

PREPARING FOR INTERVIEWS

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Researching Yourself

1. Think back on your previous experiences (work, academic, extracurricular) to determine the skills and abilities used in each.
2. Develop a list of your five to seven strongest skills for a particular position. Also, review the work-related values inventory, selecting the nine top values as factors to help you find the right organizational fit.
3. Work with a counselor to explore your skills, interests, personality style, and values as they relate to your career choice.

Researching the Position/Field

1. Review CDC and online resources describing various career fields.
2. Talk with personal contacts and alumni—available through the **Stanford CareerConnect** (alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/career) about the nature of their work and the organization they represent. The Guide to Informational Interviews, available on the CDC website, will help you prepare for this kind of informational interview.
3. When a job description is available, list the key skills being sought so that you can match your skills/strengths with the needs being listed. It is helpful to develop an example from your experiences to demonstrate each skill.

Researching the Organization

1. View CDC publications and resources listing information on specific employers.
2. Visit the organization's website.
3. Review the resources in the Rosenberg Corporate Research Collection located in Jackson Library at the Business School.
4. Prepare questions to ask about the organization during the interview (see **QUESTIONS TO ASK EMPLOYERS** section).

Mock or Practice Interviews

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT! Review the commonly asked interview questions and prepare answers in advance. You don't want to appear rehearsed, but you do want to sound prepared. The more practice you have answering typical questions, the better able you are to convey your ideas in a clear, concise manner.

1. Attend one of the many Interviewing Workshops conducted each quarter at the CDC.
2. Use InterviewStream, via your Cardinal Careers account, to conduct practice interviews.
3. Talk with a CDC counselor about how to present yourself most favorably in an interview.

Preparing for Questions

1. Whenever possible, answer questions using specific examples to support your response. Think of the acronym **STAR** (situation or task, action, and result), a simple three-step process that will enable you to focus on specific experiences to support your responses:
 - **Situation or Task**—describe a task or project for which you had responsibility
 - **Action**—talk about the approach you took to deal with the situation
 - **Result**—discuss the outcome of your action, making sure to mention accomplishments or improvements resulting from your action

Emphasize the most relevant and impressive aspects of your background and qualifications (including paid and volunteer work).

3. Stress that the skills you have developed in the past are transferable to the employer's organization.

4. Speak in positive terms about previous experiences and employers.

5. Don't be afraid to talk about accomplishments and skills (assume that what you don't tell an interviewer, she/he won't know). Also, don't assume they have read your resume in depth.

6. If possible, include an example (either extracurricular or in a work situation) of your ability to work as a part of a team.

TYPICAL STAGES OF AN INTERVIEW

The First Impression

1. Introduction and greeting
2. Small talk (brief, informal conversation on a topic of mutual interest—keep comments short)
3. Employer is looking for a firm handshake, eye contact, appearance and dress appropriate to the organization, ease in social situations, good manners and poise

Discussion of Background and Qualifications

1. Education
 - a) relevance of coursework to career interests
 - b) willingness to work hard
2. Work experience
 - a) relevance of skills developed to position being sought
 - b) motivation, enthusiasm
 - c) initiative
 - d) willingness to follow directions
 - e) ability to get along with others, team player
3. Extracurriculars
 - a) diversity of interests
 - b) social conscience
 - c) leadership or teamwork/organizing ability

Determination of Your Career Goals

1. Preparation for employment
2. Knowledge of opportunities
3. Graduate school plans (best to describe as at least two years in the future)

Demonstration of Your Interest in the Organization

1. Knowledge of and genuine interest in the organization
2. An opportunity to ask informed and relevant questions, to learn more about the employer

Conclusion

1. Next steps in the interviewing process are discussed—ask for the organization's time-line in the decision-making process if one is not mentioned
2. Volunteer to provide additional information (i.e., references, transcript, etc.)
3. Thank the interviewer for his/her time
4. Ask for a business card—this will be helpful when sending your thank-you letter

Review

1. Go over the positive and negative points of each interview and modify your responses
2. Learn from your mistakes and build on your strengths

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introductory

- Why did you choose to attend Stanford?
- What are some of the greatest personal challenges you have faced during your lifetime?
- What motivates you?

Skills and Personal Qualities

- What skills or personal qualities do you possess that will help make you successful in today's job market?
- Tell me about yourself (ask what type of information the employer is looking for, skills? personal background?).
- What special skills do you possess that would make you stand out from other candidates?
- Describe a frustrating or challenging experience you've encountered and tell me how you dealt with it.
- Discuss some of your past leadership/teamwork roles and your accomplishments in them.
- Why should our organization hire you?
- Who was the most difficult person you have ever dealt with, and how did you handle the situation?
- Can you think of a specific situation that reflects your ability to show initiative? Describe it.
- What is your greatest weakness, what have you done to try to overcome it?

Career Goals and Objectives

- What are your long range career goals and how are you preparing to achieve them?
- Why are you interested in this industry/occupation?
- Why do you want to work for our organization?
- What do you see yourself doing in three to five years?

Extracurricular Activities and College Experiences

- Please describe your most rewarding college experience.
- If you could relive your college experience, what would you do differently?

Academic Programs

- What factors influenced your choice of a major?
- What were your favorite and least favorite courses?
- What is your grade point average and how do you feel about this?
- Are you satisfied with your academic accomplishments?
- What courses gave you the most difficulty?
- How has your coursework prepared you for this position?

Work Experiences

- What did you enjoy most about your most recent job experience?
- Please elaborate on your most relevant work experience.
- What do you see as your major strengths as they apply to this position?

Accomplishments/Achievements

- What else would you like us to know about you?

- Of what accomplishment are you most proud?

Knowledge of Organization/Industry

- Why did you select our organization with which to interview?
- What attracts you to this industry?
- What do you know about our organization?
- Why do you think you'd like working for our organization?

Salary and Benefits

- When comparing one company offer to another, 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).

Unusual Questions

These questions seldom have right or wrong answers. Even though the questions may not seem to be job-related, employers may try to determine your confidence and creativity through your answers.

- If you could be any fruit which would you choose and why?
- Think about your favorite product. Now think up five better names for it.
- Tell me a story.
- How would the world be different if you had never been born?
- If you had to choose to be one of these three life forms; a lemming, a sloth, or an earthworm, which would you be and why?

Illegal Questions

Employers may ask questions to learn about a candidate's motivation and personality. Such questions can relate to former job responsibilities and outside interests. Inquiries into an applicant's: RACE, COLOR, AGE, SEX, RELIGION, NATIONAL ORIGIN, MARITAL STATUS, PAST ARRESTS, ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE, CREDIT HISTORY, CHILDBEARING PLANS or AGE are illegal.

- An interviewer may not ask about your religion, church, synagogue, parish, the religious holidays you observe, or your political beliefs or affiliations.
- An interviewer may not ask about your ancestry, national origin, or parentage; in addition, you cannot be asked about the naturalization status of your parents, spouse, or children. The interviewer cannot ask about your birthplace. However, the interviewer may ask whether or not you are a U.S. citizen or a resident alien with the right to work in the U.S.
- An interviewer may not ask about your native language, the language you speak at home, or how you acquired the ability to read, write, or speak a foreign language. But, he/she may ask about the languages in which you are fluent, if knowledge of those languages is pertinent to the job.
- An interviewer may not ask about your age, your date of birth, or the ages of your children. But, he/she may ask you whether or not you're over eighteen years old.
- An interviewer may not ask about maiden names or whether you have changed your name; your marital status, number of children or dependents, or your spouse's occupation.

Illegal questions are often asked unintentionally. If you feel you are being asked an illegal question during an interview you can legitimately, but politely, refuse to answer. You might say, "I'm not sure of the relevance of that question, can you tell me how it specifically relates to this job?"

QUESTIONS TO ASK EMPLOYERS

It is important to have prepared questions to ask of each employer; these questions will indicate your interest in the position and organization. Additional questions may occur to you during the course of the interview.

About the Organization

- What is it about this organization that attracted you in the first place and has kept you here?
- How would you describe your organization's style of management?
- How will industry trends affect this organization within the next 3-5 years?
- How does the organization define a successful individual?
- What is the method of feedback/evaluation used by this organization?
- What do you see as your organization's strengths and weaknesses?

About the Position

- Can you describe recent projects on which a person in my position has worked?
- What is the common career path for people entering the organization in this position?

How are people trained or brought up to speed with regard to their responsibilities?

- What type of person tends to be successful in this position? What type of person are you looking for?
- How and when is performance evaluated?

Inappropriate Questions

Inappropriate questions include those that ask what the organization will be doing for you if you're hired; i.e., What salary can I expect? How much vacation time will I accrue? Are you willing to pay for graduate school? etc. You can find the answers to these questions later, if employment is offered.

SEND A THANK-YOU LETTER

The most important aspect of a thank you is to send it promptly within three to four days of the interview. If you do not have access to a computer, then hand write your thank you on a note card. It is also possible to send it via email if the recipient has offered her or his email address. The more time that elapses, the less enthusiastic you will be about writing it, and the less impact your letter will have on its reader.

When you have interviewed with a number of individuals in one day, as you might in a site interview, address the thank you to the person who seemed to coordinate the day. You can make mention of the others with whom you spoke and ask the coordinator to convey your thanks to them as well. The letter provides an opportunity to continue building the rapport that you began during your initial meeting.

The letter is a vehicle for:

- acknowledging the individual's participation in your interview visit
- thanking them for insights shared
- highlighting a specific aspect of the organization which you admire

REASONS FOR REJECTION

- **LACK OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE.** An interviewer cannot determine where you fit into the organization until you explain your career interests and applicable skills.
- **LACK OF COMPANY KNOWLEDGE.** Most employers make information about themselves readily available, especially if they recruit on campus.
- **LACK OF QUESTIONS.** When employers ask if you have any questions for them, a negative response indicates a lack of interest on your part.
- **LACK OF ENTHUSIASM.** Employers want to hire someone who is excited about the prospect of working with their organization.
- **LACK OF CONFIDENCE.** If you doubt your ability to do the job, an employer will also experience doubt.
- **POOR COMMUNICATION SKILLS.** The employer must be able to hear you, understand your words, and follow your train of thought. Otherwise, no matter how qualified you may be for a job opening, you put yourself at a disadvantage.
- **UNPROFESSIONAL APPLICATION OR APPEARANCE.** It is true that you only have one opportunity to make a first impression. If your resume is sloppy or has typos, you are at an immediate disadvantage and may not even get an opportunity to interview. Additionally, if you present yourself at an interview inappropriately dressed, an employer may decide you wouldn't fit into their organization.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Screening Interviews

These are usually shorter interviews used for the purpose of conducting a brief evaluation of a candidate. Employers are usually

looking for reasons to screen an applicant out. On-campus interviews, typically 30 minutes in length, are screening interviews. Job offers typically do not come as a result of this interaction.

One-on-One Interviews

These interviews are quite common and involve the candidate being questioned by one person.

Phone Interviews

Upon receipt of a candidate's application materials some organizations will call to conduct a brief phone interview. It is important to remain composed if you get such a call. If the timing of the call is inconvenient, let the employer know. Ask if you can call them back at a more convenient time. Also, while conducting a phone interview, arrange to have a copy of your resume and cover letter in front of you to use for reference.

Panel/Committee Interviews

This scenario involves a panel of interviewers each with questions to ask. These interviews are common for government, academic and some corporate positions. It is important to establish eye contact with each member of the committee early in the interview.

Case Study Interviews

Some organizations, especially management consulting firms and companies recruiting for entry-level training programs, rely on case study or situational questions to evaluate a candidate's analytical skills.

Second Round or Site Interviews

Often, the interviewing process entails several rounds of interviews. If you are considered a serious candidate, after the first interview you may be contacted for a second on-site interview with other members of the organization. If travel arrangements are involved, usually the

company will pay for your expenses and make the necessary travel and lodging arrangements. Site interviews usually consist of a series of interviews with several individuals including your potential supervisor, co-workers, and higher-ranking staff members. These interviews can range from very casual to very technical. You may spend a half or whole day interviewing, which may also involve a luncheon, dinner meeting, or social activity.

Stress Interviews

Although many interviews can be nerve-racking, some are designed to cause the applicant stress. The interviewer may ask confrontational or particularly difficult questions. It is important to remain calm and think carefully about your answers. Don't be afraid to take time to think through your answers and don't get tricked into losing your temper. The purpose of these types of interviews is to evaluate your behavior and maturity in difficult situations. Stress questions are most commonly used for those positions in which your reaction to stress is critical.

Helpful Hints

- **ARRIVE EARLY.** Ten to fifteen minutes can provide you with a cushion should some unforeseen problem occur.
- **BRING ALONG EXTRA COPIES OF YOUR RESUME.** If the interviewer has misplaced your information this will assist them and add to your image as a prepared person.
- **MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT.** Unwillingness to look someone in the eye is often taken as evasiveness.
- **ASK FOR CLARIFICATION.** If you're confused by a question, ask the interviewer to restate it. This shows poise on your part and allows you to answer questions appropriately.
- **BE YOURSELF.** Interviewers respond well to those candidates they feel are being sincere.

INTERVIEW ATTIRE—GUIDELINES FOR WHAT TO WEAR

What kind of suit is appropriate for the interview?

According to Julie King in *The Smart Woman's Guide*, women should dress "stylish but conservative." Opt for a fashionable business suit in a low-key color such as navy, black or gray. Patterns are acceptable if they are extremely subtle, such as a fine dress tweed or pin stripe. The jacket should have long sleeves, with a straight or pleated skirt. A coatdress, with clean, simple lines, is also acceptable attire. Again, subtle colors. Men should wear a two-piece, single-breasted suit in navy, black or charcoal, wool or wool blend, and solid or very thin pinstripes. If at all possible, avoid the shiny polyester.

What about accessories?

Women should carry a small, simple purse. Men, if you are not yet in the habit of carrying a wallet, now is the time to start, and the place for it is in one of the inner chest pockets of your suit. A brief case is not necessary. However, a leather portfolio or notebook holder is a good idea for on-site interviews; on campus, a notebook to hold a few extra resumes would be appropriate. Now is the time to wean yourself from your faithful backpack.

What is the correct skirt length for business?

Whatever is the most flattering to both your legs and your profession. Consider what happens when you sit down in a short skirt. Would you be comfortable?

Does it matter what kind of tie I wear?

Yes. You should wear a tie that matches your suit. Bright yellow, pink and the "power tie" concept are no longer the vogue. Wear a conservative tie with a simple knot.

What do you mean when you say "conservative tie"?

Silk in a simple stripe or repeating pattern, with no more than three colors. The background color should be neutral perhaps navy, dark gray or burgundy, a paisley tie, in muted dark colors, is modern yet conservative for young men.

Can I wear a pantsuit to the interview?

A pantsuit can be very smart and professional looking provided that the jacket is tailored to fit with matching slacks and is worn with a simple no-frill, no-tie blouse. However, if you are unsure of a company's policies regarding proper dress, call the personnel office for more information.

What are the appropriate shoes to wear?

For men, shoes should be leather, black or brown, and polished with no worn down heels. Plain lace-up shoes are the traditional footwear. Slip-ons work as well if they are dressy and in good taste. Business socks should be over-the-calf, never ankle length or even slightly droopy, and should match your pants or shoes. White athletic socks—*never!*

For women, the best shoes are plain pumps with one- to two-inch heels. You can go higher if you don't feel tall enough, but make sure you can still walk quickly and steadily. Shoes should be comfortable and of high-quality leather in black or the color of your suit. Wear sheer stockings in a skin tone. Never wear black or opaque stockings with light or white shoes.

I was told to dress casual for my interview—what is casual?

Never wear jeans, T-shirts, tennis shoes, sandals or boots to an interview. Appropriate business casual is usually a pair of slacks, shirt, and sports jacket.

I have only one suit. How can I change my look?

Your suit should always be clean and professionally pressed, worn with an all-cotton, well-ironed white or possibly light blue, long sleeved dress shirt. Wearing a different tie can dramatically change the look of your suit. A woman may accent her basic outfit with a different blouse, or she may add a scarf or a simple small pin.

I do not own a suit and I do not have a lot of money to purchase one. Where can I shop to find an inexpensive one?

You can find suits, dress shirts, blouses, and shoes that are very inexpensive and in good taste at thrift shops, Salvation Army, discount stores, consignment shops and outlet stores. Remember that the key is a simple style in a conservative color. If you find a dark suit with contrasting buttons, replace them with buttons the color of the suit, have it cleaned and professionally pressed, and you will look like a million!

Is it appropriate to wear perfume or cologne?

It is nearly impossible to tell how strong a fragrance your own perfume or cologne is emitting. What seems like a pleasant whiff of scent to you may overpower someone else. In addition, your interviewer may be allergic. So, why risk it? Don't wear any scent at all, and no, a little dab is not OK. The most attractive scent is your natural, fresh smell after a bath or shower, plus deodorant. If unscented antiperspirant works for you, stop there!

If you smoke, avoid smoking in your interviewing outfit. Cigarette odors cling to your clothes for several hours and smoking to most employers is an undesirable habit.

What kind of jewelry should I wear?

Less is better. Too much jewelry or wrong jewelry can be considered distracting and can elicit negative responses.

Women should wear post or simple earrings, no dangles, and a plain bracelet, if any. A dress rule that pays off: never wear jewelry that is not functional and keep it simple.

I have worn an earring throughout my college years. Is it okay, as a man, to wear it to my interview?

It is not in your best interest because it breaks the rule of executive dress. This style of jewelry is all right when you are with your friends or even in some work environments, but it is out of place for the job interview.

Should I wear makeup?

If you choose to wear makeup, keep it understated. Iridescent eye shadow, glossy red lipstick and inch-long lashes (unless they are naturally long) should be avoided. Opt for a healthy, natural look. Your nails should be short with clear or pale polish.

Should I cut my hair to look more professional?

It is not necessary for you to cut your hair, but you should wear it in a groomed style, off your face. It is distracting during an interview to constantly have to push your hair from your face. Your hair should be neat and clean, as well as attractive.

Men should shave and trim their mustache. Beards are probably best left to grow after you get the job. You may want to call the personnel office for information regarding the company's policy on facial hair.

Do these guidelines apply to all organizations, or just the corporate world? What if I'm interviewing for a job with a less formal environment?

Every industry has its own requirements, and knowing what to wear on the day of the interview is vitally important. Always think about the impression you want to make and what clothes will make that impression.

If you are interviewing for a job in a less formal environment, then it may be acceptable for men to wear slacks, a sports coat and a shirt and tie. Women can wear a simple dress or matching skirt and blouse. Whatever you decide should be clean, pressed, and help you look your best. In the final analysis, creating a first impression is mostly a matter of common sense. Pay attention to your appearance, your body language and manners, and you will go a long way towards convincing interviewers that you are the kind of professional they want to hire.

GUIDELINES ON BUSINESS ETIQUETTE

How can I make the most of my time at business functions?

There are several things to keep in mind. Both men and women always stand when meeting someone or being introduced. Remember to make good eye contact, have a friendly smile and a good, firm handshake. If you are at a large gathering and you do not know anyone, take the initiative to introduce yourself by using your first and last name only and provide some brief information about yourself. Read body language and be aware of infringing on others. Ten minutes is about the right amount of time to stay with a group before moving on. During your conversation, avoid incorrect terms such as **ANYWAYS, YEAH, YOU GUYS**, and repetitive phrases such as **YOU KNOW** and **STUFF LIKE THAT**.

If I am invited to dine during the interviewing process, how can I best use this time?

Remember—building rapport is the most important aspect of the meal. You are still in the application process.

I am unsure of what food I should order.

Do not order the most expensive or least expensive food. Avoid messy or unfamiliar food and those with drippy sauces or bones. Above all, do not order alcoholic beverages. But if your host orders one, ask for mineral water with a twist of lemon or lime. You need to remain as alert as possible. Order only the basic salad, main course and beverage or food similar to your host. Do not change your order or send food back unless there is a major problem, then handle it discreetly.

What should I do if my napkin slides off my lap or I drop a piece of flatware?

Once you are seated, the napkin goes on your lap. Should you leave for any reason during the meal, place it loosely folded on your chair. If you should drop your napkin or a piece of flatware on the floor, ask for a replacement. Do not wipe the flatware with your napkin.

Many times, there are several utensils at a place setting. Where do I start?

Remember that your bread plate is on the left and your water glass is on the right. When using flatware, start from the outside and work your way in. For example, first your salad fork, then your dinner fork. Once you use your knife, never place it back on the table. Place it diagonally to the right of your plate (unless you are left-handed) or across the top of your plate. Use only your knife and fork during the course of the meal and cut only one piece of food at a time. Never talk with food in your mouth. Community foods such as bread and butter, if it is nearest you, offer it first to the person seated at your left, then pass it to the right after helping yourself. Food is always passed to your right.

Should I offer to pick up the check?

If the check is placed in front of you while interviewing, ignore it. Your host will ask for it when ready. Never offer to share payment, especially since you are the invited guest. Women, after your meal, do not apply make-up at the table or leave lipstick smudges on the glass or coffee cup. Blot before eating.

FINAL CHECKLIST

Your appearance is only as good as your grooming. You want your experience and qualifications to shine. Your appearance should enhance your presentation, while your business etiquette should highlight your professionalism, not overwhelm it:

- Make sure your hair is clean, neatly trimmed, and well groomed.
- Use makeup conservatively.
- Women: no runs in stockings
- Men: dark socks that cover the calves of your legs.
- Shoes polished.
- Women should avoid excessive jewelry; men should refrain from wearing earrings and chains.
- No missing buttons, crooked ties or lint.
- Remember, during lunch, dinner, or social functions with a potential employer, you are still in the interviewing process so be on your very best behavior.