

GUIDE TO INTERVIEWING



RUSSELL
SAGE
COLLEGE
CAREER AND
SELF-DISCOVERY CENTER

Russell Sage College – Career & Self-Discovery Center

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Email us at: careercenter@sage.edu

www.sage.edu/career

Make an appointment with our office at: sage.joinhandshake.com

Hours: 8:30AM - 5:00PM, Monday through Friday

Walk-ins Welcome, appointments preferred!

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 Russell Sage College's fit as a target recruiting school. As such, it's important for you to remember that you represent yourself and Sage.

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.
- Identify a unique feature or current event taking place for the employer. This could be a fundraising event, community involvement, or staff development activity that recently took place. This information is typically available on the company website.
- 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. Sometimes it helps to make a trial run or practice run to ensure you know where you are going before the actual date of the interview. This will help alleviate anxiety about getting lost, being late, or not knowing where you are going.
- Speak to a staff member in the Career Center 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 choose you.
- Review the job 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. If you are unsure about what questions to ask, review the job description and identify a responsibility that is not familiar to you, or perhaps a software or piece of technology that you have not utilized before. This could be something to ask the employer about. This demonstrates that you read the job description carefully and are willing to admit areas of opportunity for yourself and where you may need some training.
- Review your social media accounts and remove any posts or photos that may have inappropriate or unprofessional content.

Practice

- Schedule mock interviews with a staff member in the Career & Self-Discovery Center. The office offers mock interviews targeted for the career field and type of position you're applying for.
- Pick out your outfit before the big day. Try on your clothes to ensure they fit and feel comfortable. This will give you time to come up with a backup plan if something does not fit or if you feel uncomfortable in the clothes.
- Generate a list of questions and practice your responses to commonly asked questions with a friend, professor, and/or parent.
- Find a quiet place where you can practice your responses a few times, a few different ways. This will help you identify what sounds professional and what to leave out. You can even practice while driving!
- It is normal to be anxious about your upcoming interview. The more you practice, the easier it will get and the more eloquent your responses will be.

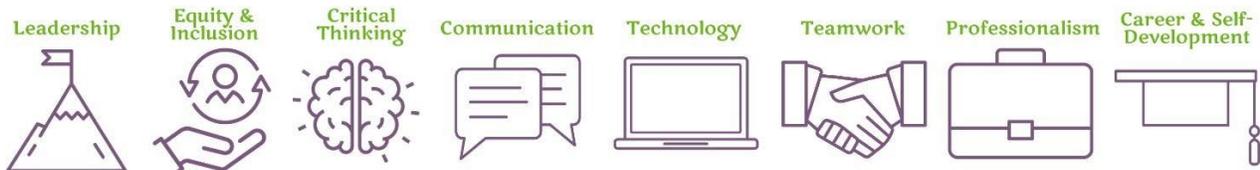
Professional Dress & Presentation

- Check out the Career Closet! The Career & Self-Discovery Center has professional attire on each campus for students and alumni.
- Standard interviewing attire is a bit more conservative than you may be used to- look to the right for more info!
- As previously mentioned, try on your interview attire and make sure it fits properly prior to your interview.
- It is best to select items that are conservative in both style and color.
- With piercings and tattoos, it is also best to remain conservative. You can ask the interviewer what the company policy is when it comes to tattoos and piercings.
- Obtain a professional portfolio and stock it with 5-10 extra copies of your resume, the position description, company information, your list of questions to ask the employer, and reference list in case you are asked for it.
- If you don't have a professional portfolio, a simple black folder with the items listed above will suffice.
- Bring a pen and a notepad, or blank pieces of paper to take notes



Skills That You Should Mention During Your Interview

Here are the 8 top skills that employers are looking for in applicants



In Person 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 (a handshake may be not accepted because of illness or cultural reasons, don't be offended if this happens!)
- 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 and that you have the correct spelling and titles of those you interviewed with.
- 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. If asked again to provide your salary requirements, ensure you have done your research in advance (both for the industry and market you reside as well as reviewed your own personal finances to know what salary will work for you) before giving a response. Once you provide the range you are seeking, be sure to add a statement about how compensation is not your only motivating factor when it comes to this opportunity. You would need to review the benefit package and have an open conversation regarding starting salary before moving forward. Always be positive, polite, and professional when it comes to discussing salary.

Post-Interview

- Write down the names of everyone that interviewed you and specifically what you spoke about with them ASAP. If interviewing virtually, you can write them down during the interview.
- Always send a thank you email or handwritten 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.
- It is estimated that less than 25% of candidates will send a thank you letter.
- Call or email 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 Career Center if you have questions or want assistance evaluating your interview performance.
- Meet with the Career Center staff for advice on accepting/rejecting an offer and salary negotiation.
- **If you are not selected, remember, rejection will happen often.** You won't get selected for every interview you go on. Don't take it personally, persevere and move on. Your best fit is still out there! There very well could be someone that had more experience than you, that had a higher level of education than you do or a certification that they desired. They might have interviewed better than you, and that's okay. If you aren't selected, stay positive and professional. If you receive word via email, respond and thank the employer for taking the time to notify you and wish them the best of luck in their search. It is also OK to ask for feedback on your candidacy, employers will often share genuine tips to improve your performance. You never know when you might be applying again, and you want to leave on a professional note.

Virtual Interviewing Tips

More and more employers are taking advantage of technology to conduct virtual interviews via Zoom, Skype, Google Meets, and more. There are some key differences between virtual and in person interviewing that you need to be aware of so that you can excel at virtual interviewing. Here are some tips on how to have a successful virtual interview!

1) Test your technology

- Technology skills are a very desirable skillset to have in the eyes of an employer- this is an easy way to demonstrate your skills! Employers can gauge your abilities easily during a virtual interview.
- Test equipment (computer and webcam) and internet connection before. You may want to click the link they provide and ensure there is nothing you need to download in advance.
- A desktop computer or laptop are preferred, however for most virtual interviews you can use a smartphone as well.
- Nothing hinders conversation quite like an interrupted connection mid-persuasion point.

2) Present a professional identity

- Make sure your user name/name you register as for the interview software is professional, including: Full name (capitalized) and a professional email (Sage email works well), personal pronouns (optional)

3) Dress the part even though the interviewers may not be able to see your entire outfit

- Wear what you would wear to an in person interview
 - Blazer, suit, suit separates
- Jewel tones and black look best on a video call and small patterns only (but best to be avoided on video interviews)

4) Create a professional space

- If possible, have a blank background behind you so you can be to focal point and make sure the area is well lit
- Sitting with a window in front of you looks best.
- Do not sit with a light source behind you. You will not be clearly visible to the employer.
- Clean and make sure the area looks organized. Ensure there is nothing inappropriate within the camera's view.
- Try to find the quietest place with the least background noise. Let roommates, parents, children, or anyone else that resides in your home know when you are interviewing and that you are not to be disturbed.

5) Be aware of body language

- Since you can't shake hands, you must convey your confidence with your body language.
- Sit up straight, smile, and keep the camera at eye level. Look into the camera (not at the screen).
- Avoid nervous habits such as hair twirling or fidgeting.

6) Get in a professional zone and set aside time ahead of the interview to mentally prepare yourself

- Silence your cell phone (turn it off), rid yourself of distractions. Leave it another room if you have to.
- If in a panel interview, use names to direct conversation.
- Some remote opportunities/interviews are not conducted in different time zones. Double check the time zone for your interview to ensure you arrive on time.

7) Practice!

- Use our office to conduct a virtual mock interview- We tailor questions asked for the position
- Practice your answers to common interview questions
- Record yourself on Google Meet (video) answering questions
 - Look for nervous habits, body language, lighting issues, etc.

8) Follow up

- Always follow up with a thank you email within 24 hours.
- Each person that interviewed you gets a personalized thank you email.
- If you don't have the email address(es), contact Human Resources.

Commonly Asked Questions and Strategies to Answer

Although we can't predict every question you might encounter, we can provide you with guidelines for answering commonly asked questions. Below are four common interview questions (with 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/organization peaked your interest and made you apply.
- **Sample Response** - "I'm a senior Biology 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 also excited to learn that your organization has a focus on sustainable agriculture education and outreach.

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

Variation: “How does this position fit into your long term 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 of 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.”

Quick hint: If an employer asks “What are your strengths and weaknesses” as a combined question, always answer with your weakness first, explain how you are working on improving it, and then discuss your strengths!

4. *What is your weakness?*

Variations: “What parts of this position do you think will be the most challenging?”, “What is an area of opportunity that you 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."

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 canceled or that we'd have to be selective in choosing who went. Rather than canceling 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.
- 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 or prepared. 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?
- Is this a newly created position? Or a replacement for a former employee?
- 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.
2. 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.
3. 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 Career & Self-Discovery Center.

Follow Up EMails and Sample

If it has been a few weeks since your interview and you still have not yet heard anything from the organization, you are allowed to email them as a follow up and to reiterate your interest in the position. Here is a sample follow up email:

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 enjoyed interviewing with you and learning more about the role. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Leslie

Knope

Thank You Notes

We highly recommend sending thank you notes/ emails after an interview. In 2022, it is estimated that there are between 250 and 300 applicants per job posting. According to a study done by CareerBuilder, less than 25% of candidates send a thank you letter to the employer. By sending a thank you letter or email to each person that you interviewed with, you can set yourself apart from the other candidates and show your interest. If you are competing against numerous applicants, you want to stand out, in a good way, and a thank you letter is a great way to do that. Keep them short... no more than a few paragraphs! You can find out the interviewers information on where to email it to/mail it to on their website or from their Human Resources office. If it comes down to two equally qualified candidates, where one sends a thank you and one does not, it could be the deciding factor amongst the two candidates.

What to include:

- A specific topic that you discussed during your interview that you found particularly interesting
- Mention any relevant or important information that you may have forgotten to mention or did not have the opportunity to mention
- Reiterate important information that you discussed such as start date, relocating, etc.
- Restate your skills, qualifications and passion for the position

Sample Thank You Email

Dear Ms. Meagle,

Thank you for the opportunity to interview for the position of Management Trainee Intern at Entertainment 720. I enjoyed discussing our shared passion of hiking in the Adirondacks and exploring the Capital District. I am excited that I had the opportunity to discuss my interest in this position and gaining real-world hands-on experience. I believe that through my experience as a shift leader at Old Navy and my time as a student athlete at Russell Sage College, I have developed the skills that would allow me to be successful in this role at Entertainment 720. If you wish to discuss my qualifications and interest further, I can be reached via this email address or at (123) 456-7890. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Tom Haverford

Interested in practicing your interview skills?

Our office offers mock interviews in which we tailor the questions to the position or graduate program that you are applying to/interviewing for.

Request an appointment on Handshake today!

<https://sage.joinhandshake.com>