Preparing for Interviews

Steps to a Great Interview

1. Prepare for the interview as if you were preparing for an exam: Know what to expect, and do your homework (that is, research the organization well).
2. Set up a mock interview at the CLS. We are happy to help you prepare for any kind of interview situation.
3. Know yourself—the qualities and goals you have, and the contributions you would make.
4. Dress professionally; be polite, punctual, and prepared; and demonstrate confidence.
5. Write a thank-you note to all interviewers within 24 hours of the interview. Restate your interest in the position and your appreciation for the opportunity to interview.

Interview Etiquette

- Know the culture of the office and organization: Are they formal or casual? Friendly or coolly professional? Bureaucratic or collaborative? Hierarchical or organizationally flattened?
- In terms of attire, being dressed a bit more formally than your interviewers is ideal.
- Make sure everything is covered: try sitting, standing, reaching, and moving around in general to be sure your clothes do not reveal too much.
- Be careful with the number and kind of accessories you sport. Be certain they are culture-appropriate to the position you are seeking.
- Be aware that standards of good hygiene are much higher in a professional work setting than on campus.
- If your interview schedule includes a meal, be strategic about what you order. Never order alcohol (even if everyone else does) or meals that are challenging to eat.

Common Interview Questions and Suggested Approaches

Below are some common interview questions. Prepare and practice answers for all of these, and be able to answer them naturally, confidently, and engagingly.

Tell us a little about yourself.

Answer in about two minutes. Be natural, avoid lengthy details that you will likely address later, and don't ramble. Touch on areas such as educational background, activities you are passionate about, work experiences, and career interests. Make sure to practice this spiel (with a timer) so that you come across as confident and enthusiastic.

Why are you interested in this position/company?

Demonstrate that you have done your homework; it confirms your commitment and interest. Pick just a few points to highlight, and strategically select points that you can connect to your skills and abilities. Remember to show enthusiasm!

What are your long- and short-term goals?

Talk about the general skills and experiences you seek to acquire (e.g., financial skills, managerial skills, customer-service experience). Be positive, and don't suggest that you'd leave after a year or two, since doing so may lessen the likelihood of getting an offer. If you are aspirational, you may state that you'd eventually hope for opportunities for advancement within the organization.

What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Be prepared for this bugaboo of a question! State your weakness first (you need only mention one), so your response ends on a positive note. Don't try to turn your weakness into a strength; rather, talk about how you have already been taking steps to lessen its impact on your professional life. Do not offer your worst or most minor weakness; try to find one in between. In terms of strengths, provide two to four, and tie them to the position itself. Make sure to be clear and concise: This question is another you can easily practice.

Tell us about a time when you showed initiative/ leadership/ingenuity.

This open-ended question is a behavior-based question (see section on Behavioral Interviews for more details). You are expected to provide specific examples of experiences that showcase desired qualities. Be clear, concise, concrete, and positive about others. Structure your answer in STAR format: Situation, Task, Action, Result.

Why should we hire you?

Be confident! Look the questioner in the eye and have an answer prepared to deliver. Make sure you know why you'd be a valuable addition, and believe in yourself.

Tips for Answering Questions Effectively

- Listen carefully. If you do not understand a question, it's perfectly fine to ask that it be restated.
- Take your time. You needn't begin answering immediately; a brief pause allows you to gather your thoughts.
- When asked a multi-part question, remember to answer all portions. A good strategy is to repeat and enumerate the questions orally so you will remember what to answer. You may provide your answers in a different order, provided you answer all the original portions.
- "That's a great question" is not usually a great initial response to an interview question—it's typically filler. Better is something akin to "I'm so glad you asked," since it will cause the interviewer's ears to perk up, as if you're about to say something really interesting and engaging. (And then you need to be prepared to say something really interesting and engaging!)
- If you feel your listeners are becoming disengaged during a particular answer, try to wrap up your answer sooner rather than later.
- "I hope I answered your question" is not a very effective conclusion. Better is something like "I'd be happy to go into greater detail later if time permits."
- Practice, practice, practice! A mock interview at the CLS will help you understand how you may be coming across to your interviewers and should help make you more confident during the real interview.

Questions Appropriate For You To Ask

Make sure you always come prepared to an interview with questions; your research about the organization should stimulate your thinking about timely topics. Other more general questions include:

- *Can you tell me a little bit about opportunities for additional training or professional development?*
- *What sorts of new initiatives are you planning in the coming year that will affect the person in this position?*
- *How do you give performance reviews?*
- *What are some typical career paths for individuals in this type of position?*
- *What is a typical day like for this job?*
- *With promotion, are transfer—including overseas—opportunities available?*
- *If you had to name just one area where you'd like the individual in this position to make the greatest impact in the coming year, what area would that be?*

General Types Of Interviews

Phone/Skype Interviews: These types of remote interviews are often used to screen candidates in order to narrow the pool of applicants who will be invited for site-visit interviews. They are also used as a way to minimize the expenses involved in interviewing out-of-town candidates. Here are some suggestions for preparing for phone or Skype interviews:

- Prepare for the interview as you would any other interview. Read the job description carefully, research the company, review your résumé and cover letter, and practice your response to typical interview questions.
- For a phone interview, consider dressing as you would for a face-to-face interview; doing so may help you project yourself more professionally and confidently. For a Skype interview (with video), you must dress professionally.
- If you are using a cell phone, make sure that your phone battery is fully charged.
- Ensure that you have a quiet space and will not be interrupted during the duration of the interview. The CLS has an Interview Room for Skype and phone interviews; you may reserve it (if available when you need it).
- Have your notes, the job description, and your résumé and cover letter in front of you for quick reference. Make sure you have a pen and paper ready for taking notes. If the

entire hiring committee is on the other end of a conference call, write down each person's name and title so you can refer to them later.

- Don't chew gum (or eat) during your interview.
- Do keep a glass or bottle of water handy, in case your throat gets dry.
- Speak slowly and enunciate clearly. Your voice is all you have to form a positive impression over the phone.
- Smile. Smiling will project a positive image to the listeners and will change the tone of your voice. Also, for a phone interview, consider standing during the interview: your voice will project more clearly.
- Use your interviewees' titles ("Mr.," "Ms.," "Dr.," and so forth); use a first name only if they ask you to.
- Don't interrupt the interviewers.
- Take your time: taking a moment or two to collect your thoughts before launching into an answer is perfectly acceptable.
- Give complete yet concise answers.
- Remember that your goal for this interview is to convince the interviewers that you are a good fit for the position and the organization so that you will ultimately be offered a face-to-face interview.
- At the end of the interview, thank the interviewers for their time. Take some time immediately after the interview to assess your responses so as to help you prepare for your next interview. Then, *promptly* follow up with a thank-you letter or e-mail message to each interviewer.

Case Interviews: These interviews are typically scenario-based, problem-solving activities used by consulting firms, financial services firms, and other industries to evaluate your problem-solving skills, analytical skills, communication skills, leadership, and creativity. If you are interviewing with a consulting firm, you'll very likely get a case interview at some point. Don't panic!

Case interviewing is not really about demonstrating your business knowledge or strategic savvy. Instead, it's about showing that you can think in a structured manner under pressure (something Grinnellians do all the time). Common case scenarios include:

- **Market Sizing:** Short and sweet: You're asked to tell how much of something exists in a certain situation. For example: *How many cups does Starbucks use in a year?* Or *How many golf balls would fit into a 747?*
- **Mini-Case:** Abbreviated case-related questions. For example: *We've developed a new cereal, but we've been told by our suppliers that it might not be ready on schedule. What's going on, and what should we do?*
- **Case:** The classic interview for consulting internships and jobs—and becoming used more often for other sorts of roles, as well, including in marketing and finance. In these situations, you're asked to take a business situation and work over the course of 20–60 minutes to come up with an analysis and recommendations for how to resolve the issue(s) raised. Cases may be tackled individually or, more commonly, in small groups. Be prepared for the interviewer to be hostile and angry, just to see how you react under pressure.

Suggestions for preparing for case interviews:

1. Try answering this market-sizing question: *How many dog collars are sold each year in the USA?*
2. Check out the following websites; both have sample cases you can try:

- **www.casequestions.com**
- **mycareer.deloitte.com/us/en/students/gettingthejob/caseinterviewtips**

3. Take a look at a current edition of Marc P. Cosentino's *Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation* (Burgee Press). (Copies can be checked out from the CLS Library.)

Behavioral Interviews: Behavioral interviewing creates a discussion of a candidate's actual experiences ("this happened, and here is how I responded, with this outcome") as opposed to hypotheticals ("I like to work hard"). The **STAR** framework (or something similar) will likely be used to evaluate your response to behavioral interview questions, so using it is a great way to structure your answers. Here's what to do:

1. **Situation:** Briefly present the *context* around what happened ("The annual report was due that evening, and the server crashed. . .").
2. **Task:** Clearly state your *task* in that situation ("I had to find a way to reboot the server. . .").
3. **Action:** Describe what you *did*—the most important part ("So I contacted the IT person who was on call and explained our critical need, and. . .").
4. **Result:** Detail what *happened* as a result and what you *learned* ("And once the server was rebooted, we were able to get the annual report done on time. I learned the importance of working more efficiently with my colleagues so we would not be trying to finish such projects at the last minute, in case technical difficulties arise that cannot be as simply resolved. . .").

Suggestions for preparing for behavioral interviews:

1. Think of your experiences in college, at work, or during internships that involved:
   - demonstrating your leadership abilities
   - getting along with a difficult colleague or classmate
   - responding to criticism from a supervisor or professor
   - resolving a work or project crisis
   - showing initiative that helped improve or complete a project
2. Write down a list of such experiences with brief descriptions of each. You don't need to have an experience for each of the possibilities above, but try to come up with something for at least three or four.
3. Now, take one of these experiences and write it out following the STAR framework. Bullet out your answer under each heading. Tip: You should have the most bullets under the "Action" category, even if what you're describing seems mundane and boring.
4. Practice talking through the answer aloud until you can make the narrative seem natural and convincing. Aim to talk for no more than two minutes per STAR answer.

Technical Interviews: These interviews serve to (1) determine how well you know advanced technology, software processing, special algorithms, and the like, focusing on your broad set of technical skills, and (2) address your problem-solving skills. Interviewers are looking at your approach to sample problems and how you think through them to find a solution. Here are some suggestions for preparing for technical interviews:

1. Review the job description to know what the job duties entail (for example, knowledge of software, hardware, testing, operating systems, circuits, etc.).
2. Make sure you are very familiar with your projects, prior technical experiences, and coursework.
3. Review old notes from classes related to the position for which you are interviewing. You do not need to be an expert; you just need to be familiar enough to answer questions and demonstrate previous exposure to the material.
4. Study and practice answering—out loud—the standard interview questions and as many variations of them as possible.

Multiple Mini Interviews: Gaining traction among medical and veterinary schools, these interviews involve a number of short, independent assessments, typically in a timed circuit, to assess (among other things) candidates' personality traits, language and communication skills, interpersonal skills, and professionalism. Please make an appointment with a staff member at the CLS to prepare for this type of interview.

Other Interview Formats: The above interview formats may involve a combination of the following (and on-site interviews typically do):

- **One-on-one:** The "traditional" interview format.
- **Committee:** Multiple people take turns asking questions to individual applicants. If an in-person interview, look the original questioner in the eye at the beginning and end of your answer, but feel free to look at other interviewers in between.
- **Group:** A small group of candidates interviews at the same time; such scenarios often involve group tasks (as in case interviews). Here, one goal is to impress the interviewers with how cooperative and supportive you can be—even among your "competitors."

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