Interview Preparation Tips

Acing an interview takes more than showing up! Preparation is the key. Check out all the tips below and spend time preparing for your interview and you will be more relaxed and successful! The Office of Career Services at Illinois College has three staff members ready to work with you for in-person interview preparation assistance and mock interviews. See the contact information at the end of this packet to connect with the Office of Career Services.

1. **What do I wear?** Dress to impress – dress professionally.
   a. For men: A suit and tie are best. If you do not have a suit, or sport coat, then at least an ironed dress shirt, tie, dress pants, nice shoes, and matching dark socks.
   b. For women: A suit is best. If you do not have a suit, then a skirt or dress pants with a blazer. If you do not have a jacket, then just a skirt or pants with nice blouse. Avoid really bold colors and patterns. Go easy on the jewelry and makeup. Wear hose with pumps or dress shoes. No flip flops, backless sandals, or low-cut tops.
   c. Cover tattoos if possible. Recommended you take out any facial piercings or tongue piercing. Men should remove earrings. Women should not wear long, dangly earrings as they can be distracting to the interviewer.

2. **What do I do before the interview?** Preparation is key!!
   a. **Research the organization and the position.** Check their website to learn as much as possible. Know what locations they are in, what they do, make, serve, etc. The interviewer is going to expect you to have done research on the company since you have the technology available to you!
   b. Prepare answers to common questions. Be ready to provide multiple examples.
   c. Prepare questions of your own to ask the interviewer. This is a great time to demonstrate that you have done research on the company, if you have not yet had another chance.
   d. Bring a pen and portfolio-style folder containing extra copies of your resumé. Don’t bring your book bag into the interview.
   e. Be ready for more than one interviewer. Many companies use panel interviews. On-site interviews often last a few hours with different groups or individuals.

3. **During the interview**
   a. **Introduction Stage**
      The first impression is very critical! You should make eye contact, smile, and appear eager, and give the interviewer(s) a firm handshake.
b. **Discussion Stage (questions and answers)  
** **STAR Method**
Most interviewers will use behavioral style interviewing and will want to hear concrete examples as answers. Be prepared to answer questions about your education, work experience, related activities, your interest in the organization, the type of work you are seeking, and present and future goals. Spend time before the interview thinking about the experiences you will share during the interview as examples.

When answering questions during the interview, be sure to provide concrete examples during your answer to “show” the interviewer how and why. A technique to organize your concrete examples in your answer is the **STAR** method.

| S | What was the **SITUATION** you faced? – Set the scenario. |
| T | What **TASK** was assigned/assumed? Describe the challenge that relates to the topic. |
| A | What **ACTION** did you take to accomplish the task or solve the problem? |
| R | What was the **RESULT** of your actions? Be sure to focus on this area! |

A lot of times we tell the story, but fail to highlight a result. Be sure to communicate the end result, and list any quantitative information, if possible. A typical STAR response will be one to two minutes. Only spend a short time on the set-up and focus the majority of your response on your actions and the result.

Be honest in your responses because lying or over-exaggerating can be easily spotted. The employer will be looking for answers that meet the needs of the position. S/he will also be observing your personality, your communication skills, and your nonverbal signals.

During the information exchange, you should also ask any questions you have about the organization. **Try to ask questions** that indicate you know something about the organization and want to work there. Do not ask questions that would be easily found on their website.

Do not worry about slips of the tongue. Most employers realize that people are nervous during job interviews. With practice, you will improve. If you are stumped by a question, take a moment to compose your thoughts before answering; you do not have to answer every question immediately.

Practice your answers, but do not memorize them. Utilize the video practice option through Optimal Resumé and review yourself. Listen for the fillers such as “Um,” “Like,” “You Know,” etc. Most people have no idea how often they insert these distracting and unnecessary words.

c. **Closing Stage**
During the closing, establish a timeline when you can expect to hear further from the interviewer. Be sure you understand all you need to know about the job. Many employers state that they are impressed by the candidate who candidly states at the close of the interview that s/he wants the job (this is especially important for sales positions). Exit gracefully to have a positive lasting image.
Interview Questions to expect
Below are typical questions that you may be asked in an interview situation. You should go over these and have answers to them. Tip: Have more than one example ready in your head. You will not be asked all of them, but be ready for any. The bolded questions are very common questions.

- **Tell me about yourself.** This is often the very first question and one of the toughest! The interviewer typically uses it as a method to break the ice and get insight into your personality. Try to keep this answer concise and do NOT simply run through your résumé. Give them insight into who you are, and try to focus on these two areas: 1.) What most interests the interviewer and 2.) Highlight your most important accomplishments.

- What are your long-range and short-range goals and objectives, why did you establish these goals, and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?

- **What do you see yourself doing five years from now?** (You must have goals!)

- Tell me about a time that you participated in a team, what was your role?

- Tell me about a time when you failed.

- What can you offer me that another person cannot? or, Why should we hire you?

- 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 career for which you are preparing?

- **What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?** (Think about what strengths you have that would mean the most for this position and how you utilize them. You could think of weaknesses as areas you need to improve on. Do not list a weakness that would be a requirement for the position, such as public speaking for a sales position!)

- How do you think a friend/professor/boss who knows you would describe you?

- Describe a time you included others in your decision making and how you incorporated their input.

- What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?

- How has your education prepared you for a career?

- What qualifications do you have that make you think you will be successful?

- How do you determine or evaluate success?

- Why did you decide to seek a position with this company?

- What do you think it takes to be successful in a company like ours?

- What do you know about our company? (Do more than just Google them!)

- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our company?

- Describe the ideal relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate?

- **What two accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction?** Why?

- Describe your most rewarding college experience.

- What led you to choose your field of major study?

- Do you enjoy independent research?

- What have you learned from participation in extracurricular activities?
• Do you have plans for continuing your education?
• In what kind of a work environment are you most comfortable?
• **Give me specific examples of when you have had to work under pressure.**
• Which part-time or summer jobs were most interesting to you? Why?
• What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
• **Tell me about a time you had to deal with conflict and how you handled it.**
• Give me two examples of your leadership capabilities.
• Tell me about a time you made a mistake.
• Who’s your mentor?
• What is the name of our CEO?
• What gets you up in the morning?
• What were your bosses’ strengths/weaknesses?
• If I called your boss right now and asked him what is an area that you could improve on, what would he say?
• Are you a leader or a follower?
• What was the last book you’ve read for fun?
• What questions haven’t I asked you?
• What questions do you have for me?

**Possible Interview Questions YOU Can Ask**
• What do you like about working here?
• How would you describe the responsibilities of the position?
• What would a typical career path be of someone who started in this position?
• How would you describe a typical week/day in this position?
• Please describe the training and evaluation process.
• What is the company's management style?
• How many people work in this office/department?
• How much travel is expected?
• Is relocation a possibility?
• Is overtime expected?
• Is this a new position? If not, what did the previous employee do successfully?
• What are the prospects for growth and advancement?
• Would you like a list of references?
• What is the expected timeline for the final selection for this position?
• If I were extended a job offer, how soon would you like me to start?
After the Interview

Obtain the correct titles and names of all the people who interviewed you. Ideally, get each person’s business card. Write individual thank you notes or letters to each person who interviewed you within two business days. Each letter can be essentially the same, but try to vary each slightly in case recipients compare notes. If a decision will be made quickly, send an email instead of mailing a letter.

1. Don’t fail to send a thank you, even if you are sure the job is not for you. If the job comes down to two people and one wrote a note and one did not…guess who gets the offer!
2. Don't worry so much about hand-written versus typed thank you letters. In your thank you letter, show appreciation for the employer's interest in you and remind the employer about why you are the perfect person for the position.
3. Don't have any errors, misspellings or typos, in your thank you letter.
4. If you have not already, alert your references that the employer may make contact with them.
5. Don't stop job-hunting, even if you feel confident that you will get a job offer. Continue to interview and attempt to find other opportunities.
6. Follow-up with a phone call to the employer within a week to ten days, or sooner depending on the employer’s timeline, to ask about the position. Continue to build rapport and sell your strengths during the phone call.
7. Be patient. The hiring process often takes longer than the employer, and candidate, expects.
8. Continue following-up, especially if the employer asks you to. Remember the adage about the squeaky wheel getting the oil? Just do not go overboard and annoy the employer.

Interview Do’s

1. Dress appropriately for the industry; err on the side of being conservative to show you take the interview seriously. Possess impeccable grooming and cleanliness.
2. Arrive early; 5-10 minutes prior to the scheduled start time. But, do not arrive TOO early, such as 30 minutes early.
3. Remember that your interview often starts as soon as you enter the door. A receptionist is usually asked about how you acted while you waited.
4. Greet everyone you meet with a smile and be polite.
5. Offer a firm handshake, make eye contact, and have a friendly expression when you are greeted by your interviewer.
6. Listen to be sure you understand your interviewer's name and the correct pronunciation. Even when your interviewer gives you a first and last name, address your interviewer by title (Ms., Mr., Dr.) and last name, until invited to do otherwise.
7. Maintain good eye contact during the interview.
8. Sit still in your seat; avoid fidgeting and slouching. Avoid crossing your legs or resting your foot on your knee.
9. Respond to questions and back up your statements about yourself with specific examples, whenever possible. Use the STAR method to organize answers and focus on your result.
10. Ask for clarification if you do not understand a question.
11. When asked a question by a single person, be sure to make eye contact with the rest of the group when answering the question.
12. Exhibit a positive attitude. The interviewer is evaluating you as a potential co-worker. Behave like someone you would want to work with.
13. Have intelligent questions prepared to ask the interviewer. Conduct research about the employer in advance to ask questions which you did not find answered in your research.
14. Make sure you understand the employer's next step in the hiring process; know when and from whom you should expect to hear next. Know what action you are expected to take next, if any.
15. When the interviewer concludes the interview, offer a firm handshake and make eye contact.
16. After the interview, make notes right away so you do not forget critical details.
17. Promptly write a thank-you letter to your interviewer.

**Interview Don’ts**

1. Don’t make excuses. Take responsibility for your decisions and your actions.
2. Don’t make negative comments about previous employers or professors (or others).
3. Don’t falsify application materials or answers to interview questions.
4. Don’t give the impression that you are only interested in an organization because of its geographic location.
5. Don’t give the impression you are only interested in salary. As a general rule, don’t ask about salary and benefits until the subject is brought up by your interviewer.
6. Don’t act as though you would take any job or are desperate for employment.
7. Don’t be unprepared for typical interview questions. You may not be asked all of them in every interview, but being unprepared looks foolish.
8. Don’t go to extremes with your posture – don’t slouch, and don’t sit rigidly on the edge of your chair.
9. Don’t take cell phone calls during an interview. If you carry a cell phone, turn it off during the interview to be sure it doesn’t ring or vibrate. Remember that a phone switched to vibrate will still make a sound and interrupt the interview.
10. Don't chew gum or smell like smoke.

**Final Thoughts**

Know the company: Ferreting out basic details on the company you are applying to seems like one of the most obvious efforts candidates would undertake, but it is not a given that they will. Job seekers should be doing rather ambitious research—reading annual reports, learning company business plans, and setting up Google Alerts so they are up-to-date on company news. Learn the issues or problems a company is facing and to prepare some thoughts on tackling those issues.

Research the people: It is important to know what the company does, but it may be even more important to know who you will be talking to once you get there. Ask who you will be interviewing with—name and title. Then get familiar with his/her staff biography and LinkedIn profile.

Find an insider: Find someone who knows the company and can provide valuable insights into the work you will be doing.

Follow-up: Send a thank you note within 2 days of any interview. Send one to every person who interviewed you. Email is OK, especially if the employer plans to make a quick decision, but follow protocols for formal business correspondence. Use the thank you note to reiterate your interest and to emphasize your specific qualifications for the position. If you were told you would hear back within two weeks and it has been three weeks, a call or email with a nice tone is appropriate. It is amazing how many people make a follow-up call and end the call with another interview invitation for the next level, or even a job offer.
Phone Interview Tips

- Phone interviews are often used as a screening interview to determine if a candidate will be invited for an in-person interview. Sometimes they are used when an in-person interview is not possible.
- Research the company before the call!
- Use a landline if possible. If using a cellphone, be somewhere with a strong signal.
- Eliminate distractions such as the TV, roommate noise, other phones, animals, etc.
- Smile! They will hear the positive attitude in your voice when you smile.
- Have a pen and paper needed for notes. Try to limit note taking to after the interview concludes so you do not miss something they say as you are writing. However, do write down important details when needed.
- Dress: While it is true that the interviewer cannot see you, the better you dress the more mentally “into” the interview you will be. You will feel more confident if you are dressed more professionally. It is harder to convince yourself that you can be a strong professional when you are wearing pajama pants and an old t-shirt.
- Have your resumé nearby to refer, if necessary.
- Have your “30 second commercial” prepared to summarize your achievements and what you can contribute to the organization.
- Review and prepare for standard interview questions.
- Create and have a list ready of your own questions to ask the interviewer.
- Do:
  - Do ask questions.
  - Do watch your speech speed. It is harder to understand people on the telephone, so speak slower than normal.
  - Do have water handy to sip, if needed.
  - Do know the next step after the phone interview. Make this one of your questions.
  - Do send a thank you note to the interviewer.
- Don’t:
  - Don’t ramble and don’t use “Like,” “Uh,” “Um,” “Uh-huh,” “Nope,” “Yep.”
    - Ask your friends and family to help you overcome this habit.
  - Don’t interrupt.
  - Don’t chew gum.
Video/Skype Interview Tips

- **Download the Skype or video software ahead of time, if needed.** Make sure that you are comfortable using the program *before* your interview. You may want to see if there is a way to record yourself talking, so you can practice where to look and how to run it. Also, practice using Skype with a friend on another computer. Using the Interview Preparation option on Optimal Resumé (found at [www.ic.edu/afterIC](http://www.ic.edu/afterIC)) is a great option for recording practice questions.

- **Check your internet connection and settings.** Test the internet connection in the area that you will be interviewing. You do not want to have an unreliable connection where you continually need to reconnect. Make sure that your sound is adequate. Test your camera before the interview to ensure that the lighting is not too bright or too dim, and that your distance from the camera is appropriate. Make sure your camera/laptop is plugged in or completely charged.

- **Make sure everything is professional.** What’s your username? If possible choose something resembling your e-mail address. Next, look around the room where you will be interviewing. If there is a blank wall behind you, great. If there is a giant poster, you might want to find another spot. What will the interviewer see on the walls or shelves behind you? Make sure it is clear and uncluttered and not distracting. Make sure there is nothing that could be misunderstood as reflecting poorly on your personality or character. If you live with other individuals, put a sign on your door to let them know that you are in a job interview and would appreciate silence. Turn off all ringers to phones, even landlines, or turn them off.

- **Before the interview, ask who should initiate the call.** If you need to reach out and make the initial call, be sure you have the correct phone number and/or username.

- **Wake up an hour early for a morning interview.** You do not want to sound or look like you just rolled out of bed, so give yourself some time to dress up, eat breakfast, and review your resumé and notes. Being prepared will set you apart from the competition.

- **Dress professionally.** Wear a full suit. It will get you in the “interviewing” mindset and will help you feel more confident during the interview. **Choose your colors wisely.** Avoid patterns unless you are sure how they will look on screen and stay away from bright colors. Play it safe; it is an interview.

- **Alternate eye contact between your webcam and your screen.** If you look only at your screen where you can see the other person or yourself, it will seem like you are always looking down. While the interviewer will probably understand, looking at the webcam itself will allow you to make eye contact. It is hard to get used to, but it shows you are more comfortable with the technology. Move the box that shows you towards the top middle of your screen to be close to the webcam.
(Video/ Skype Interview Tips continued)

- **Smile and focus on your posture.** Be enthusiastic. Skype interviews tend to dampen your personality, so make an effort to smile and act as pleasant as possible. The person with whom you are speaking also deserves your full attention, so make sure to stay focused. Remember that a good portion of understanding comes from body language and other non-verbal cues. Be wary of awkward pauses in the interview, when you might be tempted to fidget, look bored, or allow yourself to be distracted. You are still on camera; act as if you are sitting in that person’s office.

- **Don’t shift around or move your head and body very much.** This is very distracting to the viewer and could make you look like you are not focused. Don’t have your head too close to the camera to prevent making your face look large and intimidating.

- **Slow your talking speed down.** It can be easy to talk over people on a Skype call so wait for the interviewer to stop speaking before you answer. This also gives you a few seconds to think about what you want to say before you speak.

**Additional services available through the Office of Career Services:**

- Resumé Development
- Cover Letter Writing
- Finding an Internship
- Researching Graduate Schools
- Job Search Assistance
- Major and Career Exploration
- StrengthsQuest Talent Inventory
- On-Campus Student Employment/Work Study
Interview Tips

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