Interviews

Interview preparation is the best and most important step you can take toward winning a job offer. To fully prepare you need to know yourself well, the company and industry well, and understand the different type of interviews, likely questions, and techniques to craft great answers to those questions.

Knowledge of Yourself
Interview preparation begins with self-knowledge. By the time of the interview, you will need to effortlessly and effectively tell short stories about your experiences, your strengths, your weaknesses and your goals.

To prepare...

- Closely review your resume:
  - What are your main accomplishments? Weaknesses? Prepare these answers in regards to each thing listed on your resume.
  - Prepare to speak to ANYTHING you’ve listed on your resume and WHY it’s there.
- Take or review personality assessments/results:
  - What are my strengths/weaknesses and how will they affect me in this job?
- Write a list of words that describe yourself:
  - Prepare examples of how you demonstrate each characteristic or skill.
- Write down your career goals:
  - What are your future aspirations and how do they relate to this job? Be realistic.
- Practice/Mock Interviews – simulate articulating answers.

Knowledge of the Industry, Company and Job Description
Over and over again, employers complain that entry-level job seekers (aka college students) do not do enough basic research to prepare for interviews.

Things you need to know...

- Company/organization history, mission, leaders
- Company/organization structure, location(s)
- Who are the customers/those served?
- Principle services/products/lines of business
- Stock prices/trends for public for-profit businesses
- Primary sources of funding for non-profits
- Recent news/current events regarding company/organization and its leaders
- Competitors and/or partners
- Industry trends, company’s relative size in the market
- Typical career path for the position for which you are interviewing

Where to find this information...

- Company website
  - Be sure to review any about us sections, the mission statement, annual reports, current events and investor sections
Review the careers section of any company/non-profit website to learn the typical career paths, the possible identities of your interviewers, and recruiting trends
• Review any company social media
  • Set up Google alerts for the company and the CEO or major leaders
  • Research industries and trends at Vault, Wetfeet, and on Professional Association websites
  • Search company specific information at Vault, Wetfeet, Glassdoor (unlimited access available via the Glassdoor link on the Career Services webpage).
  • Review Guidestar and Idealist.org for non-profit information

Using the Job Description...
• Create a list of required qualifications from the job description
• Create a list of keywords/characteristics desired by the employer (based on the job description)
• Rank your lists to determine the top needs of the employer
• Tailor your potential answers and examples to interview questions based on your lists

Types of Interviews
There are several potential interview types, all of which require slightly different preparations. Be aware, however, that any interaction you have with the company is part of the interview process. Always be courteous, prompt and professional.

Behavioral Interviews
This is the most typical form of interviewing. Most of the questions asked are situational where you will have to describe what you would do or did do in each case. Your answers are used to predict how well you would fit into the company culture and how well you would perform under expected working conditions. You should be conscientious of your poise, tone of voice, and grammar in these interactions and be sure your answers are concise but informative and include specific examples and results.

Phone Interviews
A phone interview may take the form of a pre-screen or it may be the behavioral interview. If a recruiter calls unscheduled, they are likely looking for answers to a few basic demographic-type questions to be sure you are a good fit before scheduling you for a longer conversation or in person interview. Tone of voice, clear diction, strength of signal (if on a cell phone) and background noise are all important considerations for phone interviews.

Case Interviews
Certain industries, particularly consulting and sometimes finance, want to assess your problem-solving abilities and will use cases to do it. A typical case interview starts off with you receiving details and facts regarding a hypothetical situation. This information might be simple or it may be complex with lots of data and charts and graphs. The interviewer is evaluating your analytical and critical thinking skills as you respond to what is presented to you.

To prepare for these interviews, review the following resources...
• CaseInterview.com (sign up for daily tips via email)
• CaseInterviewMath.com
Office Visit or Second Round Interviews

You may complete one or more initial phone screens or interviews before an on-site interview at the company takes place. Typically these are scheduled for a full day or half day and will involve several meetings with multiple company representatives and executives and may include one or more meals.

Common Behavioral Interview Questions

Thinking through answers to some of the most common interview questions will go a long way in helping you prepare for any interview, though every interview you undergo will carry its own set of unique questions. It’s important to develop specific examples and focus on achievements and results in your answers. Be precise and don’t ramble. It’s a good idea to practice saying these out loud, with a partner or in a mock interview if possible. In an actual interview your answers should flow smoothly and should not sound rehearsed, so don’t memorize answers!

1. Why are you interested in our organization? Industry?
2. What work experience has been the most valuable to you and why?
3. Give an example of a problem you have solved and the process you used.
4. Describe a situation in which you had a conflict with another person and how you dealt with it.
5. What idea have you developed and implemented that was particularly creative or innovative?
6. How did you choose to attend Ave Maria and how did you select your major?
7. Tell me about a team project of which you are particularly proud and your contribution.
8. What types of situations put you under pressure, and how do you deal with the pressure?
9. Tell me about a situation when you had to persuade another person to your point of view.
10. Describe a leadership role you have held, and tell me why you committed your time to it.
11. What challenges are you looking for in a position?
12. In thinking about a past position you have held, what did you do to make your duties more effective or more challenging?
13. What three trends do you see in the future for our industry?
14. Tell me about yourself.
15. Why do you want to work in (career field)?
16. Why do you feel you will be successful in this position?
17. What is your greatest strength/weakness, and how will it affect you in this position?
18. Describe one of the toughest competitive situations you have faced and how you handled it.
19. What are some of the most creative things you have done?
20. What has been one of your greatest disappointments, and how did you respond?
21. Describe a time when you added value to an existing work process.
22. What characteristics do you think are important for this position?
23. Describe a situation in which you were criticized, and how you responded.
24. How has your education at Ave Maria prepared you for this position?
25. Where do you see yourself in five years?
26. What has been the biggest accomplishment in your life?
27. Why should I hire you?
28. What goals have you set for yourself and how are you planning to achieve them?
29. Are you willing to relocate or travel as part of your job?
30. Do you feel your GPA reflects your academic ability?
31. What was the most useful criticism you ever received and who provided it?
32. What three adjectives best describe you? Why?
33. What’s the latest book you’ve read, not for school?

Answering the Questions
In all situations, be sure to actually answer the question that was asked and answer completely. Use the following acronym for constructing complete answers to behavioral interview questions using illustrative examples.

P – PROBLEM  Begin by putting the situation you are about describe into context. What happened/what is the problem to be solved? Who are the key players, what is your role?

A-ACTION  Describe the actions you took to solve this problem/how you reacted to this situation.

R-RESULT  Always include the outcome, preferably using quantifiable results.

Example:

Problem – During one of my junior year literature classes I was assigned a group project that involved collaboratively writing a paper. Our group consisted of five people, including myself and I assumed the lead role.

Action – As the lead, I set deadlines for completion of each section of the research assignment and managed the follow up and communication among the group members. To aid in this process I established a wiki for the group to use throughout the research and writing phases of the project. I oversaw the final editing of the paper, making it a comprehensive single unit that flowed neatly from one section to the next.

Result – As a result of our organized communication efforts and attention to deadlines, my group finished the project two days ahead of the deadline and the professor awarded us accordingly.

Tips
It’s best to prepare a number of situational, result-oriented answers in advance of any interview but remember to keep the specific employer and job in mind when answering questions.

- Relate your past experiences to the things you will likely do on the job for this employer.
- Provide as much context as you can. Stating that you coached soccer for a youth league is not as big of a deal as explaining that you coached the championship team in the 7th & 8th grade division, playing 30+ games in six weeks and beating out 20+ teams overall.
- Don’t focus on what you want from the employer; instead emphasize what you can do for them.
- Your answers should be brief but not too brief. Make sure you are providing enough detail to sell yourself and fully answer the question.
- Take your time if needed. Some questions aren’t meant to have a right or wrong answer. The critical element is that you demonstrate a problem-solving process. Ask clarifying questions.
- It’s not all about what you say...how you dress, body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions all play a large role in how you relate to the interviewer and answer the questions.
Interview the Interviewer
Most interviewers will invite you to ask questions, usually at the beginning or the end of the interview. This is an opportunity and you should always take advantage of it. You accomplish two things by asking the right questions: you demonstrate your interest and enthusiasm for the position, and you gather information to assist you in the decision-making process. Studies show that the most successful interviews are the ones in which an interviewer talks about half the time. That means you need to ask questions, and not necessarily just at the end of the interview. Asking for clarification and additional information ensures that you are adequately able to answer questions asked.

Questions to Avoid:

- Questions about salary (save that discussion for when you obtain an offer).
- Questions about basic company information (if it’s easily obtainable online, you obviously didn’t do your research).
- Topics you already covered (if you need clarification, ask for it, but don’t revisit a topic or the job description just because you need something to say).

Questions to Ask:

1. As an intern, what kind of projects will I receive?
2. What characteristics best describe individuals who are successful in this position?
3. Where could a person advance who is successful in this position? Within what time frame?
4. What has been the professional growth track for other students who have been recruited by your company over the past 3-5 years?
5. How would you describe the culture of your organization?
6. If I work hard and prove my value to the company, where might I find myself in five years?
7. Does your organization encourage its employees to pursue additional education?
8. What other positions/departments will I interact with the most?
9. What are the key business reasons driving the need for this position?
10. Describe the three top challenges that I’ll face in this job.
11. What has to happen for you to know you’ve hired the best person?
12. What are the key deliverables and outcomes that this position must achieve?
13. Describe the top three initiatives for your company/department and how this position is linked to these initiatives.
14. What are the key metrics for measuring success in this position?
15. Describe the projects I would be involved in during the first 30 days.

Look the Part
You have one chance to make a first impression. That means that you need to dress professionally and not memorably. You want the quality of your answers and your accomplishments to stand out, not anything you are wearing, how you look, or your body language. You should also dress to make yourself feel successful. That means trying out your interview outfit before you have the interview.

Ladies:

- Well-fitting suits in dark colors are the best bet for a job interview. If a skirt is worn, it should be knee-length (the bottom of the knee, not the top). Skirts lengths will rise when sitting.
- No low-cut tops or really loud patterns or frills. Clothes should not be too tight.
• Shoes should be close-toed, with medium heels. Do not distract the interviewer with brightly colored shoes. Consider your height if you wear high heels and only wear them if you won’t trip.
• Wear minimal jewelry that is isn’t too flashy. Do not carry a large or casual purse into the interview. Use a portfolio or professional looking tote.
• Do not wear brightly colored nail polish. A clear or neutral, that isn’t chipped, is fine.

**Gentlemen:**

• Well-fitting, dark-colored suits in navy or gray are preferred. Black is also acceptable. Muted pin-stripes are OK. Do not wear a sport coat with slacks.
• Well-ironed white or blue button down shirt AND plain white undershirt.
• A tie is required. Do not stand out with a bow tie or exceptionally loud color or pattern. Make sure the tie is tied evenly and neatly. The tie should hit just at the waist.
• Dark colored socks that match your suit required.
• Do not wear jewelry including Livestrong bands (wedding band and dress watch acceptable).

**Always:**

• Style hair appropriately (not elaborately). Hair should be clean and well-contained. In general, a simple up-do for women (though not a pony-tail or messy bun) is considered more professional.
• Men should be clean-shaven or have facial hair contained and well-groomed.
• Wearing glasses (if you have them) tends to make you look more professional and mature.
• Nails should be manicured, trimmed and clean.
• Do not wear perfume or cologne.
• Do not wear wrinkled clothing.
• Do not carry a backpack. Bring a leather bag or portfolio.

**Body Language:**

• Be sure your handshake is firm and is accompanied by eye contact. Practice your handshake ahead of time.
• Maintain good posture to convey confidence. Do not slouch, even in the waiting area.
• Maintain eye contact as you speak to an interviewer and don’t look up when recalling answers.
• Avoid fidgeting to the best of your ability – it can be distracting.
• Do not cross your arms as that is a defensive posture.
• Smile.

**Interview Logistics**

Don’t be caught off guard by small details you should have anticipated.

• Don’t assume an employer will reimburse you for long-distance travel. Ask these questions ahead of time and make sure to verify your travel arrangements with your interviewer.
• Know your interviewer’s name and title so you can ask for directions if needed and have a phone number available in case something comes up day of.
• Verify location and time (including time zones) in advance.
• Map out your travel allowing extra time just in case – finding the location ahead of time will provide a precise estimate of travel time and will help calm your nerves day of.
• Try on your complete interview outfit—ensure your clothes are clean, unwrinkled, without visible tags, and are comfortable. Shoes should be cleaned and shined and easy to walk in.
• Have multiple alarms set to ensure you wake up in plenty of time to get ready.
• Pack your bag and/or portfolio the night before to ensure you don’t forget anything.
• Review your resume, research and notes the night before an interview.
• Eat before proceeding to the interview.
• Bring copies of your resume just in case.
• Bring a document with your references’ information if you have not previously supplied this.
• Turn off your cell phone or leave it in the car.
• Discard breath mints and gum before entering the building—do not smoke right before an interview. Avoid wearing perfume or cologne.
• Arrive early, especially factoring in time for proceeding through security.
• Always interact pleasantly with receptionist.

Follow Up
Chances are, you are one of several candidates interviewing for the same position. Therefore, what you do after the interview is just as important as what you do during the interview.

• Don’t leave without getting business cards/contact information from everyone you meet.
• Don’t leave without asking for a timeline for hearing back from the interviewer.
• Send an individual thank-you note (email) to each person you met within 24 hours. These messages need to be personalized because there is a good chance co-workers will share these notes with one another.
  o A thank you note references your relationship and what the person did for you.
  o You should restate your interest in and qualification for the position in some way.
• If you do not hear back from the interviewer on the specified date, wait until after the date has passed to politely inquire as to the hiring status.

Phone Interview Tips
• Know and verify all details including time zone, who is calling who, names and titles of all interview participants.
• Turn off your call waiting or other cell phone notifications so you will not be interrupted during the call.
• Arrange for a quiet space without the possibility of interruption.
• Standing and dressing up for the phone interview are tricks to make you feel and sound more confident and at ease.
• Have something to write with and on easily accessible. Keep a copy of your resume and other notes handy but only refer to them if you can avoid reading answers and can quickly find what you are looking for.
• Answer the phone with a greeting and by immediately stating your name.
• Silences are common on phone interviews as you and/or the interviewer may be taking notes. Feel free to narrate if that helps you feel more at ease: “I’m taking a few notes to ensure I don’t forget anything...one moment while I get my thoughts in order...”
• Don’t be discouraged by the interviewer’s tone of voice or lack of response. You can’t judge body language and facial expression over the phone so assume it’s going well despite pauses.
• Maintain a positive and energetic tone throughout. Smiling adds warmth to your answers.
• Ask the interviewer to repeat any questions you may miss or have difficulty understanding.
Skype, Webcam, or Video Conference Interviewing Tips

- If possible, verify or test the connection before the interview.
- **If you are using Skype, create a professional sounding username for interviews.**
- Have an alternate means of contact in case a last minute technical problem arises.
- Test the video quality and sound quality in advance of the interview. Make sure your signal strength supports prolonged connections.
- **The background should be clean and professional looking and free from distractions.**
- Test the lighting around you to make sure your face isn’t shadowed and there are no bright lights directly behind you.
- Just like a phone interview, make sure you will not be interrupted by sounds, animals or people.
- **Webcam should be at eye level and you should look into it when speaking (so it’s like you are making eye contact).**
- Dress like you would for an in-person interview and position the camera so that your head and torso are visible. Avoid patterns or colors that don’t show up well on video.
- Body language is just as important as an in-person interview but remember that leaning forward and other movement will affect the angle of the camera.

Second Round Interviews

The primary purpose of a second (or third) round interview or site visit is to determine your fit with the company culture. This interview is likely to be most of the day and include a number of different meetings and types of interactions. Remember that every interaction you have, from the receptionist to the President/CEO is important.

- Keep answers fresh, even if you are asked similar interview questions from previous encounters or throughout the day.
- While you should avoid word-for-word repeats of answers, keep your message consistent.
- Be prepared for group interactions.

Meals:

- It’s likely that you will have an interaction over breakfast, lunch, dinner, or a cocktail hour (or several of these). Eating is not your primary purpose.
- Do not drink alcohol.
- Choose foods that are easy to consume with silverware and are not messy.
- Do not finish too early and do not continue after your host has finished.
- Be as professional at meals as at any other time during the interview.

Assessments

Many companies use assessments or some kind of test to measure personality and skills as part of the interview process. Usually this takes place online during the time of the initial application process. But other companies may arrange for a proctored exam in person or may conduct a series of case interviews. If testing is a requirement of the interview process you can almost always discover this ahead of time online. Ask questions of recruiters to ensure you are properly prepared.

Offers

If you are offered the position at the end of an interview, request time to properly consider it before you make a decision. Ask for an offer in writing and determine the decision deadline. Still send a thank you
Note within 24 hours to let them know you are happy to have received the offer, you’re considering it, and will soon be in touch. Refer to the Guide on Offers for information about negotiation, accepting and declining offers.

Alternatively, do not be worried if you don’t receive an offer on the spot. This is not common. Usually the employer has to conduct other interviews after you or have a meeting to review all interview candidates before decisions are made and offers are extended.

**Additional Interviewing Resources**
There are many possible types of interviews, even more than listed here. Seek out resources to explore more fully explanations of how to answer particular questions and how to deal with awkward situations and incompetent interviewers. The following resources will get you started.

*Mock Interviews*
The best thing you can do to prepare for an interview is to practice. Schedule a mock interview with Career Services: [https://avemariacareerservices.acuityscheduling.com](https://avemariacareerservices.acuityscheduling.com).

*Ask a Manager Blog*
Just about any of the blog topics on interviewing could be useful: [http://www.askamanager.org/category/interviewing](http://www.askamanager.org/category/interviewing).

*Glassdoor.com*
If you are interviewing with a large or well-known company, chances are someone has posted past interview questions from this employer to Glassdoor.com. And don’t miss the blog: [http://www.glassdoor.com/blog/tag/oddball-interview-questions/](http://www.glassdoor.com/blog/tag/oddball-interview-questions/).

Glassdoor’s content is all user-submitted, therefore, in order to access the site, you are required to enter in salary information or a company review. For students with little to no job experience this is often impossible to do. Therefore, Glassdoor has offered free unlimited site access to Ave Maria students. You must click the link from the Career Services website to access the unlimited content.

*Wetfeet.com*
Search the articles for interviewing advice.

*Ac ing the Only Three True Job Interview Questions - Forbes*
[http://onforb.es/TwuMyj](http://onforb.es/TwuMyj)

*Career Services Social Media*
Career Services [Twitter](https://twitter.com), [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com) and [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com) frequently link to new articles and blogs with interviewing tips and advice. Search the archives for #interviews and #interviewing and follow us today.