



Interview GUIDE



CAREER SERVICES
Illinois State University

Types of Interviews

Today three main types of interviews exist: phone, web-based, and on-site/in-person interviews.

Phone interview

- Phone interviews are typically used as initial screening interviews to narrow down a large candidate pool.
- Since the employer interviewing you cannot actually see you during this interview, have materials in front of you during the interview, such as your résumé, the company website, and even the job description to help you target your interview responses.
- Phone interviews can sometimes be difficult and awkward since you cannot see the employer you are speaking with. To improve the conversation, actually stand and smile while responding to questions to bring energy to your voice. You can also ask “Did that answer your question?” or “Would you like me to elaborate?” after your first few responses to help signal that you are finished speaking while also allowing an employer to ask a follow-up question if necessary.
- Be sure to have the contact information of the employer you will be speaking with and be ready to begin the interview 10 minutes prior to the scheduled interview time in case they call early.

Web-based interview

- Web-based interviews are continuing to be utilized more and more today, often in place of an initial phone interview.
- Unlike a phone interview, an employer can see you during the web-based interview so remember to dress professionally in business professional attire. Also make sure to eliminate any distractions, such as noise, or clutter in the room where you will be conducting the webcam interview. Find a blank wall or area to conduct your interview so that the interviewer will focus on you and not your surroundings.
- Just like the phone interview, be sure to have the employer’s contact information in case you encounter technological difficulties, and be ready for the interview 10 minutes prior to the scheduled start time.

On-site interview

- On-site or in-person interviews require you to interview at the organization where you will potentially be working. If you have not been to the organization before, consider doing a test drive prior to the interview to be sure you know where to go. Also, allow time for traffic, and arrive 15 minutes prior to your scheduled interview time.
- Bring extra copies of your résumé and cover letter, and leave any electronic devices in the car that could be a distraction. Just like with the webcam interview, be sure to dress in business professional attire.
- Remember to be friendly and polite to everyone you encounter at the organization. You never know whom an employer might ask to provide an opinion about their interaction with you that could affect their hiring decision.

Additional types of interviews

Each of these interviews can occur within the three main interview types.

- Screening interviews are just as important as any other interview and are typically conducted as a phone or webcam interview.
- One-on-one interviews are the most common type of interview.

- Panel interviews involve multiple people interviewing you at the same time. Try to direct your answer to the person who asks you the interview question, while also maintaining eye contact with the whole group.
- Luncheon/dinner interviews are most importantly still an **interview**. An employer is likely observing how you handle social situations, so try to eat light/easy-to-eat foods so you can still have a conversation and avoid alcohol.
- Second interviews typically will be longer and possibly involve more people.

PROFESSIONAL ETIQUETTE TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING AND NETWORKING

According to the national Association of Colleges and Employers, Job Outlook 2019, 94.5 percent of employers deem professionalism/work etiquette as very to extremely essential in new hires. Therefore, it is important when networking or interviewing with potential employers that you use professional etiquette. How you present yourself to others can have an impact on your professional relationships, can damage your personal brand, and could potentially prevent you from getting a job. Interviewing includes not only what you say but also your nonverbal behavior, which can influence the interviewer’s first impression of you. This speaks to your professionalism.

General tips on professional etiquette

Tips can be applied to both an interview and network setting:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early for interviews and on time for meetings and events.
- Give a firm handshake with good eye contact when introducing yourself, and do not forget to smile.
- Maintain direct eye contact when having a conversation, but avoid staring (having eye contact about 65 percent of the time is effective). Smile frequently. Look alert and interested. Sit with good posture and body positioning.
- Be aware of tapping of feet, playing with your hair, nervous laughter, and other habits that can be a distraction from what you are saying.
- Keep the conversation going by asking appropriate questions and avoiding controversial topics.
- Use your manners (please, thank you, etc.).
- Greet people by their titles and last names unless told differently.
- Have a positive attitude. Be friendly and respectful. Enter every interview and networking opportunity with an open mind.

Dining Etiquette

It is possible that you could be asked to a lunch/dinner interview and/or business meeting over a meal. It is important in those situations to follow common etiquette rules. If you are too informal, you could jeopardize your chance at a job or other business dealing.

Tips for making a great impression

- Wait to sit until your host/hostess does so.
- Follow the dress code (usually business casual or business professional).
- Place your napkin in your lap when you sit down.
- Order something that is easy to eat, and do not order alcohol (especially at an interview).
- Wait to eat until everyone has their meal.
- Chew with your mouth closed.
- Sit up straight and do not put your elbows on the table.

- Do not put your cell phone on the table. You should probably put your phone on silent or leave it in the car or at home.
- Put your napkin on the chair if you leave the table temporarily, and put your napkin beside your plate when you are done eating.

Basic guidelines for dining

Many people are unsure of the rules for eating and drinking in public.

- Follow the “outside in” rule when using utensils, so start at the farthest point from the food and work your way inward.
- Taste your food before you use salt or pepper.
- Pass the salt and pepper together.
- Dip your spoon away from you when eating soup.
- Pass items to the right.
- If you are ever unsure of what to do, follow the lead of the host/hostess.

If you are at a lunch/dinner interview, typically the interviewer will pay for your meal. However, it is always a good idea to bring extra money for your meal and the tip just in case the interviewer does not pay. Remember that no matter what type of interview you are at, it is still an interview. It might be a good idea to have a snack before the interview. You may not have a lot of time to eat because you will be answering interview questions. If you follow professional etiquette, the focus will be on your skills and abilities for the job and not your table manners.

Writing Etiquette

The majority of employers are looking to hire candidates with strong communication skills, which include the ability to write in a professional manner. Your correspondence with employers during the interview process could have an impact on whether or not you are hired for a position. This is especially true if your correspondence contains grammatical errors and/or an unprofessional tone.

Tips for corresponding with potential employers by hard copy or electronically

- Write in a clear, concise manner. Readers should have no doubt by the third sentence what your purpose is for writing.
- Always carry a professional tone. Do not use slang or abbreviations.
- Be honest and sincere.
- Write naturally and sincerely avoiding overuse of the personal pronoun “I.”
- Use white or off-white paper or background.
- Margins: Use standard margins (1” to 1 ½”) on all sides of the document.
- Font: Use an easy-to-read font, no smaller than 10-12 points for résumés.
- Proofread, proofread, and proofread again.

Special considerations when using electronic communication

- Use a subject line that reflects the subject of your message. Avoid verbiage that is common in spam (i.e. “Thank You,” or “Great Opportunity”) and consider the hidden reader—those who may get your message forwarded to them. Usually subject lines are left intact when forwarded.
- Include a signature that has your full name and comprehensive contact information (street address, phone number, LinkedIn address, E-portfolio address, etc.).

- Avoid emoticons and electronic acronyms (e.g., BTW, etc.).
- Use greetings like you would in a letter (ex. Dear Jane, Good Morning Dr. John) and include a closing (ex. Sincerely, Best, Thank you).
- Use exclamation points sparingly, if at all.
- Keep emotions in check if you find yourself upset. Remember—would you say this to the person’s face or be embarrassed if this message was read to someone whose opinion matters to you?
- Use urgent flagging sparingly and be careful using “reply all.”
- Resist the urge to use all uppercase or lowercase letters. All uppercase comes off as if you are screaming. All lowercase comes off as if you are passive or insecure.
- When attaching documents to a message, follow directions given on file type and size requirements.
- Respond to emails in a timely fashion.
- Read emails carefully, and use spell-check before sending.

INTERVIEW PREPARATION TIPS

- Know when, where, and how the interview is to be conducted (in-person, phone, web-based). If you are not clear on these details, be sure to ask when scheduling the interview.
- Know the full name of the company and the correct pronunciation of the interviewer’s first and last name. If you are not told whom you will be interviewing with when scheduling the interview be sure to ask.
- Have knowledge about the company (review their mission, vision, values, and goals), and be prepared to answer, “What do you know about our company?” Review the job posting. Based on these knowledge points, critically think of what questions they could ask you.
- Note the transferable skills that employers across all industries seek in candidates; you may be asked questions based upon these skills as well.
- Prepare responses with examples, and relate your comments to the employer’s needs (i.e., instead of just saying you are a team player give an example of when you were a team player and how that example is relevant to the position).
- Get ready to emphasize your strengths and goals. Stress your achievements. Prepare to be positive about everything and everyone.
- Prepare questions to ask the employer ahead of time to determine if the position is suitable for you. Remember—you are interviewing them just as much as they are interviewing you. Ask about job duties early in the interview so you can target your abilities to the job. As the interview progresses, ask questions about the company to show your interest and help you decide if you really want to work for them.
- Have thank you notes ready, whether it be hard copy notes or an email, and be prepared to send them within 24 hours of the interview. Relay your appreciation for the interview as well as what you enjoyed. If you are interested in the position, relay that.
- Practice, practice, practice! Whether it is with a roommate, parent, friend, or partner practice answering questions. Also, use InterviewStream, Career Service’s free online practice interview software program where you can record your answers and play them back to observe your nonverbal behaviors.
- Meet with your career advisor to discuss these strategies and more.

Interview with Confidence Worksheet

Two types of questions you are likely to be asked in a job or internship interview include, “Tell me about yourself,” and a behavioral query, such as, “Tell me about a time you worked on a team.” With the former question, the employer is looking for you to articulate your interest in the position and industry—and to offer information about relevant skills and experience you bring to the position. With the latter question, the employer seeks your perspective on your behavior or handling of a specific situation, understanding past behavior predicts future behavior. In preparing to answer both questions, it is important to spend time reflecting on your experiences and be able to articulate not only what you did but also how these experiences influenced your career direction, workplace behavior, and occupational attitude.

TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF

For this question, consider an answer that provides some relevant background information about your interest in the field or position, in addition to your experience. This could be a brief story about events that have shaped your motivation to pursue the opportunity for which you are interviewing. Draw upon your answers to all or some of these questions to create a complete response:

- How did you become interested in this industry or job function? What classes, internships, books, or other engagements piqued your interest in this field?

- What have you done in this field to pursue or explore this interest? Alternatively, what solidified your initial curiosity?

- What experiences and accomplishments have given you the skills the employer is looking for?
(*These may include activities, leadership, internships, jobs, or volunteer opportunities you've taken part in.*)

- Why does this position interest you?

Prepare your answer

Now that you have done some self-reflection, prepare your answers. Remember interaction with employers is limited, so maximize your time with them by promoting yourself in an appropriate way to ultimately answer the question, “Why should we hire you?”

Sample script

- 5 seconds—Greeting: “Hello, my name is _____”
- 5 seconds—Educational Background: “I’m majoring in (or I’m graduating in May with a degree in) _____,” perhaps including an area of concentration or your minor.
- 5-10 seconds—Description of interest: “I am especially interested in _____ opportunity with your company/organization because of my experience _____,” which can include mention of a related internship, summer job or class, or research project.
- 5-10 seconds—Strengths and accomplishments related to your job target: Whatever highlights or strengths you select, use your own words. Convey your message naturally, without sounding rehearsed.
- 5-10 seconds—Summary or goal statement: Reasons you would be a good fit for the position or organization. Show you have researched the company thoroughly by sharing a personal career goal that aligns with the mission statement of that specific institution.

BEHAVIORAL QUESTIONS/STAR METHOD

Behavioral questions usually start with “Tell me about a time when ...” or “Give me an example of a time or experience when ...” The interviewer is looking for a concrete example that demonstrates a specific skill or quality that will make you an asset to their team. It is very important to provide particulars rather than to speak in generalities. It is useful to think of the answer to this kind of question as a story with a specific structure that relays not only the experience, but also what you learned from it.

STAR Method

One way to structure your story is captured by the mnemonic “STAR,” which stands for: Situation, Task, Action, Result.

- **Situation:** What was the situation, problem, conflict, or challenge you were facing?

- **Task:** What task(s) did you identify to respond to this situation or solve the problem?

- **Action:** What action did you take?

- **Results:** What lessons did you learn, what skills did you gain, and/or what qualities did you develop through this experience that will help you contribute to the prospective employer’s team in the position for which you are interviewing?

Remember that an employer wants to know if you have certain transferable skills and qualities that will help you be effective in the job.

STAR Method Example

Can you tell me about a significant problem you solved?

(S) This semester I was involved in a group project and presentation for an Introduction to Communication class.

(T) We needed to complete the project, but we had a group member who procrastinated for the first portion of the project. As the second step deadline approached, it was making some students nervous. People were upset with this group member and getting angry.

(A) I went to her in person and explained that we needed her part before our next meeting. While I knew she was a good student and did good work, because she was working with a team, things needed to be done further in advance not only for her group’s peace of mind, but also so that we could organize the presentation based on everyone’s information. She still thought it was unreasonable that everyone wanted the project so early, but she complied after she heard why it was important to the team and how it could affect her grade in the class.

(R) As a result, she submitted her contribution with enough time for everyone to be comfortable when it came time to present, and she and I continue to be friendly toward each other.

Commonly Asked Interview Questions

The most frequently asked question in any interview is “Tell me about yourself.”

Goals: personal and professional

- What are your short-term career objectives? What are your long-term career objectives? When and why did you establish these goals?
- How do you plan to achieve your career goals?
- What are the most important rewards you anticipate in a career?
- What qualities do you admire most in others?
- How do you determine or evaluate success?

Skills and abilities

- What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- What do you do for fun?
- If you were describing yourself, what five words would you use?
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- What is the most important lesson you have ever received in or out of an educational environment?
- What frustrates you the most? What was your greatest disappointment?
- Tell me about a difficult decision you had to make. How did you navigate it?
- What kinds of people do you find difficult to work with? How do you usually deal with conflict?
- Give me an example of a problem you solved and how you solved it.

Education

- Tell me how you chose your major. Why did you select the college or university you attended?
- Describe your most rewarding college experience.
- Which academic subjects did you enjoy the most? Why?
- Do you think your grades are a comprehensive indication of your academic achievement?
- What have you learned from participation in extracurricular activities?
- How have your education and/or training prepared you for this job?
- Do you have plans for continued study or an advanced degree?

Questions about the target job

- How qualified do you feel to perform this position? Why?
- With which aspects of the position do you feel most comfortable? Which aspects seem least comfortable? Why?
- What would you look for if you were hiring a person for this job?
- Why should we hire you?
- Why are you interested in this position? What about this job appeals to you most?
- What do you know about this company? What about our company interests you most?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?
- For which part or parts of this position would you need additional training?
- Are you willing to travel? Do you have a geographical preference? Why? Will you relocate? Does relocation bother you?

Management effectiveness (for use in supervisory positions)

- Describe your management style.
- Describe your leadership style. How do you motivate others?
- How would you go about establishing rapport with your staff?
- What qualities should a successful manager possess?
- What do you consider to be your greatest strength as a manager? What do you perceive to be your greatest shortcoming? Why?
- How do you delegate responsibility? Give me an example.
- Tell me about a rewarding supervisory experience you had.
- Tell me about a negative supervisory experience, the reasons surrounding it, and how you moved forward through that challenge.
- How would your staff describe you?

Most recent position

- What are your key responsibilities or objectives in your current or most recent position?
- Describe a typical day in your most recent job.
- What have been your major accomplishments while in this position?
- What impact have these accomplishments had on the organization?
- What aspects of your current position do you enjoy most? What aspects did you enjoy the least? Why?
- What aspects of your supervisor’s management style or philosophy do you appreciate? Which would you change? Why?
- If we talked to your current supervisor, references, or co-workers, how would they describe your performance?
- Why do you wish to leave your current position? What factors have led to this decision?

General work experience

- Tell me about your past work experience.
- Of the positions you have held, which did you enjoy the most? Which did you enjoy the least? Why?
- What work experience has been the most valuable to you and why?
- How do you work under pressure?
- Describe the kind of supervisor you like to work for.
- What have you learned in previous jobs that you can transfer to this job?
- Tell me about the most challenging or interesting job you have had. How have other positions you’ve held compared?
- Describe an innovative change you implemented in your last job.
- Using specific examples, how do you contribute toward an atmosphere of teamwork?

Questions for employers

- What opportunities are offered for personal and professional growth?
- What is a realistic time frame for advancement?
- How is an employee evaluated and promoted?
- What is the retention rate of people in the position for which I am interviewing?
- What makes your firm different from its competitors?
- How would you describe your corporation’s personality and management style?
- What are some of the skills and abilities necessary for someone to succeed in this position?

- What kind of work can I expect to be doing the first year?
- How would you describe the work environment?
- Why do you enjoy working for this company?

- How important does upper management consider the function of this department or position?
- Could you explain your organizational structure?

Dressing for the Interview

Clothing



Two-piece matched suit separates are always appropriate. Skirt-suits with bottom hems falling between 2" above or below the knee or a business pantsuit are acceptable.



Make sure your tie, when knotted, comes to the middle of your belt buckle. Bright ties bring focus to the face, but a simple pattern or solid color is best.



Everything about your ensemble should be clean, well-pressed, and professional.



Choose solid colors (navy, blue, tan, gray, burgundy, black, or beige) and tightly woven fabrics.



Wear polished shoes with dark socks high enough to not show skin when you sit down and cross your legs.



Don't forget to open the tacked vents at the back of the jacket if the suit is new.



Shoes should be closed-toe and closed-heel with low to moderately high heels. Dark leather, low-heeled options are the best choice.



If wearing a 3-button suit, leave the bottom button open.

Accessories



Match your shoe and belt color—don't mix black and brown.



Natural-colored hosiery or opaque tights that best match your suit color are wise to wear with pant- or skirt-suits.



Remove visible body piercings including nose, eyebrow, or multiple earrings in one ear.



Keep jewelry to a minimum. The Rule of 13 is helpful here; if you count more than 13 accessories—including buttons, bracelets, rings, earrings, and watches—you risk overwhelming with your outfit.



Small stud earrings are preferable to oversized earrings that tend to have a lot of movement, which can be distracting.

Body/facial



Facial hair should be neat and clean.



Use perfume or cologne sparingly.



Fingernails should be neat, clean, trimmed, and not excessively long. Conservative nail polish colors are a good choice—avoid unusual colors, such as green, blue, or lavender.



Opt for light and natural-looking cosmetics.



Hair should be clean, trimmed, and combed or styled.



Cover visible body art with clothing if possible.



Do not chew gum, candy, or carry cigarettes.

Handling Illegal Questions

Employers are permitted to ask questions based upon a bona fide occupational qualification. This means that employers can ask applicants if they have a valid driver's license, the ability to stand for periods of time, or a required degree if such qualifications are necessary to perform a given job and are essential to the operation of the employer's business.

Most employers know not to ask applicants direct questions about race, religion, age, or other protected categories, but other illegal questions may not be as obvious. Employers are guided by federal and state laws that prohibit the invasion of an applicant's privacy and attempt to guarantee equal employment opportunities for individuals. Federal anti-discrimination laws prohibit an employer from eliminating an applicant based upon race, color, sex/gender, age, national origin, religion, or disability.

Most states have adopted their own anti-discrimination laws that protect the protected categories and may also protect additional individuals. Several states' anti-discrimination laws include sexual orientation as a protected class. Employers must also navigate laws and regulations that seek to limit their ability to pry into an individual's personal history.

If asked an illegal question you have three options:

- You can refuse to answer, which is well within your rights. If you choose this option be mindful of your word choices and tone—you could be seen as being difficult or argumentative.
- You can answer the question, and you are free to do so. Remember, though, that you are giving information that is not relevant to the job. In addition, unbeknownst to you, you may be giving the “wrong” answer in the eyes of the employer so it may actually hurt your chances.
- You can think quickly and discern what the employer is actually trying to find out. For example, “Are you a U.S. citizen?” could be answered as “I am authorized to work in the U.S.”

| INTERVIEW QUESTIONS | | |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Inquiry Area | Illegal Questions | Legal Questions |
| Age | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not require an applicant's age, date of birth, or for records to prove his/her age. • Year of graduation from high school. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An employer may ask whether an individual meets the minimum age requirements set by law. “Are you over the age of 18?” is an appropriate question. |
| National Origin/ Citizenship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you a U.S. citizen? • Where were you/your parents born? • What is your “native tongue”? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you authorized to work in the United States? |
| Race/ Color | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All questions regarding a person's race/color will be deemed illegal under state and federal law. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None |
| Religion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any question with regard to an applicant's religious beliefs, denomination, or any questions that indicate religious customs or holidays observed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After an individual is hired, an employer may inquire about religious accommodations. |
| Marital/ Family Status | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you married? • With whom do you live? • Do you plan to have a family? • What are your child-care arrangements? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you be willing to relocate if necessary? • Would you be able and willing to work overtime as necessary? |
| Personal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How tall are you? • How much do you weigh? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you able to lift a 50-pound weight and carry it 100 yards, as that is part of the job? |
| Disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any disabilities? • Please complete the following medical history. • How is your family's health? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you able to perform the essential job functions? • Can you demonstrate how you would perform the following job-related functions? |
| Arrest Record | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever been arrested? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever been convicted of _____? |
| Military | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you've been in the military, were you honorably discharged? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what branch of the Armed Forces did you serve? • What type of training or education did you receive in the military? |

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