

INTERVIEWS

Learn what to expect and how to deal with the unexpected

In this tipsheet, you'll learn what to do before, during and after interviews to give you the best chance of success. We'll show you some important strategies to help you get started.

What is an interview?

Many people think of an interview as a “test,” though it’s more helpful to think of an interview as a *conversation* between you and the employer about the work that needs to be done. Interviews run both ways. Interviews allow employers to assess your fit for the work that needs to be done and interviews allow you to assess the position or company’s fit for you. Be prepared to talk about your interests, skills and personality and how they relate to your career goals and the way you work.

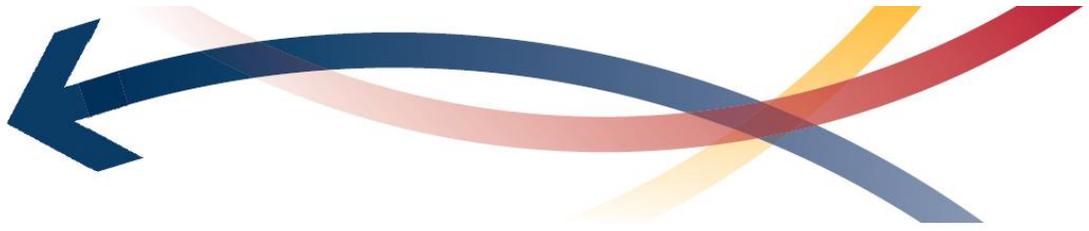
Before the interview

GENERAL STRATEGIES

- **Research the work and the organization** so that you know something about the uniqueness of the occupation and why it fits you. Visit company/organization websites for facts and editorial opinions about facets of the work. Build a list of questions that you have for the interviewer(s).
- **Prepare some answers** to common interview questions and your approach to answering unexpected questions using the formula described below.
- **Prepare “real” answers, not “right” answers.** Avoid vague answers like, “I am a team player with a variety of experiences” and naïve statements like, “Being a ___ requires patience, dedication and a thirst for learning...” Instead, tell succinct and vivid stories about your experiences that enable the interviewer(s) to get to know you and to see your potential for their organization.
- **See a career counsellor** to improve your answers, complete a mock interview, and get feedback on your interview skills with personalized strategies on how to succeed.

Types of Questions

Interview questions and processes vary between organizations and areas of work, but they are often composed of a combination of question categories, including general or traditional questions, action-based questions and behavioural questions. Less commonly, you may be asked off-the-wall or illegal questions.



The Introduction: “Tell me about yourself.”

Most interviews will start with a question like “Tell me about yourself.” It is wise to have a 30-second “blurb” about yourself prepared. Hit the high points of who you are, including your school and program, your recent work/volunteer activities, and skills and interests valuable for the prospective position. Consider what valuable information the employer may not have been able to learn about you from your submitted application as well. Remain genuine and avoid reciting facts that aren’t relevant for the position of interest. Contemplate these two approaches as you develop your approach to answering “tell me about yourself” questions:

Chronological: provide a narrative of some recent or impactful career experiences and how they relate to you being interested in the position.

Example: I chose History for my studies at university because I was really interested in what happens in times of crisis. That has been beneficial because I have been able to concentrate on recent history and legislation. My summer experience at the House of Commons has made me realize I want to do more work in a legislature environment.

Personal Qualities: speak to some of your most valuable personal qualities that would be appealing to the employer while providing evidence from your life experiences.

*Examples: I discovered that something really important to me in my work is _____.
The three things about myself that are most valuable for this opportunity are _____.
Something you wouldn’t know about me from my resume is _____.*

General or Traditional Questions

Aim: traditional questions help interviewers get to know you, get a sense of your ability to connect with people and find out about the match between you and the company/job

Examples:

- Why do you want to work here?
- What interests you most about the position? The least?
- What do you know about our organization?
- What are your strengths or weaknesses?
- What qualifications will make you successful in this position?
- What did you learn from your volunteer work?
- What kind of supervisor and work environment do you like?
- What have you learned from any of the positions you have held? Any important lessons? Any significant failures?
- What aspects of this job will be most satisfying? Stressful?

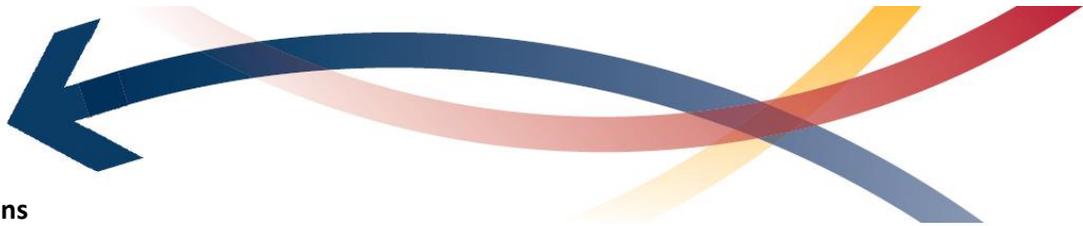
Use Your P-U-L-L

When preparing your interview question answers, brainstorm experiences from the following areas of your life:

Paid Work
Unpaid Work
Learning
Leisure

Sharing stories from these areas helps you show:

Diverse experiences
Work/life balance
Your personality
Range of experience



Action-Based Questions

Aim: action-based questions are intended to simulate a skill requirement and give candidates an opportunity to showcase their abilities.

Examples:

1. Please give us a 2-minute presentation on something you've learned in the last year.
2. Please explain to me the basic principles of fluid mechanics and how you would use that knowledge to build a simple wind turbine.
3. Read this information about our client, then present your suggested solution to the problem. Explain your rationale and evidence supporting your suggested course of action.

Behaviour-based Questions

Aim: behavior-based question reveal evidence of past behaviours and experiences that can be predictors of how you will work in the job for which you are interviewing. Behaviour-based questions often begin with the phrase: "Tell me about a time when."

Examples:

- Tell me about a time when lead people through a difficulty.
- Tell me about a time when you conformed to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with a co-worker.
- Tell me about a time when you failed at something.
- Three managers are asking for projects to be finished on the same day. What would you do?
- You see someone in your immediate working group who is cheating the employer. Has this ever happened in your education? What, if anything, would you do?

Off-The-Wall Questions

Questions such as "If you could be any kind of kitchen appliance, what would you be?" are not usually mainstays in interviewing. If you are asked an odd question, consider what characteristics or traits you want to share with your interviewer(s)—based on the job description—and answer with these in mind.

The S-T-A-R Formula

A great framework for answering interview questions.

Situation

Briefly describe a specific situation you experienced

Tactics

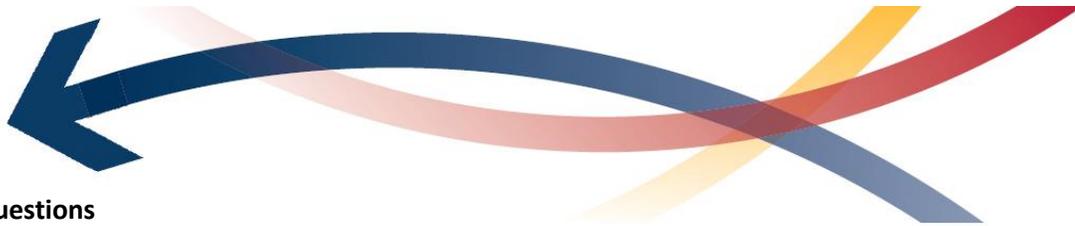
Convey your rationale for dealing with the situation

Actions

Outline your step-by-step course of action

Results

Detail the tangible outcomes of your efforts



Illegal or Unethical Questions

Questions about your age, gender, race, sexual orientation and marital status are illegal for employers to ask during an interview. For more information about your rights as an interviewee: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/iv-human-rights-issues-all-stages-employment/5-interviewing-and-making-hiring-decisions>.

Your Questions for the Interviewer

Having questions prepared for your interviewer(s) will show that you did your research about the position and the company/organization. Asking questions also allows you to make sure the job is a good fit for you.

Examples:

- Can you tell me what a typical day in this job would be like?
- What do you think will be the major challenges to your organization over the next 5 years?
- What changes would you like to see made over the next year by the person who takes this job?

During the interview

GENERAL STRATEGIES

- Bring several copies of your resume and your references
- Dress 10% better than you would dress going to work on a regular day
- Arrive 10 minutes early
- Treat everyone you meet as the interviewer (employees talk)
- Use the STAR formula for unexpected questions
- Remember important qualities / characteristics from the job description
- Share eye contact between interviewers
- Don't drink too much coffee (too much caffeine will make you appear nervous)

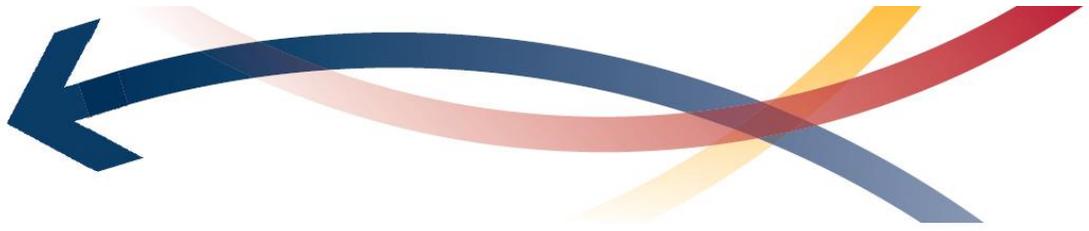
Using the STAR Formula – An Example

Situation: *During my internship last summer, I was responsible for managing various events.*

Task: *I noticed that attendance at these events had dropped by 30% over the past 3 years and wanted to do something to improve these numbers.*

Action: *I designed a new promotional packet to go out to the local community businesses. I also included a rating sheet to collect feedback on our events and organized internal round table discussions to raise awareness of the issue with our employees.*

Result: *We utilized some of the wonderful ideas we received from the community, made our internal systems more efficient and visible and raised attendance by 18% the first year.*



After the interview

- **Learn from the experience.** Make notes about what went well and what you would like to improve upon for the next time you meet with an employer.
- **Decide whether to accept an offer.** You are looking for a two-way match with a position that is consistent with your strengths. Once you have accepted an offer, even verbally, employers will consider this a binding commitment.
- **Treat people as if you will meet them again your career** because you probably will.
- **Follow up.** Send the interviewers a written thank-you letter for the opportunity to learn more about them and the position. If appropriate, confirm your interest in the opportunity; otherwise withdraw from the hiring process in writing.
- **Respond to an offer in writing.** Indicate whether you are accepting or declining the offer and complete any actions you were asked to take as a condition of the offer.

Want to learn more?

Check out our [Winning Interviews I & II workshops](#) to develop your skills.

Career Services offers [Drop-in Career Advising](#) to answer quick questions related to all aspects of your career planning and job search - Monday to Thursday from 1:30pm to 3:30pm.

For more in-depth explanations, check the following resources in our [Career Information Area](#):

- *Get the Interview Edge* by Kim Chung & Elisa Hui
- *Job Interview Success* by Jenny Rogers
- *60 Seconds & You're Hired* by Robin Ryan