

Interviewing Skills

Interviewing is a conversation where the organization evaluates how your experience, skills, and attitude fit their needs, and you evaluate how well the opportunity matches your values and personal goals. You'll need to prepare in advance in order to present the most thoughtful and polished version of yourself. Think of this not as a passive situation where you'll react to whatever is asked, but a chance for you to share examples and stories that demonstrate your motivation.

- Prepare in advance. You have control over the impression you make. Think: What do I want them to remember about me after I've left?
- Communicate your skills and professionalism through concrete examples and nonverbal poise.
- Have a two-way conversation. Prepare intelligent and specific questions based on your research about the organization that will help you gauge your fit for the position.
- Be yourself and know that you have a lot to offer. Practice will allow you to anticipate questions and answer in a way that is polished, yet genuine.

PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW: RESEARCH IS CRITICAL

Maybe you've had success winging things in your past, but in a job or internship interview it is essential to demonstrate solid knowledge of the industry, organization, and position. Industry-savvy interviewees come across as enthusiastic, professional, and on top of their game. Failure to research a company beforehand comes across as lack of interest, and even laziness.

What to learn about the organization:

- Location(s), size, products or services
- History, mission statement and/or stated values
- Clients, competitors, collaborators
- Challenges and successes
- Internal structure, leadership, culture/climate
- Recent news and current projects

Where to look:

- The organization's annual report, website, blogs, and social media channels
- Industry related web sites and publications
- Glassdoor
- LinkedIn: look for the company profile and search for WU alumni who work there
- Vault: available from your CAREERlink homepage
- On-campus information sessions and events: look on the CAREERlink events tab
- Your peers: reach out to alumni and friends and utilize the Success Stories database available at careercenter.wustl.edu

TIPS FOR MAKING A GOOD IMPRESSION:

- As you research the organization, prepare a list of specific questions to ask your interviewer.
- Bring a professional-looking folder with extra copies of your resume.
- Confirm directions and travel time beforehand and arrive 15 minutes early.
- Be gracious toward everyone in the office, not just your interviewer.
- Strive for good posture, eye contact, fresh breath, and a firm handshake.
- Smile and enjoy yourself. This is not a test; it's a conversation about mutual interests.
- Ask each interviewer for a business card and follow-up with a thank you note.

THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU HAVE TO OFFER

The best way to confidently talk about yourself without bragging is to give concrete examples of times when you demonstrated your skills. Carefully read the job description for the employer's most-desired qualities in a candidate. Then, for each one, think of particular projects you've undertaken in school, internships, previous jobs, leadership roles or service work where you developed or displayed those qualities or skills.

The employer's ultimate goal is to find someone who will serve them well. If you relate your skills to the employer's needs, you'll come across as enthusiastic and insightful. Think about how your past experiences relate to your ability to accomplish for them. Demonstrate a clear connection between your abilities and employer's needs, as well as why you're interested in this specific position at this particular organization. Schedule an advising appointment to practice connecting the dots and to get feedback.

WHAT TO WEAR

You can say a lot without saying a word. Knowing what is expected at the organization is key. Few workplaces will require you to wear a suit every day, but the interview is a different beast. Err on the side of being overdressed, versus underdressed.

Wear a suit in a color like navy, black or gray. Everything should be neatly pressed- no wrinkles. Men should wear dark socks and dress shoes, and low heels or flats are a good bet for women. In a less-formal industry like tech or architecture, you might be able to skip the suit jacket for a sweater, contrasting blazer, scarf or professional dress.

In terms of accessories, hair style and color, piercings, tattoos, etc., consider your audience and the company culture. For more buttoned-up industries it might be a good idea to downplay your wild side in the interview process. On the other hand, determine how important self-expression is to you in daily life, and if you'll feel comfortable in a place that frowns upon it.



TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Interviews can happen at the Career Center, over the phone, over Skype or Google Hangouts, in groups, on-site, or in video form. They could include a series of meetings, an analytical challenge (like a case or technical questions), a writing test, or a presentation. When you are invited to interview, ask what you should expect at various stages in the process. It will impact how you prepare. If you will need to travel to the interview, find out who will cover the costs.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Practice is critical to giving answers you'll feel good about. Like a comedian who practices joke delivery night after night, the more you tell your stories, the smoother they will sound when you do the real thing. This is not about rehearsing or sounding canned, but rather bringing your experiences and examples to the forefront so that they are available to you when you need them. Remember to always think about what the employer is trying to learn about you and strive to demonstrate the connection between your abilities and employer's needs.

TRADITIONAL QUESTIONS

Interviewers commonly use these to start the conversation and get an idea of who you are. While they don't often request an example or story, it is always a good idea to include details or experiences that back up (or "prove") what you say about yourself.

Sample Traditional Questions:

- Tell me about yourself.

This (or something similar) is the most common opener and one that you will knock out of the park if you prepare ahead of time. They are basically asking "Why are we having this conversation today?" Briefly talk about your studies and interests, experiences that have shaped your abilities, why you are interested in the organization and the how your skills are a match for the position. Do this in a nutshell; you'll give details in other answers.

- Describe your strengths and a weakness.

Pick strengths that relate to the position and give examples that demonstrate how you know this about yourself. Pick one weakness that shows self-awareness and say specifically how you are working to improve. This doesn't have to be a fatal flaw; it can be a stylistic or process-oriented thing, and might be the flipside of a strength. Trying to swing your perfectionism as a negative/positive is trite. Come up with something else.

- Where do you see yourself in three to five years?

They want to know how this position will fit into your plans. Be honest about your aspirations, either within the organization or not. Get a sense ahead of time about how long the organization expects people to stay in entry-level positions or the role that graduate school might play in advancement.

More Sample Traditional Questions:

To prepare for these, see the earlier sections on research and thinking about what you have to offer.

- Why do you want to work for us?
- What did you learn from interning at X organization?
- How will your experience with X student group help you in this position?
- What sparked your interest in this industry?
- What qualifications will make you successful in this field/position?
- What is your preferred management style?
- What do you like to do in your free time?
- What makes you the best candidate for this position? Why should I hire you?

BEHAVIORAL QUESTIONS

By asking these questions, employers hope to predict the sort of worker you'll be and see how you've grown based on examples of past behavior. The best way to prepare is to come up with success stories. Think about successful projects from past jobs and internships, programs and events you've put on with student groups, research accomplishments, impactful service experiences, and challenging courses. You'll also be smart to think of stories where you didn't handle things as well as you'd have liked. These "failures" are key to growth and talking about what you learned will demonstrate self-awareness.

The STAR Method

This is an excellent way to frame your stories and hit all the important points without rambling. Focus on your actions (I) versus group actions (we).

Situation: Set the scene. "I was interning at X organization when my supervisor assigned me Y project..."

Task: List specific objectives. "To do a good job, I knew I would have to do X, Y, and Z."

Action: Describe what exactly you did to accomplish the tasks. "First, I collected background information by doing X, and then I found that I needed to do Y."

Result: State the outcome or what you learned. "Because of my recommendations, (X) happened."

The key to this strategy is to tie your story back to one of the employer's needs. "My experience with (X) will enable me to do (Y) in this new role."

Sample Behavioral Questions:

- Explain a situation where you jumped in and made a contribution.
- Tell me about a mistake you made. How did you solve the problem and bounce back?
- Tell me about a time when you had to multitask. How did you prioritize?
- Tell me about a time when you went the extra mile.
- Tell me about a time when you came up with a creative solution to a problem within an organization. What was the challenge, and how did you resolve it?
- Describe a time when you took an opportunity to persuade someone on an idea. How did you come up with and defend your view? What was the result?
- Tell me about a time you worked with a difficult person. What approach did you use? What was the outcome?
- Tell me about a time when you led a team. What was your leadership strategy, and what did your team accomplish?
- Tell me about a time you failed.
- Describe a time when you had to work under pressure. How did you handle the situation? What was the outcome?

PRACTICE

Interviewing gets more natural with experience. Work out the kinks when the stakes are low.

- Use Big Interview for interactive online practice: wustl.biginterview.com
- Schedule a mock interview with an advisor: call 314-935-5930 or stop by DUC 110
- Stop by our front office in DUC 110 for quick tips & last minute advice from the Career Peer team

TECHNICAL QUESTIONS

Engineering and tech employers want to know whether their candidates can design a system or solve a problem. Technical interviews typically focus on concrete, demonstrable skills. As with behavioral questions, be as specific as possible in your answers and always tie back to the employer's needs and how you can fulfill them.

Sample Technical Questions:

- Tell me about a time when you used creativity to solve a problem.
- What kinds of situations have you been in that required project planning?
- When testing (X), how would you decide what to test for, given that there isn't enough time to test everything?
- Describe the most interesting software project you've completed in school.
- Give an example of a project you initiated.
- In what ways do you contribute to your team?
- Describe a situation where you had to learn something quickly.
- Implement an algorithm to sort an array.

CASE INTERVIEWS

Case interviews are standard in management consulting. They can also come up in interviews for other business roles, medical school, teaching or social service positions. Case questions assess your analytical skills, social and emotional intelligence, and ability to problem-solve under pressure. Most questions last 30 minutes to an hour. It's okay to take notes and to ask the interviewer for clarification or additional data. The best candidates use logical thought processes and come up with innovative solutions, given the information available.

Don't wait for an interview offer to start practicing; it will be too late! While there is usually no right or wrong answer, there is a standard structure for approaching the answer that you'll want to start practicing well in advance of the real thing. It usually takes students months of practice to feel confident. Two good resources for practicing management consulting cases are: *Case in Point* by Marc Cosentino, and *Crack the Case* by David Ohrvall. Find both of these books in the Career Center library.

Case study questions for education or nonprofit positions are usually looking for your ability to think on your feet, your teaching style, or your methodological approach to social science research. For help prepping for these sorts of questions, schedule an appointment with a career advisor or talk with a professor in your academic department.

Sample Case Study Questions:

- What factors would you need to consider to decide whether an insurance company should start selling car insurance over the phone?
- The oldest Opera House in San Francisco is struggling and might have to close its doors. How can we save it?
- If we were looking to add a new type of window cleaner to our line of products, how would you go about developing a business plan?
- How would you go about designing the ideal website for our organization?
- A student in your class is struggling to keep up with her math work. What steps might you take to help her succeed?

QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO ASK

At the end of your interview, the interviewer will ask whether you have any questions. Even if you asked questions during your conversation, you will want to have more ready at this point to underscore how much you've considered the role. This is a chance to ask about details that can help you decide whether you actually want to work for the organization.

Prepare 5-10 questions in advance. You'll only ask 2-3, but this way you'll have a few left if others get answered during the course of the interview. Don't ask for any information that you could have found on the organization's website. Instead, ask more detailed questions based on insights from your research, or for perspective from the interviewer. Resist asking about compensation, benefits, or other potentially-sensitive topics at this point.

Ask questions like:

- What makes an employee successful in this department?
- What are some of the challenges in this position?
- How would you describe your office culture?
- Tell me about a typical day on the job.
- What do you enjoy most about working here?
- How does this position fit into the organization's structure and this department?
- What are the department's goals for the future?
- How will I be evaluated in my job?
- What can I expect about the next steps in the process?

At the end of your interview, restate your interest in the organization and position. And remember to ask your interviewer for a business card so that you can send a thank-you.

TIPS FOR INTERVIEW FOLLOW-UP

- Start the follow-up before you leave the interview. Be sure to ask – politely and professionally – when you might expect to hear back about next steps in the selection process.
- Send your thank-you notes right away; write them immediately after you leave the interview.
- Tie up loose ends. If your interviewer recommended you do something, like submit a reference, provide information or check out a website, make sure to follow-up.
- When you write to check on their decision making process, be gracious, reiterate your interest, and provide updates or pass along something of substance. If you don't get an email response, try picking up the phone.
- Give them at least a week or two before each follow-up. It takes a lot of coordination to hire and pestering them will not work to your advantage.
- If you end accepting another offer, let them know right away.

YOUR THANK YOU NOTE

Shockingly, not everyone writes a thank you. This means that when you write one, it has a strong chance of making you stand out. It's the polite thing to do, it's another writing sample, and (best of all) it's an opportunity to demonstrate your motivation and reliability. Handwritten notes are a nice touch and might be perfect in some cases, but when timing is critical an email is fine.

The note should be concise (about 10 sentences), but don't write something generic and empty. Milk this chance to refer to the specifics of your conversation, remind them about something you have in common or something unique that you discussed. You can add anything you forgot to say, and emphasize what the opportunity means to you.

Here's an example:

Dear Ms. Smith,

Thank you for taking time to meet me on September 9 to discuss the recruiter position at XYZ, Inc. I enjoyed learning more details about the travel aspect of the position and hearing about how your career progressed after you started in a similar role.

It was encouraging to learn of XYZ's goal to double its staff size in the next three years. Being a part of the recruitment team would be an exciting and challenging opportunity. I was particularly intrigued by your team structure, and I am confident that my experience leading the intern hiring process at ABC has given me a strong foundation that I can build on and contribute to your goal for more seamless cross-team communication. As we discussed, I also look forward to using my inDesign skills to create the new employee newsletter.

Please contact me if I can provide any additional information. You can reach me by phone at (314) 935-0000 or by email at jstudent@wustl.edu. Thank you again, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jill A. Student