

Interviewing Guide

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Interviewing Basics

Congratulations! You impressed the employer with your experience and skills and now have an opportunity to interview with the employer. Interviews may occur on the phone, at the employer's site, at a job fair, or virtually. But no matter where they occur, preparation is the key to success.



Big Interview is an online tool available to SJSU students. It will help you review, practice, and record hundreds of practice interview questions from various industries. Register at sjsu.biginterview.com with your SJSU email.

Types of Interviews



PHONE SCREEN

Phone screens are typically 15-30 minutes and include basic questions. The interviewer's objective is to verify the information on your resume, determine if you fully understand the job, and learn about why you want this job. Prepare for a phone screen by finding a quiet place. Demonstrate enthusiasm by varying your voice and minimizing reading off your resume, which can sound overly monotonous.



VIDEO INTERVIEW

Video interviews may be used similarly to phone screens to narrow down candidates, particularly if the employer's location is not nearby. Prepare for a video interview by finding a quiet, clean, well-lit area. Practice using the technology in advance. Ensure your camera and sound are working correctly. Look at the camera instead of the screen to mimic eye contact.



1-ON-1 INTERVIEW

1-on-1 interviews are the most common. Ask for the interviewer's name and position before the interview. Search for the interviewer's LinkedIn profile to better understand what the interviewer might be looking for.



GROUP INTERVIEW

Group interviews consist of one or two interviewers and a larger group of interviewees being interviewed together. This type of interview could be chosen by the employer to save time and to observe how the interviewees interact with each other. Participate and contribute to the discussion without monopolizing the entire conversation.



PANEL INTERVIEW

Panel interviews consist of multiple interviewers and one interviewee: you. Ask for the interviewers' names and positions before the interview. Greet and shake the hands of all panel members when you enter the room. When responding to questions, start your eye contact with the person who asked the question, then rotate eye contact and conclude your answer with eye contact back on the panel member who asked the question.

Common Interview Questions

Write down your responses to the top 10 most commonly asked interview questions.

1. [Tell me about yourself.](#)

Tip: You have a short timeframe to answer this question, so don't repeat the information on your resume. Instead, focus on your education/degree, key skills, and how your education and experience relate to the qualifications for the job.

2. [Why do you want to work here?](#)

Tip: The interviewer wants to see that you studied the job posting, researched the company, and you are genuinely enthusiastic about the position. Focus on the education and skills you will bring to the company more than what the company will do for you.

3. [Why should we hire you?](#)

Tip: This is an opportunity to highlight your key strengths and describe your most memorable selling points for the job. One approach is to mention any unique combination of skills and experience you have that can make you stand out from the other candidates.

4. [What is your greatest strength?](#)

Tip: To prepare your answer, make a list of your top strengths and decide which three are most relevant for the position. Avoid choosing generic strengths that anyone can claim like you're a "hard worker" or "people person." Be specific and prepare an example to demonstrate each strength.

5. [What is your greatest weakness?](#)

Tip: Choose a weakness that is not essential to the job requirements. Consider something you have limited knowledge of, and explain how you are working to improve that knowledge or skill. This allows you to show that you are motivated to learn and contribute to the company, and you can answer this question in a positive way.

Common Interview Questions (continued)

6. [What accomplishment are you most proud of and why?](#)

Tip: Review your resume and use an accomplishment that is relevant to the job. Expand on it and tell a story using the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) method (for more help, see the [Resume Guide](#)).

7. [Where do you see yourself in 5 years?](#)

Tip: Think about where this position could realistically take you and how that aligns with some of your broader professional goals. Look at the company's team organization and think about how you would like to grow within the company.

8. [Tell me about a time when you faced a challenge and overcame it.](#)

Tip: Look at your college projects or jobs, think about a challenging project or situation you encountered and the steps you took to address and resolve it, either by yourself or with a team.

9. [Tell me about a time when you had to resolve a conflict with a coworker or classmate.](#)

Tip: Choose a situation in which you found a way to maintain a positive professional relationship. Ideally, this situation allowed you to demonstrate your professionalism, team skills, people skills, and calm under pressure.

10. [Do you have any questions for me?](#)

Tip: Ask questions that would help you gain insight for future interviews, such as: What are key skills and qualities you are seeking in a candidate? What do you see as some of the challenges of this position? What do you want the new person to achieve in the first three months on the job? What is the next step in your hiring process?

Behavioral Questions

Behavioral interview questions focus on how you handled various situations in the past. They typically start with “Tell me about a time when” or “Give me an example.” When you hear these words, think about your answer in the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) format (for more help, see the [Resume Guide](#)).

Examples

- Tell me about a time when you had dealt with a difficult customer or co-worker. How did you handle the situation?
- Give an example of a time when you had make a relatively quick decision. What was the decision and what was your thought process behind your choice?
- Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a high-pressure situation. How did you cope with the stress?
- Give me an example of a time when you went above and beyond the call of duty to get a job done.
- Tell me about a time when you had to lead a project or team. What did you learn from that experience?
- Tell me about a time when your team wasn’t pulling their weight in a project. How did you handle it?

Situational Questions

Situational questions are theoretical questions meant to assess your critical thinking skills and gain information about how you make decisions and think through difficult situations.

Examples

- You are given several tasks with competing deadlines. How would you prioritize them?
- You are working with a client who is making unreasonable demands. How do you respond to them?
- You disagree with your boss about how to proceed on a project. How would you handle the situation?
- You are given constructive criticism by your boss, and you disagree with it. How would you address the situation?
- If you could have coffee with anyone in history, who would it be and why?

Difficult Questions

Difficult questions gauge how you respond to situations when you are caught off guard. They can assess your critical thinking skills, self-awareness, and growth mindset. Don't be afraid to ask for a minute to think before answering. For riddles such as "How many gas stations are in the U.S.?" process your answer out loud. The interviewer is not looking for the correct answer but your critical thinking and problem-solving process.

Examples

- Tell me about a mistake that you made. Looking back, what would you have done differently?
- What are three things that you think you need to work on?
- Describe your worst boss.
- What is one thing that you would change about your last job and why?
- How many times does a clock's hands overlap?
- If you had one superpower, what would it be and why?

Illegal/Improper Questions

Certain questions are illegal or improper for interviewers to ask because they can be used to discriminate against candidates based on protected classes (race, color, religion, sex, disability, familial status, or national origin). Salary and criminal history inquiries are banned in California, including on job applications. When facing an illegal/improper question, determine why the interviewer is asking that question, avoid directly answering the question, and turn the conversation to your strengths.

Examples

- Are you married or single?
- Do you plan to have children in the next year?
- Do you have a disability?
- What's your race?

Questions to Ask the Interviewer

At the end of every interview, your interviewer will most likely ask if you have any questions they can answer. It is always a good idea to have some questions prepared to demonstrate your interest in the position.

Examples

- What type of professional development opportunities do you offer your employees?
- Can you tell me about the training and supervision I will receive during my first year?
- What potential growth opportunities are available within your company?
- Can you describe some of the projects and assignments I will be assigned during my first year?
- What are some of the department/company's goals for the upcoming year?
- What are the biggest challenges that new hires face in their first year?

Interview Attire

When preparing for an interview, it is important to dress appropriately to give a good first impression. Research the company and look for the Careers or Jobs page. Often it will have information about the company culture or photos of employees. It is always best to overdress rather than underdress, so dress a step above what employees would typically wear to a work day.



DO

- Wear closed toe shoes that are polished and comfortable.
- Keep your accessories simple and minimal.
- Keep your hair clean and well groomed. Facial hair should be neat.
- Be aware of natural/disagreeable odors.
- Have your resume and application materials in a professional portfolio or folder.
- Put your phone on silent mode and out of sight.

DON'T

- Wear anything too tight or sheer. Avoid wearing yoga pants or shorts.
- Wear flip flops or tennis shoes.
- Put on heavy makeup.
- Bring a bulky backpack.
- Look at, text, or answer phone calls before or during an interview.

Interview Etiquette

Your positive attitude plays a key role in the interview process and sets the stage for your success. You can have a great resume, college degree, and required skills for the job—but, employers are also evaluating how well you fit into the work environment and work with others. Learn how to project a polite and professional appeal.

Introductions

- Be friendly to all employees the moment you enter the building—this is your chance to make a great first impression!
- Make sure to look people in the eyes, and smile to seem confident and approachable.
- Give a firm (but not too firm) handshake.

Discussions

- Try not to interrupt people in the middle of a story—this shows people you value their ideas and company.
- Don't talk too loudly or for too long—these actions might make you seem self-centered.
- Stay away from negative conversations—they can build mistrust.
- If you struggle to come up with conversation topics, equip yourself with conversation starters—for example, from watching the news, reading an interesting article, or attending a professional event.

Body Language / Non-Verbal Behavior

- Show that you're focused on the conversation by keeping eye contact, nodding, smiling, and using other nonverbal positive gestures.

Thank You Notes

After an interview, job/internship fair, or employer event, always send a thank you email to the person you spoke to.

Example

Dear First Name,

Thank you very much for the interview yesterday. I wish to reaffirm my strong interest in the position with your organization. As we discussed, I feel that my recent Bachelor's degree in Communications, my semester projects, and volunteer experience have provided me with an understanding of business operations which will prove to be an asset to your organization. I have always been considered a dedicated student, hard worker, and dependable team member, and I am confident that I can make a valuable contribution to your organization. I also enjoyed discussing our shared interest in the local environment and community service. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Your First and Last Name

Negotiating an Offer

Congratulations! Your hard work has landed you an internship/job offer! Now you get to choose whether or not to accept the offer and if you should negotiate. Compensation is only one factor in an ideal job offer, though it is often considered the most important. To determine the compensation range for similar roles, check sources such as the [SJSU Career Outcomes \(First Destination Survey\)](#), the [Educate to Career Job Salary Calculator](#), [Payscale](#), and [Glassdoor](#).

Factors to Consider

- **Benefits:** Does the employer offer medical, dental, and vision? If it does, how much does the employer cover? What options does the employer offer for retirement?
- **Vacation/Sick Time:** How much vacation and sick time will you earn?
- **Location:** How long is the commute? Is there public transit available if needed?
- **Work/Life Balance:** What is the expected work schedule? Does the employer offer telecommuting or flexible work schedules? Will you be an exempt (salaried) or non-exempt (hourly) employee?
- **Professional Development:** Does the employer support professional development opportunities (i.e., conferences, trainings) or provide financial aid for continuing education?
- **Company Culture:** What is the work environment like? If you conduct salary research and find that the offer is fair, you may accept it. In other instances based on your research, you might decide to negotiate salary and benefits.

Under 2018 California Employment Laws, employers can no longer ask candidates about their salary history. Employers also must provide the pay scale for a position in the job posting.

Salary Negotiation Tips

- **Be Reasonable:** Knowing what your employer typically pays, as well as what competitors typically pay, will help you appear informed, educated, and ready for discussion.
- **Be Gracious:** If the offer you are given does not fit your desired income, don't panic! Keep your demeanor neutral and express gratitude for the offer before jumping into the negotiation. Express confidence in your ability to succeed in the job and provide reasons to support your request—such as relevant experience, special skills, or current competing job offers.
- **Be Creative:** Examine the compensation packet carefully and don't hesitate to ask the HR representative questions about employee benefits such as health insurance, employee wellness programs, vacation, and sick leave.

If it becomes clear that the salary is fixed, be respectful and ask if it would be possible to establish a 90-day evaluation period to re-visit your salary if you meet (better yet—exceed) your goals.

Negotiating an Offer (continued)

Sample Negotiation Discussions

What do you say if...	
The pay is less than you had hoped for	“Thank you very much for the offer! I am excited about the company and the role we have discussed. I have no doubt I will be a great addition to your team. However, based on my research, experience and skill set, would you consider a salary more in the range of \$\$ to \$\$? Is there any flexibility on your offer?”
You have a competing offer with a higher salary	<p>“Thank you very much for the offer! I am excited about the company and the role we have discussed. However, as you know, I have been actively interviewing, and I do have another potential offer. If you’re able to extend the offer to \$\$, I’d be eager to accept.”</p> <p>Tip: Be prepared to share how you have exceeded expectations. Have an arsenal of stories prepared that show how you have come up to speed quickly, exceeded the expectations of your professors and internship supervisors, or came up with a creative idea that drove success in prior roles.</p>
The salary is fixed but you would like to negotiate benefits	“Thank you so much for the offer! I am excited about the company and the role we have discussed. The salary looks great, but I’d like to ask a couple of questions about the benefits. The offer said I’d be eligible for 2 weeks of paid vacation, but I would like to request 3. How do you feel about that?”
If there is no room for salary negotiation	If the same salary is offered after you negotiate the original offer, the salary is probably fixed.

After Accepting an Offer

Once you accept a job/internship offer, we recommend you stop applying or interviewing for other roles. Accepting a job offer means you have officially committed to work for a specific organization. Review our [student services and expectations](#) web page for more information. If there are circumstances in which you are considering another offer, please [schedule an appointment](#) with your career counselor to talk through your specific situation and the best options to move forward with minimal negative impact on the employer you are working with.

Keep in mind the following considerations, tips, and sample language if you decide to move forward with withdrawing an accepted offer.

What does it mean to renege on accepting a job offer?

- The act of reneging on an acceptance of a job offer in the job search process happens when a candidate accepts a job or internship offer (verbally or in writing) and then rescinds that acceptance (before starting or soon after starting).
- California is an “at-will employment” state—meaning that the employer or the employee can legally terminate the employment relationship at any time, with or without cause.
- Keep in mind, that there are short- and long-term consequences that need to be considered prior to reneging on an accepted offer.

Why does it happen?

- The candidate doesn’t stop interviewing and applying for jobs, even after accepting an offer
- The candidate receives a better offer from a competing organization
- Emergency circumstances occur—such as a personal illness or needing to care for an ill family member
- An unexpected move

Things to Consider Before You Renege on an Offer

- It can take a lot of time and resources for a recruiter to interview multiple candidates and decide who will receive the offer. Once a hire is made other candidates are turned down and recruiting stops.
- When a candidate reneges, the recruiter has to start the hiring process all over again which also leads to the position not being filled for a longer period.
- When students renege on an offer, it reflects badly on the university, and the recruiter may decide to stop recruiting—which affects the whole campus.
- Even in a large metropolitan area like Silicon Valley, it is not uncommon for professionals in similar industries to be connected. You don’t want to create a negative reputation for yourself or SJSU as “flakey” or unreliable.

Things to Do Before you Renege on an Offer

- Consult with a [career counselor](#) to discuss the situation and how to approach your communication with the employer.
- Speak with the hiring manager first to share that you have received a competing offer from another organization, and allow your current employer the chance to counteroffer.