



Interview Prep

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Prep #1: Before the Interview

For many people, the interview process is their least favorite aspect of the job search. What do I wear? How do I present myself? What am I suppose to ask? What are the best responses? It feels a little like walking through a minefield. One wrong step and "Kaboom!"

For others, the interview process is where they feel the most confident, secure in the knowledge that "If I can just get the interview, I'll get the job."

Regardless of how you feel about interviewing, good planning and preparation can substantially improve your ability to participate in a productive manner and increase your confidence level during this important step in the job search process.

The following are some areas to prepare, before the first interview is ever accepted:

Interviewing Isn't Just About How You Answer the Questions

Effective interviewing is more than simply responding to tough questions with great answers. It also requires knowing the right questions to ask; enabling you to learn what you need to know in order to make well-informed decisions.

Job candidates sometimes have their eye so set on the goal of getting a job, that they fail to effectively evaluate the position or company's fit for their own needs, goals and interests.

To avoid misunderstandings, equal responsibility must fall to the candidate to clarify the expectations of the position, prior to accepting a job. How many times have you heard a friend or colleague say, "This job isn't what they said it would be."

Some questions you may want to ask a potential employer, include:

*What do you see as this position's responsibilities on a daily basis? Weekly? Monthly? How, if at all, do you see these responsibilities changing over time?



*What do you feel are the most important responsibilities of this position? (take notes!)

*What are some additional aspects of this position that are unique to your company? (hidden responsibilities?)

*What was the reason for this position's vacancy? (new need? recent firing? expansion?)

*How long has this company been in business? (are you interested in a growing company, an established company, or one that's going through restructure?)

*How many people do you employ? How long does the average employee remain with your company? (frequent turnover is a warning signal)

*What are this company's current challenges? (this question can produce surprising information)

*What do you view as this company's greatest goals and missions? (consider how you can be part of the solution here)

*Has this company experienced a downsizing at any time in its history, and if so, when?

*How long have you worked for this company, and what do you like the most about your position here? (is your interviewer happy with this company?)

Never forget that you have some amount of control regarding the course of this interview. By being prepared and perfecting your responses, and taking an active and participatory role in the process, you'll not only make the interview process easier and more productive for you, but more valuable for your interviewer as well. Sue Campbell offers over 15 years experience as a professional resume writer and career strategist helping clients achieve their career, business and marketing goals

The Tough Questions

Before the first interview, prepare answers to interview questions that are especially difficult for you to answer. These questions may be as "basic" as "Why do you want to work here?" to as complicated as "Why did you leave your last position?" or "Why should we hire you?"



If you would like a list of some of the most frequently-asked tough interview questions and their best responses, send me an e-mail and I'll be glad to send you an interview practice file.

References

Before accepting the first interview, you should get your references in order and you may want to request a letter of recommendation be written on your behalf. This is not something you should be thinking about after references have been requested.

Contrary to common practice, you don't want to provide references prior to an interview or include them with your resume, unless the job ad specifically states that references are to be included with the submission.

Keep in mind that a potential job may not live up to your expectations. You're not going to know for certain until after you've had the opportunity to interview. There's no good reason to have your references contacted needlessly or repeatedly for jobs you don't plan to accept. References contacted repeatedly tend to lose their enthusiasm in the repeated telling.

Another reason to hold on to your reference list information until the interview is that you want the opportunity to be able to contact your references prior to the interviewer's call, so you can give them a heads-up, "John Doe from ABC company is going to be calling you sometime today or tomorrow. I interviewed with him today about the Project Manager position they have open." This will give you the opportunity to tell your reference about the important issues discussed at the interview.

A reference who is prepared for a call, and not caught off-guard, will appreciate the heads-up, and by understanding what the interviewer is hoping to secure, will likely provide a better reference. Your references want to help you, make this process as easy for them as possible.



Your reference list should match your resume and cover letter in letterhead style and stationery, and should include the following information for each reference listed:

Reference Name

Current Title, Current Company

Relationship to You (Mentor, Coworker, Supervisor, Client, etc.)

Phone Number

Optional e-mail address

Make sure you have your references' permission to release any information you're providing to potential employers.

Dress For Success

Attention needs to be given to appropriate interview attire, and the time to do this is before the first interview is scheduled.

Interview attire does not need to reflect the style or uniform of the company or position for which you're interviewing. In other words, if the company dress code is relaxed (khaki slacks, casual shirts), your attire for the interview should remain conservative, professional, and appropriate to the event (a business interview).

A suit coat and tie is appropriate interview attire for men, a dress suit or suit jacket with tailored slacks is appropriate interview attire for women. Avoid loud patterns or excessive color. You don't want to distract your interviewer by your attire.

Your clothing need not be new, but they should be in good condition; clean, well-pressed and well-fitted. It is unwise to wear brand new, out-of-the-box shoes. Break them in, first! Nothing can make a person feel more ill-at-ease than clothes that feel uncomfortable, unnatural or don't fit well.

Try your interview clothes on before an interview is scheduled, and sit, stand, and walk in them. If possible, look at yourself in a full length mirror. Make sure your clothing is comfortable, as well as appropriate (ask someone else's opinion). Check how the combination of clothes work together in both natural and artificial light, so that you don't



find yourself realizing, too late, that, "Wow, this tie doesn't match this jacket, at all" or "This jacket needs to be tailored, it's just too long for me."

These are the types of clothing issues that should be determined long before you walk out the door for an interview. Inspect your clothing closely for any wear, stains or damage.

Interview Attire Checklist:

- ✓ Don't wear cologne (this may be offensive to your interviewer, no matter how good it smells to you).
- ✓ Make sure your socks match, each other and the outfit you're wearing.
- ✓ Wear shoes that are in good condition, match your attire, and are comfortable to wear. No loud colors. No open toes.
- ✓ If you carry a purse or briefcase, these should be conservative in color and design.
- ✓ Make certain your hands and nails are clean and in good condition (you probably "speak" with your hands more than you're aware). Men should not wear polish. Women's polish should be conservative in color and nails should not be an excessive length.
- ✓ Check your clothing for stains, tears, loose stitching and/or loose buttons - and repair.
- ✓ Do not smoke and avoid being around others who are smoking ~ the odor will stay on your clothing and may be offensive. If you have worn the clothing previously, have it cleaned or dry-cleaned to remove all cologne, smoking, and other odors.



- ✓ Limit the amount of jewelry you wear. Keep it simple and conservative.

Thank You Cards and Postage Stamps

The time to purchase "Thank you" cards and postage stamps is before you begin to interview. Have these in supply. Yes, e-mail is acceptable (sigh), but even if you follow-up an interview with an e-mail, PLEASE, follow up the e-mail with a handwritten thank you note and send it snail mail. Trust me. Do it.

Extra Resumes and Reference Sheets

Be sure you have extra copies of your resume and reference list printed. You'll want to take at least two clean copies of your resume with you to each interview: extras for any additional interviewers in the meeting, and an extra copy to help you complete an application with the correct dates and information.

Having extra reference sheets will make it easier to contact your references after the interview.

Prep #2: You Have An Interview!

Congratulations! Being requested to interview is a clear indication of your potential as a job candidate for this position at this company. In fact, I don't know a single hiring manager who will waste his or her time interviewing an unqualified candidate (unless at the request of a friend, colleague or superior). Therefore, know that you're already viewed as qualified going in. It's now your job to convince the employer or hiring manager that you're the best person for the job.

The following are some preparatory steps you can take before and during the interview that will aid your chances for a successful outcome:

Where Am I Going?

Knowing where you are going is half the battle. I mean this both literally and figuratively.

- How well you present yourself will depend on how well you know yourself. What do you have to offer?
- What are your unique professional and personal characteristics, as they directly relate to the position you are targeting?
- What are your personal and professional aspirations? What is it you are looking to achieve?



When that self-knowledge, or figurative meaning of "knowing where you are going" is completed, you need to take care of the literal meaning of "knowing where you are going" by figuring out where the interview is going to be held and how you are going to get there.

One of the first things you should do after an interview is scheduled is drive to the interview location (at least a day before the actual interview) to determine the location and how long it will take to get there. You do not want to be late for this all-important appointment by underestimating travel time or travel conditions (or worse, get completely lost).

By driving to the location (or taking the bus or whatever other transportation you will be using) at the same time of day for which your appointment's scheduled (if possible), you will be able to clock the time it takes you to get there, identify the level of traffic and any potential hold-ups (due to construction or road conditions), and locate where you will be able to park your vehicle (is there a parking fee involved?).

If you are taking a bus or other form of public transportation, you should time the distance from your bus stop to the front door of the building.

Once at the location, you should determine which building entry door leads to your interviewer's office, and on which floor the office is located. Is there a public restroom close by? Knowing this will save you time if you want one last opportunity to check a mirror, fix a tie or comb your hair.

If you add at least ten minutes to your travel time, it will help you to avoid any unexpected delays. If this added time makes you a few minutes early for your appointment, so much the better.

At the same time, do not show up excessively early for your appointment. Respect your interviewer's time and schedule. If you show up early, expect to wait.



Darn, I Forgot To Ask . . .

Prepare a brief, written list of questions to take with you. A question you desperately wanted to ask the night before may vanish once you find yourself in the interview ("I've answered twenty questions, what was I going to ask?!").

Some questions may have arisen during the phone contact you had with the interviewer in setting up the interview appointment ("Mr. Jones mentioned _____, I need to ask him about that"). Or you may have questions regarding information you learned about the company during your research ("ABC Company is showing expansion into the European Market. I'd like to learn more about this.").

Don't trust your powers of memory during an interview appointment, and don't allow the interviewer to take total control of the course the interview. This is a two-way exchange, and the only way you can learn all the information you need to know to make an informed decision is by asking the types of questions that are meaningful to you.

Expect the interviewer to ask, "Are there any questions you have about ABC Company?" or "Is there anything else you would like to know?" and be prepared to have a response.

Having been given this opportunity to address questions at your interviewer's convenience, don't assume this same invitation will apply the next day (or when you get home and realize you failed to ask an all-important question). In other words, your interviewer may not appreciate a follow up call that begins, "Mr. Jones, after our interview I realized I had a few more questions I'd like to ask you . . ."

What Did They Say?!

It is a good idea to take notes during the interview (so add a clean pad of paper and working pen to the list of items to bring). The very first thing you should write down is your interviewer's name (this may not be the same person who called you), including the correct spelling (even if you have to ask the receptionist).

During the interview, write down the key criteria discussed and reiterate this information with your interviewer; "As I understand it, Mr. Jones, this position will require . . ." Using these notes to clarify your understanding of the position, both its responsibilities and expectations, and communicating your understanding back to your interviewer, is called "mirroring."

Mirroring will help clear any potential misunderstanding and will also give you a better record of what was discussed and agreed upon during the interview.

The notes you take will also be used when you write your follow up "Thank you" note, following the interview.



What To Take

Be prepared to bring along at least two clean copies of your resume to the interview. You may be interviewed by more than one person, and you will want to make sure these additional interviewers have clean copies of your presentation (rather than a photocopied version).

You also may be required to complete an application. Having your resume with you will help you complete the form without trying (again) to remember specific dates and events. Bring along at least two copies of your reference list to the interview appointment (one to give, one to use to call your references following the interview). Provide this to your interviewer only after you've determined this is a position you still want to pursue. There's no need (or benefit) in having your references contacted needlessly.

You shouldn't need a suitcase, but here are some suggestions of items to take:

Directions and phone number for the company, in case something deters your arrival.

- A folder (to prevent bending) containing at least two clean copies of your resume and two copies of your reference list.
- A pad of paper with a list of prepared questions you want to ask (and for taking additional notes).
- Two pens (now is not the time to find out your only pen is out of ink).
- A comb or hairbrush and a pocket mirror.
- Tissues, wet naps, or a small washcloth (trust me, these can be a lifesaver).
- Toothbrush and toothpaste (especially if it is an after-work appointment) or breath spray.
- Travel-size antiperspirant (Did I or didn't I? You can never be too sure).
- Umbrella (if there is any potential for rain).
- Women: an extra pair of pantyhose (still a good idea) or clear nail polish for quick repair. Men: an extra tie.
- Correct change for parking, if necessary.



Final Preparation

Re-read all the information you have gathered about the company and re-read your prepared questions.

Practice your interview responses to tough questions (best if done out loud). I've compiled a long list of commonly asked tough interview questions for you to become familiar with the types of questions you will be asked, and to help you prepare your responses (see my website, or contact me and I'll be happy to e-mail you a list of some of the toughest interview questions and their best responses), or try the interview questions quiz on my site and see how you do.

Make time to relax, even if it is just 10 minutes, and do positive affirmation exercises (envision yourself working for this company and envision a positive outcome to the interview).

Continue to give yourself positive messages throughout the day ("I am a great candidate for this position - I can make a positive difference in this company").

Get a good night's sleep, and get up earlier than normal for early morning appointments, so that you have plenty of time before the interview to get ready and relax.

Take a leisurely walk, especially if you find yourself feeling overwhelmed with pre-interview jitters.

Eat well (do not skip meals!), and avoid foods that commonly disagree with you. Even if your interview appointment is scheduled for your lunch hour, prepare to take something with you that can be eaten beforehand. Dry cereal and a bottle of water will work in a pinch to stop stomach noises and nervous stomach acid.

Confirm that baby sitters will arrive on time, and have a back up plan if this fails. Have backup transportation.

Make certain any other responsibilities are accounted for, in case the interview runs longer than assumed (clear your schedule, etc.).

For people who suffer from sweaty palms during stressful situations, apply antiperspirant



followed by foot or body powder to the palms of your hands, and blot with a facial tissue or cloth (to remove any excess). Really, this works.

Okay, This Is It!

You have arrived on time. In fact, you are early. You are appropriately dressed. You have memorized every piece of information on this company you could get your hands on. You have honed your communication skills to perfection. You know what you are looking for and what you have to offer. You have contacted your references and they are ready and prepared to come to your aid. You have your "Thank you" cards at home with postage stamps affixed. You have all the necessary items with you (resume copies, references, pad of paper, pens, prepared questions, etc.), and you have a winning attitude.

Like an actor preparing for a theater performance; after the makeup artist, the lighting manager, the stage director, and the choreographer have done their part, and after the actor (you) has learned his or her lines to perfection . . . opening night comes and the actor steps out on the stage, confident that he or she is ready to put into action all that he or she has learned in preparation for this moment.

Prep #3: After The Interview

You have had the interview. Now it's time for taking notes.

Write down everything you can remember from the interview, including:

- The responsibilities of the position as you understand them
- Any key points or concerns discussed at the interview (particularly any deficits noted)
- Specific goals of the company and/or company projects for which the position is responsible
- Names of key personnel in the company (and the correct spelling and pronunciation)
- Any other issues or information you have learned about the company or interviewer that is of value

Contacting Your References

Contact each of your references to let them know a call will be coming and from whom (name of interviewer / name of company). Tell each of your references about the position (title and responsibilities) and any key areas that need to be addressed (what is the interviewer trying to secure in potential candidates for the position?).



Writing The "Thank you" Letter

A "Thank you" card should be sent within 24 hours following an interview. It is preferable to send an actual card, rather than a letter (more personable), and handwritten, if your handwriting is neat and legible.

You should send a "Thank you" card to each individual involved in your interview. Include the following in your letter:

Your interviewer's name (and correct spelling). If there was more than one interviewer, each should receive his or her own personalized thank you letter.

Key points discussed during the interview. These should include the objective of the position you are targeting, the goal and mission of company or department, and any special concerns or considerations discussed.

Any positive contributions you feel your particular skills and experience will bring to this particular company's goals and missions (including any that were actually discussed during the interview).

Preparing For The Next Interview

The initial interview may not have resulted in the guarantee of a position, so you need to be prepared for the next interview, whether it is a second interview with this company or an initial interview with another company.

Your interview clothing needs to be cleaned and prepared for the next opportunity. For second interviews, a second interview dress needs to be made ready (this doesn't have to be an entirely new outfit, it can simply be a different shirt, tie, blouse or skirt worn with the same basic suit).

For second interviews, a new list of questions and responses need to be prepared. Take what you have learned from the first interview (including any questions or concerns you or the interviewer may have expressed) and formulate a plan. What answers do you need to secure? How can you reduce the interviewer's concerns during round two? What types of solutions can you suggest? What problems can you solve? Used what you have learned from this interview to avoid any potential pitfalls in interviews with new companies, too. If you have exhausted your resume copies, it's time to have new ones printed.



Until a job offer has been presented AND you have accepted it, your job search isn't over. Keep submitting resumes, polishing your interview skills, and being prepared for the next opportunity.

Sue Campbell, President of 1st-Writer.com, is a professional resume writer, career strategist and marketing specialist with over 18 years experience. Sue provides powerful resumes and career strategies for thousands of clients throughout the United States and over 47 countries overseas. Through her personalized and focused services, Sue helps job seekers of every level achieve their career and business goals.