



INTERVIEWING SKILLS

Interview Objectives

An interview is a formal meeting of two (or more) individuals to discuss employment. There is no set recipe for a successful interview, but the objectives are:

1. To elaborate resume information
2. To supply info **not** on your resume (personality, communication skills, general “fit”)
3. To enable you to gain additional information about the employer

Types of Interviews

Screening: This is a general interview aimed at weeding out those who do not meet the requirements or who do not fit with the organizational culture. Common places where screening interviews are held include on-site interviews and career fairs. The purpose of a screening interview is to eliminate unqualified candidates.

Selection: A selection interview is a longer, more thorough interview geared toward identifying more qualified candidates. It ranges from a one hour interview to an entire day, incorporating several people or offices. It might even include a dinner the evening before. Most likely this type of interview is held on site, including a tour of the facility.

Behavioral Based Interviewing

Behavioral based interviewers believe past behavior is an accurate predictor of future behavior. They concentrate many of their questions on situations candidates have encountered in the past. What they want to hear is an illustration of your behavior. Typical questions focus on understanding a specific situation or challenge you faced that will demonstrate a particular quality or skill relevant to the position. To maximize the effectiveness of your answers try using the STAR system.

S = situation

T = task

A = action

R = results



In the Days Before the Interview

Define your Criteria

Clearly define your goals before the interview. What can you not live without in this position? What is important to you in a career?

Some things to consider may include any of the following:

- Location (city, suburb, region of country)
- Distance from family
- Salary vs. cost-of-living (salary.com)
- Culture of organization
- Travel required
- Opportunity for advancement
- Benefits (health insurance, vacation, training program, sick days, retirement plan)
- Fit with co-workers
- Fit with direct supervisor
- Office environment (casual, business)
- Relocation possibilities

Link Your Skills to the Skills They Seek

Employers want to see that you possess the skills necessary to successfully perform the job for which they are hiring. An interview is an ideal time to link your experience and skills with the skills listed on the job description. It will be important for you to make this linkage for them – show them how your experiences, skills, and education match what they need in a specific position.

Know the Organization

Research the company, the industry, and the competition. Most company information can be found using the Internet. You may also call the company directly and request some company literature be sent to you. When conducting your research focus on locating the following information.

- The function and size of the organization
- The potential for expansion or growth
- The products or services provided
- Typical salary ranges for your desired position
- Geographical locations
- Mission/vision statement
- Career advancement possibilities
- Opportunities for training or further education
- Stability of the financial condition or backing

Practice, Practice, Practice

1. Begin by preparing your 60-second personal statement: Your answer to the, "Tell me about yourself," question (see page 4 for examples).
2. Write out at least five success stories using the STAR model to answer behavioral interview questions ("Tell me about a time when..." or "Give me an example of a time...").
3. Practice verbally processing through answers to potential questions.
4. Make an appointment with a Mount Mary Career Counselor to practice a mock interview.



Before You Go to the Interview

What to Wear

You only get one chance to make a first impression. As a result, employers assume this is the best you will ever look. Therefore, it is important to project a professional image. Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.

Do's & Don'ts

Do wear	Don't wear
A conservative suit (navy, gray, black). Pants suits are acceptable with many companies. Check out the office culture to find out for sure. When in doubt, wear a skirt suit.	Casual clothing (denim, casual twill, knit t-shirts, skirts without pantyhose/tights)
Clothing that fits your body correctly. Clothing is too tight when it is pulling horizontally across your body or has gaping buttons. Clothing is too big when tops are falling off the shoulders or pins are used to hold waist bands	Do not wear something that is distracting. Do not show too much skin. No plunging necklines, low-rise pants, miniskirts, belly shirts, see-through shirts, shorts, or anything too tight.
Polished shoes with matching belt (if appropriate).	Flashy, trendy, chunky shoes or accessories nor open-toed shoes or sandals. Shoes that are not polished or are in need of repair
Neat, pressed, clean clothing without tears, rips, hanging threads or pills. All buttons, snaps, or hooks should be on the garment and hems sewn in place	Anything wrinkled, has holes, or missing a button.
Accessories (necklaces, earrings, and bracelets) should be kept to a minimum and relate to the fashion trends of the season. Wear only one ring per hand.	Large accessories around the head and neck, large hair bows, large drop/hoop earrings, or three or more earrings per ear

Hygiene

- Always have fresh breath and clean body hygiene. This may seem obvious but take a shower, use deodorant, and brush your teeth.
- Wear perfume, cologne, or aftershave that is subtle as some people may be allergic. Your scent should leave the room when you do.
- Have clean, short nails without ragged edges. Women should have unpolished nails or use clear polish or a neutral tone.
- Take out any body piercings. They can be put back in when you are not interviewing or at work.

Makeup

- Makeup should be neat and refined. Color application should be subtle and blended (less is more). Avoid too bright or frosted colors.
- Makeup colors should compliment skin tone.



Items to bring with you to the interview:

- Several copies of your resume on quality paper.
- A copy of your references.
- A pad of paper on which to take notes (notes are optional). To look even more professional, invest in a leather portfolio. Keep your questions, paper for notes, and a nice pen inside.
- Directions to the interview site and a phone number of the interviewer (in case you need to call).

Upon Arrival

- Arrive early — enter the building 10 minutes before your appointment (arrive earlier if desired, but avoid entering the building too early).
- Announce yourself to the receptionist in a professional manner and treat the receptionist with respect. If s/he is not formally part of the search committee, you can bet s/he is informally.
- Smile and greet everyone with a firm handshake.
- Make eye contact and use names when introduced.
- Review your prepared stories and answers.
- Go to the restroom and check your appearance one last time.

During the Interview

- Try to focus on the points you prepared without sounding rehearsed or stiff.
- Be yourself and focus on positive qualities.
- Back up every answer with examples.
- If you talk quickly, count to 3 before answering questions right away. Take a couple of seconds to think about what you are going to say so your response is accurate and appropriate.
- Relax and enjoy the conversation. Learn what you can about the company.
- Ask questions and listen; read between the lines.
- At the conclusion, thank the interviewer and determine the next steps.
- Ask for the interviewer's business card so you can send a follow-up letter.

After the Interview

- As soon as possible write down your thoughts and feelings regarding the interview.
- Later in the day look at what you wrote and assess how you did.
- Write a follow-up thank you letter, reminding the interviewer of your qualities- maybe something you forgot to say in the interview. Send it within 24 hrs.



Common Interview Questions

*** Indicates a STAR behavioral question*

Introduction

- **Tell me about yourself. / How would you describe yourself?**

Translated, "Tell me about yourself" in a job interview means "give me an overview of who you are, professionally speaking." There is a reason this is asked at the very beginning of an interview; it is a way of saying, "Give me some broad background before we dive into specifics." Focus on what most interests the interviewer, highlight your most important accomplishments (tell a memorable story), and stick to a one minute answer.

A good format to use is as follows:

- Introduce yourself
- Tell what your current status is (i.e. last job title or student status)
- Describe what you do at work (or school)
- Describe one or two things you have accomplished or excel at that directly relate to the position
- Mention why you decided to apply for this position

Example: I'm Kelly Smith (1), and I've been a store manager for seven years (2). I'm especially skilled with managing budgets and meeting deadlines (3), and I was previously the supervisor for the store's shoe department (4). I'd like to move more toward that industry, so I am applying to be a store manager at your business (5).

Example: "I've always been a news junkie and I spent my last two years in school preparing myself to work in communications when I graduated. I looked for internships and extracurricular opportunities that would expose me to media relations, and I'm excited to continue on that path. I've been told that I'm particularly good at coming up with creative story angles, and I love pitching those stories, but I really want to learn every aspect of this business from the ground up. I'd like to work in-house rather than in an agency, and I'm especially interested in political work, so I'm particularly excited about this opportunity."



Education

- **How and why did you select Mount Mary University?**

The important section of this question is in the word 'how'. The manner in which you make large decisions is vital information for an interviewer, who believes you probably will be quite consistent in your decision-making mode.

- **What led you to this major and what courses did you like most/least?**

Let the love of your favorite subject matter show. If your major or classes you enjoyed the most do not seem to have a direct connection to the position concentrate on the skills these classes developed. If the main reason you did not like the coursework was because of the professor the interviewer will wonder about your ability to be productive in the occasional difficult work situations common to any professional position.

- **How has your education prepared you for this job? In which respects are you best prepared or most knowledgeable?**

Your education has given you much. Be prepared to discuss three areas – theory/facts via coursework, hands-on experience (labs, internships, projects, co-ops) and the total experience of a Mount Mary University education (include your major, the core curriculum and your volunteer activities).

- **What is your GPA and how does it reflect your academic abilities?**

All employers wonder if you are mature, if you will be a hard worker, or if you will prefer to do the minimum. This question is a test of those qualities. What is your maturity level? How would you describe your work ethic? If your GPA is low be prepared to talk about it. Hopefully, it will have been rising each semester and will be highest in your major.

Skills/Achievements

- **Why should I hire you?**

This is where you should really sell yourself. Highlight areas from your background that relate to the company's needs. Recap the interviewer's description of the job, matching it with your skills.

- **What are your skills or strengths?**

Share a short list of 3-5 transferable skills critical to performing this position well. A good way to assess which skills are most important is to study the job description and the ad. Usually the responsibilities are listed in order of importance and require specific skills to perform them well. Then, design at least one story in STAR format (situation, task, action, result) to illustrate this strength. Isolate high points in your background. Always back your answers with specific examples. Your biggest mistake here is to sell yourself short!

- **How do you think a friend or professor who knows you well would describe you?**

Of course, be honest. Think about any compliments you have gotten on projects or activities. Do not just tell characteristics, but include examples of why friends or professors would describe you that way.



- **In what areas do you need to improve / What do you consider your biggest weakness?**

Everyone has weaknesses, but a careless answer can virtually end your consideration as a candidate, so prepare this answer thoughtfully before you arrive. The interviewer is trying to find out 1) if you are aware of your weaknesses, 2) if you have thought about how you might improve, and 3) if your weak points are going to jeopardize how you perform. There are three ways to approach this question. If there is a minor part of the job about which you lack knowledge, but will gain it quickly, use that. Be careful using this one. Put the weakness in the past. You had it once, but now you are over it. Design the answer so that your weakness is ultimately a positive.

- **What accomplishment has given you the greatest satisfaction?***

This question will help employers gain a sense of what accomplishments you have achieved and how you are motivated. Employers may also be looking to find out if the position they may hire you for will provide you with similar opportunities to feel fulfilled.

- **What is the toughest challenge you have faced? Why?***

In your story include the skills, traits, and knowledge that aided in this achievement. Use the STAR system and be certain to end with positive results. Make sure you are proud of something you accomplished rather than being proud of someone or something else of which you had no contribution.

- **As we make our decision about your fit for this position, what do you want us to remember about you?**

This is a typical wrap-up question at the end of an interview. Always be ready to give a summary of your qualifications in 2-3 sentences. This could be your skills, personal traits, work ethic, or passion for the career. Make the answer short and spirited.

- **How do you work under pressure?***

Give an example of a time when you felt you were working under pressure. Talk about how you successfully dealt with the pressure.



Work Experience/Environment

- **Tell me about the position that has given you the most satisfaction.****

Talk about the most career-related position you can. If you really loved organizing the last homecoming as a student leader, talk about the experience and skills you used, relating it to your current field. If you loved planting flowers for your grandmother and you are seeking an accounting position, the employer may wonder why you are not pursuing a career as a green thumb.

- **How have your extracurricular activities provided experience applicable to the workplace?***

All of your life experiences are connected in some way. What skills, traits, and work habits have you utilized and strengthened? Ideas for illustrations: positions of leadership, being an active responsible member, adding quality, or designing new programs.

- **Tell me about your favorite supervisor – your least favorite supervisor. / Describe what you think would be an ideal relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate / What qualities does a successful manager possess?**

In order to assign you to an appropriate manager or section of the company for a second interview, the interviewer needs to know how you want to be supervised. S/he also wants to know what management styles displease you. This is a time for being able to succinctly describe the qualities and attitudes you would desire in a supervisor. This is not a time for character assassination. Think about why you would want a supervisor to be supportive or hands-off or a mentor or give autonomy, etc. Be realistic in thinking about whether or not your potential supervisor is asking the question and what his or her style seems to be now. This is a good question to ask of him or her, too.

- **Tell me about a time...**

When you had a major problem and explain how you dealt with it. / When you made a poor decision and how you corrected it. / When you had to adapt to a difficult work situation. / When you worked with someone you disliked and how you handled the situation.**

Describe these events as non-judgmentally as possible. Explain difficult situations using facts (not emotions) and be as succinct as possible. Discuss the event in a professional manner and even though the result may not have been ideal, remember to also share what you learned. Possible examples: differences in work habits, work values, or ethical attitudes.

- **In what type of work environment are you most comfortable?**

Employers are assessing for "fit" in this question. Answer with environments types you thrive in (making sure you know yourself to sell yourself).



- **Will you be willing to relocate? Do you have a geographical preference or limitation? How much are you willing to travel?**

Tell the truth. State amount of travel in terms of annual percentage. If you are willing to relocate, know what locations the company presently has and refer to them. You may need to ask questions about what type, how much, and to where you would be relocating or traveling. Be as flexible as you can. Remember, though, if you are not willing to do this, do not accept the position if offered. A bad “fit” is the number one reason for leaving a position.

Traits/Values/Beliefs

- **What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?**

Is it financial reward, work environment, the supervisor, helping others, variety, challenge, etc.? Employers want to assess this area because they know what factors they can and cannot provide.

- **How do you determine and evaluate success?**

Do you have standards? What are they? What does quality mean to you? How will you know whether or not you are successful? How much do you depend on other people’s feedback?

- **What are your salary expectations?**

Until you are offered a position, this question should not be answered. Right now you are searching for a position and a company that are a good match. If you share your ideas, and your expectations are significantly different than theirs (whether low or high), you may no longer be a candidate. If you both come to the conclusion that this could be an excellent situation, then you must be ready to discuss this subject. Before your first interview, conduct research on salaries in the industry, in this type of position, and in the geographical area. What is fair for you in terms of a total package? What do you need versus what might you desire? Remember to assess benefits as well as the salary.

- **What two or three things are most important to you in your work?**

Be honest here, but also be professional and career-oriented. Talk in terms of values such as: helping others, interacting with many different people, making tough decisions, having a variety of responsibilities, having the opportunity for advancement, being recognized for your contributions, making a difference in peoples’ lives, etc. Stay away from those more egocentric reasons such as pays well, great vacation and benefits package, fun social atmosphere, easy commute, cool uniform.



Career Plans and Goals

- **Why did you choose this particular career field?**

This is where you want to help the employer understand *why* you are a good fit for this field. The reason you chose the field can reflect how your interests, skills, and values match the position.

- **What are your long and short-term career goals and objectives?**

These questions are designed to find out 1) if you set goals, 2) if your goals are related to your profession or industry, and 3) if you have goals of pursuing excellence. People want to hire someone who is self-motivated, who wants to improve, and who has taken the time to establish a vision beyond today. An exact career goal is not necessary nor is a plan that stretches far into the future.

- **How do you balance the needs of work and school with your personal life?**

This is a time to discuss what balance means to you and how you achieve it. Employers are concerned about your physical, mental, and emotional health because they believe a well-balanced employee will be productive. You may wish to talk about a few of your activities you believe promote your well-being. Personal relationships are not of interest to the employer.

Specific to Organization

- **Why are you seeking a position with our company?**

Tell the employer why you want to work for *them* specifically. Share what you know about them. This is the time bring in the mission or vision of the organization and to brag about the organization you want to work for – everyone loves a little flattery!

- **Tell me what you know about our organization.**

This is a test! It is assumed that, as a college student, you have the abilities to learn and research. Now this company wants to know if you were motivated enough to utilize these skills in learning about them. Know the company's mission, its competencies, and goals so you can relate honestly to the issues they believe are important. This question is one of the most important ones interviewers ask. Interviewers want to know if you care about this company and what it does.