



Career Development Office | Vassar College

All About Interviewing

You've put together an impressive resume, contacted various employers, and you finally receive a request for an interview. In order to feel more comfortable with the process, you should understand the three P's of interviewing—Purpose, Preparation, and Presentation.

Purpose

The interview is an exchange of information, or a directed conversation, between you and an employer. The basic purpose is simple: to determine how well you and the organization will be able to meet each other's needs. The interviewer will evaluate such things as your qualifications, motivation, personality style, and ability to communicate. It is your job to assess the organization as well by listening closely to the interviewer's comments and descriptions, and asking directed questions of your own. Although it is easy to view the interviewer as an authority figure or adversary, you can increase your confidence—and have more productive interviews—if you see yourself as an equal partner in the venture.

Are all interviews the same?

Most interviews fit into one of three categories: screening, telephone, or on-site.

Screening interviews may take place on campus, at recruiting fairs and conferences, on the phone, or at the employer's office. Often the people who conduct screening interviews are from human resources or personnel departments. Their job is to weed out candidates and recommend promising ones. A typical screening interview lasts about 30 minutes, although you may have 15 minutes or less at a recruiting fair. Many of these interviews follow a structured format, usually beginning with a few minutes of pleasantries to put you

at ease, followed by questions about your academic/work background, skills, and future goals. The interviewer may tell you more about the organization or position, and will probably give you a chance to ask some questions. If you are not told what comes next in the application/hiring process, feel free to ask.

Telephone interviews can be an intermediate step, especially if the organization has limited travel funds. They are commonly used by smaller organizations, where you are likely to speak with someone who has direct hiring power rather than with a human resources representative. Expect to ask and be asked similar questions over the telephone as you would in person, but remember that your appearance and non-verbal communication can't help you out—your words and vocal inflections will make the impact.

The **on-site interview** may be the second step after a screening interview, or it can be the first contact you have with an employer. Large employers usually funnel you through a series of interviews, which culminate in one or more on-site visits, while smaller organizations often make hiring decisions after one interview at the office. Learn what to expect in your industry before you begin interviewing.

On-site interviews for full-time employment can last anywhere from a couple of hours to two days, and will typically consist of a series of half-hour to hour-long interviews with several individuals. Dining or other social interaction with your interviewers is typically part of the package, and you may be reimbursed for travel, lodging, and meal expenses incurred on your way to and from the interview. (Always verify this in advance, when you make your initial interview arrangements.) An itinerary is usually given to you ahead of time.

How will I know what to expect?

Within any of the three interview categories, there are a variety of formats. One-on-one meetings are the most common, but you also may talk with a group of interviewers at once (either in person or over the telephone). The interviewing styles you encounter can range from highly structured to free flowing, depending on the personalities and experience of those involved. Some employers, frequently those hiring for training programs, interview several candidates at the same time so that they can observe your interaction with peers. You may be asked to analyze a case study, give a presentation, take a written test, or participate in an exercise such as "in-box" (designed to see how you would prioritize typical work tasks). You might be asked behavioral questions to elicit clues about your future based on how you have handled past challenges. Occasionally you may face a stress interview, especially in a high-pressure industry. In this situation, the interviewer appears hostile or asks intimidating questions for the purpose of testing your reactions.

The fact that you were invited to an on-site interview indicates that the employer thinks highly of you. Whatever format you encounter, the interview is a chance for you and the employer to get better acquainted. This process will require energy, concentration, and flexibility on your part.

Preparation

There are three key elements to interview preparation: knowing your skills, interests, values, and goals; understanding how they relate to the industry, the employer, and the specific job you seek; and being able to clearly articulate that message to the interviewer. Memorizing answers to every conceivable question isn't the point; rather, you should be in tune with yourself and familiar enough with the job that you can comfortably field a variety of questions.

What should I plan to talk about?

Think ahead about what you want to stress and the image you want to present. Experts in behavioral interviewing suggest the S.T.A.R. approach to answering questions: State the **Situation** and your **Task**, describe the **Action(s)** you took, and sum up the **Result**. You might also develop various anecdotes that could give the interviewer an idea of who you are. Does the job require good organizational and managerial skills? Discuss the planning, coordinating, and delegating you did for a campus committee. Does the employer need someone who's a stickler for details? Maybe you could talk about

how the office secretary at your campus job always gave you letters to proofread. Using experiential anecdotes rather than flat descriptions and yes-no answers, will create a believable, and memorable picture of yourself.

If you learn about the industry, organization and specific job ahead of time, you'll be able to ask more intelligent questions during the interview, and also indicate your thoroughness and sincerity. There are various ways to gather information. You might start on the organization's website, or an industry guide such as vault.com. Additionally, there are various guides in the Career Development Library. A staff member or Peer Advisor can give you suggestions on where to look.

Newspapers and trade magazines, many of which are available in the CDO and college libraries, are the best means for keeping abreast of current industry trends. Finally, you may want to talk informally with people who know the organization. Check the Alumnae/i Directory database for alumnae/i to contact.

As you do your research, think about issues you would like to talk about with your interviewers. You are interviewing them just as much as they are interviewing you; so make sure to address pertinent questions. If you are preparing for a group or on-site interview, you will want to formulate different types of questions depending on whom you are talking with. A senior-level staff member might be the most appropriate person to ask about long-term trends or organizational policy, whereas you could ask a peer about day-to-day responsibilities, office social life, or the boss's supervisory style.

Is there anything I shouldn't discuss?

Usually, the employer brings up salary and benefits at the on-site interview or when a job offer is presented. If you feel you must know the salary at an earlier point, you might ask for a salary range rather than a specific figure.

Formally presenting yourself to an employer can be a challenge, especially if you are harboring doubts in your own mind about where your career niche might be. Maybe you are interested in paralegal work because it could help you make a decision about law school. Or the nine-month schedule of a teaching job is appealing because it would give you time to travel in the summer. These are legitimate reasons for choosing one type of work over another, but they both focus on what a job or employer can offer you. In an interview, you should stress what you can do for the employer. It is fine to mention the non job-related factors that led to your interest in a position but keep the emphasis on your potential benefit to the employer: the abilities,

experiences, and personal attributes that could enhance your performance on the job.

There are a number of topics that are irrelevant and illegal for an interviewer to question you about. These include, among others, marital/parental status, cultural/ethnic background, and religious affiliation. Some employers will pose illegal questions; therefore, it is a good idea to think ahead about how you might handle such inquiries. For instance, if asked: "Do you have any disabilities?" you might respond by asking if there were disabilities which would prevent someone from performing the job. Recognize that your interviewer may be trying to get at a legitimate job-related concern, and by addressing that concern, you eliminate the need to divulge unnecessary information. Of course, you may always choose to bring up a topic such as ethnic background or relationship status if you feel it could clarify your situation or enhance your qualifications.

It is illegal to ask about your citizenship; however, an employer can legally ask whether you have the right to work in the U.S. If you are a visa-holder, make sure you understand and can explain your work restrictions if asked.

Presentation

First impressions do count, especially in an interview. The way you conduct yourself should reinforce, rather than call into question, your qualifications for the job. Your interviewers will ask themselves, "Is this a person I want representing my organization eight hours a day? Is this someone I'd like to work with?" To make your best impression, let courtesy, professionalism, and common sense be your guides.

No discussion of interviewing could be complete without also mentioning ethics. Ethical issues in the interview process usually center around honesty, and they aren't always clear-cut. Stop by the CDO to discuss any ethical concerns with one of our career counselors.

Plan to arrive five to ten minutes early for your interview, and bring along these items: extra copies of your resume, a sheet with names and contact information for your references, and if appropriate, a portfolio of written or artistic work. You also should have a pad of paper and pen for notes.

What should I wear?

Appearance is a very important aspect of how you present yourself. Your clothing should be similar to that of others in the organization, sending the message that you could easily fit in. Research ahead of time what type

of clothing is appropriate, and remember that it is usually better to err on the side of conservatism. Although you may feel uncomfortable wearing a suit, suits are standard attire in many industries. If you wear something less formal, you may be perceived as naive or unprofessional. To keep the interviewer's attention focused on your conversation, avoid distracting jewelry and heavy cologne or make-up. (It should go without saying that your clothing is clean and pressed, shoes are shined, hair is arranged neatly, and personal hygiene is immaculate.)

For more information, see our "*Dressing for Success*" Career Brief.

Are there guidelines for interview etiquette?

It is only natural that you feel somewhat nervous during an interview, but try not to let your anxiety produce distracting behaviors that can get in the way of your effectiveness. Remember to focus on the questions at hand and avoid rambling and run-on sentences. (It is OK to pause and collect your thoughts every now and then.) If you tend to tap your feet, say "umm," or overuse hand gestures, be aware of these habits before the interview so you can make the effort to control them. Appropriate interview behavior includes maintaining consistent eye contact, offering a firm handshake, speaking clearly and distinctly, listening carefully, and, above all, showing good humor and enthusiasm.

At the conclusion of your interview, be sure to indicate your interest in the position (assuming, of course, that you still want it), and thank the people you spoke with for their time and hospitality. In addition, collect business cards for thank you letters and mail/email thank-you notes within 24-hours of the interview.

Practice is the key to making yourself comfortable and effective in the interview process. There are a variety of techniques you can use to organize your thoughts and become aware of trouble spots. Try developing answers for the sample questions on this handout. Focus especially on the questions that might give you problems and think of examples to illustrate key points. You might ask friends for suggestions and feedback, schedule a mock interview with the CDO, or talk out loud to a mirror or tape recorder. Finally, the CDO schedules interviewing workshops on a regular basis.

Possible Interview Questions:

Preparing for some common questions can improve your performance and help you to be less nervous about the interview. Think about why the interviewer is asking the question when considering your response.

Skills and Personal Qualities

- Tell me about yourself.
- How would you describe your personality?
- What skills or qualities do you possess that will help make you successful in today's job market?
- What special skills do you have that would make you stand out from other candidates?
- How would a friend or professor who knows you well describe you?
- What is your greatest weakness and what have you done to overcome it?
- What was the last book you read, film you saw or sporting event you attended?

Career Goals and Objectives

- What are your long-term career goals and how are you preparing to achieve them?
- Why are you interested in this career field?
- What other types of jobs or organizations are you considering?
- Do you have plans for graduate school?
- What do you see yourself doing in three to five years?

College Experiences and Extracurricular Activities

- Why did you choose Vassar?
- Tell me about your college activities.
- Please describe your most rewarding college experience.
- Tell me about the role you usually play in a group.
- If you could relive your college experience, what would you do differently?

Academic Programs

- What factors influenced your choice of major?
- What were your favorite and least favorite courses?
- What courses gave you the most difficulty?

- How has your coursework prepared you for this position?
- What is your GPA and how do you feel about it?
- Are you satisfied with your academic achievements?

Work/Internships Experiences

- How have you spent your summers for the last four years? What did you learn from these experiences?
- What did you enjoy most about your recent job experience? Least?
- What do you see as your major strengths as they apply to this position?

Accomplishments / Achievements

- What do you consider your greatest accomplishment and why?
- What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?

Knowledge of Organization/Industry

- What attracts you to this industry?
- What do you know about this organization and why do you want to work for it?
- What trends do you see in this field?
- What are you looking for in an employer?
- In what kind of work environment are you the most comfortable?
- What criteria are you using to evaluate the organizations with which you interview?
- What qualities should a successful manager have?

Salary and Benefits

- What factors will be important to you besides starting salary?
- What salary range are you expecting? If possible, you may want to state that you are more interested in the content of the position at this point and would be happy to discuss salary when an offer is presented.

Sample Behavioral Questions

- Describe a situation where you used persuasion to convince someone to see things your way.
- Describe a time you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.
- Give me a specific example of a time you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Tell us what you did in your last job to build teamwork. How did you resolve conflict in the team? Be specific.
- Convince me you can adapt to a wide variety of people, situations, and environments.
- Describe a time on the job when you faced problems that tested your coping skills.
- Give an example of a time when you had to be quick in coming to a decision.
- Tell me about a time when you used your written communication skills to get a point across.
- Describe a specific occasion when you conformed to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Give me an example of an important goal that you had set in the past and tell me about your success in reaching it.
- Describe the most significant or creative presentation that you have had to complete.
- Tell me about a time you went above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
- Tell me about a time when you motivated someone else to do a good job.
- Give me an example of a time you were able to communicate successfully with another person even when that individual might not have liked you (or vice versa).
- Describe a frustrating or challenging experience you've encountered and tell me how you dealt with it.

Questions you could ask an interviewer:

- What are the top three traits of your most successful employees in this role?
- What are you looking for in a candidate?
- What are your expectations for new hires? How can you best utilize my skills?
- What would you add or subtract to the background of the person who held this position before?
- What are the immediate challenges/pressing concerns facing the organization? What will be the role of the person you hire in facing these challenges?
- Tell me about the culture of this organization. What kind of person best fits this office?
- Who would I be working with most closely?
- What type of training do you offer?
- What are the opportunities for growth?
- What is the typical career path for someone with my background?
- What would my daily responsibilities consist of?
- How much flexibility would I have in defining my responsibilities?
- How important would a graduate degree be in terms of advancement?
- Is there anything about my background and experience that we didn't cover today that would be helpful for you to know?
- What is the next step in the application/hiring process?
- Do you have a general timeline in mind?