

# Preparing *for an* Interview

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The character of a man is known from his conversations.

*Menander (342 - 292 BC)*



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**CAREER SERVICES**  
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# Researching *the* Company

Hopefully, you did some research when you wrote your cover letter and applied. Maybe you looked up the company's website or talked to people familiar with the organization. In preparing for the interview you should continue where you left off and begin more in-depth research on the company and the profession in which you work.

Start with the company website. Learn about what they do and how they approach what they do. Many companies have annual reports or goals or similar documents through which you can learn much about the organization.

For research about your profession including salary, job outlook and much more, the US Department of Labor through the Bureau of Labor Statistics puts out the Occupational Outlook Handbook ([www.bls.gov/ooh/](http://www.bls.gov/ooh/)). Another Department of Labor website with additional information is called O\*Net ([www.onetonline.org](http://www.onetonline.org)). Either site will give you a ton of data and information you can use in an interview.

## O\*NET OnLine

Other websites offer information on salary and benefits by region and profession ([salary.com](http://salary.com)). The National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE) has a salary calculator that is very good as well (<http://www.jobsearchintelligence.com/NACE/jobseekers/salary-calculator.php>)



You should also research the local culture, cost of living, schools, etc. if the prospective job entails moving. Local chambers of commerce and tourist sites often have information for people moving to their area. A chamber of commerce is an organization made up of businesses in a region to promote and encourage commerce and tourism. If you do a web search with the name of the town, state and the phrase "chamber of commerce" you will find the web site for the area you want to investigate.

# First Dates *are* Interviews

In the movie *Van Wilder*, a college newspaper reporter (*Gwen*) is trying to schedule an interview with the main character and "big man on campus" (*Van*) who would rather that interview be something more. When a time is finally decided upon, the following conversation takes place.

**Van Wilder** ..... **It's a date!**  
**Gwen** ..... **It's an interview.**  
**Van Wilder** ..... **Gwen, first dates are interviews.**

Finding a job is like dating, and interviews are, as Van Wilder points out, first dates. You should think of finding a job like dating, after all you are going to spend more awake time at work than with a significant other. Take a look at the numbers.

<b>Total hours per work week (M-F)</b> .....	<b>120</b>
<b>Hours spent at work</b> .....	<b>47.5*</b>
<b>Hours spent sleeping</b> .....	<b>34*</b>
<b>Hours per week commuting</b> .....	<b>3.9**</b>
	<b>34.6</b>

When you start adding things like bringing work home, having a hobby, shuttling kids to their events, cooking meals, cleaning the house and the other details life throws us, the amount of quality time is cut down even more.

It becomes obvious then that a key to being happy in life is finding a career that is a good match to your talents, values, and/or personality and at which spending 46+ hours a week is not a burden. So, thinking about 'getting a job' should be thought of more like on-line dating: check out possible matches, do some research and read about them, initiate contact in a written form and then, if both parties are interested, set up a first date...or interview.

*\* The National Sleep Foundation: 2012 Sleep in America Poll. The average employed American works a 47.5-hour work week; 38% of the respondents in their study worked more than 50 hours per week. The average American gets 6.7 hours of sleep during the week and 7.6 hours on the weekend.*

*\*\* The US Census Bureau: American Community Survey (ACS). If you live in or around large cities your commute will be more than 3.9 hours/week (47 minutes round trip). People in New York City on average will spend almost 8 hours a week commuting or one full week each year.*

# Dressing *for* Success

While much work goes into preparing for an interview, an interview can be won or lost in the first few seconds. For an interview and larger career success you need to put away the jeans, sneakers and book bag, and get your ‘pro look’ together.

How should I dress for an interview? The general recommendation is to dress the way a person two levels higher would dress. For most situations, interview attire should be traditional business (*see below*). When in doubt, dress up. You also want to consider the culture of both the company and the geography: business people on the west coast dress more casually than those on the east. Business casual is a good rule for technical positions, but, again, when in doubt dress up.

If you want to be sure you are dressed appropriately, you can call the company and politely ask what the expectations for dress are. Some occupations, like Veterinary Technicians, use working interviews. If you are expecting a working interview, you should bring a bag with working clothes to change into.

## Traditional Business Dress for Men

- Two-piece suit in black, dark grey or blue
- White long-sleeve shirt and conservative tie (*no big patterns or picture ties*)
- Dark belt that matches shoes (*cleaned & polished leather wingtips or loafers*)
- Dark color dress socks that match your pants

## Business Casual for Men

- Dress or khaki pants
- Shirt with a collar (*no polo's or t-shirts*)
- Sport coat (*optional*)
- Clean, polished shoes

## Traditional Dress for Women

- Professional/conservative looking pants or knee-length skirt with a jacket, or a suit
- Clothes should fit appropriately: not baggy or tight
- Neutral colored nylons
- Closed-toe low-heeled shoes that are clean and polished

## Business Casual for Women

- Dressy skirt or pants with coordinating jacket
- Blouse, shell or sweater
- Closed-toe low-heeled shoes

## Good Grooming for Interviews

*You may be tempted to ‘get spiffed up’ for your interview. When it comes to grooming, keep it clean and simple.*

- Shower and style hair neatly
- Clip fingernails
- Use no or VERY light aftershave/perfume/cologne
- Be careful of strongly scented soaps and shampoos
- No gum chewing during the interview
- Keep jewelry to a minimum and keep it simple
- Rings: no more than one per hand
- Remove any pins or buttons from suit lapels
- Do not eat strong smelling food before your interview
- Be careful of strong odors your clothes can pick up on the way (smokers, restaurants, etc.)





# Questions You Should Ask!

Based on the research you do and the information you want to know, you should generate at least five questions to ask the interviewer about the job, company or situation.

## Here are some examples:

- What kind of supervision can I expect?
- What opportunities exist for me to advance?
- I noticed on the website \_\_\_\_\_. How is that going? Would you tell me more about that?
- Are there any professional development opportunities?
- Why is this position available?
- What do you like the most about working for this company? The least?
- What are the most challenging aspects of the position?
- What are the people on the team like?

# the Interviewer's Checklist

Preparing and sitting for an interview is nerve-wracking enough without having to keep track of lots of the details. Below is a checklist to help prepare you for the interview and help you remember details during and after. You might even want to carry this list or a shortened version with you to the interview.

## Week Before Your Interview

- Research the company, the industry and their competition.
- Make a list of your strengths and weaknesses paying particular interest to those strengths that relate to qualities for which the company is looking.
- Write at least five success stories that illustrate your strengths to answer behavioral interview questions.
- Prepare your 30-second personal statement -- your answer to the "Tell me about yourself" question.
- From your research write five questions to ask the interviewer about the position, supervision, company culture and/or whatever else you want to know about.
- Research cost of living in the area where you would be working and the typical pay for positions in the area.
- Drive to the location where you will have your interview so you know where you are going and how long it takes to get there.
- Make sure you have clothing appropriate for the interview. If you don't, go shopping. You might also want to buy a nice portfolio in which to carry your career documents and a pad of paper.

## Night Before Your Interview

- Lay out your clothes making sure everything is clean and ironed.
- Make sure you have printed 4-5 extra copies of your résumé and references on good paper.
- Your portfolio contains your career documents, pad of paper with questions for you to ask the employer and a pen.
- Directions to the interview site have been checked and are in your portfolio along with the name of the person with whom you are interviewing.

## At the Interview

- Arrive 10-15 minutes early.
- Be kind and professional to everyone you run into including secretaries and receptionists. Announce yourself to the receptionist in a professional manner.
- Take a 'last check' trip to the bathroom. Do you look professional? Is your hair right? Nothing in your teeth? Spit out your gum.
- Review your prepared stories and answers.
- Stand and greet your interviewer with a hearty -- not bone-crushing -- handshake.
- Smile and look into the interviewer's eyes.

## During the Interview

- Sit with both feet on the ground. Don't cross your legs.
- Sit up straight and don't slouch or put your hands or elbows on tables, desks or chair arms.
- If you 'talk with your hands' try to keep them under control as much as possible.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Relax and enjoy the conversation. Learn what you can about the company.
- Try to focus on the points you have prepared without sounding rehearsed or stiff.
- Ask questions and listen; read between the lines.
- At the conclusion, thank the interviewer, and determine the next steps.
- Ask for the interviewer's business card so you can send a follow-up letter. This is important so you can address the thank you letter (*see below*) correctly.

## After the Interview

- As soon as possible, write down what you are thinking and feeling.
- Later in the day, review what you wrote, and assess how you did.
- Write a follow-up thank-you letter. Include information about a topic you enjoyed talking about with the interviewer or restate an answer you thought made an impact or reiterate why you are excited for this position.

There are many websites with valuable information for your job search. Check out Career Insider and video tutorials on Career Spots both on the SUNY Canton Career Services site: [www.canton.edu/career](http://www.canton.edu/career)

## Other sites:



# Tell *us* About Yourself...

In virtually every interview, the following question will be asked first: “Tell us a little about yourself and why you are interested in this position.” The question is your opportunity to say succinctly what it is about you that makes you a compelling candidate. It is the one question for which you should have a memorized or planned answer.

**The danger of this question is that it sounds so easy!** However, if you do not plan your answer or memorize it you could go on and on about any number of things completely unrelated to the job. The task is to communicate the best information in the shortest amount of time. You need to be succinct and compelling. Think of it as a radio commercial for you.

Also, stay away from personal information like being married or how many kids you have. That information is illegal for the employer to ask. If you share that information it may be used against you. An example, you share that you are recently married. An employer may act happy for you, but they may also assume that you will be having kids soon and they may lose you to maternity/paternity leave. See more about illegal questions in the “Other Interview Tips” section.

Think about what it is about you that best matches with this position. Describe that and then tie it to why you want the job. For example, let’s assume Betty is applying for a position as a nurse at ABC Hospital this may be how she answers the ‘Tell us about yourself’ question.



*I am graduating this May from SUNY Canton with an Associate’s degree in nursing. My aunt is a nurse, and she often talked about her career. When I expressed interest in nursing, she encouraged me to take every opportunity to shadow nurses at work, to volunteer at hospitals and expose myself to the nursing profession. I have seen the good and bad and continue to be inspired by the commitment to care that nurses have and find energy and enthusiasm for the work. It is those qualities I see in ABC Hospital and it is those qualities that I want to bring to this position.*

**Don’t take the question for granted.  
Plan it out and practice, practice, practice.**



# Behavior Questions *and the* STAR Technique

Standard interview questions like the ones we have provided as samples ask you to speculate or theorize about an answer. In an interview, an employer is trying to find out how you will behave as an employee. Behavioral questions seek to find out how you acted in in the past to similar situations to the ones you will face in the job...if you are hired.

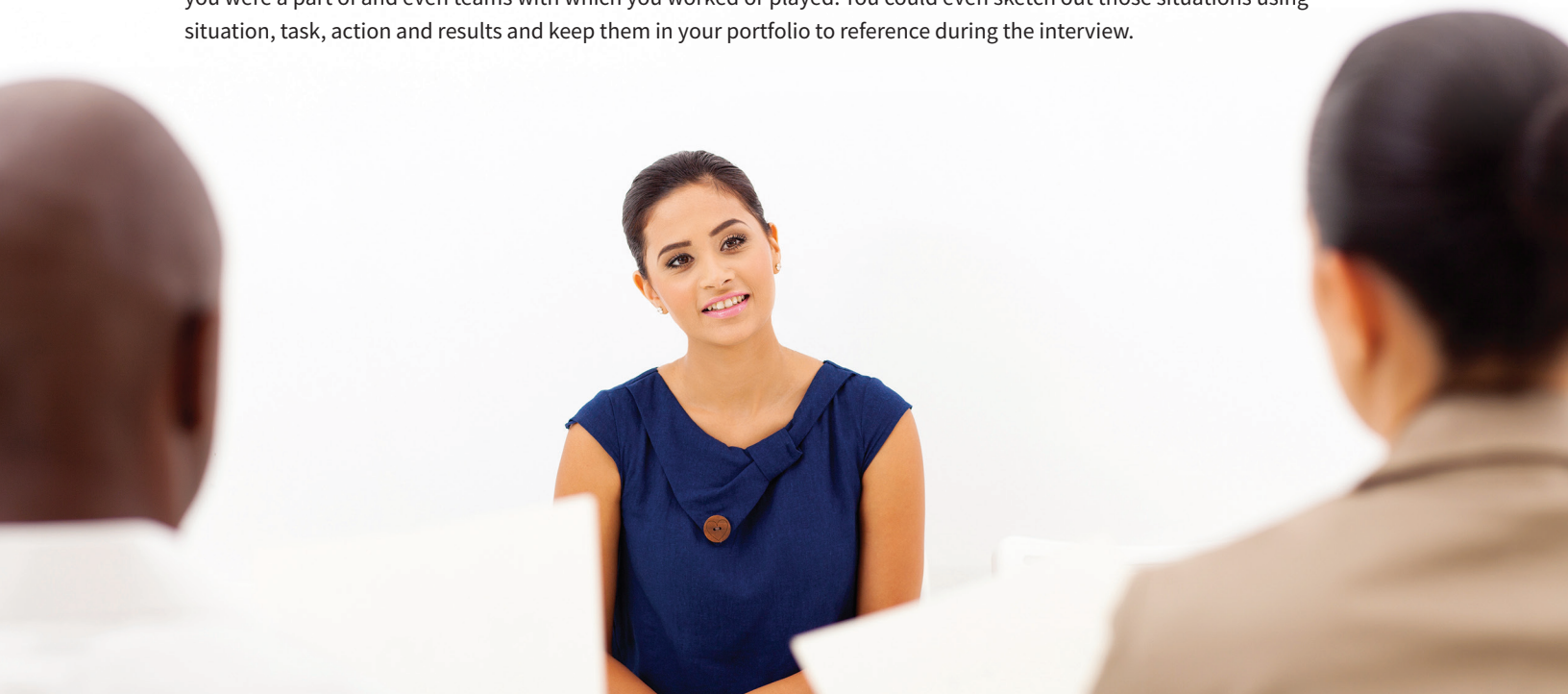
**That is the main premise of behavioral questions: The best indicator of future behavior is past behavior.**

Anytime you are asked a question that begins with “Tell us about a time...” or “Give us an example...” you are begin given a behavior question. When you get a behavioral question use the **STAR technique** which helps you give a STELLAR answer. STAR stands for S = Situation, T = Task, A = Action, R = Result. See if you can see the STAR in this example:

Tell me about a time when you got a group of people together to make something happen.

“ *We had a really good band in high school, and we wanted to go to the State band competition. The problem was we didn't have enough uniforms for everyone and some needed mending. My school no longer had money for band uniforms. If we were going to compete we needed to raise \$5,000. I got a bunch of students together and coordinated a series of fundraisers over three months. We surprised everyone, even ourselves: we raised \$10,000. New uniforms were purchased and the morale boost helped us to place 3rd the state band competition after not competing for five years.*

To prepare for behavioral questions in your interview, you should think about your talents, successes and projects you were a part of and even teams with which you worked or played. You could even sketch out those situations using situation, task, action and results and keep them in your portfolio to reference during the interview.



# Sample Behavior Questions

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- Tell us about a time when you had to make a hard decision and what decision did you make.
- Describe a time when you had to work hard to overcome an obstacle.
- Tell us about a time when you showed leadership.
- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- Give me an example of a time when you set a goal and were able to meet or achieve it.

# Sample Interview Questions

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The key to success at any endeavor is practice. Answer as many questions below as you can on your own or with friends. In addition to the ones below, you can try a practice interview through the OptimalInterview system on the Career Services web site. Through OptimalInterview you can pick the employer you want to practice with (an actor), how many questions and the kind of interview. If you have a web camera and microphone you can even record yourself and see how you did! You can also search the internet for sample interview questions.

**These sample questions are taken from QuintCareers.com**

- Why did you leave your last position, or why are you leaving your current position?
- What do you know about this company?
- What are your goals?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Why do you want to work for this company?
- What has been your most significant achievement?
- How would your last boss and colleagues describe you?
- Why should we hire you?
- How would you describe yourself?
- What do you see yourself doing five years from now? Ten years from now?
- What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?
- Can you explain this gap in your employment history?
- How well do you work with people? Do you prefer working alone or in teams?
- How would you evaluate your ability to deal with conflict?
- Describe the best job you've ever had.
- Describe the best supervisor you've ever had.
- What would your last boss say about your work performance?
- What motivates you to go the extra mile on a project or job?
- What makes you qualified for this position?
- What are the attributes of a good leader? Do you consider yourself a leader?
- What's the most recent book you've read?
- Do you have plans for continued study? An advanced degree?





# Other Interview Tips

## Anticipate the Hard Questions

One of the laws of the universe is that any question you are worried an employer will ask will in fact be asked...unless you have prepared for it. Rather than hope an interviewer will not ask you about things like employment gaps or 'job hopping' (where you don't stay in jobs long), low GPA, or lack of experience, prepare good answers to the questions of which you are most afraid, practice them and have them ready.

## Don't End the Interview Before It Ends

Even when you think you are doing poorly, composure can make up for bad answers. Continue answering questions as best as you can...confidently. If you begin realizing that you are failing an interview, do not panic and whatever you do not give up or walk out instead take a big breath, ask for time to think about a next question, and focus. When it is over, shake the hand of the interviewer and thank her/him for the opportunity.

## Money Questions

You generally do not ask about salary and benefits in an initial interview. Discussion about pay is reserved for after they have offered you the position and before you have accepted. However, an interviewer may ask you about salary in an initial interview. Answer with a range and not just one particular salary. That is why it is important to do some research about average pay for the position and the cost of living in the area.

## Illegal Questions

In the U.S., interview questions that ask about information that could be used to discriminate against you are not allowed. Questions about age, race, disability, gender, national origin, religion or family situation are generally not asked, but they can be. If you get asked an 'illegal' question you basically have three options: answer it, refuse to answer it or redirect the question. For example, if you are asked about marital status or if you have kids you could answer "I like to keep my personal life private." It is also important to point out that just because you have been asked an 'illegal' question does not mean a crime was committed. The question for an interviewee is whether there is a good reason for an illegal question to be asked; is it related to the job. Being asked an 'illegal' question may tell you a lot about the company.



# When is an interview *not* an interview?

...when it's a phone interview...or a web interview...or a group interview. Not all interviews are one-on-one and face-to-face.

## Phone Interviews

Many employers use phone interviews as a cost-saving way to make initial or screening interviews. Sound easy? That's just what makes it hard. Here are some tips.

- PRACTICE! Call a friend and have them ask you some interview questions. The hardest part of a phone interview is knowing when to STOP TALKING!
- Prepare as if it was a face-to-face interview. Print your resume and have talking points ready.
- Do NOT relax. Dress up and sit in a straight backed chair.
- Smile! Your tone changes when you smile...even on the phone.
- Use a landline or make sure you have a strong cell signal. You want your interviewer to be able to hear you...clearly.
- Is your cell phone professional? "Ring backs," phone tweaks, and unprofessional voicemails can leave a bad impression.
- Quiet environment & no distractions. Make the call where it is quiet: no pets, friends, cars, kids, etc.
- Have the company's website open to be able to reference it during the interview.
- Be careful! Phones are sensitive and can pick up other sounds that may make an employer think you are not paying attention.
- Carve out time. Do not try to 'squeeze in' a phone interview on a break or over lunch.
- Use the Mute button. If you have to sneeze, type, drink, or anything noisy, mute buttons are great!
- Test the mute button. Some phones give a signal to the listener when mute is engaged. Test it first.
- Answer the phone professionally. "Hello, this is [name]."
- Send a thank you within 1-2 hours.

## Web Interviews

Skype, Google Hangouts, and other systems are being used by employers as alternatives to phones that provide more visual information. An interviewee should be careful of all that an employer can see!

- What is your background? Look around you. What will the camera see? Make the environment professional.
- PRACTICE! Connect with a friend and have them ask you some interview questions. Ask them what they see and how you look.

- Eye contact. If you are looking at their image, you aren't looking them in the eye! Look at the camera!
- Microphones hear everything. Just like phones, microphones are sensitive and can pick up sounds that may make an employer think you are not paying attention.
- Watch Yourself. Use the picture-in-picture function to keep an eye on how you look to the employer.

Web Interviews...at the company?!

- Larger companies may have you go to a branch location and have a video interview with someone at the home office. Dress and prepare just like a face-to-face interview. Even if you are tech-savvy, ask for an overview of the video system and how it works.

## Group Interviews

There are two types of group interviews: where there is a group of interviewers and where you are in a group of interviewees. The biggest tip when being interviewed by a group is to talk to the group, not just to one person. Listen and focus on the person asking a question, but while responding look at each of the group members in turn.

When you are interviewing with a group of interviewees, employers are usually seeking to learn how the candidates interact with people in a team. When you answer a question make your points, but remember it is also important to interact with the other interviewees. Do not dominate the conversation. Encourage others who may be shy. Do not try to outdo other people's answers. Also, do your research on the company before hand and use that research in your answers. Show you did your homework!



# The Wheel *of* Career Transition

You interviewed and got the job! It is a long and complicated process a lot like dating and getting married. Like personal relationships, you can get into work relationships that just do not fit. Whether you are figuring out exactly what you want to do or you need to engineer a career change, to make a good career decision take some time and follow the wheel of career research.





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