

Signal & Scope

The first step to learning the language of the interview is to understand the other side of the table – what are interviewers trying to do?

If you were dropped inside a hiring committee (the place where they decide your offer) you would get a clue, because they would use a few words, over and over and over again to describe your performance.

The main word? **signal**

The interviewer’s job is to get as much **signal** as they possibly can.

Signal is information which demonstrates to the interviewer your specific skills and knowledge.

This lets them see what kind of experience you had, what kind of impact you can have, and the kind of leadership you can take on if you join.

The interesting thing — this signal is divided up — There are different kinds of signal, and interviews are designed to parse them separately.

For example:

- Coding signal. This answers — how deeply does this person understand, and how effective are they at actually coding? This is parsed through the algorithm interview — If you’re asked “how do you merge sorted lists” — the kind of tradeoffs you mention, the solution you choose, the way you communicate your solution, and the way you implement it — will reveal to the interviewer your coding signal.
- System signal. This answers — is this person experienced and capable in coming up with and leading a large technical system? This is parsed through the systems design interview. If you’re asked to implement Google Photos — the way you drive the conversation, the tradeoffs you mention, and the solutions you propose will reveal your systems signal
- People signal. This answers — is this person experienced and capable in either working with, or leading, a group of people. This is parsed through the experience interview. Here you are asked: tell me about a conflict you had, the *kind* of conflict, the *size* of the conflict, and the *way* you resolved it. Your answers to these will reveal your people signal

Finally, there’s signal that permeates throughout — and that is called **scope**.

Scope answers the following:

- What kinds of problems is the person going to be solving?
- Are they going to lead a team, a team of teams, or re-architect our entire company?

You want to demonstrate to the interviewer the scope that you are capable of owning. You do this through describing:

- The kinds of problems you solved — did you architect one system, or own a suite of systems?
- The kinds of conflicts you resolved — did it involve one team, or multiple orgs?

Based on your answers, you will be leveled a certain way (discussed in the next section).

Conclusion

You now know the language of the interview. The purpose for each interview is to extract signal, and the signal that shows our seniority the most is called scope.

When you're in an interview, **you need to keep these concepts top of mind.** It's like you're on a broken telephone — unless you focus on the conversation, the signal won't go through.

In the next sections, we'll learn exactly *how* to communicate signal and scope.

Homework

No real homework here — we want to get you thinking — if you've had an interview already, how do you think you've been communicating? Do you think you have been sending the right signals, or were you missing something?