

Unit 5

Interview Skills



Job Interview Skills

1. YOUR AIMS AND THE INTERVIEWERS' AIMS

1.1 Introduction

Suppose your cover letter and resume have got you an interview. How do you prepare for it? What are the aims of an interview? Look at the aims from your own point of view and from the interviewers'.

Think Through This ...

What are your (the interviewee's) aims?



- A job interview is your opportunity to convince a prospective employer that you are the best person for the job. It is important that you are both well informed and effective in presenting yourself. You need to “market” yourself to the interviewer.
- At the same time, you need to be able to collect information about the job and the organisation so that you can decide whether you are interested in the position and whether you would be comfortable in the company.



Think Through This ...

What is the interviewers' main aim?



- The interviewer wants to identify the best candidate for the position. Your own role, then, is to demonstrate your suitability for and interest in the job. Your effectiveness in doing so decides whether you are offered the position.

2. THE RESEARCH BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

2.1 Overview

To be prepared for an interview, you need to know several things well:

- Know the job – its responsibilities
- Know the job ‘market’ – the common remuneration [salary], skills and knowledge required to do it well, and likely duties
- Know the company – their products / services, structure / organisation, competitors, reputation, recent major developments
- Know the interviewers – the names and positions, when the company calls you to arrange the interview
- Know the industry in general

Where can you go to find such information?

- The **company’s website** – this should be the first place to look for information on the company and perhaps job description
- Some **job search websites** feature write-ups on the industries they serve, and provide descriptions of typical jobs in these industries. Some state salary ranges for these positions and yet others provide a salary calculator.
- The **Ministry of Manpower’s Career Compass** The website www.careercompass.gov.sg provides information on various industries, job listings, and expected salaries.
- Your contacts – people who work in that company or industry are good sources of information. It is important to establish and keep a **network** of friends.



Other possible sources include:

- Annual reports
- Industry magazines

3. THE INTERVIEW

Next, you need to know what the interview process is generally like, as well as the different forms an interview can take. Let us examine the second point first.

3.1 The Forms an Interview can Take

Interviews can vary in their interviewer–interviewee ratio. The ratio can be:

- One interviewer–one interviewee. This is the **one-to-one or one-on-one interview**.



- A panel of interviewers [usually about four] – one interviewee. This is the **panel interview**.
- One or two ‘facilitators’ – a group of interviewees [eight or more]. This is the **group interview** or group discussion.

Very often, large corporations start with a one-on-one interview conducted by the immediate supervisor or Human Resource personnel. Successful candidates then move on to the panel interview. There may or may not be psychometric tests. Interviews, especially if one-on-one, may also take place over the telephone or Skype, to save on travelling.

3.2 The Interview Process

An interview is somewhat like a conversation, with

- its opening and rapport building first,
- the body where the bulk of the information is exchanged, and
- a closing to wrap it up.

Here is a break-down of the process and what you need to do at each stage.



Opening and Rapport Building



Being over-familiar is not appropriate.

Think Through This ... 3

The interviewer's role	Your role
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Extend such basic courtesies as building rapport with you.Assess how you reciprocate their welcome.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">This is the first-impression stage. <u>Create a positive first impression</u> by entering the interview room confidently. [body upright, relaxed shoulders, good eye contact]<u>Reciprocate their welcome appropriately.</u> [Take the lead from the interviewers. If they offer to shake your hand, then do so. If not, do not initiate the handshake.] Don't sit until they invite you to do so. Alternatively, you could ask politely if you could have a seat.]Don't be lulled into a false sense of security by the rapport building. Keep your listening skills sharp as they may provide you with information on the company. If so, you will be expected to remember the information later on.



Body of the Interview – Interviewers Gather Information



Think Through This ...

The interviewer's role	Your role
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Change the tone to a more business-like one.▪ Probe for specific information on which their decisions will be made.	<p>This forms the bulk of the interview.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ <u>Listening skills</u> are required. Listen carefully to questions and answer them thoughtfully and confidently.▪ Market your skills and abilities effectively.▪ <u>Stay calm</u>. Be able to face confrontative questions without getting upset. Remember that the interviewers are merely testing your skills, not getting at you personally.▪ Speak clearly and audibly [Speak up; don't mumble or whisper to yourself.]

Body of the Interview – Interviewers Give Information

Think Through This ...



The interviewer's role	Your role
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Supply information requested by interviewee.▪ Assess interviewee's priorities from the questions asked.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Discuss your concerns and get a clear idea of what the job is about.▪ <u>How you ask</u> the questions matters as much as <u>what you ask</u> about.

Close of the Interview



"Actually, we're not hiring. We hold lots of interviews like this one, so our competition thinks we're busy."

Think Through This ...

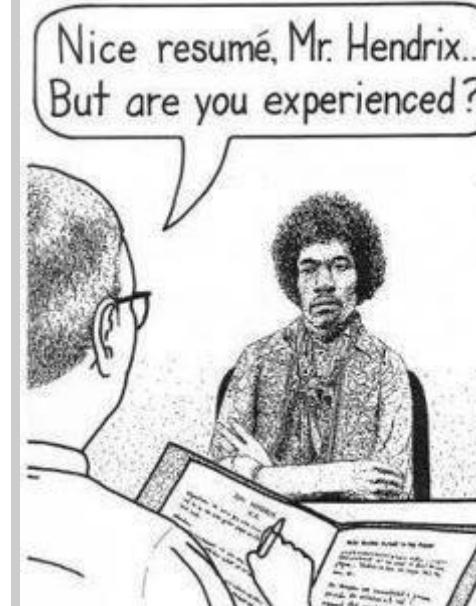


The interviewer's role	Your role
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Thank the interviewee.▪ Indicate what the next stage will be, if relevant.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ When the interviewer indicates that the interview is over, recognise this signal. Be ready to <u>express thanks</u> for the time and consideration that has been given to you.▪ Ask when to follow up and clarify last-minute doubts.

3.3 Interview Questions – ‘Traditional’ Questions

Besides providing good content in your answers, it is also important to be able to see what the form of the question requires. This is so that we interpret the intent of the interviewers correctly.

Open Questions

Function	Example
The open question <u>encourages interviewees to speak freely</u> and talk about themselves while the interviewer listens, observes and makes notes.	Could you tell me about your work experience? 

Closed Questions

Function	Example
The closed question is designed to limit the interviewee’s response and to establish familiar facts such as their address, previous place of employment or qualifications.	How long was your industry attachment?

Mirror Questions

Function	Example
The mirror question restates the interviewee’s previous answer and <u>invites them to add further information</u> .	Interviewee: “I thought my project group was great.” Mirror question: “The group was great?” Interviewee: “Yes. We shared ideas and I liked the support provided. I like working in groups.”

Leading Questions

Function	Example
The leading question directs the interviewee to clarify answers.	- Do you like using computers in your work? - Are you satisfied with the quality of the product?

Probing Questions

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"My short-term goal is to bluff my way through
this job interview. My long-term goal is to invent
a time machine so I can come back and
change everything I've said so far."

Function	Example
The probing question follows on from the last response of the interviewee. This type of question is spontaneous rather than planned. It aims to <u>probe the basis</u> for the interviewee's response.	Interviewee: "My current job requires me to manage my time." Probing question: "How do you manage your time?"

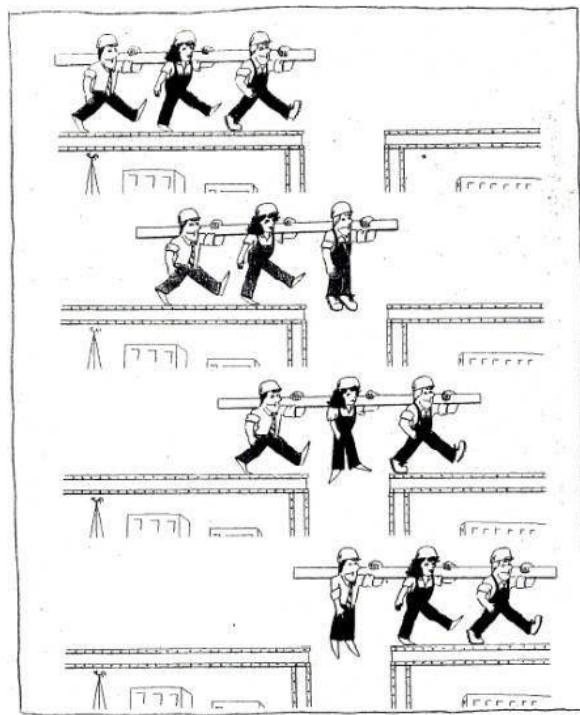
3.4 Interview Questions – Competency / Behavioural Questions

A competency is a set of skills and knowledge required to carry out a job successfully. A job requires several sets of competencies and your interviewers need to gauge if you can deliver. Therefore, competency questions focus on past behavior to predict future behavior. In the process of answering, information on your attitude towards work, people and even life, generally come through. In fact, this is the most common style of questioning in an interview.

Here is a list of common competencies required to do most jobs well. For each competency, think through your past experiences and bring out the best shining example.

1. Your adaptability or flexibility
2. Your ability to communicate

3. Your ability to plan / make good decisions / be decisive even with incomplete information
4. Your integrity
5. Your leadership ability
6. Your ability to contribute positively as a team player
7. Your initiative
8. Your resilience
9. Your ability to organize
10. Your ability to manage time or handle stress



Strong answers to behavioural questions describe specific situations which demonstrate that ability or competency. A very good formula to keep you on track is the STAR response:

S – Situation: describe the situation you were in

T – Task: explain the task or problem that arose

A – Action: describe the action that you took

R – Result: what was the outcome?



Strong answers usually describe situations where your actions result in success. If it was a partial success, be ready to say what you learnt from the experience and how you could handle it better.

Here is a sample question and a good response.

Interviewer:

Tell us about a time when you led a group project or work, and the situation was challenging.

Candidate:

[Situation: Provide just enough information to make the situation clear.]

We were in the first semester of our final year and we were assigned to work in a group of five by our tutor. The project was on ... [please be specific enough for it to be meaningful, but do not give too much technical detail]. It so happened that we were new to each other.

[Task: What did you need to achieve? Make it clear why that was a challenge.]

I took the initiative to get the brainstorming started. Two members were cooperative, one was quiet, and the last one contributed one or two ideas, and then was negative about all the ideas when no-one supported his. We divided up the work and drew up a timeline. Four of us volunteered to handle different portions. The same person, whom I shall called X, didn't volunteer so he was given what was left. X stayed negative throughout the first half of the project, coming late for meetings or not at all. When it was time to hand in work halfway, only he had to be chased. His work was also sub-standard.

[Action: State specific things you did to clear the block to solve the problem.]

I knew I had to do something; it was going to affect the group's morale and grade if I let him off. I chatted with others who knew him better. They said X often behaved that way when he didn't get his way. On his own, his work was quite good. I talked to him privately, noted the good portions of his work and the grade we all want. He didn't get negative or defensive. I didn't accuse him of anything negative. He agreed to re-do his work, saying what he gave was 'only a draft'.

When the new work came in, it was really much better. At the next group meeting, I gave him recognition. He was also much more positive and contributed to the team discussion. We also swapped some aspects of work to tap on our abilities better.

[Results: Your story is worth telling only if the outcome is good. Otherwise, think of another incident to relate.]

We completed the work a week ahead of schedule, and clinched an A. Today, X and the group are friends. He is still a little reserved, but there is a lot of mutual respect.

Interviewer:

What did you learn from this experience?

Candidate:

When people appear not to cooperate, there usually is a reason. It could be a mismatch between the task and his ability, or in this case, X needed to be recognised and given positive strokes.



Think Through This ...

How would you answer this competency question?

- Tell us about the most stressful situation you have been through.

Possible probing questions they will ask if your answer doesn't provide enough proof of your stress management competence include:

- How exactly did you deal with it?
- How do you know it worked?
- How did you feel about the outcome?
- Could you have handled it differently?

Try answering questions on other competencies, including those listed earlier.



3.5 How to Prepare for a Specific Interview

With all the work done so far, you would have put together a clear picture of who you really are – your strengths, weaknesses and motivations, what you are looking for in your career, and why you have decided to work in certain industries. This is your general preparation. But there is more to do.



Think Through This ...

Prior to each interview, ensure you beef up your knowledge of the organisation and comb through the job advertisement again.

- What are the technical skills, know-how and experience they require?
What evidence can you supply to make your case a strong one?
- What are the non-technical skills, attributes and attitude they are looking for?
What stories can you relate to make you a strong candidate?

3.6 Frequently Asked Questions

Here are some questions commonly asked by interviewers and interviewees.
Think through the answers you would supply as an interviewee.

Question	How to handle it
1. Tell me about yourself. 2. Tell me about your polytechnic programme and why you chose it. 3. What are some things you do in your spare time? Hobbies? Sports? 4. Why did you apply for this job? 5. What particular qualifications do you have for this job? 6. Tell me about any relevant work or training experience you may have. 7. Why have you chosen to work in this field? 8. Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time? 9. This job requires you to be a good team player. What does it mean to you? Give an example of an occasion in the past when you were a good team player. 10. What do you see are your personal strengths which will help you to perform well in this job? 11. The nature of this job is quite stressful. How well do you handle stress? 12. What plans do you have for upgrading yourself?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An open-ended question. Use it to market yourself well.• Market your interests and abilities.• Your answer will indicate how well-rounded you are.• Match the job with your interests and market your abilities – those that they require.• List relevant qualifications, highlighting special awards. Support with concrete examples.• Highlight key aspects and support with good examples.• Market your suitability: show them how your interests, abilities and qualifications match the field.• This is about career goals and your interest in the field.• This is to gauge your adaptability to corporate culture.• Support with concrete examples.• Illustrate with good examples.• Employers generally want staff who are eager to keep up with developments.

<p>13. How do you think you can contribute to this organisation?</p> <p>14. If you land this job, what would you do to be sure you fit in?</p> <p>15. If your supervisor was dissatisfied with your work and you thought it was acceptable, how would you resolve the conflict?</p> <p>16. What is your expected salary?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market your special strengths – qualifications or personal, but be realistic about what you can do. • Tests adaptability. Provide concrete steps. • Stress question. Tests how you handle tricky situations. • Ensure you know the market rate.
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There are more questions your interviewers could ask.

Think Through This ...


Questions that gauge whether you fit into their working environment and culture

Try answering these.



- 1. Do you prefer to work under supervision or on your own?
- 2. Do you prefer large or small organizations?
- 3. How do you feel about working in a structured environment?
- 4. Are you able to work on several assignments at once (multi-tasking)?
- 5. How do you feel about working overtime?
- 6. Are you willing to work flexitime?



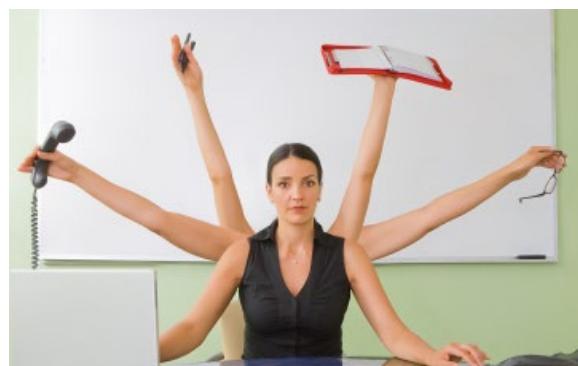
Think Through This ...

Questions that gauge your stress tolerance / ability to manage stress

These can test your stress tolerance through the stories the interviewers elicit from you, or through the tone the interview takes. Come up with winning answers to these.



1. Why should we hire you rather than another candidate?
2. Have you had difficulty getting along with a former professor/supervisor/co-worker and how did you handle it?
3. Tell me about a situation where you failed, what you learned from the experience, and how you changed.
4. Describe a time when you had to juggle many tasks at one time.
5. Describe a team situation when an individual did not pull his or her weight. What did you do and what were the outcomes?
6. Do your grades accurately reflect your ability? Why or why not?
7. What did you enjoy least about your last employment?



3.7 Good Questions for a Candidate to Ask

Here are some questions you could ask.

More details about the job

- What will my duties be if I were selected for this position?
- What are the likely projects I would be working on if I were employed in this position?
- What are the major challenges for people in this position?
- What is a typical day like for someone in this position?
- What qualities or skills are you looking for in the ideal candidate to fill this position?
- What are some key challenges I may face in this position?
- How much travel might there be?
- What opportunities for professional development are offered?
- What current projects are underway for this position?



About the structure, culture and environment

- Why is this position open? Did the person who held it previously leave?
- Could you tell me what it is like working here in terms of the people, management practices, workloads, expected performance and rewards?
- What training programmes are available from this organisation? What specific training will be given for this position?
- Who would be my immediate supervisor?
- Will I be required to travel in this position?



About career prospects

- What is the typical career path for someone in this position?
- What are some opportunities for growth in this organization?

About the process

- When will I hear from you regarding further action on my application?

Do not ask about these unless the interviewer initiates the discussion:

- Salary, vacation, leave and other compensation/benefits issues

"I ALREADY WORK HERE. I JUST WANTED TO SEE IF YOU PAY NEW HIRES MORE THAN I GET."

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phone: (216) 371-8600 / e-mail: ft@funnytimes.com

3.8 Handy Tips for the Day of the Interview

You would have done all these before the big day:

- researched the job, company and industry
- found out where the interview is to be held, and worked out how much lead time you will need to get there about 15 minutes before your slot
- found out who's interviewing you – name[s] and job title[s]
- thought through winning answers to likely questions
- made a list of good questions to ask
- given your clothes and shoes a 'test run'; you don't want to limp your way into the interview room because your new shoes pinch!



Think Through This ...

What else do you need to do on the day of the interview?



Dress appropriately

- Take a shower and groom yourself. Dress for the job you want. Looking the part is very persuasive.

Arrive early

- Be more than punctual – you can soak in the atmosphere and gather your thoughts so that you have the proper frame of mind to handle the interview. If you are late for the interview, the interviewer may wonder how often you will be late if you are hired.



Be armed

- Bring a copy of the advertisement, your cover letter, and most importantly, your resume. Put them in a smart folder.
- Please know your resume inside-out, but when asked about it, do not repeat the information word for word. Be anecdotal. Tell them winning stories about your experiences.

Be positive

- Think positive. Feel positive. It is amazing how easily your interviewers pick up your vibes.

Be pleasant to listen to

- Speak at a normal pace. Too hurried, and you sound nervous. Too slow, and your interviewers get impatient – they are working under much time pressure.

Let your ‘good’ body language take over.

- Relax. Make eye contact with not just the person asking you the question, but with everyone in the panel. Remember to smile now and then, as appropriate.



Follow the interviewer’s lead

- Remember that you are a guest. Do not sit until you are told. Shake hands if the interviewer offers to do so and give a firm handshake.

Be tactful and gracious

- Listen carefully. Do not interrupt. Never contradict the interviewer or imply that an error has been made, under any circumstances. This will be a sign of blatant rudeness. Thank everyone at the end.

Think Through This ...



What NOT to do:

The last thing you want is to be remembered by the interviewers for the boo-boos you made – a sure way to be NOT short-listed!

Here are some common pitfalls to consciously avoid:

- **Over-familiarity, courtesy and interruptions**

Don’t behave as if you are among colleagues of equal rank. Neither should you use first names. Don’t show nonchalance by chewing gum or doodling.

Don’t finish the question for the interviewer, even if it is clear to you where the question is headed, thinking that this shows them your intelligence. It is discourteous.

- **Jargon, slang and accents**

Don’t punctuate your speech with such expressions as ‘yeah’, ‘y’know’ and ‘cool’. Neither should you slip into Singlish. At the other end of the scale, do not put on a fake accent; be your best self.

- **Negative vibes**



Negative vibes can come through in your choice of words. Don't use words with negative connotation such as 'can't', 'won't', 'unable', 'failure' and 'incompetent'. Never bad-mouth anyone – bosses, supervisors or team mates.

- **Win an argument at all costs**

Don't get into an argument with any interviewer. You may think you've won the argument, but you would have lost the job!

4. THE PHONE INTERVIEW

Companies may conduct interviews over the phone or Skype for these reasons:

- To save time or money [especially travel expenses]
- To pre-screen candidates and narrow down the search for potential face-to-face candidates

If it is done through Skype, be prepared for pauses. Wait for your message to be transmitted. This also gives you additional thinking time. Remember to be well groomed and do not do anything to distract the interviewer.



Think Through This ... 12

Different in What Ways?

Besides the usual preparation, what else do you need to do differently for such an interview? To understand this, let us examine how a phone interview differs from a face-to-face interview.



- **They can't see you: It's your words and tone only**

- ✓ Choose your words carefully, using positive ones such as 'challenge', 'success', 'responsible'. Avoid negative ones like 'bad', 'hopeless' or wishy-washy ones like 'may be', 'sort of'.
- ✓ Your tone should project enthusiasm and positive vibes. Take care that you don't come across as tired and disinterested.



- **You can't see them: no visual cues**

Be mentally prepared. Unlike the face-to-face interview where you will have the opportunity to make inferences about the people and the culture of the organization through their physical set-up and their people-to-people interactions, you won't have these clues. Don't feel rattled by this.

- **The timing!**

They may let you know ahead when they will call, or they may not. In the event that the call comes unexpectedly, try to see if you could get an hour's preparation by saying: 'It's not a very good time now; do you mind if I call you back in an hour?' Ensure you get the contact number and name, and you both agree on the exact time. Then, you would want to beef up on your research and materials quickly. In the event that you can't, give it your best shot still.

- **The preparation**

If you are lucky enough to have advance notice, please have these materials handy:
The advertisement, your cover letter and resume

- ✓ Your research – on the company, job, etc.
- ✓ An outline of the points you want to cover
- ✓ Your list of questions to ask
- ✓ Pena and paper to take points down
- ✓ Your laptop and internet access – a stand-by in case you need additional information

- **The location**

Make sure you are in a quiet place with good reception. Arrange things so that no-one will interrupt you. Cancel your call-waiting facility.

- **During the Interview**

They can't see you, but they can hear whether you are chewing, eating or drinking [so don't]. They can also 'hear' your posture [sit upright], and your smile – they come through in your tone, whether you realize it or not.

Speak succinctly – get to the point, and don't ramble.

Thank your interviewer at the end, and make sure you agree on a time-line for follow up. Write an e-mail to thank him again after this.

5. OTHER FORMS OF INTERVIEW OR ASSESSMENT

Besides interviews, different organisations also utilise a number of other ways to assess their candidates:

Assessment centre: This could include group exercises, presentations and group discussions.



Group tasks reveal how you function in teams.

In-tray exercise: You will be given a list of tasks and a fixed amount of time. This tests your ability to plan, prioritise and organise. You are likely to explain your course of action.



Assessors watch you keenly.

Group discussion: You are put in a ‘leaderless’ group and required to discuss a topic. Assessors will be on hand to observe how you function in a team, your leadership ability, your initiative, and interpersonal skills.



Ability to present at short notice is valuable.

Presentation: You may be given the topic ahead or on-site. This tests your resourcefulness, ability to think under pressure and public speaking skills.

Written assessment: This is for jobs that require you to articulate opinions well on paper. This also tests your time management and critical thinking skills.

6. AFTER THE INTERVIEW

You thank your interviewers and follow up on the outcome. Besides that, do evaluate how you performed at the interview, so that you can improve on your weaker points.

Content – Marketing Yourself, Demonstrating Company and Job Knowledge

Checklist for the information you supplied			
	Very successfully	Successfully	Unsuccessfully
How well did you do the following?			
Market yourself			
Answer each question in terms of qualifications and experience related to the requirements of the position	[]	[]	[]
Emphasise your strengths	[]	[]	[]
Demonstrate company knowledge			
Show knowledge of the company	[]	[]	[]
Demonstrate job knowledge			
Show knowledge of the position	[]	[]	[]
General alertness and preparedness			
Consider and prepare answers to possible questions	[]	[]	[]
Give relevant examples to support your point	[]	[]	[]
Ask appropriate questions	[]	[]	[]
Engage the interviewer's attention and interest	[]	[]	[]
Show you kept cool and collected; remembered to greet and thank the interviewers	[]	[]	[]

Verbal Performance

Checklist for your verbal performance			
	Very successfully	Successfully	Unsuccessfully
How well did you do the following?			
Look up the pronunciation of difficult words and articulate your words clearly	[]	[]	[]
Speak at a comfortable pace	[]	[]	[]
Speak audibly	[]	[]	[]
Vary your tone and pitch as appropriate	[]	[]	[]

Attitude and Non-Verbal Aspects

How well did you do the following? (Non-verbal)	Checklist for your non-verbal performance		
	Very successfully	Successfully	Unsuccessfully
Present a positive and courteous attitude	[]	[]	[]
Control your nervousness and not fidget	[]	[]	[]
Maintain good eye contact	[]	[]	[]
Sit with good posture – one of relaxed confidence	[]	[]	[]
Smile	[]	[]	[]



