

Employment



by Olivia Crosby

Interviewing is the most stressful part of the job search for many people. But it doesn't have to be. Interviews are an opportunity to show you are an enthusiastic worker who would do a job well.

You can make the most of that opportunity by being prepared, presenting a professional demeanor, and describing your qualifications well.

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There are many types of interviews: screening interviews, designed to whittle the applicant pool; longer second and third interviews, intended to help employers make final selections; and telephone and video conferencing interviews, arranged to capitalize on available technology.

Although these interviews often have different purposes, they all require basic interviewing skills. Read on for advice about what to do before, during, and after a job interview. The sidebar on page 17 discusses ways to enlist good references,

interviewing

Seizing the opportunity and the job



and the special feature on page 19 offers tips about job fairs.

Preparation

Career counselors say a good job interview starts well before the jobseeker and interviewer meet. Preparation can be as important as the interview itself. Researching, practicing, and dressing appropriately are the first steps to making the most of a job interview.

Research. One of the best, but most frequently overlooked, ways to demonstrate

enthusiasm for a job is to research both the company and the position for which you are being interviewed. Employers say they are impressed by well-informed jobseekers.

Before arriving for an interview, you should know what the company does, how large it is, any recent changes it has undergone, and what role you could play in its organization. Try to learn about the company's goals and values. With these facts, you can show how your qualifications match the company's needs.

The company itself is often the easiest place to start your search. Many businesses fill their websites with information tailored to jobseekers. These sites often include a history of the company and a description of its products and customers. And many companies' human resources departments will send recruiting information if you request it.

Public libraries and career centers also have valuable information about employers, including companies' annual reports to shareholders, reports kept by local

chambers of commerce, trade journals, and business indexes, such as *Hoover's Business Index* and *Dun and Bradstreet*.

Practice describing yourself. Another important step in preparing for a job interview is to practice describing your professional characteristics. Think of examples from past jobs, schoolwork, and activities to illustrate important skills. Recalling accomplishments beforehand, when you don't have to respond under interview pressure, will strengthen your answers during the actual event.

Every interview will be different, and there may always be surprising questions. Nevertheless, interviewers suggest rehearsing with a career counselor or friend to gain confidence and poise. As a starting point, try to respond aloud to the following:

- ◆ How would you describe yourself?
- ◆ What did you like most about your last job?
- ◆ What types of courses do you enjoy most?
- ◆ Why should I select you over other applicants?
- ◆ What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- ◆ What are your hobbies?
- ◆ Tell me more about the project you described on your résumé.
- ◆ Describe a work or school-related problem and how you solved it.
- ◆ Tell me about a time you worked as part of a team.
- ◆ What are your short-term goals?
- ◆ Why do you want to work in this occupation and for this company?

Each question gives you an opportunity to illustrate your favorable characteristics. When responding, focus on subjects related to the job. For example, if asked to describe yourself, talk about your professional characteristics and background, not your personal life.

Some questions—such as those about hobbies or interests—may seem irrel-

Make your first impression a good one by greeting the interviewer with a smile, a firm handshake, and direct eye contact.

evant. Interviewers ask these types of questions to learn about your personality and test your interpersonal skills. In addition, answering questions about your hobbies or interests allows you to highlight some of your other strengths. Participating in a sport might demonstrate teamwork; ability in a craft, such as needlepoint, shows an attention to detail.

Career centers and libraries have many books with additional questions and possible answers. The goal is not to memorize responses to these questions but to become comfortable speaking about yourself, your training and experience, and your career goals. Responding to interview questions should not sound as if you are reciting a script.

Whatever the question, be ready to accentuate the positive. The interviewer might ask for a weakness or failure; choose one that does not affect your ability to do the job, or describe a shortcom-

ing you are working to overcome. For example, if interviewing for an entry-level job, cite your lack of paid experience. If there are weaknesses evident on your résumé or transcript, such as being fired from a job or receiving poor grades, rehearse an explanation before the interview in case you are asked about them. Focus on what you learned from the experience, being careful never to criticize a previous employer or coworker.

Dress professionally. Securing a job is much easier if you look the part. A useful guideline is to dress as you would for an important day on the job, like a meeting with a supervisor or a presentation to a client.

Clothes should be clean, well fitting, and wrinkle free. Most employers expect jobseekers to wear a traditional two-piece suit, preferably in a conservative color such as navy blue, gray, or black. The object is to look reliable, not trendy. Many

employers say that women's skirts should be knee-length or below. Polished, closed-toe shoes complete the professional image.

Avoid last-minute clothing disasters by trying on your suit a few days before the interview. And plan for the unexpected: if you will wear a skirt, buy an extra pair of stockings; if you have shoes that tie, get more shoelaces. Bring such extras along with you the day of the interview.

Keep hair neat by tying it back, putting it up, or cutting it short. Avoid cologne and perfume, large pieces of jewelry, and heavy or unnatural makeup. These distract the interviewer from your qualifications.

Showtime

On the day of the interview, give yourself plenty of time to get ready for and travel to the interview. Plan to arrive 10 to 15 minutes early. (Some career counselors suggest making a test run to the interview site in advance to familiarize yourself with the travel route.)

Consider carrying a briefcase to the interview. In addition to giving you a professional look, a briefcase serves a function: it gives portability to things you'll want at the interview. These include a pen and paper to record important information, such as the proper spelling of the interviewer's name and the time and date of followup interviews; copies of your résumé or application and references; and examples of your work, such as writing samples.

Butterflies. Most people are nervous when interviewing. But remember: You have been asked to interview for the job because the employer believes you could be right for it. The interview is your chance to confirm that belief and establish rapport.

To reduce nervousness, interviewers recommend getting a good night's sleep and maintaining your usual morning routine—if you never eat breakfast, for

example, don't eat a hearty morning meal on interview day. They also recommend calling to mind some of your happiest memories or proudest moments before arriving for the interview.

And they remind jobseekers that each opening you interview for is not the only one that exists. More than one company recruits for jobs. If one interview doesn't go well, another will.

First impressions. The interview begins the moment you arrive. Everyone you meet, from the receptionist to the hiring manager, will form an impression of you. To ensure the impression is positive, remember that your words and mannerisms

Interviewers suggest rehearsing with a career counselor or friend to gain confidence and poise. The goal is to become comfortable speaking about yourself, your training and experience, and your career goals.

will affect the image you project. When greeting people, smile warmly and shake hands. Make eye contact and maintain good posture. Don't create a negative impression by using slang, chewing gum, smoking cigarettes, or giving curt, one-word answers.

Standard politeness is important in an interview because the interviewer knows very little about you. To be safe, never use the interviewer's first name unless you are invited to do so, and don't sit down until the interviewer does.

Responding to questions. After introductions, the interviewer will probably explain the job in more detail, discuss the company, or initiate friendly conversation. The interviewer will then ask questions to try to gauge how well you would

References:

Making the last word a good one

Before making a hiring decision, most employers want to speak with people who know a candidate well. You should contact three to five people who will agree to provide favorable recommendations about you to future employers.

Choosing references can be difficult, especially for people with little work experience. But there are more options than you might think. The people you ask to be references should be familiar with your abilities. Supervisors from either paid or unpaid jobs, teachers, coaches, advisors, and coworkers are all good choices for references. Select the most willing, articulate people you can. And always ask permission of the people you ask to be references before including their names on your reference list.

After choosing and contacting references, type a list providing their names, addresses, telephone numbers, and relationship to you. Bring copies of this list with you to interviews.

When people agree to be references, help them to help you. Provide a copy of your résumé or application to remind them of your important accomplishments. Tell them what kinds of jobs you are applying for so they know what types of questions to expect.

Responding to interview questions allows you to describe your best work-related characteristics.

fill the position.

When responding to the interviewer, avoid giving vague answers such as, “I want to work with people” (or animals, or cars, or whatever the job entails). Instead, describe the specific ways you want to work with them. You might also give examples of how you have successfully done so in the past. Focus on your strengths, but always tell the truth.

Many employers use résumés as guides, asking for additional details during the interview. In addition to finding out more information, they may be trying to see how well you can communicate your work to others.

Some interviewers ask questions about real-life job situations. For example, they might ask candidates for a retail job how they would handle customer complaints.

Rather than trying to stay in control, let the interviewer direct the session. Listen attentively, and be sure to answer the question asked. Watch the interviewer’s mannerisms for clues about whether to elaborate or keep your responses short.

Some jobseekers are so focused on

specific answers, they forget to relax and connect with the interviewer. An interview should be conversational. However, that does not mean you are expected to speak without pause. You should stop to consider an answer before responding to difficult or unexpected questions. And if a question is confusing, ask for clarification.

Turning the tables. At some point, usually toward the end of the interview, you will have the opportunity to ask your own questions. This is your chance to find out more about the company. After all, you may have to decide if you want to work there. Some questions you might want to ask include:

- ◆ Who would supervise me?
- ◆ Can you describe a typical assignment?
- ◆ Are there opportunities for advancement?
- ◆ How do you train employees?
- ◆ What do you like most about working for this company?

An interview is not the time to inquire about salary or benefits. You don’t want

to seem more interested in financial rewards than in contributing to the company. If asked about salary requirements, try to convey flexibility. The best time to discuss earnings is after you have been offered the job.

Before leaving the interview, make sure you understand the next step in the hiring process. Find out whether there will be another round of interviews, whether you should provide additional information, and when a hiring decision will be made.

Finally, be sure to thank the interviewer. And if you are interested in the job, say so.

“Fuzzy slipper” interviews

For some interviews, what you wear makes no difference at all. Many employers conduct preliminary interviews over the telephone. This arrangement gives employers an opportunity to find the best prospects before investing time, effort, and, in some cases, expense in arranging a face-to-face interview.

Telephone interviews are especially common for jobs that are out of State, attract many applications, or require a good telephone demeanor. A phone interview is similar to a traditional interview, but it poses special challenges.

If your phone has a call-waiting feature, consider disabling it the day of the interview. You do not want to put the interviewer on hold, and persistent call-waiting beeps are distracting. Take advantage of being on your home turf by having your résumé, pen, paper, appointment calendar, notes, and reminders within easy reach.

Remember to speak clearly and listen attentively, just as you would if you were meeting with the interviewer in person. Even though no one can see you, your voice betrays attitudes and confidence; sometimes, sitting up straight can help project enthusiasm over the phone.

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Job fairs

So many companies, so little time

Job fairs, like interviews, are face-to-face meetings between jobseekers and employers. They are one of the easiest places to find good job leads. Every employer attending is there to hire one or more workers.

At a fair, jobseekers gather information about a company to help them decide if they want to apply for a job. Recruiters staff booths and answer questions, distribute brochures, accept résumés, and size up jobseekers.

Making a good impression at a job fair may give your résumé or application added weight. The following tips can help you make the most of any fair.

Find the fair. Career centers, associations, State and local governments, and private companies organize job fairs. Find the fairs in your area by looking everywhere they might be announced. Ask a career counselor, review the business bulletin board at your school or local library, check the employment section of the newspaper, and search online via an Internet job fair locator.

Ready your résumé. Before attending a fair, you should prepare a résumé. Bring several copies to the fair. Leave at least one with every company that seems promising.

A résumé lists your name, contact information, education, and experience, both paid and unpaid. It emphasizes accomplishments and skills. Most résumés for entry-level jobs are one page.

For more information, see the article "Résumés, applications, and cover letters" in the summer 1999

OOQ, available as a reprint or online at <http://stats.bls.gov/opub/ooq/1999/Summer/art01.pdf>.

Dress neatly. A job fair is like a series of mini-interviews, with recruiters forming impressions of the people they meet. You might not need to wear a suit, but clothes that are too casual could be a strike against you. Clothes that are too short, too tight, too worn, or too playful are particularly risky. If you are unsure about what to wear, ask a career counselor or someone from the organization sponsoring the fair.

Go alone. Leave children and other relatives at home. If you plan to attend the fair with a friend, don't appear to be inseparable when visiting booths. A professional image is easier to maintain if you speak to employers alone.

Survey the terrain and plot a strategy. When you arrive, take a quick walk through the fair. Time is limited, and booths are crowded. Plan a route before stopping at booths to see your favorite companies. Save visits with the best prospects until after you've warmed up with a few other employers.

To make the best use of your time, ask for a list of participating companies a few days before the fair, and rank visits before you arrive.

Complete applications flawlessly. When a company distributes application forms, take two. One will be a rough draft. If you bring an application home to send later, consider adding a

note saying you met the recruiter at the fair.

Master the mini-interview. Every time you speak with an employer, no matter how briefly or how boisterous the atmosphere, consider it an interview. Recruiters will expect you to introduce yourself, shake hands confidently, answer questions about your coursework or experience, and have an idea of the type of job you want.

Finding out about the company is equally important. You might ask what the hiring process is like or what jobs are available for people with your education.

Before you leave the booth, be sure to ask for the recruiter's business card.

Take notes. After visiting several booths, it's easy for conversations to run together, leaving any jobseeker muddle-headed. After each visit, take a few notes to read at home.

Stay organized. Fairgoers are deluged with paper—company literature, recruiters' business cards, applications, and their own notes. Bring a briefcase, an expandable folder, or a canvas bag to keep materials organized. Counselors suggest going through these papers while your memory is still fresh.

Apply in absentia. If you cannot attend the job fair, contact the sponsoring organization. The sponsor may be able to give your résumés to participating employers before or after the fair.

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At the end of the interview, express your willingness to speak with the employer in person. This is important, because most employers prefer to meet with a potential employee face to face before hiring.

Following up

Even after the interview is over, your task is not complete. Secure a good impression by sending a thank you letter to the interviewer. It is best to send the letter within 2 days of the interview, but any time is better than none.

Thank you letters should be brief—less than one page—and may be hand-

written or typed. Their purpose is to express your appreciation for the interviewer's time and to reiterate your

Send a thank you letter within 2 days of the interview.

interest in the job. For a sample letter, see page 21.

Most thank you letters have three main paragraphs.

- ◆ The first paragraph is your chance to thank the interviewer for meeting with you and to show enthusiasm for the

job. Some suggest refreshing the interviewer's memory by mentioning the date of the interview and the position for which you applied.

- ◆ The second paragraph is for you to briefly reiterate a few skills that make you well suited for the job. You might also mention a topic from the interview that was especially interesting to you. Also, include any important information you forgot to mention during the interview.

- ◆ The third paragraph is where you thank the interviewer again, give your phone number, and state that you look forward to hearing from him or her.

Write or type the letter on solid white, off-white, or gray stationary. Use a standard business format. Put a colon after the interviewer's name and a space after each paragraph. And don't forget to sign your first and last name.

Many employers say an e-mailed thank you letter is acceptable if e-mail correspondence was exchanged between the interviewer and the candidate. Otherwise, an e-mail message should not substitute for standard mail in most situations.

Address the letter to the person who interviewed you, and make sure to spell his or her name correctly. If a group interviewed you, write either to each person you spoke with or to the person who led and coordinated the interview, mentioning the other people you met.

Finally, be sure to proofread the letter, and ask someone else to proofread it for you, too. Interviewers tell tales of misspelled, misused words written in thank you letters that tarnish the image of an otherwise impressive candidate. As you write your thank you note, remind yourself that you might be writing to your next supervisor.



Before leaving the interview, express your thanks and your interest in the job.

Sample thank you letter

John Ryan
15 Spring Road
Hamlet, LS 41112
555-555-5555

Use a standard business format

August 25, 2000

Ms. Susan Carson
Director
Hamlet Child Development Center
Hamlet, LS 41112

Spell the interviewer's name correctly

Dear Ms. Carson:

Thank the interviewer

Thank you for the opportunity to interview with you yesterday afternoon. I am very interested in the child-care position you described.

Highlight your qualifications

My child development classes, summer jobs, and recent volunteer work as a storybook reader at the community center have prepared me well for a preschool teaching position. I am especially interested in the field trip program you mentioned. I would welcome the opportunity to contribute to that effort.

Express interest in the job

I enjoyed meeting you and your staff and look forward to hearing from you soon. If I can provide any additional information, please call me at (555) 555-5555. Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Place your phone number near the end

Sincerely,



Sign your first and last name

John Ryan

Ask someone to proofread the letter before you send it