

The First Job Interview

Objectives

1. Learn the three major aspects of interview preparation.
2. Become familiar with the interviewing process, including interview formats and question types.
3. Maximize positive interview outcomes using tips and strategies highlighted within this guide.

Prepare for the Interview

When an appointment is made for an interview, it is imperative for you to be fully prepared. There are three primary preparation areas to consider as you ready yourself for a first-round interview:

1. Employer Knowledge

The interview is an opportunity for you to demonstrate your research skills to an employer. It is important to find out as much as you can about the organization, agency, institution, etc., with which you are interviewing. Consider the following questions:

- What does the organization make or what service does it provide?
- What is the organization's mission? Vision? What are the organization's values or current projects?
- What is the size of the organization? What is its organizational structure? How much potential for advancement is there within this structure?
- Who are the organization's officers, administrators, etc.? Know something of their background and recent achievements.

Find out how the position you are applying for relates to the whole organization. Try to pinpoint some challenges, opportunities, policies, or philosophies of the organization, and plan to speak knowledgeably about these during the interview.

You can find some of this information in The Career Center Library, Strozier Library, or at the local library. You can also visit glassdoor.com for interview questions job seekers have been asked at specific organizations. Visit employer websites to find additional information.

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Helpful Web Links for Employer Information

(More available at www.career.fsu.edu/library):

- Chamber of Commerce:
www.chamberofcommerce.com
- Vault Career Intelligence:
www.vault.com
- Career OneStop: Employer Locator
www.careerinfonet.org/employerlocator/employerlocator.asp
- FSU Libraries Databases
www.lib.fsu.edu/find-database

This research can be valuable to you during the interview as it may increase your self-confidence and impress the interviewer. In researching the organization beforehand, you demonstrate sincere interest in an organization, which shows an employer that you are prepared and eager to work for them. For additional information, see the "Researching Potential Employers" guide in The Career Center or online at career.fsu.edu/Resources/Career-Guides.



2. Self-Knowledge

The interview is an opportunity for the employer to evaluate your fit with an organization. It is also an opportunity for you to evaluate the organization to determine if you feel this position will be a good fit for you. To accurately perform this evaluation on both sides (employer and candidate), it is essential that you are aware of your values, interests, skills, preferences, and career goals. Having a firm grasp of this self-knowledge will allow you to give strong answers to questions like “Tell me about yourself” and “Where do you see yourself in the next five years” while enabling you to accurately evaluate the information you learn about the position and organization you are interviewing for.

In addition to values, interests, and skills, think about your strengths and how you could translate these strengths into skills your prospective employer can use. Be prepared to provide real-life examples of times when you demonstrated these strengths.

You will also want to be prepared to talk about weaknesses, past failures, and times when you encountered challenges. If asked about these less comfortable topics, always speak to how you are proactively working to overcome challenges and what you learned from the experience. If asked specifically about your greatest weakness, speak to the ways in which you are working to strengthen your weak areas. For example, if your weakness is public speaking, think about taking a Toastmasters course or volunteering to lead presentations. That way, when the question comes up in an interview, you can show the employer that you are the kind of person who recognizes areas for personal growth and takes active steps towards bettering yourself. Do not tell an employer you have no weaknesses. We all have areas for growth and improvement. Saying otherwise may cause a candidate to be perceived as arrogant or lacking self-awareness.

The most important point to remember when preparing for an interview is that the prospective employer is primarily concerned with hiring someone who will make a valuable contribution to the organization. Be ready to talk about your career objectives and goals. Study your résumé and be prepared to discuss experiences from any item listed on the document. Practice articulating how your extracurricular activities are examples of skills in leadership and responsibility. Be prepared to tell an employer why you would be a valuable asset to them and why they would benefit from hiring you.

3. Effective Communication

It is imperative for you to know yourself and the organization with which you are interviewing, but if you are unable to communicate your knowledge clearly and concisely, your interview may not be impressive. You must be able to articulate your value and demonstrate strong communication skills to the interviewer.

The best way to improve your communication skills is to practice role-playing before the interview. Consider participating in a *mock interview* at The Career Center or ask a friend, your partner, or your roommate to help you simulate an interview. Use the “Sample Interview Questions” (page 6 of this guide) to prepare. Make sure you are critiqued on your voice tone, body language (like eye contact), and quality of answers.

Another suggestion for role-playing might be to get together with others who are also preparing for interviews. You could learn by critiquing different approaches and comparing experiences. This method may be helpful in boosting self-confidence and overall morale.

A critical point to remember while practicing is to avoid memorizing what you want to say. If you present yourself in the interview as if you have a speech prepared, your interview will most likely be less effective and appear robotic. It is unlikely that you will know exactly what an interviewer is going to ask you and a memorized answer may not effectively answer the interviewer’s questions in the moment. To avoid sounding rehearsed, practice answering questions in varied sequences and worded in different ways.

One of the most essential components of effective communication is active listening. It is okay to ask for clarification or to have an interviewer repeat a question. It is also normal to feel nervous during the interview, but try not to let these feelings overwhelm you. If you begin to experience an increase in anxiety or nervousness, concentrate on what is being asked and respond appropriately. Take a breath and speak as you normally would in conversation.

Attend the Interview

Be on Time

Interviewers have busy schedules, and if you are late, your behavior could be interpreted as disrespectful while taking away precious interviewing time. First impressions are very important in the interviewing process, so make an effort to be 10-15 minutes early for your interview. You may want to rehearse your commute a couple of days beforehand to ensure you know where you are going and can plan appropriate travel time.

Dress Appropriately

Appropriate dress is considered one of the most important parts of a first impression when interviewing. Dressing in “business professional” attire is generally preferred for most professional organizations; however, some organizations may have more relaxed dress standards. One way to determine appropriate dress for your interview is to observe how others in the organization dress and match their attire. Some guidelines for business professional dress are as follows:

- A conservative matched suit is preferred in a neutral color (gray, black, brown, tan, navy blue) with a subtle shirt underneath (try to stay away from loud colors)
- Professional shoes with socks/stockings that match
- Tidy and groomed hair/facial hair
- Attend to personal hygiene (nails, teeth, etc.)
- Avoid gaudy or flashy jewelry and any scented perfumes/colognes/lotions

For more on business dress, see The Career Center’s “Dress to Impress” guide at career.fsu.edu/Resources/Career-Guides.

Anticipate the Interview Format

The interview format can vary depending on the organization, position, resources available, etc. Be sure to ask when you set up your interview appointment which format will be used and, if possible, who will be present (names, position titles, departments represented). Below are descriptions of potential interview formats:

One-on-One

One interviewer, one candidate for one interview

Panel Interview

A group of interviewers take turns asking questions to one candidate

Group Interview

Several candidates interview at the same time with one or more interviewers

Skype/Telephone Interview

An interview in any of the above formats but held using technology (telephone or computer with webcam)

Performance Interview

Candidate performs specified tasks related to potential job in a limited timeframe.

In other situations, especially academic settings, you may be asked to lecture or present in your area of expertise in addition to participating in other kinds of interviewing. Some interviews last for 30-45 minutes, while in other organizations interviews can be performed in a series covering one or more business days. Knowing the format in which you will be participating will help you prepare and perform on the day of the interview.

Break the Ice

When the interviewer comes out to greet you, make eye contact, smile, and give a brief, firm handshake. As the interview begins, try to remain calm and relaxed. Interviewers usually try to make you as comfortable as possible as the interview begins, often starting with some small talk to help you acclimate to the interview and then proceeding with basic general questions (such as “Tell me about yourself”). While it may feel uncomfortable at first, the interviewer is on your side! Remember — they called you because they were hoping you were the perfect fit for their position!

Answer the Interviewer’s Questions

After an introduction, the interviewer will usually get to the point. Typical initial questions are:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why did you decide to apply for this position at our organization?
- How can a job with this organization help you meet your career objectives?
- What contributions do you see yourself making to our organization?

From this type of questioning, the interviewer can gauge whether you are looking for any job you can get or if you know yourself well and cared enough about the position to research the organization. The interviewer will attempt to assess your motivations, as well as the way you conduct yourself as an employee. While a résumé provides the facts, the interview provides the “why’s” and “how’s.”

Question Types

It is difficult to know exactly what will be asked in an interview as each interviewer will have different preferences and styles. There are, however, some general question types that tend to come up frequently in first-round interviews.

General questions are designed to help the interviewer get to know you. Opening questions tend to be general questions. General questions can also be a bit more personal than other types of questions. These questions will primarily be about your experience, background, goals, values, interests, and skills. You may also be asked about industry trends or current events in your field. Refer to the “Sample Interview Questions” (page 6 of this guide) for examples of general questions.

Behavior-based questions, also known as “behavioral interviewing,” is very common across industries. These questions are designed to help the interviewer assess your ability to problem-solve and produce results. The interviewer will ask you to tell them about a time in the past when you faced a particular challenge. You will be asked how you went about solving a problem or overcoming an obstacle. There is a simple formula to use when answering a behavior-based question that can help you to effectively provide the information an interviewer is looking for. Just remember the acronym, “STAR-F.”

- **S – Situation.** Give the interviewer some context with regard to the the situation you are describing. Describe the details and activities that lead up to the situation.
- **T – Task/Thinking Process.** Explain to the interviewer how you conceptualized the problem in your situation and how you mentally devised a plan for solving the problem. This is one of the most important steps in the STAR process because it tells the interviewer how you typically make decisions and address challenges.
- **A – Action.** Tell the employer how you implemented your plan to solve the problem. Cite specific examples of actions you took and talk them through the process step-by-step.
- **R – Result.** Tell the employer the outcome of your actions, highlighting your contribution.
- **F – Feeling.** Let the employer know how you felt about the outcome of the experience. This allows the employer to gain insight into your motivation, work ethic, beliefs, and personal standards of behavior.

Emotional intelligence questions are behavior-based questions that ask about situations you have encountered where you demonstrated the ability to handle stress or regulate your emotional experience/expression. You will know these questions because they tend to ask about more sensitive topics such as “Tell me about a time when you disagreed with your boss. How did you handle it?” or “Describe a time when you were criticized by a team member. What did you do?” For these questions, use the STAR-F method and concentrate on telling the story as objectively as possible. Focus on your ability to manage stress or handle complex emotions while highlighting positive outcomes.

Stress questions, also known as *case questions*, are more common in consulting or medical fields; however, they have the potential to show up in any interview. These questions pose a hypothetical situation and ask you to answer the question. An example of a case question might be, “How many VW Bugs would fit into a 747 aircraft?” The question may seem unrelated to your work, but the interviewer is simply seeking to understand how you solve problems in your mind. The interviewer is not usually looking for a right or wrong answer — they just want to see that you can follow a logical, pragmatic process of problem-solving. Talk through your thinking process out loud so that the interviewer can see how you arrive at your conclusion.

Atypical questions. It is possible that an interviewer may ask some questions that seem strange or completely unrelated to the work you will be doing. For example, “If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be and why?” These questions are designed to help the employer learn more about your personality and self-awareness. When answering these questions, try to highlight information that gives the employer some insight into your positive qualities and attributes as an employee. For example, “I would be an oak tree because I am determined, strong, and I stand my ground whatever the weather.”

Be Prepared to Talk Salary...

...But do not bring the issue of salary up before the employer! One question you should be ready to address is expected salary. It is not proper etiquette to mention salaries on your résumé. You can even leave it open on your application form or write *negotiable*. But in an interview, you might be asked to state a figure. Research standard starting salary ranges for individuals with your general

qualifications in similar positions so that you can state a reasonable range if pressed in the interview. For salary information, consult resources in The Career Library, including the National Association of Colleges and Employers *Salary Survey*.

There are also several websites that provide salary information. One example is www.salary.com. Glassdoor.com also offers salary information from people in specific jobs and organizations. Many other sites can be found by simply searching the web using the term “salary” in conjunction with your desired position title. You may also want to consult a cost-of-living calculator like the one found at money.cnn.com/calculator/pf/cost-of-living/. These sources can give you some idea of what your likely salary range will be and what a fair offer might look like. By knowing the rate beforehand, you can be realistic in your terms. Candidates whose rates are too high might price themselves right out of the job. If the candidate sets the rate too low, they might sell themselves short. Be prepared to back up your salary request with specific information about your education and experience. **Generally, it is recommended that candidates allow employers to address salary first.** For more information, see The Career Center’s “Negotiating Job Offers” guide.

Ask the Interviewer Questions

During your pre-interview research, you should prepare some intelligent questions to ask your interviewer at the end of the interview. Examples include:

- What are your expectations for the individual you hire for this position?
- What training do you provide to new employees?
- What is the normal progression of an employee over the first few years?
- How much travel is required of this position?
- Do you encourage continuing education and/or reimburse tuition?
- What options do I have in selecting/accepting assignments?
- Where do you see the organization going in the next five years?

Never ask about vacation time or retirement. These are not work-related activities. You must talk opportunity, not security, although you can ask for more information regarding all fringe benefits. It can be helpful to prepare questions concerning the organization’s markets, methods, and projected plans. Ask for general information, not how these issues will affect you.

During the interview, you should be sensitive to signs that your time has run its course. Most first-round interviews (including on-campus interviews) last around 20-45 minutes. The employer may look at the clock, start asking wrap-up questions like “Is there anything else you feel we should know?” Most employer representatives, however, expect you to sense the proper time to leave on the basis of subtle indications that your time is up. Pay attention to employer signals so you do not overstay your welcome.

Tips for Delivering a Strong Interview Performance

During the interview, the most important thing to remember is to **be honest**. Interviewers will not be able to evaluate you fairly if you tell them whatever you think they want to hear so that you can get the job. If you are inauthentic or dishonest, it is difficult for the interviewer to determine if you really are a strong fit for the company and position, which could result in dissatisfaction for both you and the employer if you are hired.

Be prepared to back up what you say. If you state that you have certain skills and abilities, cite specific examples where you have demonstrated them. The **FSU Career Portfolio** (accessible through The Career Center website or Secure Apps in myFSU) is a good way to help yourself identify and document your skills and accomplishments.

When the interview is over, **thank the interviewer** for taking time to talk with you. Re-emphasize your interest in the position and your appreciation for being considered. This is important, since many candidates mistakenly assume that interviewers sense their interest.

If the interviewer does not offer you a job (this is very rarely done in the initial interview) or indicate when you will receive word, ask when you might hear about a second interview or an actual offer. This is important because every timeline is different, and you will likely be relieved to have a timeframe where you can expect to hear back from them. If there is no response at the indicated day/week, call to demonstrate your continued interest. If the interviewer is impressed with your performance, you will probably be invited to visit the organization, meet other personnel and go through more extensive screening. It is usually after the second interview that a job offer is given. For help on these second interviews see The Career Center’s guide on “Preparing for the Second Interview.”

Follow Up After The Interview

Write a Letter of Thanks

Ask for the interviewer's business card and write a letter of appreciation, either as an email or handwritten note, **within 24 hours of the interview**. Previous communication with the organization may give you an idea of the best format to use. Make your letter more than a plain thank you note. Tell the interviewer you are still interested in the position, and review some of your qualifications discussed in the interview so that his/her memory will be refreshed.

You can also include some pertinent questions that you did not ask in the interview. If the interviewer answers you quickly, this might be an indication that the organization is interested. For further help, refer to the "Writing Effective Letters" guide.

Make each interview a learning experience

As soon as possible after the interview, write down what you have learned. Ask yourself:

- Which of my points interested the employer?
- Which questions were most challenging?
- What did I do effectively in the interview?
- How can I improve my next interview?

Evaluating your interview performance can help you to continue improving your interviewing skills. It is also a way to keep track of important information about each interview, such as who interviewed you, where the organization was located, any items that seemed important (like they might come up in a second interview), and contact information for your interviewers.

Sample Interview Questions

To help you practice for your interview, consider the sample interview questions on the following pages. For additional assistance or to learn more about the **Mock Interview Program**, drop in at The Career Center or visit our website at www.career.fsu.edu.

General Questions

- What are your short- and long-term goals and objectives? When and why did you establish these goals? How are you preparing to reach them?
- What specific goals, other than those related to your occupation, have you established for yourself for the next 10 years?
- What do you see yourself doing five years from now?

- What do you really want to do in life?
- How do you plan to achieve your career goals?
- What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?
- Why did you choose the occupation for which you are preparing?
- What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- How would you describe yourself?
- How do you think a friend or professor who knows you well would describe you?
- What motivates you to make your greatest effort?
- How has your college experience prepared you for your chosen occupation?
- Why should I hire you?
- What qualifications do you have that make you think that you will be successful in this field?
- How do you determine or evaluate success?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?
- What qualities should a successful manager possess?
- Describe the relationship that should exist between a supervisor and those reporting to him or her.
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction?
- Describe your most rewarding college experience.
- What led you to choose your field of study?
- What college subjects did you like best? Like least? Why?
- If you could do so, how would you plan your academic study differently? Why?
- What changes would you make in your college or university? Why?
- Do you have plans for continued study? An advanced degree?
- What have you learned from participation in extracurricular activities?
- What have you learned from previous jobs?
- In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable?
- How do you work under pressure?
- What do you feel is the most pressing issue facing our industry today?
- How would you describe the ideal job for you following graduation?
- Why did you decide to seek a position with this organization?
- What do you know about our organization?
- What two or three things are most important to you in your job?

- How do you feel about current events impacting our field?
- What criteria are you using to evaluate the organization for which you hope to work?
- Will you relocate? Does relocation bother you?
- Are you willing to travel?
- Are you willing to spend six months as a trainee?

Behavior-Based Questions

- Describe an example where you worked as part of a team.
- Tell me about a time when you stepped up and took a leadership position without being asked.
- Describe a time when you utilized organization tools to keep yourself on-task.
- Tell me about a time when you motivated others.
- Describe a time when you exceeded your goals.
- Describe a situation where you included others in a task that would have been easier to do by yourself.

Emotional Intelligence

- Tell me about a time when you felt unfairly criticized by your superior.
- Tell me about a time when you tried and failed.
- Describe a situation when you underwent significant stress. How did you cope?
- Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with a co-worker. What did you do?
- Describe a situation when something was better left unsaid. How did you make that determination?

Stress/Case Questions

- How many VW Bugs would fit inside a 747 aircraft carrier?
- You own a large chain of banks. You are tasked with determining whether or not it would be best to continue supplying personnel to staff each banking location or to employ an ATM option for your customers. What do you decide to do?
- You are the leader of a seven-person team on a project with a deadline fast approaching. You have noticed the productivity of your team members declining over the past week and suspect that morale is dropping. What do you do?

Atypical Questions

- If you were an animal, what would you be and why?
- Fork, knife, or spoon. Which do you pick?
- You are lost in the forest close to nighfall. The temperature is rapidly dropping. You know there is a town close by, but you are unsure of the actual distance. You have a compass, a flashlight, a canvas tarp, a lighter, and a canteen of water. You only have the strength to carry two of these items with you as you attempt to find civilization before the temperature drops too low for survival. Which do you take?

Questions adapted from *The Endicott Report: Trends in Employment of College and University Graduates in Business and Industry*, by Frank S. Endicott.

Summary

Interviewing is both a skill and an art. Careful preparation is necessary to produce optimal outcomes from an interviewing experience. Individuals who take a proactive, intentional approach to preparing, executing, and evaluating their interviewing skills may find themselves experiencing more successful, enriching, and even enjoyable interviews.

Additional Resources

Select Career Center Library Resources

<i>Ace Your Interview</i>	VB W4
<i>A/E/C Employers Guidebook: 2005-2006 Edition</i>	VIB5 E55
<i>Almanac of American Employers</i>	VIB A4
<i>Boost Your Interview IQ</i>	VB M3
<i>Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation</i>	VB C6
<i>Competency-Based Interviews</i>	VB K4
<i>Corporate Equality Index 2012: Rating American Workplaces on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Equality</i>	IGI H8
<i>Cracking the Coding Interview: 150 Programming Interview Questions and Solutions</i>	VB M32
<i>Employer Literature Files</i>	Section VI
<i>Directory of Florida Industries</i>	VID FL 8
<i>Hoover's Handbook of American Business</i>	VIB H6
<i>How to Ace the Brain Teaser Interview</i>	VB K3
<i>How to Land A Top-Paying Federal Job: Your Complete Guide to opportunities, internships, résumés and cover letters, networking, interviews, salaries, promotions, and more!</i>	VI B2 W5
<i>Interview Preparation Binder</i>	VB C62
<i>Interview Magic: Job Interview Secrets from America's Career and Life Coach</i>	VB W45
<i>Knock 'Em Dead Job Interview: How to Turn Job Interviews into Job Offers</i>	VB Y3
<i>Peterson's Top 2,500 Employers</i>	VID US P4
<i>Sell Yourself!: Master the Job Interview Process</i>	VB W5
<i>U.S. Directory of Entertainment Employers</i>	VIB6 E32
<i>Vault Guide to the Top Advertising & PR Employers</i>	VIB6 P3
<i>Vault Guide to the Top Hospitality & Tourism Industry Employers</i>	VIBI P31
<i>Vault Guide to the Top Insurance Employers</i>	VIBI P3
<i>Vault Guide to the Top Media & Entertainment Employers</i>	VIB6 P29
<i>Vault Guide to the Top Tech Employers</i>	VIB5 P3

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Alternative Format Available
Revised 3/16