



Complete Guide to Interviewing

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THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

- Each organization has their own structure, timeline, and process for completing interviews.
- It is common to have to complete multiple interviews with the same organization prior to being offered a position. These are referred to as “rounds” of interviews: first-round, second-round, etc.
- A first-round interview is shorter (typically 30-60 minutes). These are also referred to as “screening interviews,” when employers are trying to get a better idea of your skills, experiences, and enthusiasm for the position and their organization.
- Second-round and any additional interviews are longer (sometimes a full day or more). You may meet with multiple people throughout the organization, receive a tour, and/or be asked to give a presentation.
- When you are invited to interview, ask for details about the agenda and structure of your interview, who you will be meeting, any materials they want you to bring, and so forth.

PREPARATION

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- **Research the organization.** What do you know about it? Why do you want an opportunity there? It is crucial to articulate this to the employer.
- **Be prepared to talk about anything on the resume.** Relate your skills and experiences to the position and organization.
- **Prepare 3 or more “Success Stories.”** Emphasize your strengths through projects, jobs or other situations where you were directly involved in the success of an item.
- **Confirm all details.** Ask for the correct street address, approximately how long to plan for, and who you will be meeting with. Plan a route in advance, and either check your directions and parking or figure out public transportation options ahead of time. If possible, do a ‘practice run’ to the area of your interview.
- **Prepare questions to ask the employer** at the end of your interview. You want to get as much information as possible to ensure this is the right opportunity for you, but avoid asking about salary and benefits.
- **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!** You can schedule an in-person mock interview with a staff member in the TCDC at any time, or complete an online mock interview using the [Ram Career Network](#) Online Interview system.

DAY OF THE INTERVIEW

- **Arrive 10-15 minutes** early and be pleasant to everyone you encounter.
- **Bring a professional portfolio** and extra copies of your resume. Try to avoid carrying other large items and turn off your cell phone.
- **Be confident!** Greet the employer with a smile and a firm handshake.
- **Be aware of your body language.** Show you are interested, maintain good posture, and avoid nervous habits as much as possible.
- **Manage your anxiety—it’s OKAY to be nervous!** Picture the interview as an ‘exchange of information’ between the employer and you; remember that the interviewer is a human being with their own roles, responsibilities and stressors as well.

RESEARCH THE ORGANIZATION

Researching employers is perhaps the single-most important activity you will undertake in your job search. The information you uncover can help you:

- Discover organizations that are a good match for you,
- Identify the organization's goals and needs,
- Tailor your resume and cover letter to highlight your skills and experiences that match the employer's needs,
- Know what questions to ask employers,
- Demonstrate your interest in and enthusiasm for the organization,
- Answer interview questions with confidence, and
- Make an informed employment decision.

Unfortunately, many students overlook the importance of research when undertaking a job search or looking for an internship. In fact, it's common for employers to complain that potential job candidates haven't "done their homework," and instead come into the interview with little or no knowledge about the organization. These candidates flounder, asking questions that could be easily answered by a cursory look at the company website or literature. Needless to say, they make a poor impression, because employers often assume lack of research means lack of interest.

Where should you begin your employer research?

Start by developing a list of organizations in which you might be interested—companies that have the types of jobs or do the type of work that interests you. These could be organizations that visit campus for career fairs, information sessions, and interviews, or they might be companies you have identified on your own as potential employers. An added bonus: You may discover lesser-known organizations that might be a match for your skills and interests.

When researching organizations, obtain information in each of the following categories:

- Organizational overview: age, size, financial outlook, growth, and structure
- Trends/issues in the industry
- Mission, philosophy, objectives
- Public or private or foreign-owned
- Location of plants, offices, stores, subsidiaries
- Products and/or services
- Names of key executives
- Competitors
- Sales, assets, earnings
- Growth history and current growth activity
- Current challenges
- Major achievements and activity, issues, news
- Career paths, training, benefits
- Company culture

Review the organization's website: Well-constructed and comprehensive sites will have abundant information, and for the sites that are not as comprehensive, it is still important to learn what is there. This is what the organization deems most important for you to know.

Look at social networking sites, including Facebook and LinkedIn

LinkedIn has become a leading source of inside information about organizations.

- Find companies of interest and once found, click on the "Follow" tab to receive updates posted by the company.
- Join groups related to any career interest appealing to you.
- Contribute to discussions and connect with other members.
- Use the advanced search to find alumni working in companies in which you are interested.

Check the University Library and Public Libraries

Libraries have research tools not available elsewhere for free, including financials, industries, market news, and trade data. WCU's Francis Harvey Green Library has this guide to employer research databases: <http://subjectguides.wcupa.edu/companyresearch>. Choose business databases for information about the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. In the business category, ReferenceUSA has information for more than 20 million U.S. companies, including nonprofit organizations. Other relevant databases are Hoovers.com, Dun & Bradstreet Million Dollar Directory, Thomson One, Business Source Premier, IBISWorld, and Mergent Online.

Try the Employer Locator on CareerOneStop

Go to www.acinet.org; in the site search window, search for "Employer Locator." This is a U.S. government database of nearly 12 million U.S. employers with brief information about each. It's a good resource for finding employers in a specific industry in a particular geographical location.

For specific industries or sectors see:

- ThomasNet.com, for brief information about manufacturers in 67,000 categories in the United States and Canada.
- GuideStar.org, for brief information on more than 1.8 million U.S. nonprofit organizations.
- Idealist.org, for information on 71,000+ nonprofit organizations worldwide.
- USA.gov, for a list of federal agencies (click on "Find Government Agencies" on the home page).
- USChamber.com, for a list of employer members (click on Chambers and then "Chamber Directory").

Don't forget the resources available in [Ram Career Network](#) and through the Career Development Center, where you can learn more information about employers that recruit at WCU. Finally, this list of resources is a *starting* point; never underestimate the power of a search engine. Simply "Google" the name of the organization you are interested in and see what information and news is returned!

DRESS FOR SUCCESS

What to Wear:

These suggestions were prompted by recruiters who expect all candidates to present themselves in appropriate interview attire, both on-campus and at their site.

- Conservative business suit—both skirts (no shorter than knee-length) or pantsuits are acceptable
- Pressed blouse or dress shirt with collar in a classic/traditional style, tucked in
- Conservative tie (no bright colors or busy prints)
- Nylons/hosiery in sheer (close to skin color) or dark socks, executive length (to the knee)
- Polished leather wing tips or business type shoes only (no loafers, no suede)
- Low heeled pump shoe (avoid ornaments, thick soles, high heels)
- Neat haircut and clean-shaved neck (front and back)
- Facial hair neatly trimmed
- Minimum jewelry—watch, small earrings (one or two holes), rings, etc.
- Light makeup, neat nails (natural or polished-conservative color, not chipped)
- Very light or no perfume/cologne
- Small purse and/or professional portfolio for copies of resume, pad of paper, and pen

What NOT to Wear:

- Jeans, shorts, spandex, casual dresses
- Sneakers, casual boots, flip flops
- Low cut blouses, bows, ruffles, lace, loud prints, bright colors, etc. (keep it simple!)
- Large jewelry (remove facial piercings) and cover tattoos
- Avoid overbearing scents (cologne, perfume, hairspray, smoke, etc.)

Beat the competition! Remember that your attire is a reflection of your professionalism. It is about image and NOT fashion. Don't lose a job opportunity because you didn't wear the right interviewing outfit. You never get a second chance to make a first impression!

RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS

- **Be honest and concise.** Never exaggerate about your experiences.
- **Prepare a one-minute summary** of your resume and accomplishments. Emphasize your strengths, what you can offer the organization, and what makes you unique.
- **Articulate why you want to work for a particular organization.** Show your interest and enthusiasm. Do your homework and research the employer.
- **Use the STAR Method** and back up statements with examples. Be sure to give details and results/outcomes from your past experiences.
- **If you do not understand a question**, politely ask for clarification: “Can you help me understand what you mean by...” or repeat back your understanding of the question and ask for clarification. “So, my understanding is that you’re looking for examples of... is that correct?”
- **Be sure to take a few moments to think about an answer** if nothing comes to you right away. You can communicate that you need to think about the answer. You can also ask “Does that answer your question?” after your response to ensure you were on the right track.

STAR Method

The STAR method is a structured way to answer a behavior-based question, which is a type of question that asks about your past behaviors in order to predict future success. Your goal is to discuss the Situation, Task, Action, and Result of the example you are providing the interviewer:

- **SITUATION:** Describe the situation that you were in to provide context. You must describe one specific event or situation, not a generalized description of what you have done in the past.
- **TASK:** Explain the goal were you working toward and what you had to accomplish.
- **ACTION:** Describe the specific actions you took to address the situation. What specific steps did you take and what was your particular contribution? Use the word “I” not “we”.
- **RESULT:** Describe the outcome of your actions and don’t be shy about taking credit for your behavior. What happened? How did the situation end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn? Make sure your answer contains multiple positive results.

Sample STAR Response: “Tell me about a time when you solved a problem.”

Situation: “Advertising revenue was falling off for my college newspaper, *The Review*, and long-time advertisers were not renewing contracts.”

Task: “My goal was to generate new ideas, materials and incentives that would result in at least a 15% increase in advertisers from the year before.”

Action: “I designed a new promotional packet to go with the rate sheet and compared the benefits of *The Review* circulation with other ad media in the area. I changed the pricing and benefits structure to make our advertising more affordable.”

Result: “Over a three-month period our advertising revenue increased by 10% over the previous three-month period, and we were projecting that we were well on track to achieve the 15% increase by the end of the semester.”

COMMON QUESTIONS FOR YOU & THE EMPLOYER

Common Interview Questions

A job description lists desired skills, abilities, knowledge, and experiences; you will be asked questions about any or all of these items, so one of the most effective ways to anticipate what you will be asked during an interview is to carefully review the job description. Some of the most common interview questions are:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why are you interested in working for (insert organization name)?
- Why are you interested in this position?
- What are your career goals?
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses or areas in need of development?

Behavior-Based Interview Questions

Employers evaluate how we handled a situation in the past as a good indicator of how we will handle a similar situation in the future. Respond using specific examples and positive results.

- Describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills.
- Give me an example of a time you set a goal and were able to meet or achieve it.
- Tell me about a time when you had too many things to do and you were required to prioritize.
- What is your typical way of dealing with conflict? Give me an example.
- Give me an example when you took initiative and took the lead.
- Describe a situation in which you used persuasion to successfully change someone's position or opinion.
- Tell me about a recent situation in which you had to deal with an upset customer or coworker.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Tell me about a time you used your presentation skills to influence someone's opinion.
- Tell me about a difficult decision you have made in the last year.
- Give me a specific time in which you had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Please discuss an important written document you were required to complete.
- Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get the job done.
- Give me an example of a time that you had to make a split second decision.
- Tell me about a time you were able to successfully deal with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).
- Give me an example of a time in which you motivated others.
- Tell me about a time you delegated a project effectively.
- Give an example of a time you used fact-finding skills to solve a problem.
- Tell me about a time you missed an obvious solution to a problem.
- Describe a time when you anticipated potential problems and developed preventive measures.
- Tell me about a time when you were forced to make an unpopular decision.

Questions to Ask Employers

Remember, the interview is a two-way street! Use this time to learn about the position and organization so you can make an informed decision about the opportunity. Make sure you are not asking about information that is not easy to gather on the website and always avoid asking about salary and benefits.

- Describe the work environment and/or culture of this department/organization.
- Describe a typical day or week in this role. What will some of my projects and assignments be?
- Tell me about training that is involved with this role.
- What are your company's strengths and weaknesses?
- What makes your organization different from its competitors?
- Why do you enjoy working for this organization? What is most challenging about working here?
- What qualities are you looking for in your new hires?

- Describe your supervisory style and your expectations for new hires.
- How is an employee evaluated and promoted?
- What are the opportunities for professional growth?
- I read ____ about your organization. Could you tell me more and how it might impact this position?
- When can I expect to hear from you? or Tell me about your hiring timeline.

AFTER YOUR INTERVIEW & SAMPLE THANK YOU NOTE

After Your Interview

- **Let the interviewer end the interview.** Thank them for the opportunity and try to get business cards from everyone you met with.
- **Take notes immediately after you leave** while the information is still fresh—what went well, what did you wish you had mentioned? Did they say anything about decision-making timelines?
- **Follow up with a ‘thank you’ email or letter** within 24-48 hours after the interview. If there was a committee or group, you can request the main interviewer to extend you appreciation to the entire interview team.
- **Stay in touch** and follow-up in the allotted time frame if you do not hear back.

Sample Thank-You Note:

Both email and handwritten notes are appropriate. If emailing, use “Name of Position Interview Follow-up” as the Subject. If sending a handwritten note, be sure to use your best penmanship and drop it off or address the envelope correctly.

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. _____:

Express your thanks for their time during the interview or meeting. Reemphasize one of your strongest qualities and details from your conversation. Draw connections between the position and your skills and experiences. Explain why their organization is a good fit for you.

Reiterate your interest in the position. Provide additional contact information (phone and/or email). Tell the recipient that you are looking forward to hearing from them.

Sincerely,

Your name

SPECIAL TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

SKYPE INTERVIEWS

Skype and other video interviews are commonly used by employers for initial screening interviews, particularly for international and national opportunities that might require substantial travel expenses otherwise.

- Check the online connection in advance; have your phone and the number of the employer available as a back-up.
- Pay attention to your posture and how you dress. Do not just wear the top of a suit and then wear jeans...what if you have to stand up during the interview?
- Be in a quiet place, preferably at desk or table with a copy of your resume available.
- The wall behind you should not have any distracting or inappropriate pictures, posters, etc.
- Avoid sitting in front of a window or mirror.
- Turn off any potential noise-makers—TV, radio, alarm clocks.
- Do not have any family, friends, pets, etc. around you; be the only person in the room.
- Inform roommates that you will be interviewing so they do not walk into the room and interrupt.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Smile and let your personality show!

TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Telephone interviews are commonly used, especially during the first-round of an interview process.

- Make sure your phone is charged and you are in a location with good service (if using a cell).
- Be in a quiet place, preferably at desk or table with a copy of your resume available.
- Since the employer(s) cannot see you, you can also have a 'cheat sheet' of notes available.
- Convey more enthusiasm and energy through your voice—interviewer(s) cannot see your body language.
- It is okay to be quiet after your answer. If the interviewer does not respond, you can say "Does that answer your question?"
- Pay attention to your posture and how you dress—these can add to the overall effect of your phone presentation.

PANEL INTERVIEWS

Panel interviews are when a group of people interview you. These can occur during video, phone, or in-person.

- When answering questions, be sure to make eye contact with each participant and not just the person who asks the question or the person with the "highest title" in the room.

LUNCH/DINNER INTERVIEWS

It is common for interviews to have a food and/or drink portion. This is a chance for the employer(s) to get a better feel for your personality and fit, oftentimes in a more relaxed setting. Remember that this is still an interview, though, so maintain your professionalism throughout the meal.

- Do not order items that are messy or hard to eat, order what will be easiest to eat while talking.
- Avoid ordering an expensive dish, as your interviewer will pick up the tab.
- Do not drink alcohol, even if everyone orders it but you.
- Be polite to your server and treat him or her with respect.
- Let the interviewer guide the conversation and start the interview.
- If a spill or food accident happens, don't dwell on it and have a sense of humor. It's an opportunity to show the interviewer how you handle stressful situations!

NEGOTIATING OFFERS & SALARY INFORMATION

Prior to any interview, conduct research on the salary range for the type of position and geographic location of interest to be best prepared for an interviewer's questions about your salary expectations.

Salary is what most people think of first when researching compensation. Be certain to consider other forms of compensation, particularly benefits such as health care and retirement planning, before making a final decision about whether a position's salary will meet your needs and expectations.

How to Handle a Request for Salary History

When an employer requests a salary history, many job seekers find themselves at a loss. You don't want to price yourself out of a job, but you don't want the employer to offer less than the going rate for the position. So what's the right answer?

- Don't include salary history on your resume.
- Handle the request at the end of your cover letter. First, highlight your skills, experience, and interest in the position—information that is far more important to your consideration as a candidate.
- Respond to the question positively without giving a specific amount. (e.g., My salary is in the mid-30s.)
- Say "salary is negotiable and commensurate with my experience".
- If you know the market value for the position and for someone with your skills and background, give at least a \$3,000-\$5,000 range.
- Be prepared to respond to this question in an interview. Carry a list of your positions in reverse chronological order, including the name of the company, your title, a synopsis of your duties, and, lastly, a general compensation amount (e.g. mid-30s).
- Don't lie about your salary history. Employers may verify salary history through reference checks.

Salary requests are difficult for all job searchers to handle, not just new college grads. The key is to shift the focus, politely but firmly, from what you made in the past to competitive compensation for the position you want.

SALARY INFORMATION WEBSITES

- [NACE Salary Calculator Center](#)
- [PayScale](#)
- [Salary.com](#)
- [Glassdoor.com](#)
- [Profession-Specific Salary Surveys](#)

Some of this information is courtesy of the [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#).