

McCABE HALL

## CENTER FOR CREATIVITY & CAREERS

»»»» *BEYOND THE BUBBLE*



# AN INTRODUCTION TO INTERVIEWING

**Office Hours:**  
Monday – Friday  
8:00 am – 4:30 pm

**Walk-In Hours:**  
Mon, Tues, & Wed  
2-4pm  
or call 319-399-8581 for an appointment

# Table of Contents

How to Prepare for an Interview	3
What Are Interviewers Really Looking For?	4
Types of Interviews – Traditional & Behavior-Based	5
Structuring Responses to Questions – STAR Technique	6
Commonly Asked Questions	7, 8
Questions You Can Ask	8
First Impressions	9
Mastering the Phone Interview	10,11
Informational Interviews – Cultivating Contacts	12
Conducting an Informational Interview	13
Questions to Ask During an Informational Interview	13, 14
Sample Thank-You Correspondence	15
Final Tips	16

# How to Prepare for an Interview

## Research the position & the organization

- Go to the organization's website and find the "Careers" or "Employment" section
- Read about company culture and jot down key words
- Look through descriptions of current openings and write down additional skill words
- Read the "About" page to understand what the organization does or makes, and who they serve
- Take note of who the decision makers are within the organization (just in case you meet them)

## Know about the organization:

- What they do—products, services
- Who they do it for—market/niche
- How they do it—management style, organization philosophy
- Where they do it—location or locations
- Organizational structure—within the organization, who does what and who reports to whom
- Career opportunities
- # of employees
- History
- Revenues—sales volume; profit/loss; stock information if publicly held; budget cycle; etc.

## Know about the job itself:

- What the job description is—on O\*NET at <http://www.onetonline.org/find/>
- Who you will report to and who you will be working with—titles, reporting structure in that unit or area
- Salary or pay range for similar positions in this industry and geographic region at buzzfile <http://www.buzzfile.com/major/employers-by-major>

## Prepare yourself

- **Define Your Personal Brand**—Be able to describe what makes you "you" and establish an image to match.
- **Check Social Media**—Look at your social media through the 'eyes' of a hiring manager. Search yourself on Google, often. Make sure that your social media is representing what you want your personal brand to be.
- **Identify Your Strengths & Weaknesses**—What are you good at; not-so-good at? Start thinking of stories to demonstrate your strengths.
- **Gather Your "Stories"**—Be prepared to share specific examples that demonstrate your abilities and skills as they relate to this job. Anticipate what questions might be asked, and how you can use a specific example to answer the question.
- **Envision Future Plans**—How does the position you are interviewing for fit into your future goals? Make sure you know how to verbalize your answer to your interviewer; they may ask.
- **Create Your Resume/Cover Letter**—Having a well stated resume and cover letter will help you articulate your skills, experience and education, and relate it to the job/internship/graduate school or scholarship you're applying for.

# What Are Interviewers Really Looking for?

The objective of the interviewer isn't to find the "most qualified" person, but the person who is the "best fit".  
*There is often a distinct difference between the two.*

For example, imagine the final decision comes down to two candidates, both of whom are qualified for the job. **Candidate A** has more education and experience, but appears somewhat reluctant to handle some of the duties of the position. **Candidate B** has somewhat lesser qualifications, but is extremely enthusiastic, expresses a willingness to learn and appears to be an

easy person to work with. Even though Candidate B is not as qualified on paper, she is capable of doing the job and based on her personal attributes, would most likely be the one selected for the position.

## Throughout the conversation, a good interviewer seeks specific information:

Do you have the **skills** required to perform the job? Your basic qualifications for the job are typically dealt with early on. Other skills are often evaluated throughout the interview process (i.e. your communication skills).

Do you possess **relevant experience** to do the job? Again, this is usually handled early in the conversation. Interviewers typically ask for detailed examples of your past performance. Their assumption is that you'll perform similarly on the new job.

Do you have a **compatible personality** compared to others on the team and in the workplace? As the interview process proceeds, there is more importance placed on this aspect. If you get to a second or third interview, the focus grows stronger to determine whether or not the "chemistry" is right.

Do you have the **appropriate potential** with the likely growth potential of the position? It may be high resulting in advancement, or low, meaning that you stay at this position. This is identified after it's determined that you have the requisite skills and relevant experience.

Are there likely to be any **negative surprises** after the hire? Throughout the process, interviewers are vigilant to recognize anything which suggests you may be concealing something that would compromise your ability to perform on the job.

# Types of Interviews

## Traditional Interviews

You will be asked broad questions about your skills, experiences, background and general qualifications. You may also be asked general questions about your strengths and weaknesses.

Examples of traditional interview questions include:

- “Tell me about yourself.”
- “How would you handle an upset customer?”
- “How do you usually handle conflict?”

The key to doing well in an interview is to prepare thoroughly. Identify 3-4 specific stories from your background that will illustrate the skills that the employer is likely to be seeking for this particular job.

To start, prepare stories to back up anything you have claimed in your resume and cover letter. Just about any aspect of your background is fair game: volunteer work, study abroad, domestic off-campus study, research, co-curricular activities, class projects, part-time jobs, work-study, internships, etc.

It is impossible to predict exactly what questions you will be asked in an interview, but you can develop examples centered on the key skillsets for the job as well as the culture of the organization. That’s why it’s so important to go in knowing something about both the job and the employer. Within the stories you prepare you will likely be able to find a response and supporting example for just about any question!

Interviewers can take a few of different approaches to determine your fit for the position and the organization. Here are examples of the most common:

## Behavior-based Interviews

Used in most companies, interviewers question you about your specific past performances and behavior in an attempt to determine your promise for future success. In this interview type, you are asked to share real examples in a story format, and to emphasize the results of your work. The idea behind this technique is that past behavior is the best predictor of future success.

Examples of behavior-based questions include:

- “Tell me about a time when you dealt with a crisis.”
- “Describe a time when you handled an upset customer”
- “Discuss an example of a conflict you have run into.”

*One of the biggest mistakes people make in this type of interview is responding in vague generalities.*

**Appropriate stories will give the employer something to remember you by, and can set you apart from other candidates!**

# Structuring Responses to Questions

Preparing for an interview is much different than studying for a test, there is no guide to study from, but there is a formula you should know:

**Your skills are one of your strongest selling points.** It is not as effective to *state* that you are skilled at something as it is to *give an example of how you are skilled at something*. Use descriptive action verbs and include the outcome. Whenever possible, quantify results (i.e. “increased sales by 110%, decreased production costs by 50%”). If results are not implied and cannot be quantified, include a positive outcome (i.e. “effectively made technical presentations to customers”).



Use the **STAR** Technique (Situation-Task-Action-Results) to develop your skill examples:

(S)	=	<b>Situation</b>	What occurred
(T)	=	<b>Task</b>	What needed to be done
(A)	=	<b>Action</b>	How did you do it
(R)	=	<b>Result(s)</b>	What was the outcome

## Example:

**Q:** “Tell me about a time when you were on a team and a member wasn’t pulling his or her weight.”

**A:** “I had been assigned to a team to build a canoe out of concrete. One of our team members wasn’t showing up for our lab sessions nor doing his assignments. I finally met him in private, explained the frustration of the rest of the team, and asked if there was anything I could do to help. He told me he was preoccupied with another class that he wasn’t passing, so I found someone to help him with the other course. He not only was able to spend more time on the project, but he was grateful to me for helping him out. We finished our project on time, and got an “A” on it.”

*The Blue Chip Graduate, by Bill O'Her, Ph.D. & S.H. Campbell*

# Commonly Asked Interview Questions

## Education

- Why did you choose your major?
- What subjects did you enjoy most? Least?
- Do your grades reflect your abilities? Why/why not?
- What other activities were you involved in?
- What specialized training have you had?
- How have your education and training prepared you for this job?

## Character Traits/Personality

- What are the reasons for your success?
- How would a friend describe you?
- What do you do when you have trouble solving a problem?
- What are your hobbies?
- How do you spend your spare time?
- Are you active in the community?
- What was the last book you read?
- What frustrates you the most? How do you handle it?

## Salary

- How much are you currently making?
- I am surprised your salary is not higher, considering everything you have done. Why is that?
- What are your salary expectations? How did you arrive at that figure?
- What do you consider satisfactory earnings progression from this? point?
- Why do you want so much more?

## Employment History/Skills

- Why did you join your current employer?
- Why are you leaving?
- Does your employer know you are looking for another job?
- Describe a typical day in your job?
- What parts of your job do you enjoy the most/least?
- Which areas of your performance have been criticized?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- How have you helped reduce costs?
- What was your greatest accomplishment in your current or previous position?
- What are your most important accomplishments to date?
- Tell us how your experience ties in with our job requirements.
- Have you ever done any \_\_\_\_\_? (a specific function that ties into the job requirements, e.g. budget forecasting, programming, purchasing, etc.)
- How does your current manager rate your performance?



# Commonly Asked Interview Questions *cont ...*

## Miscellaneous

- Tell me about yourself.
- How do you fit the qualifications for this position?
- Why are you interested in this position?
- How have you prepared yourself for this position?
- What qualifications do you have that make you think you would be successful here?
- Why should we hire you?
- What do you know about this company/department?
- What are your professional goals? What do you see yourself doing five years from now?
- How long do you think you'd be happy in this position before you started thinking about promotion?
- What's the most difficult challenge you've faced in life?

## Questions You Can Ask

While you want to be prepared to answer questions asked by the interviewer, you also want to be ready to ask some of your own questions. Accepting a new position is a major decision. Questions asked by the candidates can reveal as much information as those posed by the interviewer. It also shows that you have done your research, so make sure when they give you an opportunity to ask questions, you do so!

- Why is this position open?
- What specific responsibilities of the position do you regard as most important?
- Describe a typical day on the job.
- What does the first 30 days look like in this job?
- What do you like most about your job?
- What do you like about working at \_\_\_?
- What are the goals for this area? For this specific job?
- What type of training and/or professional development does this position have?
- What are the major challenges/rewards of the job?
- How much travel is involved?
- How do you see (example of a news story/current event affecting the business or industry) impacting this job or company?



# First Impressions

The focus should be on **YOU** & your **SKILLS**,  
not on your appearance!

## What to wear



## What not to wear



## Tips to Impress:

- Professional dress
- Neat, clean, well-groomed
- Conservative
- Minimal accessories
- Body language and demeanor
- Details count!

## What to wear



## What not to wear



# Mastering the Phone Interview

You just got word that you have landed an interview with a company that really interests you—only there’s a slight catch. You won’t be meeting with your interviewer(s) face to face. Instead, you’ll be taking part in a phone interview, the

results of which will determine whether you’re invited to meet with company representatives in person.

Many companies use phone interviews as an initial employment screening technique for a variety of reasons. Because they’re generally brief, phone interviews save company’s time. They also serve as a more realistic screening for cases in which companies are considering out-of-town (or out-of-state and foreign) candidates.

So the chances are pretty good that, at some point in your job hunt, you’ll be asked to participate in a 20- to 30-minute phone interview with either one person or several people on the other end of the phone. In many ways, the way you prepare for a phone interview isn’t all that different from the way you’d get ready for a face-to-face interview – save for a few slight additions to and modifications of your list of preparation tasks.

## **Treat the phone interview seriously, just as you would a face-to-face interview.**

A phone interview seems so informal on the surface that it can be easy to fall into the trap of “phoning it in” – i.e., not preparing for it as well as you would for an in-person interview. Don’t get caught with your guard down. Be sure to research the company, study the job description, and practice your responses to anticipated questions, just as you would for any other interview.

## **Have your resume and cover letter in front of you.**

You’ll almost certainly be asked about some of the information that appears on these documents. You might also want to have in front of you any supporting materials that relate to information in your resume and cover letter, like documents you’ve designed or written, a portfolio of your various projects, or the written position description from your key internship.

**Make a cheat sheet.**

Jot down a few notes about the most critical points you want to make with your interviewer(s). Are there certain skills and experiences you want to emphasize? Do you have certain interests or passions you want your interviewer(s) to know and understand? Then touch on them during the interview, even if your only chance to do so is at the end of the session when the interviewer asks you if you have any questions or anything to add.

**Find an area with good reception.**

This isn't the time to be in an area that causes your cell phone to cut in and out, that makes it difficult for you and your interviewer(s) to hear and understand each other. Check out the spot you're going to take the call before you do your interview to make sure it has good reception.

**Shower, groom and dress up (at least a little).**

Odd advice? Perhaps. But focusing on your appearance, just as you would for a normal interview, will put you in the right frame of mind from a psychological standpoint. You won't do as well in your phone interview if you're lying in bed, for example, or if you're draped over your couch in your pajamas.

**Stand up, or at least sit up straight at a table or desk.**

Again, there's a psychological frame of mind aspect to consider here. But on a more tangible level, research has shown that you project yourself better when you're standing up, and you'll feel more knowledgeable and confident.

*Phone interviews can be tricky, especially since you aren't able to read your interviewer's non-verbal cues like facial expressions and body language during the session – a big difference from the typical interview. But if you prepare well for your phone interview, you won't need to read anyone's nonverbal cues to gauge your performance. You'll know for sure how you've done because you'll be invited to a face-to-face interview, where you'll have yet another opportunity to prove you're the best person for the job.*

# Completing an Informational Interview

*A guide to developing contacts, networking, and informational interviewing*

## Cultivating Contacts

**Informational interviews** will help you develop contacts, sources of knowledge, and guides to meeting other people in a particular interest area. This network of people will also keep you informed and connected to possible job openings.

The first step in the process of informational interviewing is to identify people who are working in the fields that you've decided are interesting to you. It is especially helpful if you know a relative, friend, or neighbor involved in the field or at least someone who can refer you to a potential contact; it's always easier to talk to someone whose name is familiar.

So, where do I search for contacts, you ask? Here are some suggestions.

Remember, this is a process that will unfold and there is no set of contacts that will ensure success. It has been estimated that an average adult knows 500 to 1,000 contacts. If each of these people referred you to one other person, that would give you 1,000 to 2,000 contacts, and it expands from there. The potential is there if you are willing to put in the effort.

### **Alumni**

These individuals are helpful contacts because of the history they share with you and their general tie to Coe College. Consult with the Center of Creativity and Careers on how to contact alumni.

### **Professors**

You see them almost daily, but it's your responsibility to tell them you are interested in a specific career because they can't read your mind. Talk to them, odds are they know someone.

### **Family and Friends**

Don't under estimate the potential here. Besides, what family member would turn down a request for information?

### **Supervisors**

These individuals have a sense of your skills and can offer specific insight as to paths that might be well-suited for you.

### **Current Professionals in the Field**

You might not know them personally, but they have the experience and specific information you are seeking.

### **Professional Associations**

Many career fields have professional associations or organizations. For example, if you are interested in business and want to improve your public speaking skills, you can join Toastmasters. (Note: It's less costly to join as a student)

# Conducting Informational Interviews

The purpose of an informational interview is to confirm information in a particular career field and to develop contacts that may be helpful to you in the future, not to look for a job. Informational interviewing is based on the premise that you have already read much of the

**When involved in an informational interview, you are asking the questions.**

**Be sure to tell your contact person that *you are not looking for a job, only for information.***

written information related to a specific type of job and now need confirmation from people who are already doing that job. When setting up an informational interview, try to arrange the

interview at the person's work site, so you can determine firsthand how it might feel to work there. It is also important to set a time limit to your visit as well (usually 20 to 30 minutes). Once in the interview, keep to your agreed-upon time frame.

**Thank your interviewee and follow up with a written thank-you note to acknowledge their time and information given.**

## Possible Questions to Ask During an Informational Interview

### Occupational Requirements

- What college courses (requirements, electives) were most helpful to you in your college career?
- Is special certification, licensing, or an advanced degree required for your job? If so, what?
- What was your undergraduate major field of study?
- Have you always been interested in this area of study?

### Experience

- Did you have any practical experience or training, other than college, prior to your current job?
- How did you get your current job?

### Outlook

- What are the opportunities for advancement in this field?
- What is the current and future demand for people in this occupation?
- What are possible salary ranges and benefits for someone in your occupation?

**Advice**

- Are there any professional groups that I, as an undergraduate, can join which would be beneficial to me?
- How can I get experience in this field while I'm still in college?
- Would you mind taking a look at my resume?

**Occupational Environment**

- How would you outline or describe a "typical" day at work?
- How much flexibility are you allowed on your job in terms of dress, hours, vacation, job location, etc?
- What portion of your job involves interacting with others, such as co-workers and/or the public?

Notes:

# The Thank You Letter

Always follow up after any interview with a handwritten, typed or emailed thank-you letter. Make sure your thank-you letters are warm and personal.

May 23, 20XX

Julia Edmonds  
Technical Design Group  
1220 Warwick Avenue  
Newport News, VA 23607

Dear Julia:

I want to thank you very much for interviewing me yesterday for the Associate Editor position. I enjoyed meeting you and learning more about the Technical Design Group.

My enthusiasm for the position and interest in working for TDG were strengthened as a result of the interview. I believe my education and cooperative education experiences fit nicely with the job requirements and I know that I will make a significant contribution to the organization over time.

I want to reiterate my strong interest in the position and in working with you and your staff. You provide the kind of opportunity I seek.

Again, thank you for the interview and your consideration.

Sincerely,  
Joe Simmons

*Re-emphasize your strongest qualifications. Draw attention to the good match between your qualifications and the job requirements.*

*Express your sincerity.*

*Reiterate your interest in the position. Use the opportunity to provide or offer supplemental information not previously given.*



# 10 Final Tips

1. **Control what you can, and prepare!** Interviewing is a skill that can be learned and practiced. Lack of knowledge about the company and the position you are applying for is an interview killer. Poor understanding of your own skills and prior experiences and how they relate to the position is a “no-no” as well.
2. **Set up a professional sounding voicemail.** Your first contact with a recruiter may be through your voice mail. Your outgoing message should be professional and polite. Do not use music. One recruiter reached a candidate whose voice mail that included a current pop song. While she thought it was hilarious, she also thought it was terribly unprofessional, so she decided to eliminate that candidate from consideration.
3. **It’s not a real world confessional.** Volunteering irrelevant or potentially damaging information about yourself may hurt your chances.
4. **On the other hand,** if there is ANYTHING potentially incriminating that may show up in your background reference check (for example, you once got picked up for public intox, or fired for poor attendance), you are much better off being honest with him or her rather than having she/he finding out from someone else. No surprises!
5. **Provide depth without prompting.** Answer with more than a “yes” or “no”. Provide support and evidence of how you have demonstrated skills and accomplishments relating to the position you are interviewing for.
6. **First impressions count.** Appropriate dress, grooming, and overall appearance are very important in getting the interview off to a good start. Some things to think about, but are not limited to would things such as bad breath (use a breath mint), visible tattoos, inappropriate attire (too sexy, casual, unclean).
7. **Be kind.** Don’t make derogatory remarks about your present or former employers, management, or co-workers.
8. **Honesty is the best policy.** Answer questions truthfully, frankly, and succinctly.
9. **Know when to say when.** Keep your answers short! It is best to answer the question honestly and fully, without going off on tangents. Your goal is to have the interviewer ask YOU questions.
10. **Relax. It’s just an interview!** Still, make sure you make good eye contact, have a firm handshake, speak firmly and loudly enough to be understood.