

GUIDE TO INTERVIEWING



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Sage Office of
Career Planning



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Interviewing

Interviewing is a two way process that allows the employer to assess your fit for the position and organization by asking questions about your experiences, qualifications, and career interests, while also allowing you to learn about and assess the organization and specific position to which you are applying. During the interview process, not only is the employer assessing your fit for the organization, but also The Sage College's fit as a target recruiting school. As such, it's important for you to remember that you represent yourself and Sage. Treat every interaction with employers as critically important for both yourself and the College.

Pre-Interview

Employers want smart students who communicate well, work effectively in teams, and are genuinely enthusiastic about the position and organization. To interview well, you must demonstrate these attributes while also relating your knowledge, skills, and abilities to the position of interest. Below are some tips for effective preparation.

Research

- Research the organization via their website, industry/trade journals, and online searches. Among the details you should know: industry, mission, competitors, annual sales, income, number of employees, recent news, and if a publicly traded company, stock symbol and price.
- Acquire as much information as possible about the position you've applied for. Read the position description, know the job responsibilities, and talk to people doing this or similar work.
- Be sure you know what time you should arrive, where you should be, who you should ask for upon arrival, and the expected duration of the interview.
- Speak to a staff member in the Office of Career Planning about interview tips specific to your target career field. Different career fields require familiarity with different types of interview questions and strategies.

Reflect

- Use the research you've collected to make a case for WHY you want to work for the organization in the specific position you've applied for and why they should chose you.
- Review the position description and highlight similarities between job responsibilities/qualifications and specific experiences that demonstrate your competences in these areas.
- Prepare to speak about everything on your resume. In addition, identify three items on your resume that you hope the employer won't ask about and be ready to talk about each one in a positive manner.
- Create insightful questions to ask the employer based on your research.

Practice

- Schedule mock interviews with a staff member in the Office of Career Planning. The Office of Career Planning offers taped and un-taped mock interviews targeted for the career field and type of position you're applying for.
- Generate a list of questions and practice your responses to commonly asked questions with a friend, professor, and/or parent.

Professional Dress & Presentation

- Check out the Career Closet! The Office of Career Planning has professional attire at each campus for students and alumni.
- For Men – Standard interviewing attire is a conservative navy or charcoal two-piece business suit, white long sleeved button-down dress shirt, silk tie (that coordinates with the color of your suit), belt, dark socks, and polished dress shoes.
- For Women – Standard interviewing attire is a conservative dark colored pant or skirt suit and white (or light colored) blouse. Pantyhose should be neutral in color and flawless (no runs). Shoes should be moderate heeled, closed toe, and color coordinated with your suit.
- Check out our Pinterest board titled "Interview Outfits and Business Professional in the Workplace" board for samples of appropriate interview outfits (<https://www.pinterest.com/sagecareer/interview-outfits-and-business-professional-in-the/>)
- Try on your interview attire and make sure it fits properly prior to your interview.
- Obtain a professional portfolio and stock it with 5-10 extra copies of your resume on resume paper, the position description, company information, your list of questions to ask the employer, and reference list in case you are asked for it.

General Interviewing Tips

Arrival & Introduction

- Turn off your cell phone and discard gum before getting to the interview site.
- Arrive 15 minutes early to get settled and be ready when the interviewer greets you. Research where you are going ahead of time so that you know exactly where you are going and how long it will take to get there.
- Greet your interviewer by name, make eye contact, smile, and offer a firm handshake.
- Be prepared to engage in small talk. This will usually be prompted by the interviewer.
- Remember that you are being evaluated from the moment you come into contact with a representative from the organization, whether in the waiting area, elevator, or parking lot. Be courteous and respectful to every individual you interact with.

During The Interview

- Listen carefully to the question asked and be sure to answer the question clearly and succinctly. Once you answer the question, stop. Don't ramble.
- Sit up, lean forward, speak confidently, be positive, and avoid fidgeting. Research suggests 55% of communication is non-verbal, 38% is *how* you deliver your message, and only 7% is what you actually say.
- Support your statements with specific examples. This will help make your experiences more tangible, thus making you a stronger candidate.
- Focus on the qualifications you have, not on those you don't. The fact that you're interviewing for the position means that you have the necessary prerequisites.
- Ask for business cards from each person you interview with. This will help ensure proper follow up.
- Ask your contact when you can expect to hear from them regarding the position if he or she does not tell you.
- At the end of the interview day, thank your contact for their time, shake their hand, and tell him/her that you look forward to hearing from them.
- Avoid talking about salary or benefits during the interview. If asked for salary requirements, say that you trust the organization will offer a competitive salary commensurate with your qualifications and target position. ***Don't provide a number.***

Post-Interview

- Write down the names of everyone that interviewed you and specifically what you spoke about with them as soon as you can.
- Always send a thank you e-mail or hand written note to each individual that you met with within 24 hours of your interview. While email is perfectly acceptable, a handwritten thank you note may have greater impact. Thank the interviewer for their time, mention details about your conversation if you remember, reaffirm your interest in the position you interviewed for, and reference something you learned about the opportunity.
- Call or e-mail to follow up with your contact if you have not heard from him/her within the discussed time frame. If no time frame was discussed, follow up one week later. Following up is important because it reiterates your interest in the position and keeps your name in the interviewer's mind.
- Schedule an appointment with a staff member in the Office of Career Planning if you have questions or want assistance evaluating your interview performance.
- Meet with a staff member in the Office of Career Planning for advice on accepting/rejecting an offer and salary negotiation.
- **If you are not selected, remember, rejection will happen often. Don't take it personally, persevere and move on. Your best fit is still out there!**

Behavioral Interviewing

Behavioral Interviewing is an interviewing technique in which the interviewer probes for details about your past experiences to assess your qualifications for a particular position. It is based on the premise that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar situation. Behavioral interview questions typically address some of the following themes: communication, teamwork, leadership, persuasion, problem solving, initiative, handling conflict, decision making, and overcoming failure.

STAR Method

An effective strategy for answering behavioral interviewing questions is the **STAR** Method. **STAR** stands for **Situation, Task, Action, Result**. To respond, detail the specific **situation** or **task** you faced (the problem or challenge presented), the **action** you took, and explain the positive **result** of your actions. If an employer were to say: “Tell me about a time when you had to utilize creative problem solving skills.” You would use the STAR method to respond. For instance, “As Treasurer of the Biology Club, we saw a 15 member increase from 10 to 25 from my junior to senior year, though our club received no additional funding. This meant that our field trip to the Museum of Natural History would either be cancelled or that we’d have to be selective in choosing who went. Rather than cancelling the event, I reached out to another campus programming source, the Minerva system, and was able to secure a co-sponsor for the event. As a result of their co-sponsorship, all 25 of our members were able to go to the museum.”

Behavioral Interviewing Tips

- Identify specific scenarios from past experiences that effectively demonstrate skill sets consistent with the themes mentioned above. Include examples from past internships, work experiences, extracurricular activities, coursework, class projects, etc.
- Use these scenarios to prepare answers to sample behavioral questions using the STAR method.

Sample Behavioral Questions

- Tell me about the best presentation you’ve ever done.
- Give me an example of a time when you worked with a group/team to determine project responsibilities. What difficulties did the group/team have? What was your role?
- Give me an example of a time when you played a leadership role in a work situation, course project, student club, or team setting.
- Describe a situation in which you were able to persuade someone of your point of view.
- Tell me about a time when you had to analyze information and make a recommendation to solve a problem or issue.
- Describe a time where you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
- Tell me about a time when you had to work with someone that you don’t get along with.
- Have you ever taken an unpopular stand on an issue? What was the situation and what did you do?
- Describe a situation when you tried your hardest but didn’t achieve the desired result. What did you learn?
- Tell me about a time when you were faced with conflicting priorities. How did you determine what was a top priority in scheduling your time?

Questions to Ask Employers

Following the conclusion of the interviewer's questions, he or she will generally ask if you have any questions for them. Saying no will indicate to the employer that you're not interested. Asking insightful questions about the position and employer demonstrates to the interviewer that you've done your research and are genuinely enthusiastic about the opportunity. Below are some questions to ask the employer. Use these examples in combination with your research to create your own list of questions.

- What are the key challenges for the department/organization?
- What are the characteristics of the people who succeed in this position?
- In six months time, how will you know if you've hired the right person?
- Relative to your competitors, what is your competitive advantage?
- What are the key metrics that you use to evaluate your department/business?
- What are the trends that will/are influencing the business/industry?
- How would you describe the culture of the department/organization?
- What are the key objectives for the next 6-12 months? And, how does this role impact these objectives?
- (For the manager) How do you describe your management style?
- How did you advance to your current position in (company name)?
- Is this a new position? If not, where did the person go who occupied the position?
- Where are you in the search process? When do you expect to make a hiring decision?

Note: Many of these questions can be asked to each interviewer. Asking the same questions allows you to assess the consistency of responses. The more consistent, the more likely the information is an accurate depiction of the organization.

Tips for Asking Insightful Questions

- Review recent headlines about the organization. You should be able to generate a few insightful questions from these headlines.
- Write down your questions and, if necessary, refer to them at the appropriate time. Employers would rather you refer to your list of questions to ask an insightful question than not refer to your questions and ask a silly question.
- Do not ask questions that can be easily answered by viewing the employer's website.
- **Do not ask questions about salary or benefits. Wait until the employer makes an offer before either topic is discussed.**

Illegal Questions

Federal and state laws prohibit employers from asking questions to uncover personal information unrelated to the position you're interviewing for. **Specifically, employers are not allowed to ask questions about your race, gender, religion, marital status, disabilities, ethnic background, country or origin, sexual preferences or age.** If you're asked an illegal question, you have a few options.

1. Simply answer the question directly if you're comfortable doing so and don't believe it will affect your candidacy. If you're not comfortable answering, tell them you don't feel comfortable as you don't see how it pertains to the position, and ask politely if they would explain the relevance.
2. Redirect the question and then provide an answer. For instance, if an employer asks your country of origin, you could reply, "If you're asking whether or not I can work in the US, I can."

If you think you've been asked an illegal question, contact The Sage Colleges Office of Career Planning.

Sample Thank You E-Mail

Subject: Thank You

Dear Mr. Swanson,

Thank you for the opportunity to interview for the Program Coordinator position at the Ferguson Community Center. I enjoyed discussing your vision for the organization and am excited about the possibility of working at Ferguson.

I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me and look forward to hearing from you regarding the position.

Sincerely,

Leslie Knope

Sample Follow Up E-Mail

Subject: Program Coordinator Position

Dear Mr. Swanson,

I'm writing to express my continued interest in the Program Coordinator position and ask if you know the status of my application. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Leslie Knope

Commonly Asked Questions

Although we can't predict every question you might encounter, we can provide you with guidelines for answering commonly asked questions. Following are four common interview questions (including popular variations) and strategies for answering each. Prepare answers for each of the following question types, as you're likely to encounter most (if not all) during your interview. The goal of this exercise is not to memorize your responses, but to familiarize yourself with common interview questions and strategies to effectively respond. Once you master the strategies behind these questions, you will have the ability to answer many different interview questions.

1. Tell me about yourself.

Purpose of Question

This type of question is very popular in the beginning of an interview and is used to transition from small talk to formal interview questions. It is used to assess your communication skills, as well as your interest and enthusiasm for the organization and career field.

Strategy for Responding

To answer, give the interviewer a little background on yourself (class year, major, career interests), how and when you became interested in this field, and explain why the opportunity and organization peaked your interest and made you want to apply.

Sample Response

“I’m a senior Environmental Science major at Russell Sage College and am very interested in sustainability initiatives. As Vice President of the Environmental Club, I research and plan relevant activities and projects for the club to participate in. Last fall, I organized a community service project at the Boston branch of Sustainable Farming International, an organization dedicated to educating third world communities on the benefits of sustainable agriculture. After volunteering for this organization and seeing how many communities could be improved from proper education in sustainability practices, I became inspired to intern for them that summer. Upon seeing your position posting and doing more research, I was excited to learn that your organization also has a focus on sustainable agriculture education and outreach, and decided to apply.”

2. Where do you see yourself in 3 - 5 years?

Variations

- “How does this position fit into your long term goals?”
- “What are your career goals?”

Purpose of Question

This question is used to evaluate your commitment to the particular occupation and career field, and assess your long term plans. Employers want to hire dedicated, enthusiastic individuals that are going to put their energy and passion into the position and organization, thus making it successful.

Strategy for Responding

To answer, let the interviewer know that you’ve thought long term, that their organization is a part of your plan, and that you’re genuinely interested in the opportunity. Mention a long term career goal, break down the major steps you need to reach it, and provide tentative timelines.

Sample Response

I hope to learn the key responsibilities of this position quickly and begin to add value to the department. Once I have a solid understanding of my role, I hope to take on additional responsibilities and eventually a leadership position. After three or four years experience in the field, I plan to start taking classes toward my MBA in Marketing.

3. What is your greatest strength?

Variations

- “What distinguishes you from other applicants?”
- “What do you bring to this position that sets you apart from other candidates?”

Purpose of Question

Interviewers ask this question to gauge how well you know your qualifications as they apply to the position. An effective answer demonstrates self awareness and links the position requirements with your particular qualifications.

Strategy for Responding

To answer this question, reference one of your strengths and cite a specific example that demonstrates how it aligns with the position. To prepare for variations of this question, identify 3-5 strengths and specific examples pertaining to the position you're interviewing for.

Sample Response

"I'd say that my best skill is effectively managing time and prioritizing responsibilities. This fall was especially busy for me. I was Vice President of my class, a member of the Women's Soccer team, and managed a demanding course load including my senior research project. Knowing it would be a difficult term, I printed out monthly calendars for September, October and November, and noted high priority events in red (academic deadlines, tests, soccer games), medium priority events in orange (sorority functions, community service projects), and daily responsibilities (practices, weight lifting sessions, study tables) in yellow. This helped keep me on task and effectively plan for important events weeks ahead of time."

4. What is your weakness?

Variations

- "What parts of this position do you think will be the most challenging?"
- "What is an area you struggle with and are working on?"

Purpose of Question

Employers ask this question to evaluate a candidate's self-awareness and confidence to admit a shortcoming, and catch potential barriers to their success in the position. Job seekers generally make one of two mistakes. They either give a dishonest answer that the interviewer can see through (e.g., "I'm a perfectionist"). Or they give an answer that can take them out of contention for the position (e.g., "I put off responsibilities until the last minute and don't get them done until I have to").

Strategy for Responding

To answer, mention a true weakness and show how you've taken steps to improve it. To identify potentially appropriate weaknesses, consider something you're not naturally good at but have worked to further develop. Address the steps you've taken to get better at it, and end by showing how you've improved. Some examples include: public speaking, leading a group, handling multiple priorities, delegating responsibility, meeting new people, and understanding the value of differing perspectives.

Sample Response

"Public speaking is an area I've been working to improve. I used to get nervous about speaking in front of large groups of people. To improve, I forced myself into situations that required me to speak to large groups. This year, I became a campus tour guide and planned my class schedule around two courses that required three presentations each. The two courses and tour guide position gave me many opportunities to practice speaking and receive feedback. This has helped me improve dramatically. I also recently read the book "The Exceptional Presenter" by Timothy Koegel, and have incorporated many of his tips into my presentation style."