

# Successful Interviewing



“Employers look for a person who will be a pleasure to work with and who will fit into the company’s work atmosphere just as much as they look for skills. Keep that in mind when conversing with potential employers!”

Nicole B., Sophomore, Psychology



“At some point in your search you’ll probably have a phone interview. To me, they are like open-book tests: you can write down answers ahead of time, and have them in front of you during the interview!”

Alex T., Junior, Integrative Biology/Psychology



Like exams, interviews require a great deal of preparation. In order to do well, you must assess your current knowledge about the position, study the employer, and anticipate difficult questions. In a competitive job market it’s especially important to follow these steps to interview success:

1. Analyze the Position
2. Research the Employer
3. Review Your Experiences
4. Practice!

## ●●●●● ANALYZE THE POSITION ●●●●●

Review a copy of the job description and highlight the qualifications and main responsibilities. If you are still unclear about the nature of the position, check out the information in the Vault Employer & Industry Guides that can be downloaded for free through **Callisto**, the Career Center’s gateway to online services, and conduct informational interviews: see p. 7.

Keep in mind that employers with lengthy qualifications statements rarely find applicants strong in all areas, so do not get discouraged if you do not meet all of the specified requirements, just be sure to emphasize your strengths.



## Chapter Action Items

more info: [career.berkeley.edu](http://career.berkeley.edu)

- Write out answers to questions you think the employer will ask and keep a list of your strengths, weaknesses, and key accomplishments
- Learn about the employer: browse their website, conduct an article search, and attend information sessions and career fairs
- View our Successful Interviewing Online Workshop
- Sign up for **Callisto** to download free Vault Guides on interviewing at [callisto.berkeley.edu](http://callisto.berkeley.edu)
- Practice with friends or family and schedule a mock interview at the Career Center
- Have extra copies of your resume and lay out your interview attire
- Get directions to the interview site, confirmation of the day and time of the interview. Allow plenty of time to get to the interview site and arrive at least 10 minutes early.
- Show the employer that you are a good fit with detailed examples of times when you successfully used the skills they seek
- Send a thank-you email within 48 hours of your interview

## RESEARCH THE EMPLOYER

Learn as much as you can about the employer's mission, services, products, and future prospects. Understand how this organization compares with similar or competing organizations. The best place to start your research is on the employer's website. Information can also be obtained from the following sources:

- See "Research the World of Work," p. 6
- Article searches (search Google or Hoovers.com)
- Attend Employer Info Sessions, see p. 18
- Network with alumni using the @Cal Career Network or LinkedIn, see p. 19
- Talk to representatives at career fairs, see p. 17

## REVIEW YOUR EXPERIENCES

When reviewing your qualifications, consider all experiences valuable even if they do not directly relate to the position. Review the following:

- Work experience
- Internships
- Volunteer experience
- Class projects
- Course work
- Student group experience
- Interests and hobbies

For each experience, identify the skills and knowledge you developed. Many skills are transferable from one setting to another. Be able to say how the experience has prepared you to contribute to an organization. For assistance on reviewing your skills, see "Top 10 Qualities Employers Seek in Job Candidates," p. 5 and "Making a Career Transition," p. 24

## PRACTICE!

Try the following methods to boost your interviewing confidence:

- Practice saying your responses out loud. Answering potential questions in front of a mirror can be useful for assessing your facial expressions.
- Have a career counselor or friends and family ask you a list of questions and give you feedback on the following: content and organization of your answers (completeness, level of detail, how easy to follow) and your presentation style (pace, voice quality/tone, energy, posture, eye contact, hand gestures, etc.)
- Film or tape your responses and review your performance. Ask yourself: did I look/sound confident, what does my body language say, did I look/sound relaxed, and did I sound enthusiastic?

## FEELING NERVOUS?

Feeling nervous about interviews is normal. In fact, being a little nervous can be helpful, motivating you to prepare and do your best. But worrying about being nervous usually just makes you more nervous! Focus your energy on being more self confident instead. Use these tips to harness your nervous energy:

- **Think of your accomplishments.** Try to think of five things you would like the employer to know about you and practice telling these stories out loud so that you will sound more polished and prepared for your interview.
- **Remember that interviewing is a two-way street.** Keep in mind that you are not the only person being evaluated during the interview. You can also think about what impression the interviewer makes on you and view him or her as a resource to learn more about the company and the position. This will help give you a sense if this employer is one that you would like to work for and whether or not this position fits in with your goals.
- **Build rapport in the first 5 seconds.** First impressions can set the tone for the rest of the interview. When your interviewer comes into the waiting room and calls your name, walk toward that person with confidence, make eye contact, extend your hand for a handshake, and say, "Hello I'm (insert your name here)." This should help set the tone for a successful interview.

## ETIQUETTE TIPS FOR INTERVIEWS

- Be on time! Even better, arrive 10 minutes early
- Do not chew gum or wear too much fragrance
- Style your hair neatly and keep it off your face
- Do not put your belongings on the interview desk
- Turn off cell phones
- Be respectful to everyone. Job offers have been denied on how applicants treat administrative staff
- Alert references that they may be contacted. Bring your reference list with you to your interviews. **For reference sheet format, see p. 38.**

## TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

If possible, ask your prospective employer what type of interview you will have. This will help you prepare and feel more confident. Types of interviews include:

- **One-on-one:** just you and one interviewer, the most common type of interview
- **Panel:** more than one person interviews you at the same time
- **Group:** a group of candidates is interviewed by a panel
- **Meal:** you are interviewed while eating, usually over lunch
- **Working:** you are put to work and observed
- **Telephone:** often used as a screening tool before inviting you to an on-site interview
- **On-Site or Second Round:** after you have made it through a screening interview, many organizations will invite you to their site for an extended interview that may include a series of different types of interviews, a site tour, and a meal. Getting a second round interview means the organization is seriously considering you for a position.



### Preparing for a Phone Interview

- Schedule it for a time when you can give 100 percent of your attention and take the call in a quiet place.
- Jot down points you want to make, a list of your skills and accomplishments with examples, and questions to ask.
- Keep a copy of your resume and the job description near the phone.
- Have your calendar in front of you if you need to set up another interview.
- Ask for clarification if necessary and think out your responses clearly before you answer.
- Show enthusiasm for the position—be sure to smile—it can come through in your voice.
- Avoid saying “ah, er, um.” These non-words are more noticeable on the phone.
- Dress in business casual attire to help put you in an interview mindset.



### Preparing for a Second Round Interview

- Confirm the date, time, location, and who you should ask for on your arrival.
- Make any necessary travel arrangements. If traveling out of the area, will the company make reservations for you?
- Keep any receipts. Some medium and large sized companies may pay your expenses.
- Research the company ahead of time. The employer will expect you to be very familiar with them.
- Study the job description and know exactly what you are interviewing for.
- Bring extra copies of your resume, transcripts, references, and all employer forms that you have been asked to complete.
- Bring at least five questions to ask, see “Questions to Ask Employers,” p.51. Develop lists of different questions tailored to who you are meeting with (e.g., you can ask a human resources representative questions about the company culture whereas you can ask a potential coworker more detailed questions about job responsibilities).
- Be prepared to answer the same question several times. During the day you will most likely meet with several people: your potential supervisor, coworkers and a human resources representative. They may ask you the same questions. Be enthusiastic, honest, and consistent in your answers.
- Remember that you are always being evaluated. In group activities and during meals, your ability to work with people and your “fit” in the organization is being observed.
- Remember that the interview is a two-way street. Be observant. What is the atmosphere like? Are employees friendly?
- Remember to ask when you can expect to hear from the employer again. If the employer does not respond within that time, you may phone or email the person who interviewed you to ask about your status.
- Know what to do if you receive an offer on the spot. In most cases, it’s better to think about the offer before accepting or declining. If you do receive a verbal offer and are not ready to make a decision, ask for written confirmation and tell the firm when you expect to make a decision. Maintain communication with the firm.
- After your visit, send a thank-you letter within one or two days to the person in charge of your visit with copies to the others involved. You should mention what you appreciated from the day’s activities and your interests in both the job and the organization. A week after sending the letter, you may contact the employer to show your continued interest and ask if there is any additional information you can provide.



## TYPES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Most interviews consist of different types of interview questions that will depend on the position and the organization. Types of interview questions include:

### Qualifications

These are straight-forward questions about your experience, background, and personal traits. Examples:

- What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- Tell me about yourself.
- Why should I hire you?

### Behavioral

These very popular questions are based on the premise that past behavior best predicts future behavior. For example, if you have shown initiative in a club or class project, you are likely to show initiative when you are working. Before an interview, each position is assessed by the employer for the skills and traits that relate to job success and related interview questions are developed. Examples:

- Describe a situation where you used persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- Tell me about a time when you had to take on a leadership role.

You should respond to these questions with a specific example where you have demonstrated the skill the interviewer is seeking. It's helpful to remember "CAR" to compose a thoughtful response. Here's how it works:

**CONTEXT:** What was the problem, need, or concern? Include obstacles you had to overcome.

**ACTIONS** you took: This does not mean what the group did, but what you did. Practice saying "I" instead of "We." Assume ownership of your accomplishments.

**RESULTS** you achieved: quantify the results and relate them, your skills, and actions to the employer's needs.

How will you know what skills are important for a particular position so you can prepare targeted examples?

- Read the job/internship description and highlight skills, qualifications, and what you will do on the job.
- Read occupational information that describes which skills are used in jobs/internships like the ones you want.
- Ask questions at employer information sessions or career and internship fairs.
- Contact alumni or current students working in the same position or company.

Go to interviews with several stories that show off your relevant skills. Develop them by anticipating the skills that are important for the position and by reviewing past experiences for your accomplishments. Accomplishments can be found in all parts of your life:

- Academics, including class projects
- Sports (Will your goal-orientation transfer to your career? What did you learn about being a team player?)
- Activities (Have you published a story, given a speech, or marched in the Cal Band? Were you a leader?)
- Volunteer, work, or internship experiences (When did your performance exceed expectations? Achieve something new? Make things easier? Save or make money?)

### Technical/Case

Depending on the industry that you want to enter, you may receive questions related to concepts that you learned from your coursework, industry knowledge (e.g., familiarity with financial markets), or specific skills (e.g., programming languages). Technical/case questions are especially common in business fields such as finance, consulting, and accounting and also in engineering, physical science, and computer science fields.

In order to prepare for these types of questions, it can be helpful to ask employee representatives, alumni, or peers who have had interviews in that field about the types of questions you can expect. In addition, reading through the Vault Career Guides and Interview Guides (e.g., Guide to Case Interviews) can help you learn more about the skills each industry values and can also give you an idea of industry-specific questions that you might expect.

**SEE NEXT PAGE FOR PRACTICE  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Preparing for Your  
Search

Internships

Your Job or  
Internship Search

Resume & Letter  
Writing

Successful  
Interviewing

Internship &  
Job Offers

## PRACTICE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Since most interviews consist of a mix of different question types, practice responding to questions from both the qualification and behavioral categories. Add in some technical/case questions if you are entering a field that is known to use them. For information on “Types of Interview Question,” see p. 47.

### Practice Qualification Questions

- Why are you pursuing this field?
- Describe your ideal job.
- What are your career plans?
- What do you see yourself doing in five years?
- Do you plan to return to school for further education?
- What classes did you enjoy most/least and why?
- What other positions are you interviewing for?
- Why are you interested in our organization?
- Where do you see yourself fitting in?
- What do you know about our services/products?
- How do you feel about traveling as part of your job?
- In what type of setting do you do your best work?
- Tell me about yourself.
- Why should I hire you?
- How does your background relate to this position?
- What can you offer us?
- What have you learned from the jobs you have had?
- Tell me about an accomplishment that you are proud of.
- What are your greatest strengths?
- What are your greatest weaknesses?
- Why did you decide to attend UC Berkeley?
- Why did you choose your major?
- What have you learned from your failures?
- What motivates you to do good work?
- How do you prefer to be supervised?
- How would a former supervisor describe you?

### Practice Behavioral Questions

#### Interpersonal skills

- When working on a team project, have you ever dealt with a strong disagreement among team members or a team member who didn't do their part? What did you do?
- Tell me about the most difficult or frustrating individual that you've ever had to work with and how you managed to work with him or her.
- Tell me about a time when you had to be assertive.

#### Communication skills

- Tell me about a time when you had to present complex information. How did you get your point across?
- Describe a time when you used persuasion to convince someone to see things your way.
- Tell me about a time when you used written communication skills to communicate an important point.

#### Initiative

- Give me an example of when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty to get a job done.
- Tell me about projects you have initiated. What prompted you to begin them?

#### Leadership

- Tell me about a time when you influenced the outcome of a project by taking a leadership role.
- Describe your leadership style and give me an example of a situation where you successfully led a group.
- Give me an example of your ability to build motivation in your coworkers, classmates, or a volunteer committee.

#### Planning and organization

- How do you determine priorities in scheduling your time?

Give me an example.

- Tell me about an important goal of yours. How did you reach it?
- Describe a situation when you had many assignments or projects due at the same time. What steps did you take to finish them?
- Give me an example of what you've done when your time schedule or plan was upset by unforeseen circumstances?

#### Flexibility

- Describe a situation in which you overcame a “personality conflict” in order to get results.
- Describe a time where you were faced with issues that tested your coping skills.
- Describe a time when you received constructive criticism.

#### Creativity/innovation

- When and how did you provide a creative solution?
- What is the most creative thing you have done?

#### Decision making

- Give an example of when you had to make a difficult decision. How did you approach it? What kinds of criteria did you use?
- Describe a time when you had to defend your decision.
- Summarize a situation where you had to locate relevant information, define key issues, and determine the steps to get a desired result.



## Behavioral Interview Question: How to Say It!

**Question:** Describe a time when you worked in a team. What role did you play?

**CONTEXT:** Last semester, I was part of a team of five people for a group project in my Introduction of Marketing class where we were given an assignment to develop a marketing strategy for a new line of toys for Mattel. As part of the group project, we were required to create a 15 page marketing plan by the end of the last day of class.

**ACTION:** I was the team leader and was in charge of coordinating all of the group meetings and delegating tasks. I took the initiative to create a meeting schedule so that our group met every Wednesday afternoon, emailed the agenda to each group member prior to our meetings, and kept an Excel spreadsheet of all of the tasks. I also worked on making sure that the team was cohesive and supportive of each other by mediating conflicts by facilitating discussion, listening to each member, and helping them to work towards a compromise.

**RESULT:** As a result of my efforts as team leader, we were able to finish the group project one week ahead of schedule and also were chosen as the group with the “most innovative” marketing plan. Also, the number of conflicts between the group members significantly decreased and we were able to agree upon a marketing plan that satisfied everyone.

### Practice Technical/Case Questions

In technical/case interviews, you will be presented with a complex problem involving issues or situations that are not likely to be familiar. You will be asked to formulate a solution to the problem under tight time constraints. While primarily an analytical exercise, these questions also gauge your comfort level with problem solving, your curiosity about the problem at hand, and your ability to articulate your insights.

#### Tips for Technical/Case Interviews

- Use pictures and diagrams if it will help. When you finish, ask if that was what the interviewer was looking for.
- Often, you won't know the answer, but you need to make an attempt. Remember, the interviewer is evaluating how you approach a problem just as much as your answer. Logical and reasonable thinking is preferred over a one-line response. Keep in mind that there is often no RIGHT or WRONG answer; each candidate has their opinion and perspective on a question.
- If it is a difficult question, ask for some time to think about it. If you do not have an answer, let the interviewer know that you really don't have an answer. It is better than making something up. It shows honesty, which is a trait all employers highly value.

There are two primary types of technical/case interviews:

#### Guess the number problem

These questions are designed to determine how logically and quickly you can think on your feet and to see whether you think before you speak. An example is: “How many disposable diapers were sold in the U.S. last year?” There are no right answers. You must work off assumptions. These might include:

- The population of the U.S. is 250 million
- The average household size is 2.5 people
- There are 100 million households in the U.S.
- The mean household income is \$35,000
- The U.S. Gross Domestic Product is \$6 trillion

#### Business case problem

The second type of case is more analytically focused and tries to gauge your comfort and confidence with numbers. To understand these cases, you will often need some understanding of the numbers that validate the hypotheses.

An example of a business case problem is: “Savannah Jane’s is a convenience store franchise located in Needham, MA, across the street from the Hersey commuter railroad station. Needham has a population of 28,000. In the town there are four convenience stores. Savannah Jane’s wants to increase sales and profits. What would you do to help them?”



## ●●●●● DIFFICULT QUESTIONS ●●●●●

When encountering a difficult question, pause for a moment and ask yourself, “What is the interviewer really hoping to learn about me?” A few examples follow:

### **Tell me about yourself.**

This commonly asked question seems so broad. It helps to keep in mind who your audience and what your purpose is. Keep your comments focused on information that will help the employer determine your qualifications and/or interest in this position. This can include your future career aspirations, what you have gained from your education and/or experiences, and your enthusiasm for beginning a job in your field of interest.

### **What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?**

View this as an opportunity to point out strengths that relate to being successful in the position for which you are interviewing. Back up your statements with examples of experiences in which you have demonstrated your strengths. Strategies for addressing a weakness (only mention one) include choosing one you have overcome, or selecting an area/skill that you have not had much time to develop or an area that is not that important to the demands of the work. Also, be genuine with your answers and avoid cliché answers such as “I work too hard” or “I’m a perfectionist.” Employers are impressed by people who can be honest, recognize areas for improvement, and overcome personal challenges.

### **What are your salary expectations?**

If you are asked this question during an interview, assume that the employer is deciding whether or not they can afford you, or wondering if you will undersell yourself. Research location-appropriate industry salaries. See “Internship & Job Offers,” p. 53, so you can quote your findings and say, “I’m comfortable with a salary that’s in this range.” If the interviewer persists, make sure that they name a figure first. You can do this by saying, “I’m sure you have a range in mind. What are you willing to offer?”

### **Tell me about your participation in this religious/political/cultural/LGBT activity?**

Employers may inquire about anything that appears on your resume, so if you do include information about being affiliated with religious, political, cultural, or LGBT activities, be prepared to talk about them. While it is important to be honest about your experiences, you should also be cautious, and if possible, avoid discussing controversial topics during your interview. Before answering these types of questions, be sure to spend some time researching the company’s culture to determine what would be an appropriate response and if the employer is a good fit for your values; discuss what you gained from the experience rather than your personal beliefs or opinions.



## **Difficult Question: How to Say It!**

### **Question: What is your greatest weakness?**

#### **Sample Answer (make sure to use your own weakness and your own words!):**

One area that I have been working on is feeling more comfortable with public speaking. While I have given presentations in class on several occasions, I noticed that I do get more nervous than I would like when speaking in front of large groups of people. For this reason, I took the initiative to join the Debate Society at Cal to get more experience with public speaking. I recently participated in a regional debate competition where I helped my team win second place. Because of my experience in the Debate Society I have felt less nervous and more confident about speaking in public and feel that this position would be a good fit for me because I could continue to develop my communication skills.

## **INTERVIEW TIPS**

- Express genuine interest and enthusiasm when you answer questions.
- Be specific and give examples. This adds credibility to statements you make about your qualifications. It is better to make a few strong points than many brief, unrelated points. Go for quality over quantity.
- Organize your thoughts and show an understanding of the issues. The employer may not necessarily be looking for the right response, but how you respond.
- Do not diminish your past experiences; don’t say, “I was just a cashier.” Talk up your transferable skills.
- A challenge to your qualifications may not be a rejection, but rather a call for more information.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK EMPLOYERS

Bring at least five questions to ask employers to all of your interviews. Asking thoughtful questions is an excellent way to show your interest in the position and demonstrate that you have done research on the company. Avoid questions that you can find the answers to on the company's website and focus on questions that show you have gone above and beyond to learn about the employer through news articles, company reports, talking to company representatives, etc. It is usually OK to ask questions during the interview, and typically the interviewer will ask you if you have questions at the end of the interview. Although questions will vary with each interview, the following are some possible questions to ask, especially if you do not completely understand the job description.

- **ALWAYS ASK:** May I have your business card(s)? This will give you proper contact information for thank-you letters and follow-up information. See "Thank You for the Interview," p. 52.
- **ALWAYS ASK:** What are the next steps in the hiring process? This will give you a timeline, peace of mind, and clues for any possible follow-up actions.
- When and how are employees evaluated?
- What are the best/worst aspects of working in this group/organization?
- What's the biggest challenge facing this group/organization right now?
- How would you compare your organization with your major competitors? What are your plans for expansion in terms of product lines, services, new branches, etc.?
- How would you describe this organization's management style? How are decisions made?
- What are some typical first year assignments? What is the career path for my position? How does this position fit into the overall organizational structure?
- What kind of training is given to new employees?

**As a general rule, questions about salary and benefits are best left until a job offer has been extended.**

### AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Every interview is a learning experience, so after the interview, ask yourself the following questions to prepare for your next one:

- How did my interview go?
- Did I feel at ease with the interviewer after my initial nervousness?
- Did I highlight how my experience and skills could meet with their qualifications?
- Did I ask questions which helped me clarify the position and show my interest and knowledge?
- Did I take the opportunity to mention my strengths and show what I have to offer?
- Was I positive and enthusiastic?
- How did I make myself stand out?
- What points did I make that seemed to interest the interviewer?
- Did I talk too much? Too little? Was I assertive; not assertive enough?
- What did I learn that I can apply to my next interview? How can I improve for next time?

### WHAT TO WEAR

- Unless otherwise directed, dress conservatively. Men should wear a dark suit and conservative tie. Women should wear a dark suit. Avoid miniskirts, trendy outfits, or loud colors.
- You may dress in business casual for interviews only if the employer indicates this is appropriate. Search the Career Center website for business casual descriptions. Make sure your clothes are cleaned and pressed.
- Wear dark polished conservative shoes with closed toe and heel. Men should wear long, dark socks and women should wear dark or nude colored nylons or trouser socks.
- Minimize jewelry and makeup. Women should wear no more than one pair of small earrings. Men and women should wear no additional body piercings.