

An Effective Technique For Preparing for Interviews

Most career experts agree that few interviewees prepare adequately for interviews. In fact, the average interviewee spends less than an hour preparing. Yet research has shown that hiring decisions are often based more on a candidate's interviewing skills than on his or her background and experience.

Almost all career experts stress the importance of preparation. Interviewing guru Carole Martin notes that "the secret to success in any interview is preparation." Author Tom Washington points out that since so few job-seekers prepare for interviews, those who do "gain a real edge over others." However, these experts also emphasize that responses to interview questions should never be memorized. Memorized responses make you sound fake and mechanical – not the impression you want to make with a hiring manager!

How then can you best prepare? One proven way takes advantage of the "Write to Learn" method. This involves composing written responses to questions typically asked in job interviews. This will:

- increase your level of confidence in an interview;
- help you give thoughtful, non-rambling responses;
- increase the specificity and relevance of your responses;
- allow you to be more thorough in responding to questions;
- let you focus on oral delivery and rapport building in an interview.

Here are some of the writing exercises that have been proven most effective:

- writing an autobiography, which can reveal important patterns of work that you especially enjoy as well as those you do not;
- describing your behavioral competences, with examples from your professional, community, personal or academic experience;
- writing an accomplishments journal, in which you identify 25-30 accomplishments and write 100-400 words about the top 12 of these, followed by categorizing competences demonstrated by each accomplishment;
- composing business stories that capture both successes and lessons learned.

Why these exercises are so effective can be explained by a branch of Cognitive Theory known as Writing to Learn. A major proponent of Writing to Learn, James Britton, points out that writing enables learners to organize their knowledge "so that it remains coherent, unified, and reliable." Janet Emig, another proponent, notes that "writing through its inherent reinforcing cycle involving hand, eye, and brain marks a uniquely powerful multi-representational mode for learning."

Writing as a “uniquely powerful multi-representational mode for learning” plays a vital role in higher education. Too many students labor under the common misconception that views writing as simply the act of conveying information. But skilled writers know it is much more. Stephen Jay Gould, a prominent scientist much admired for his writing style, describes writing as “the best way to organize thoughts.” Why? Writing is a creative process whereby we make our thinking visible to ourselves. As such, it is a process that enhances and strengthens our powers of thinking.

David Joliffe asserts that the physical act of writing – whether with pen or pencil and paper, typewriter or word processor – compels writers to become “actively involved” with what they’re writing about. Through writing, Joliffe says, participants “generate challenging ideas ... engage in a substantial process ... practice analysis and synthesis ... and demonstrate a personal commitment to their ideas...” Suzanne Cherry echoes Gould’s perspective when she calls writing “thinking on paper.”

So how does that help you? Composing written responses to interview questions helps you learn and remember concepts and content. It sharpens your thinking and cognitive abilities by forcing you to organize your thoughts. Doing so has three clear benefits. It enhances your communication skills; it bolsters your self-knowledge; and it allows connections between experiences to emerge that you otherwise might have missed.

The thoughtfulness and organized thinking that results scores high marks in an interview. A study by Maurer, Solamon, Andrews, and Troxtel shows that cognitive ability in applicants serves as a “strong and consistent predictor of job performance.” In fact, it predicts job performance “more accurately and universally” than other constructs – largely because it predicts a candidate’s ability to rapidly learn job requirements.

You would be smart to heed the strong correlation between written interview preparation and interview success. Preparing written answers to common interview questions will give you confidence. It will let you focus your energies in the interview on your oral delivery and on building rapport with the interviewer.

Finally - writing-to-prepare involves effort. It takes discipline and commitment. Hence it’s something many of your competitors will not want to do. So you can use it to further distance yourself from the pack. By putting in the effort that many of your competitors will not, you can land the job that your competition can only dream about.