?
- What do you expect to be doing five years from now?
- Are you willing to relocate?
- What extra-curricular groups or activities have you enjoyed most and why?
- Why did you choose the particular field of study you have majored in?

Whenever possible, support your answers with examples from your experiences. Some interviewers will use situational questions:

- What would you do if a client came in with this kind of problem?
- How would you handle a customer who...?
- Tell me about a time when...?

### **Questions You May Want To Ask:**

- What resources are available for professional development?
- What career path does someone usually follow in this position?
- What is the organizational structure?
- How will I be evaluated?
- How much or what type of travel is required?
- Why is this position vacant?
- Benefits-usually not discussed in an interview, unless brought up first by the employer.

### **LETTER OF THANKS**

#### *Tips*

- Depending on the time frame, follow up with a letter, fax or phone call. It is also acceptable to send a quick email when appropriate. If faxing a letter, always mail the original. There is no excuse for not sending this letter. If you do not, it could easily cost you the job.
- Send within 24 hours!
- Type on plain stationery with matching envelope. Spell interviewer's name correctly!

#### *Format*

- Begin by mentioning the potential job, time, and date of the interview, and thank him/her for the meeting.
- Next, reaffirm your interest in the position. Restate your prime assets and accomplishments, relate an important problem or project to provide additional information about your expertise. Then use a second issue from the meeting to introduce relevant skills you may have overlooked during the interview.
- Conclude by saying that you are very interested in the opportunity and leave the door open to make further contact with the interviewer.

### **FOLLOW-UP**

- If the employer does not contact you within two weeks or by the agreed upon date, call and restate your interest, ask about a timetable, and if you can, provide them with any additional information.
- Job offers sometimes take a while. Candidates at various schools may be interviewed. Keep going; do not wait around!
- If you do not receive a job offer, turn it into a learning experience. Ask for suggestions for improvement or what you could do so that next time you might be a final candidate.

### **HELP??**

**Individual Counseling:** The staff in the Office of Career Services is available to answer questions about interviewing and to discuss your reactions to interviews. Stop by the Office or call (860) 465-4559 to make an appointment.

**Interview Workshops:** Check the schedule or stop by our Office.

**Mock Interviews:** Our staff is available to conduct 'mock' interviews to help prepare you for a 'real' interview. Inquire about this service by stopping by or calling our Office.



## THE TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

This is a preliminary conversation used by employers or recruiters for any of the following:

- To eliminate mismatches.
- To reduce the number of applicants.
- To provide an opportunity for fact finding.
- To allow them to “hear a voice”.
- To reduce expenses.

**Your Advantage:** You can have a script in front of you, along with any other reference material you need. You may feel more confident because you are in familiar surroundings.

**Your Disadvantage:** You do not see the interviewer and s/he doesn't see you.

### When an Employer Calls, Here's How to Answer Acing the Telephone Interview



#### Are You a Good Communicator?

The telephone became an interview tool in the early 1990s—and employers continue to screen job candidates this way because it costs less and it is less time consuming—phone interviews average 30 minutes versus an hour or more for a face-to-face interview.

A telephone interview can be like an open-book test. You may have the answers in front of you, but you need to know the material thoroughly to do well on the test—or in this case, the interview.

Employers hope to catch you unprepared, in order to see if you can think on your feet and if you have superior communication skills. So, if you are prepared for the call, you will ace the test.

#### Here are some tips to do ahead of time for a successful telephone interview.

1. Turn off distractions. Have your phone in a quiet room—away from radio, television, family, roommates or anything else that may make noise or take your attention away from your task.
2. Gather your tools by the phone.
  - *Resume*
  - *Pen and paper to jot the interviewer(s) name(s) and to take notes during the interview.*
  - *Company research (with relevant information highlighted).*

- *Questions to ask about the company and position.*
- *A loosely written outline of points to make or items to cover as you talk about the position.*
- *Comfort items: tissues, a glass of water.*

### **Do these things at interview time:**

1. If the employer sets up an appointment in advance, dress the part for the interview. Experts say if you are dressed in a professional manner, you will speak that way.
2. If an employer calls and wants to do the interview right away, rather than scheduling an appointment, excuse yourself politely and offer to call back in five minutes. This will give you time to make the psychological switch from whatever you are doing to your professional demeanor.
3. If you have call waiting, turn it off.
4. Sit in a straight back chair with your feet firmly planted on the ground. Your position affects the quality of your voice. If you are sitting in a relaxed position, you do not project the same readiness and intensity as you do when you sit more formally.
5. Talk only when necessary. Since you lack the visual cues of body language to assess whether you've said enough, mark the end of your response with a question, such as "Would you like more details of my experience as an intern with XYZ Company?"
6. Let the employer end the interview. Then you should say "Thank you for your time," and reiterate your interest in the position.

If you perform well on the telephone, you'll probably be invited to interview with a hiring manager on site.

## **BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEWING**

### **What exactly is behavioral interviewing?**

Behavioral interviewing is a new style of interviewing that more and more employers are using in their hiring process. The basic premise behind behavioral interviewing is this: *The most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar situation.* It provides a more objective set of facts to make employment decisions than other interviewing methods. Traditional interview questions ask you general questions such as "Tell me about yourself." The process of behavioral interviewing is much more probing and works very differently.

### **Important Points about Behavioral Interviewing:**

- Employers predetermine which skills are necessary for the job for which they are looking, and then ask very pointed questions to determine if the candidate possesses those skills. To assess which skills the employer is seeking, talk with alumni, read the company literature carefully, and listen closely during the employer's information session.
- In the interview, your response needs to be specific and detailed. Tell them about a particular situation that relates to the question, not a general one. Explain briefly the situation, what you did specifically, and the positive result or outcome. Frame it in a three-step process: 1. situation, 2. action, 3. result/outcome.

- The candidate tells a story for a few minutes; typically the interviewer will pick apart the story to try to get at the specific behavior(s). The interviewer can probe further for more depth or detail such as “What were you thinking at the point?” or “Tell me more about your meeting with the person,” or “Lead me through your decision process.”
- Always listen carefully to the question, ask for clarification if necessary, and make sure you answer the question completely.
- Your interview preparation should include identifying examples of situations where you have demonstrated the behaviors previously for a former employer, at school or in some other situation.
- Your resume will serve as a good guide when answering these questions. Refresh your memory regarding your achievements in the past couple of years. Demonstration of the desired behaviors may be proven in many ways. Use examples from past internships, classes, activities, team involvement, community service and work experience. In addition, you may use examples of which you may be especially proud such as running for student body president, exhibiting paintings in an art show, climbing half of the high peaks in the Adirondacks, running a marathon, biking across country, etc.

## SAMPLE BEHAVIORIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**These are often difficult questions to answer on the spot. Use this sheet to jot down examples of stories in your past that you would use to answer these questions. Careful preparation is the key to an effective behavioral interview. Scheduling an appointment for a mock interview is an excellent way to practice.**

- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- Describe an instance when you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Convince me that you can adapt to a wide variety of people, situations and environments by providing examples.
- Describe a time on any job that you held in which you were faced with problems or stresses that tested your coping skills.
- Give an example of time in which you had to use your written communication skills in order to get an important point across.
- Give me a specific occasion in which you conformed to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Give me an example of an important goal that you had set in the past and tell me about your success in reaching it.
- Describe the most significant or creative presentation that you have had to complete.
- Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
- Give me an example of a time when you were able to successfully communicate with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).



## **SOME FINAL THOUGHTS**

- Use proper grammar; avoid constant use of verbal slips such as “you know”, “right”, and “yeah”.
- Do not apologize for shortcomings and avoid negative comments that downgrade your abilities. Negative information is weighed more heavily than positive.
- Pay attention! Maintain reasonable eye contact; do not look out the window, up at the ceiling, down at the floor.
- Don’t answer questions with just a “yes” or “no”. Use relevant examples.
- Concentrate on an ‘at ease’ position. This sense of self-confidence is gained by knowing what the employer does. Be prepared!
- Be responsive.
- Listen carefully; use paraphrasing to clarify and confirm interviewer’s statements.
- Don’t interrupt.
- Be honest; a routine check is a near certainty.
- Do not criticize present or former employers, schools, or faculty.
- Salary questions? Turn these back to the interviewer, especially if it is on an entry-level position. Don’t bring up the salary yourself unless you are being offered the job.
- Don’t get too comfortable.

**THANK YOU LETTER**  
*(After employment interview)*

**Emily Smith**

22 Elm Street, Hanover, CT 13502  
(203) 297-4398    esmith@usa.com

September 10, 1999

Ms. Carolyn Plourde  
Director of Personnel  
ABC Corporation  
One Industry Plaza  
Cromwell, CT 13502

Dear Ms. Plourde:

Thank you for the opportunity to interview for the Engineering Management position yesterday at Thayer Engineering Corp. I enjoyed meeting you, and learning more about your corporate organization. Your organization's future plans appear to be heading in a direction that parallels my interest and career goals.

As we discussed, I feel that my education and background have provided me with an understanding of business operation that will prove to be an asset to your company. My prior experience as an intern in an engineering consulting firm, plus my training in engineering design would enable me to progress steadily through your training program, and become a productive member of your Design and Implementation team. Additionally, I have always been considered a hard worker and a dependable, loyal employee. I am confident that I can make a valuable contribution to your company.

Again, thank you for your consideration. If you require any additional information from me, please feel free to call at (203) 297-4398. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Emily Smith

*\*Use your own words when composing your letter rather than just copying the above.*

**THANK YOU LETTER**  
*(After an Informational Interview)*

**Emily Smith**  
22 Elm Street, Hanover, CT 13502  
(203) 297-4398    esmith@usa.com

September 1, 1999

Mr. Ronald Dawson  
Assistant Manager  
Bentley Enterprises  
34 State Street  
Wallingford, CT 06785

Dear Mr. Dawson:

Ellen Keating was right when she said you would be most helpful in advising me on a career in Biomedical Engineering.

I appreciate you taking time from your busy schedule to meet with me. Your advice was most helpful and I have incorporated your suggestions into my resume. I will send you a copy next week.

Again, thanks so much for your assistance. As you suggested, I will contact Ms. Carolyn Plourde next week in regards to a possible opening in her company.

Sincerely,

Emily Smith

*\*Use your own words when composing your letter rather than just copying the above.*

