

# CAREER CENTER

## Interviewing Guide



CAREER CENTER

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Westfield  
STATE UNIVERSITY

# THE ART OF INTERVIEWING

The interview is a chance for applicants and employers to mutually evaluate the fit between the applicant's qualifications and the position being considered.

Because interviewing can be a nerve-wracking process, the Career Center encourages you to learn as much as possible about interviewing do's and don'ts so that when faced with the question, "Would you like to join us for a job interview?" you will be excited for the opportunity.

## Interview Types

**Screening Interviews** – The screening interview is generally used to determine whether or not you are qualified for the position and to develop a first impression. This type is typically short (20-30 minutes) and can be completed via phone or on-site. Selected candidates are then offered an opportunity to move on to the next stage of interviewing at a later date.

**Skype/Phone Interviews** – Employers generally use a phone interview when it is not convenient or possible to meet in person. Employers might also use Skype in lieu of a traditional phone interview, so be prepared to secure access to a computer with a camera function and familiarize yourself with the program. Remember to find a quiet place (without the possibility of interruptions), smile (even though it won't be seen via phone – it helps to change your tone) and dress professionally (especially if using Skype).

**On-Site Interviews** – These interviews are typically longer and more comprehensive in nature, taking place inside the workplace. On-site interviews may be facilitated by just one interviewer, but often include a series of one-on-one meetings with small or large groups of people. On-site interviews might include a meal, tour of the workplace, assessments and more. Remember, it's certainly appropriate to ask for an agenda in advance to best prepare for an on-site interview.

**Interview with a Meal** – These interviews are set up in a way so that the candidate and interviewer(s) sit down for a meal together while conducting the interview. There is a lot of etiquette to be mindful of when dining with a possible employer so it important to be mindful and to remain professional.

## Preparing for an Interview

**Do your homework on the ORGANIZATION** – This is often overlooked but recruiters consider research as the key to interviewing success. Find out as much as you can about the organization including the history, mission and values, and current happenings (i.e. new products or services). What makes this organization different from its competitors? Why are you interested in working for this organization versus another employer? At a minimum, visit the organization's website, review recruiting materials, and even consult local periodicals and newspapers. To go the extra mile, try connecting with a current or past employee at the organization through your network or LinkedIn.

**Do homework on YOURSELF and the POSITION** – Review your own history thoroughly. What are the top three to five skills or experiences you can offer this particular employer? Prepare examples of these skills/experiences so that you can effectively communicate them during an interview. Revisit the job posting – what are the main responsibilities of this position and how can you convey your ability to complete those tasks successfully? Ask yourself: Why do you want this particular job over any other position?

**Practice the ROUTE** – To ensure you will arrive with ample time prior to the interview, practice the route you will take in advance. Research the parking situation so that you not only know where to park, but are prepared for potential costs and the time it will take to find the interview location from the parking lot. You cannot be late for an interview! Arriving to the interview 10-15 minutes early is strongly suggested.

# DRESS FOR SUCCESS

*Should* your clothes and appearance be a consideration for whether you can perform the duties of a job? No.

*Will* your clothes and appearance be considered in evaluating you for a particular job? YES!

It's all part of the process. Your primary goal in dressing for an interview is to feel good about the way you look while projecting an image that matches the requirements of the position and company, or even a step above that.

## Guidelines for Professional Dress

### **Suits:**

Conservative and tailored fit business suit, pantsuit, or skirt of length no shorter than the knee  
Choose neutral colors such as black, navy, gray or brown-muted pinstripes are also acceptable

### **Ties:**

Conservative stripes or paisleys that complement your suit; silk or good quality blends preferred

### **Shirts:**

Simple style white, soft or classic colors  
Good quality button down, collared shirt or blouse  
Overly detailed or low cut shirts should be avoided  
Be sure it is clean and ironed

### **Shoes:**

Highly polished pumps or low-medium heels in a neutral color-no open toed shoes. Lightly polished flats or laced dress shoes.

If wearing a dark colored suit, brown or black shoes would be best

### **Stockings and Socks:**

Sheer hosiery if wearing a skirt-avoid lace and patterns  
Choose dress socks that match your suit

### **Jewelry & Tattoos:**

Keep it simple and minimize – a watch is often helpful during an interview  
Keep in mind body piercings body piercings and tattoos may not be viewed positively by most employers

### **Perfume and Cologne:**

Use sparingly if at all.



# TIPS FOR INTERVIEW SUCCESS

## Interview Checklist

- ✓ Prepare questions to ask the interviewer (at least 3-5). You can type or handwrite these out ahead of time and reference your questions at an appropriate time during the interview (typically at the end). Do not ask questions you can find on the organization's website.
- ✓ Arrive early (preferably 10-15 minutes).
- ✓ Bring extra resumes in a neutral, professional folder or portfolio, professional pen, and a list of references. Do not bring over-sized bags. Also, be sure to turn off your cell phone or simply do not bring it with you.
- ✓ Be personable from the moment you arrive in the parking lot. Greet the receptionist, staff, and interviewer with a smile.
- ✓ Prior to your interview, review your resume and rehearse key points you want to communicate. Be sure to mention qualifications that fit the job requirements.
- ✓ Offer a solid handshake whenever you get the chance (upon arrival and departure). Show enthusiasm and interest.
- ✓ Do not sit down before the interviewer. Wait to be shown where to sit or to be asked to be seated. Sit up straight with upright, yet relaxed posture.
- ✓ Make good eye contact with everyone at the interview, regardless of who is talking at the moment. Do not fidget with pens, paper, or your hands. Try to keep hands still or folded in your lap.
- ✓ Speak slowly and clearly and don't be afraid to pause a moment to collect your thoughts. Silence is better than filling the time with "um's" and "uh's".
- ✓ Do not criticize previous employers, supervisors, professors, etc. When explaining your reasons for leaving a past job, communicate your rationale professionally and as positively as possible.
- ✓ Be honest. Don't try to cover up mistakes. Instead, focus on what you learned from them and convey the strategies you now utilize to avoid future mistakes.
- ✓ If you don't understand a question - or need a moment to think about it - say so. Never pretend to know something or someone when you don't.
- ✓ Do not inquire about salary or benefits until you have been formally offered the job.
- ✓ Before you leave the interview, be sure to ask, "When should I expect to hear from you?" This shows your interest in continuing in the process and provides insight into how you can best follow up after the interview.
- ✓ Remember and pronounce the interviewer's name correctly. Also, don't be afraid to correct an interviewer if they say your name incorrectly.
- ✓ Ask the interviewer for a business card and send a thank-you note or email within 24 hours of your interview.

# INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## Common Questions Interviewers May Ask You & Example Responses

### 1. Tell me about yourself.

Keep response related to the job you are applying for. You may include educational experience, interests, goals, recent activities, etc. Another approach is to give 3 examples of traits that describe you best.

- *Example:* I am a hardworking, creative, and organized individual who likes to work with children. I graduate from Westfield State University in May with a bachelor's degree in psychology and have been an elementary tutor and camp counselor for the past two years. I hope to bring my passion for encouraging children to achieve their potential to the \_\_\_\_\_ position at \_\_\_\_\_ organization.

### 2. Why are you the best person for the job?

Focus on how you fit with the description of the position. What skills/experience can you bring to this role? What sets you apart from other similarly qualified candidates?

- *Example:* Your description indicated that you are looking for a person with \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. My experience working with \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ skills would be a valuable addition to your team.

### 3. How has your educational training prepared you for this job?

Explain how coursework, internships, volunteer experience, projects, or workshops have contributed to your learning and have helped you gain skills for the job. Give concrete examples.

- *Example:* My courses in childhood development gave me insight into the developmental stages of elementary aged children. I also worked on a project with my peers honing my ability to assess students' needs. By working at a youth camp this past summer, I gained hands-on experience with children as well as parents to facilitate learning outside of the classroom.

### 4. Discuss your work experience.

Focus on jobs that are related to the job you are applying for, but you may consider mentioning skills that you acquired from unrelated employment. Be sure to give examples of accomplishments and skills you have learned from your work experience and clearly demonstrate how you will bring these to a new position.

### 5. In what work environment are you most productive?

Explain what work environments you have had experience in. Then, explain what your ideal working setting would be, and connect it to the typical environment of this particular position.

- *Example:* My ideal working environment would be one where I could utilize my \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ skills.

### 6. Name 3 adjectives or descriptors that best describe you.

Be honest and give examples to back up the 3 descriptors.

- *Example:* I am hardworking, creative, and intelligent. I have pursued my degree while working 25 hours a week, achieved a GPA of 3.6 and accomplished assignments that have been creative and unique at both work and school. An example of my most creative project is \_\_\_\_\_.

### 7. Why do you want this job?

Discuss the position, how you are qualified for it and express a genuine interest in the job/company.

- *Example:* After reading the job description, I immediately grew interested in the challenge, opportunity to contribute to the organization's goals in \_\_\_\_\_, and felt confident in my ability to carry out the responsibilities successfully.

## Common Questions Interviewers May Ask You & Example Responses – CONT'D

### **8. What are you looking for in a position?**

Share how you would like to contribute your skills. Discuss how you wish to service the clientele you will be working with (if applicable). You may mention you would like to gain experience and the opportunity to grow in the field. Additionally, a good reason to want a certain position is to gain a sense of purpose or fulfillment.

### **9. What is your biggest strength and weakness?**

Provide a strength you know the employer is looking for and give a supportive example of how you have demonstrated this strength in the past. Do not share a weakness that deals with your personal life. Avoid using a weakness that is a requirement of the position. Give examples as to how you are improving your “weakness”.

- *Example:* Some of my strengths include that I communicate well with others, pay high attention to detail and problem solve well. (Provide an example of this) Something that does not come as naturally to me is public speaking. To improve in this area, I have taken classes to improve my skills and confidence when presenting to others.

### **10. How would your co-workers describe you?**

Give specific characteristics and examples. Include personality traits that fit with the job description.

- *Example:* Co-workers would say that I work well under pressure and keep a level-head in times of crisis. I also have a friendly nature and set people at ease.

### **11. What are your greatest achievements?**

Keep answers relative to job and even consider including one personal achievement, showing you have life goals/accomplishments aside from work. Be sure to include why this is an accomplishment for you.

- *Example:* One of my biggest achievements was graduating from college with high honors. As the first person in my family to earn a college education, I’m serving as a role model to my younger siblings and example that you can achieve anything you set your mind to.

### **12. What do you know about our organization and how do you see yourself fitting in?**

Do your research and demonstrate it here. (If you cannot answer this question, you have not properly prepared for the interview). Discuss positive things you’ve learned about the company that you’re especially interested in or areas in which you could add value.

- *Example:* Your website seems to emphasize \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. My values and strengths in \_\_\_\_\_ align well with \_\_\_\_\_.

### **13. What are your short and long term goals?**

This is a good opportunity to demonstrate how this position aligns with your short term career goals. Demonstrate your knowledge of potential long term career paths in the field, and describe your interest in continually strengthening your skills and ensuring your occupation allows for growth.

- *Example:* I hope to expand my skill set and contribute to the field of\_\_\_\_\_.
- *Example:* I hope to always be in a position in which the job responsibilities best match my skills and experience as I move forward in the field.

### **14. What are your salary requirements?**

Stay away from mentioning exact figures.

- *Example:* My salary requirements are negotiable based on the overall compensation package.
- *Example:* I’m hoping you will consider my experience and skills I would bring to this position and compensate me accordingly.

# BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The premise behind behavioral interview questions is that past performance will predict future behavior. With this in mind, it is important that you anticipate questions that will ask you to provide concrete examples of times when you demonstrated a skill or behavior. Ideally, the examples you provide will convince the interviewer that you have the skills, experiences and behaviors that are a match for the position and the culture of the organization.

## Sample Behavioral Questions

- Tell me about a time when you went above-and-beyond the call of duty in your position.
- Describe an example of a time you had to meet a quick deadline.
- How do you deal with conflict?
- How do you manage stress?
- Tell me about a time when you failed.
- Describe a difficult problem you have encountered. How did you identify the problem and how did you go about trying to solve it?
- How do you respond to criticism?
- Tell me about a time when you experienced a significant accomplishment.

## Questions about Negative Experiences

Employers will ask difficult questions in an interview to see how an interviewee will handle it. Some questions however are specifically targeted to bring about a negative response.

### Examples:

- What are your three biggest weaknesses?
- Tell me about a mistake you made in your work and how you handled it.
- Can you tell me about a time where worked with an individual who you did not like/did not like you?
- What was one thing you really did not like about your last employer?

### Answering Questions about Negative Experiences:

The best way to answer questions like these is to be honest. However, instead of following the negative tone of the question, attempt to make your answer more positive. Use this as a way to illustrate some of your skills such as use of communication to resolve an issue, the ability to work as a team to meet a deadline or your problem solving skills to dissolve a conflict.

### **Top Qualities Valued by Employers**

1. Leadership
2. Teamwork
3. Communication Skills
4. Problem-Solving Skills
5. Strong Work Ethic
6. Initiative
7. Analytical/Quantitative Skills
8. Flexibility/Adaptability
9. Technical/Computer Skills
10. Attention to Detail

# QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR INTERVIEWER

Don't forget to develop a list of (at least three to five) questions to ask during your interview! This is a great way to show an employer your sincere interest in the position and company, ways you can fit into their success, as well as demonstrate your level of interview preparedness.

Research the company and position in detail and determine anything that you might wish to have clarified. Do NOT ask anything that can be found on their website and do NOT bring up salary or benefits.

- As an intern, what kind of projects will I receive?
- What characteristics best describe individuals who are successful in this position?
- Where could a person advance who is successful in this position? Within what time frame?
- In what ways has this organization been most successful over the past several years?
- What do you consider to be the organization's weakness as compared to its competition?
- How is this position important to the organization?
- How would you describe the culture of your organization?
- What is your management style?
- What are you most proud of within your organization?
- What have you enjoyed most about working here?
- What are the department's short term and long term goals?
- If I work hard and prove my value to the company, where might I find myself in five years?
- What professional development opportunities are available for employees at this company?
- What are the key business reasons driving the need for this position?
- What were the best things about the last person who held this position (or why was this position created?)
- Describe the three top challenges that I might face in this job.
- What has to happen for you to know you've hired the best person?
- What are the key deliverables and outcomes that this position must achieve?
- What would you expect me to accomplish in the first 60 days if hired for this position?
- Describe the top three initiatives for your company/department and how this position links to these initiatives.
- What are a few things that really drive results for the company?
- What are ways in which I can contribute to the company beyond the job description?
- What are the key metrics for measuring success in this position?
- How can I best help you and your team succeed?
- When should I expect to hear from you?



# CHALLENGING INTERVIEW SITUATIONS

## Addressing Job Loss in an Interview

If you've been fired, laid off, or abruptly left a job in the past, you might be wondering how to address a job change in an interview setting. Here are a few tips to consider:

- **Work through your feelings of loss** so you can change your attitude, move on and prepare to confidently talk about the experience.
- **Write out how you would describe the situation** to an interviewer and ask for feedback from others.
- **Check with your references.** You want to be in sync with what your former employer will say.
- **Don't lie.** Before you know it, you'll be in over your head.
- **Don't bring it up** unless the employer prompts you.
- **Always end on a positive note** in an interview (i.e., "Going forward, I have..." or "Since then, I now...").

## Handling Legal/Illegal Interview Questions

It's important to recognize legal vs. illegal questions in an interview setting. All questions asked by an employer should relate to the candidate's ability to perform the job at hand. Any question that refers to your age, religion, ethnicity, or personal status is not required to be answered.

### **LEGAL:**

Are you over the age of 18?

Do you speak/read/write languages other than English?

Are you able to perform the duties of this position?

### **ILLEGAL:**

How old are you?

What is your marital status?

What is your native language?

Were your parents immigrants?

Do you have a religious affiliation?

Do you have any health problems?

Tell me about your family.

A good way to respond to illegal interview questions you wish to not answer is to directly question its relevancy.

*Ex: "I am unsure how this information relates to this job. Would you mind explaining this a bit more?"*

## The Interview Question that Stumps You

Even after extensive research and interview preparation, you might be asked a question in which you do not know the answer. Do not panic! Simply respond with what you do know (rather than making something up) or use the following example reply,

"I'm not currently familiar with \_\_\_\_\_ but I understand its importance to this position/company. If hired, \_\_\_\_\_ would be the first thing I research to bring myself up to speed quickly".

# THANK YOU LETTERS

It is good practice to send thank you notes to those who give you their time, either in person or over the phone.

Always write thank-you notes within 24 hours. Sending an email thank you note is advisable—especially if the hiring manager is set to make a fast decision – though following-up with a handwritten note demonstrates further initiative.

It is especially important to write a thank-you note after an employment interview to at least the primary interviewer. If you are interviewed by more than one individual, it's best to write to each person if possible. When writing individual notes, it is important to personalize them as much as possible. This requires more time and effort but is an impressive touch.

A typical thank-you note after an interview may have the following format:

**Paragraph 1:** Shows gratitude and makes specific reference to the job.

**Paragraph 2:** References your overall fit and stresses key points working in your favor. When writing to more than one interviewer, you may want to note a particular question asked by the interviewer or thank them for a specific kindness that was extended.

**Paragraph 3:** Reiterates interest in the position, restates gratitude and closes on a positive note.

## Sample Post-Interview Thank You Letter

Ms. Joanna Jones  
Senior Recruiter  
Consumer Products Department  
ABC Company  
123 Main Street  
Westfield, MA 01086

May 20, 2018

Dear Ms. Jones:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to interview for the Marketing Assistant position with ABC Company on Thursday.

I especially enjoyed learning more about the Consumer Product Department's annual goals and how the marketing team can make an impact. I am confident that my coursework along with my summer internship experience with XYZ, Inc., will allow me to successfully meet the objectives of this position.

I am excited to continue moving forward in the process and I look forward to hearing back from you soon. Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Shauna Sharp

# INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Did you know that instead of interviewing for a job, you can also interview for *career information*?

An informational interview allows you the opportunity to connect with a professional in a field/occupation of interest to gain insight and advice for your own career development. It also happens to be a great way to network. Typically, these take place in person but can also be arranged over the phone.

The process is simple:

1. Identify a professional you would be interested connecting with or learning from.
2. Send a personalized message requesting a few minutes of his/her time for an informational interview.
3. Develop a list of questions to ask during the informational interview.
4. Follow up with a thank you note following the informational interview.

## Sample Informational Interview Questions

- How did you get involved in this field/occupation?
- What educational background is most appropriate for this type of work?
- What steps would you suggest someone take to pursue a career in this field?
- What is the typical career path for this profession?
- Could you suggest specific internships, volunteer, or part time work that would be particularly useful in preparing for this career?
- What qualities/skills are necessary for to be successful in this job?
- What trends do you see taking place in this profession?
- What is the one thing you wish you knew about this field before becoming a \_\_\_\_? (fill in title)
- What do you enjoy most/least about your job?
- How would you describe the work environment?
- What are the biggest challenges in your job?
- What does a typical day look like?
- What advice would you give someone in my shoes?
- Are there other occupations I should also consider exploring?
- Who else might be a good person to talk to?

## Sample Informational Interview Request

*Email Subject Line:* Request for an Informational Meeting from a Westfield State University Student

Dear Mr. Smith:

I am a second year student at Westfield State University, majoring in Psychology. My research indicates that you are an alumnus of Westfield and currently work with the Westfield YMCA.

I am extremely interested in learning more about careers working with children and families. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to hear about your experiences in the field and would appreciate your suggestions on how I might best prepare for a career in these areas.

Please let me know if you might be available to briefly meet with me or speak over the phone. Thank you very much for your time.

Jane Student

# HOW DO YOUR SKILLS MATCH THE POSITION?

An additional step that you can take to prepare for an interview is to review the job description for the major job responsibilities and then think about how your previous experiences (class, jobs, volunteer activities or clubs) demonstrate your specific qualifications.

Major Job Duties/Qualifications	My Qualifications