



# THE JACKSON SCHOOL INTERVIEW TOOLKIT

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# THE JACKSON SCHOOL INTERVIEW TOOLKIT



## INTRODUCTION

Preparing for a job interview is definitely time well spent. If you're getting to the interview stage of the hiring process, it means you're doing a lot of things right. Congratulations!

Your next step is to prepare yourself for the interview so you can demonstrate to your potential future employer that you are a) a great fit to join their team and b) should be their number one choice for the job.

A lot of work goes into good interview that results in a job offer; successful candidates are those who prepare well, understand what the employer is looking for, and can make the right points when responding to interview questions. This guide is designed to help you prepare and know a little more about what interviewers are looking for, what they're thinking, and how they make decisions.

## SECTION 1: ANALYZING THE JOB POSTING

When you apply to a job, be sure to save the original position description/ posting that you applied to. Being able to refer to this information throughout the process is incredibly important: it will help you to better understand what the employer is looking for. Why take the time save the position description when you apply?

After an application deadline passes, job description links can disappear before interview offers are made. The key sections to pay attention to in a position description are:

- The duties of the job
- The core requirements
- The desired requirements

## SECTION 1: ANALYZING THE JOB POSTING (Cont.)

More often than not, the person that wrote the original position description will be involved in the interview process, and will base their interview ranking rubric on how well candidates fit the criteria in those three sections. The content here matters.

For each section, it's important to pay attention to the order things are listed as from an interviewer's perspective, this order represents a rough priority ranking: job duties or requirements that are mentioned first are of higher priority to the hiring manager than those at the bottom. An example of a typical duties section:

### **Global Development Associate**

[humanresources@cfr.org](mailto:humanresources@cfr.org)

### **Council on Foreign Relations**

**Location: New York, NY**

The principal responsibilities of this position will include (but are not limited to):

- Conduct foundation and individual donor research and help strategize approaches
- Create briefing materials for CFR president and board member meetings with donors
- Assist with the development of comprehensive proposals and budgets for Council initiatives
- Draft grant reports to foundations and individuals
- Track and monitor grant timelines and work with program and development staff to ensure that deadlines and other requirements are met
- Prepare internal reports, including grant summary memos, and maintain the deadlines calendar
- Provide support for tracking, cultivating, and stewarding individual donors as needed, including working events
- Schedule, prepare materials for, and take minutes of weekly department meetings
- Perform other administrative duties to support the Development Office as assigned

For the duties of this particular position, it's safe to say the employer will be placing more importance on donor research and strategy proposals than they do for weekly meeting prep and "other duties as assigned". So, while the candidate that can demonstrate previous experience and aptitude that hits all of these bullet points in the interview will likely be the most successful, priority attention should be paid in demonstrating your fit for the most important aspects of the job.

## SECTION 1: ANALYZING THE JOB POSTING (Cont.)

The same will apply to the requirements sections. A sample section may look something like this:

### **Requirements:**

- Excellent writing, editing, and proofreading skills required
- Minimum one year of related experience in prospect research and proposal writing essential
- BA in international relations or related field with high academic achievement. Knowledge of current foreign policy issues preferred
- Exceptional organizational skills, attention to detail, and ability to work within deadlines while handling several projects at once
- Prior experience working with budgets
- Excellent interpersonal/communication skills and ability to work cooperatively in a team-based environment
- Outstanding professional judgment, discretion, and demeanour
- High degree of proficiency in Microsoft Office suite and database management

Here, the employer is probably most focused on choosing a candidate that can write, edit, and research. The right educational background is likely important, but the addition of “or related field” means they are willing to hire someone from a variety of disciplines. Next, we have our mid-tier requirements that fall into the “soft skills” or “competencies” category: organizational skills, attention to detail, the ability to meet multiple deadlines, communications skills, and collaboration skills. While the first tier of requirements are specific to the job, the mid-tier requirements are attributes that almost all employers value, but can be applied to any position. The last items should be interpreted as lower priority to interviewers, but part of an “ideal” candidate.

The better the position description is understood from the outset, the more likely it is you’ll be able to focus your answers on highlighting things that are most important to your interviewers. Once you are comfortable with what you’ll need to focus your answers on, remember that during the interview, your interviewers will be not only be considering your knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), but also your competencies, how you acquired your KSAs and how these will be used in their workplace. Some sample questions interviewers may be asking when assessing your KSAs:

- What kind of problems will the person who gets this job have to deal with?
- What type of planning is needed for this positions? Is it strategic or logistical?
- How much creativity or innovation is needed?
- What are the pressures of the job resulting from time demands or interpersonal interactions?
- Will this individual need to possess any unique qualities in order to thrive here?
- What will be the degree of client or customer contact? How important are communications skills or interpersonal skills?
- How much initiative will the success candidate need to display in this position?

In your interview, you'll want to make sure that during the course of your answers you've addressed how your experience, skillset, and mindset can be applied to their top priorities for the job. Having the original job description on hand when preparing your answers will mean you'll be able to focus your efforts on hitting the appropriate bullet points. Interviewers may use a checkbox system to outline if candidates have mentioned how they meet the basic job requirements, but if something is more open than a simple yes/no (for example communications skills), they may use a numerical system to rank applicants.

Thinking about how answers are evaluated will help you to build better answers as part of your interview preparation – we'll address this more in section 5: evaluation criteria.

## SECTION 2: PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

### **Advance research to conduct**

- As mentioned in the previous section, make sure you are completely familiar with the job description, its duties, and the KSAs/ competencies the employer is focused on.
- Find out/ confirm where you would fit in to the mission of your department/ team, who you would be reporting to, and who you would be working with. Sometimes the website of your target organization may have this information in their directory, sometimes it's available on LinkedIn.
- Become familiar with the goals and values of the place you're applying to: the "About Us" or "Mission" sections of the website often provide good intelligence on this. [Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com) also has profiles for a lot of employers. While it's important to look at the employee reviews section on glassdoor profiles as potentially biased, the input left can sometimes be an important window on the culture of where you are applying.
- Contact connections through LinkedIn, friends, or Jackson alumni to get insights on the recruitment process. What are interviews like? How long are they? What kind of questions get asked? How long does the recruitment process take? The more information you can get on these points, the more comfortable you'll be when you interview because you have a better idea of what to expect. [Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com) sometimes lists user experiences with interviews, but again, these should be taken with a pinch of salt. If you know someone who works where you are applying to, now is the time to leverage that connection.
- Look at other positions your target organization is recruiting for, if applicable. Do you notice patterns in the kind of job duties or requirements you see? If so, that's a good indication your interviewers will have them in mind.
- Lastly, you'll want to prepare answers to questions you think your interviewer will ask. We'll address this in section 4: Question Response Strategies.

## SECTION 2: PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW (cont.)

### What to wear

What exactly is appropriate job interview attire? It depends on where you are interviewing, but a good rule of thumb is aim to let good taste be your guide. It's important to research the culture and values of where you are applying to and **dress to match**. Interviewers at a tech startup are going to be less focused on formal attire than say, interviewers at a government office. The thought you should put into your outfit should match the thought you put into things like tattoos, piercings, unique hairstyles, etc. Some employers don't worry about conforming to conservative norms, others do. Find out about the culture of where you are applying to and you'll avoid a potential "first impression" pitfall.

If it isn't obvious, the best way to determine how to dress for a particular job interview is to go to the place of business in question a day or two before the interview. Watch staff coming and going and see how they are dressed; that will give you an excellent idea of how people dress at that particular company. When in doubt, err on the side of business dress. It's easier to remove a jacket and roll up sleeves to quickly fit into a more casual environment – it's harder to go the other way in a pinch.

When you're deciding how to dress for an interview, keep in mind that the concept of casual Friday does not apply to job searching. If your interview is on a Friday, dress as you would for an interview on any other day of the week. Normally employers will dress up a bit for interviews, even if it happens to fall on a casual Friday. However, if you go to an interview on a casual Friday, and all of the staff and the employer are wearing jeans while you are dressed more formally; don't worry, you've done the right thing. Other things to consider:

- Be aware of details when you dress for an interview. Shine your shoes, trim your nails and carefully iron your clothes. Some employers notice details of your dress, and it makes an impact on their first impressions of you. For better or worse, first impressions can impact how much attention your interviewers pay to you when you're responding to their questions.
- Decide what you will wear at least the day before the interview, preferably sooner. Once you've decided how you will dress for an interview, try everything on at least a day before your interview. You don't want to discover your best dress shirt has a stain or doesn't fit on the day of the interview.
- Go through a complete trial run with your interview outfit so there will be no surprises on the day.

## SECTION 2: PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW (cont.)

### Interview Logistics

Part of removing interview stress is how you prepare for getting to the interview. Know exactly which building you need to go to, the route you'll take, how much time to budget for different traffic conditions, and what to do when you arrive.

- Time is your most important resource on interview day. Leave enough time to easily get to your destination and you'll avoid the stress that comes from rushing. It's easier to form good answers to interview questions when you haven't had to run or be distracted by traffic.
- Timing is one of the most prominent absolutes of interviewing: candidates who arrive late to an interview will very likely torpedo their chances of being offered a job. Get there.
- Where appropriate, remember that just arriving at the location's street address does not mean you are on time – make sure you know which entrance to go in, which office or floor to go to, where to check in, and where to wait. When in doubt, do a practice run. It's OK to confirm all of these things by visiting before the interview!
- If you are offered a choice of interview slots, take the following factors into account when making your choice. What time of day is easiest for travel? What time of the day am I or my interviewers going to be most alert and engaged? Be strategic about your choice.
- Prepare the materials you'll want to bring with you – a copy of the materials you used to apply to the position (so you can remember what you said), a copy of the position description (so you can refer to it and remember what the interviewers priorities are) and your notes (so you can remember the talking points you want to hit, responses you want to give, and questions you want to ask). It's OK to bring materials, notes etc. into the interview – it shows you have made the effort to prepare.
- Make sure your mobile devices are turned off before you head in for your interview. Not just silenced, not even airplane mode, but completely off. Why? Because interviewers can still hear a phone buzzing or vibrate, and even in airplane mode, calendar alerts can still cause a phone to ring if it's not silenced. At best, a phone making noise can interrupt your train of thought, at worst, it will mean you'll have to apologise to your interviewers and hope they don't hold it against you. This is a pitfall that you can easily sidestep.

Lastly, a key part of interview logistics is follow up – thanking your interviewers after they have interviewed you is a simple but effective tool for keeping you fresh in the minds of your interviewers and standing out from the crowd. We'll look at this in detail on the next page.

## SECTION 2: PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW (cont.)

Interview thank notes make a great impression, and very few people actually send one, so sending a thank you note is an easy way to show that you will go one step beyond the average person to do a great job.

### 6 Tips for Writing a Great Interview Thank You Letter

1. **Ensure the letter is sincere.** *Write your thank you note immediately after your interview.* Do not write it before the interview and drop it off or post it on the day. You may think you are being efficient, but how can you write a custom thank you note about an interview before the interview has happened? You won't be able to reference specific things or make the most memorable impression with a template. Customised notes make the most impact.
2. **Make it specific.** In the note, mention something specific and positive about the company or the job that was discussed in the interview.
3. **Do not mention or apologize for any perceived negatives** that may have come up during the interview. If you didn't feel completely comfortable with your answer to a question, do not bring it up again in the thank you letter. You'd only remind the employer of it. Besides, the employer may have been perfectly satisfied with your answer; it's typical to be highly self-critical about your performance in a job interview, so the best strategy is to focus on the positives.
4. However, if you forgot to mention an **important relevant skill** in the interview, you can briefly mention that in the thank you letter.
5. Send your interview thank you letter both by email and postal mail. The problem with sending a thank you note through postal mail is that it may not arrive in time to influence the employer's hiring decision. On the other hand, an email lacks the impact of a hand-written, customised thank you note. It's not essential to use both methods of follow up, but it may mean you have the best of both worlds. Neither version has to be lengthy.
6. If applicable, **ask for your interviewers' business cards** before you leave so you have correct contact information and spelling of their names.

Sending an interview thank you letter after a job interview is an extremely useful way to add to the employer's interest in you as a potential employee. There are plenty of stories from employers who have been positively influenced by a well written, sincere interview thank you note - there's really no good reason to overlook this aspect of an interview.

## SECTION 3: INTERVIEW STRUCTURE & QUESTION TYPES

An important aspect of interviews is preparing yourself so that you know what to expect. In this section we are going to outline the key sections of a typical interview so that you'll be able to adapt to the flow of an interview, understand what kinds of questions interviewers like to ask, and learn about what responses those questions are designed to do.

A typical interview can comprise of some or all of the following:

- Opening/ housekeeping
- Closed questions
- Open questions
- Behavioral questions
- Theoretical/ Situational questions
- Q & A with the interviewers,
- Closing, what to expect next

We'll go through what you can expect for all of these sections below – the more you know what to expect, the less intimidating an interview will be.

### **Opening/ Housekeeping**

Most interviews will not start with the interviewers jumping immediately into questions – you'll have a few minutes of welcome, some small talk to start the conversation off in a way that puts you at ease, and an outline of what some interviewers call "housekeeping". Housekeeping items can include verifying the job title the interview is for, introductions, and asking if any aspects of your application have changed since you submitted your initial materials. Some interviewers may give a basic introduction of the team or department the position would be attached to, but you can expect this section to last no longer than 5 minutes.

Small talk usually revolves around your journey to the interview or the weather – keep your participation polite, short, and friendly. It's important to start with a good impression, but allow as much time for talking about your qualifications as possible.

After the small talk, usually interviewers will connect the interview opening to more substantive questions by starting with a generic and easy-to-answer question; something along the lines of "tell us about yourself" or "tell us why you decided to apply to this job". While many people will think that it is at this point the interview begins "for real", it is important to remember that all interactions are part of the interview. Even the ones at the opening/ housekeeping stage.

## SECTION 3: INTERVIEW STRUCTURE & QUESTION TYPES

### Closed Questions vs. Open Questions

Interviewers are going to primarily focused on identifying to what extent your experience, your skillset, and your competencies match the kind of person they'd like to add to their team. They will do this through a variety of question types, some of the simplest being closed/ open questions.

Closed questions are typically short, binary (yes/no), or technical in nature. Closed questions can typically be answered quickly and are sometimes used by interviewers to check off basic required knowledge, skills, or abilities. Examples include:

- *Can you perform the basic functions of this position with or without accommodation?*
- *Are you still reachable via the email and phone you listed on your application?*
- *Do you have any relatives or acquaintances currently employed here?*
- *Do you have experience with <X> software in an office environment?*

Closed questions are not used extensively by interviewers because they can be considered leading, and candidates will sometimes try to tell interviewers what they think they want to hear. Open questions are preferred by interviewers (at least in non-technical interviews) because they encourage the candidate to talk and cannot be answered by just a few words.

Some examples include:

- ***Tell us about yourself*** (or some variation of “summarize your skills, experience, and motivation for applying” as an introduction)
- ***Why did you apply for this position?***
- ***This position requires a lot of travel – what kind of coping strategies do you have for managing the stress of travel while working on complicated projects?***
- ***Can you tell us about what you think your greatest strengths and weaknesses are?***

Open interview questions typically revolve around words like *how, why, please describe, or tell us about*, and are designed to help interviewers learn about the candidate in an open way. Interviewers look at open questions as a chance for the candidate to outline their skills, competencies, or experience points as they pertain to the job in a measurable way.

## SECTION 3: INTERVIEW STRUCTURE & QUESTION TYPES

### **Theoretical/ Situational Questions**

Employers will use theoretical or situational questions to elicit discussion of what the applicant might do and may or may not be based on actual experience. Behavioral questions, unlike theoretical/situational questions, are designed to have the candidate talk about how they have reacted to a situation in the past with actual experiences. While interviewers prefer behavioral questions because they focus on actual experience the candidate has that could be applied, theoretical or situational questions are still considered by interviewers to be useful in situations where the candidate might not have direct experience with a policy or procedure that is unique to the company.

Interviewers recognize that asking theoretical or situational questions raises the risk a candidate will try to use a “textbook” answer, but they are designed to reveal information about how a candidate thinks, what their problem solving abilities are, their adaptability, and how they apply their knowledge. Remember these aims when building your response. Some examples of theoretical or situational questions include:

- ***What do you think are the qualities of a good manager?***
- ***How would you resolve the current supply chain problem we have with Kreplachistan?***
- ***If hired, could you tell us about what you would do during your first month in the job?***
- ***Please describe how you see this position fitting into your long term goals***
- ***How would you handle conflicting requests from colleagues or difficult clients?***

### **Behavioral Questions**

Behavioral questions are designed to elicit conversation about actual experiences the candidate has that connect to the job they could potentially be doing in the future. This is one of the most popular question types that interviewers use, and the rationale behind them is that past behavior is an indicator of future performance. From an interviewer’s perspective, behavioral questions can screen for specific attributes necessary for success in the job and help them to compare and categorize applicants in a way that separates them into satisfactory, preferred, and highly preferred categories.

Behavioral questions will typically involve follow up questions or prompts to keep the answer focused on actual behavior rather than a general description, and typically start with phrases like “Tell us about a time you...”, “How have you...” or “Can you give us an example of a situation when...”.

## SECTION 3: INTERVIEW STRUCTURE & QUESTION TYPES

### **Q & A with Interviewers**

Most interviews will feature a mix of closed, open, theoretical and behavioral questions, although the proportions will vary from interview to interview. However, one constant that almost all interviews feature is time set aside at the end for the candidate to ask questions to the interviewers. This signals that the interview is almost finished, so take a breath! You're almost there.

While it is important to make sure you have good, substantive questions to ask at this point, you should also limit the number of questions asked to three or four. This is because interviewers are typically on a regimented schedule that requires a buffer for discussion before they speak to the next candidate – if you start eating into this buffer with excessive questions, it can make it difficult for interviewers to keep to their schedule.

This section should last between 5-10 minutes. That said, the only wrong answer to the question “do you have any questions for us?” is “no”. At this stage should avoid the following themes:

- Benefits, vacation, salary (asking about these before you get a job offer is considered poor taste, and gives the impression you are more focused on compensation than joining the team)
- Promotion potential (this implies you are not interested in the job you're applying for, and are just using it to move on to something better)
- Company policy on pets at work, internet usage, or lunch breaks
- Any question that could be easily answered with a quick search online (this reflects poorly on both your preparation and your effort to learn)

Instead, better questions to ask include:

- *What is the thing you enjoy most about being a part of this team?* (encourages the interviewer to think about a positive aspect of the job from a personal perspective)
- *To you, what will a successful first year in the position look like* (shows you are focused on preparing to meet and exceed their evaluation metrics)
- (If it hasn't already been covered) *What does a typical day or week look like for the person in this position?*
- *I'm always looking to improve my skillset – does this organization support professional development or continued education?*
- *What kind of communication style is most prevalent here? Are there regular in-person meetings or does collaboration go more through email or reports?*

## SECTION 3: INTERVIEW STRUCTURE & QUESTION TYPES

### **Q & A with Interviewers**

Regardless of what questions you ask at the end of the interview, always try to leave time for the following if applicable:

- *Do you have any lingering concerns about me or my qualifications?* (Can be used as one last chance for you to address something you haven't addressed that might be on their minds – interviewers will often say no, but it is always good to ask.)
- *I'm very excited about the prospect of working with the team here – would it be possible to ask what the timeline is for next steps in the process?* (In this situation, everyone in the room will understand you're asking about when you can expect to hear about a decision. However, it's useful to avoid that specific phrase because it can sound too demanding in some cases).

The last question is important to remember because it means you can leave the interview knowing when you'll hear back. This will help you to focus your energies on other activities or manage other applications instead of waiting and wondering unnecessarily.

### **Unfair/ prohibited interview questions**

While it is quite unlikely candidates will be asked prohibited interview questions, it is important to remember that not all interviewers are trained HR professionals – many are employees or supervisors connected to the department doing recruiting. In this situation it is important to not assume negative intent on the part of your interviewer – they may not know their question is prohibited. Be polite, but also be aware there are certain questions that you do not have to answer because they related to legally protected classes. These include questions relating to your age, national origin, race, religion, medical status, marital status, sexual orientation, and more.

For full information on prohibited questions, we recommend further reading at:

[www.uw.edu/admin/hr/roles/mgr/hire/interview-select/fair-preemploy.html](http://www.uw.edu/admin/hr/roles/mgr/hire/interview-select/fair-preemploy.html).

Some of these questions may be obvious if asked: *“Are you on any prescription medications?”*, *“Have you had a major illness in the last 5 years?”*, or *“Do you have kids?”*

However, some forms of these are more subtle. These include: *“That's a nice accent – where are you from?”*, *“I think we take the same bus – do you rent in XYZ neighborhood?”*, or *“You seem very good with kids – do you have any yourself?”* In any of these cases, we recommend candidates deflect the initial question and turn the response back to their job-related strengths. For example, a way to deflect the last question about kids:

*“Kids are great aren't they? I'm comfortable communicating with a really wide variety of people, I think it's one of my strengths and I'm certainly looking forward to applying that in this position.”*

## SECTION 4: QUESTION RESPONSE STRATEGIES

When preparing for an interview, it's important to understand that it is possible (and acceptable) to prepare answers for questions you think you'll be asked. While it's not advisable to read from a script in an interview, no interviewer will ever begrudge candidates referring to notes or talking points – so feel free to use them! Having notes and talking points prepared for different questions will mean interviewees are less likely to lose their train of thought or forget to highlight a particular skill or experience that is relevant to the job.

With each question an interviewer asks, before you prepare a response it is important to think about **why** the interviewer is really asking this question. This will help you to stay on message and tie your skills and experience directly to the priorities listed in the job description. Some common interview questions as examples:

- ***“Tell us about yourself”***
  - What they're really asking and how to respond: A classic conversation started to transition between small talk and more substantive interview questions. In this situation, interviewers want you to summarize your education, skills, and experience in a way that demonstrates concisely why you should be considered as their top candidate. The content should stick to professional themes: interviewers are not interested in your personal life, your interests, your hobbies, where you are from, or your family. Responses should be limited to no more than a minute or so and should be in the form of an “elevator pitch”.
- ***“Why did you apply for this job?”***
  - What they're really asking and how to respond: The interviewer wants to know not only why you are applying for this position, but why you are applying for this position at this specific organization. Why not a similar position somewhere else? The interviewer also wants to use this question to assess more intangible aspects – are you someone who is self-motivated and enthusiastic? Are you a planner? Have you bothered to research us specifically, or are you just applying to a variety of positions? Keep the theme of your answer focused on them; you're applying because you want to be a part of a team that contributes to X, Y, or Z, you're applying because you have shared goals and values and you're excited to apply your skills and experience to that. Avoid responses that talk about your interests or how this opportunity will benefit your career.

## SECTION 4: QUESTION RESPONSE STRATEGIES

- ***“What would you say are your strengths and weaknesses?”***
  - What they're really asking and how to respond: the interviewer is trying to find out if you are someone who is analytical, thinks about how to develop and improve processes, how you handle challenges, and which aspects of you are best suited to excel in this position. For the strengths, highlight a combination personal competencies (communication or collaboration skills), directly relevant experience, and technical skills. For weaknesses, avoid clichés like “I’m a perfectionist” or “I work too hard”, and don’t try to take a strength and frame it as a weakness. Instead, focus on talking about competencies or skills that **were** lacking that you have since corrected, and say how and why you did this. That way, you’re answering the question, but reassuring the interviewer that you can reflect, improve, and resolve problems.
- ***“What would you say your greatest accomplishment is?”***
  - What they're really asking and how to respond: This deceptively simple interview question has gained traction because it was highlighted by one HR author as the best way to draw a lot of information on a candidate’s thought processes, experience, and motivation in an anecdotal way. It’s a short question, but a prepared candidate would know that a lot of information goes into an answer: the candidate’s role in the accomplishment itself, the preparations and processes that were involved, the resources used, challenges faced/ overcome, and what would be done differently to improve if things happened again. A well-prepared answer here will speak to skills and experience directly connected with the job, but also to leadership, initiative, commitment, motivation, adaptability, and the desire to improve.
- ***“Where do you see yourself in the future?”***
  - What they're really asking and how to respond: In this situation, interviewers are really asking “are you the sort of person that can plan, analyze, and think critically about present challenges and future goals?” When responding, outline how you see yourself continuing to learn, continuing to grow, and taking on more professional responsibility based on your strengths if the option arises. Avoid talking about personal ambitions, family ambitions, hobbies, or anything that isn’t connected to the job at hand. Highlight your skills and experience and frame it in a way that shows you’ve thought about how you could apply it to serve the organization in the future. Avoid talking explicitly about moving to other positions.

## SECTION 4: QUESTION RESPONSE STRATEGIES

### **Behavioral Interview Question Response Technique: STAR vs. STARE**

In an interview, a common framework interviewees can use to respond to open-ended or behavioral questions is summarized by the **STAR** acronym: **S**ituation, **T**ask, **A**ction, **R**esult.

From an interviewer's perspective, when applicants describe their actual experiences as they connect with the position being interviewed for, a response should cover **STAR** to give the interview the information they need to decide how they would rank a given candidate's experience or abilities.

Component	Definition	Example
Situation	Background information	<i>"I recently joined a different unit and had noticed some inefficiencies in appointment scheduling..."</i>
Task	What needed to be done	<i>"...clients were routinely kept waiting for more than 15 minutes for their appointments. We needed to cut down the wait time."</i>
Action	What was done specifically	<i>"I decided to get the team together to see how they saw the situation, to get their recommendations, and to offer my own..."</i>
Result	What happened – whether or not the action taken was effective	<i>"Together, we came up with a new system that cut waiting times in half."</i>

It's important to note that when addressing open or behavioral questions that opinions and theories should be avoided – interviewers feel these are not behavioral descriptions of actual performance, which is what they are really after. Opinions and theories do not give interviewers enough information to assess a candidate's potential for success in the job. Examples include phrases that start with "I am confident that I could" or "I believe that". They could also be unqualified statements like "I get along with everyone" or "organization is my strong suit".

When responding using the STAR framework, make sure you focus on details that demonstrate how your past performance would connect to future success in the job. If you want to connect your opinions about your competencies, make sure they are qualified with evidence that backs them up.

## SECTION 4: QUESTION RESPONSE STRATEGIES

### The anchors interviewers look for in candidate responses

Now that you have identified your KSAs, competencies, and STAR anecdotes to use in open or behavioral questions, it's also important to consider the anchors that interviewers look for when preparing your answers. Interviewers regard these anchors as the difference between a good answer and an outstanding answer. Here is an example of a behavioral question in an interview for a position with an emphasis on service:

Question	Prompts (said or unsaid)	Behavior Anchors
Can you tell us about a time when a client's dissatisfaction with a service was brought to your attention?	<p>What was the nature of the dissatisfaction?</p> <p>What did you say?</p> <p>What did you do?</p> <p>What was the outcome?</p> <p>If you could do it again, is there anything you would do differently?</p>	<p>Candidate describes specific examples without assigning criticism or blame</p> <p>Candidate describes specific behaviors and responses used, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use of "I" statements instead of "we"</li> <li>- Assumed empathetic role</li> <li>- Asked clarifying questions</li> <li>- Owned the problem; actively sought resolution</li> <li>- Established common ground</li> <li>- Offered solutions to "make it right"</li> </ul> <p>Describes positive outcome to encounter OR reflective self-evaluation, e.g. additional measures that could have been taken to improve the situation.</p>

The final prompt in the second column highlights something that candidates can add to their STAR answers to make them even better – a summary evaluation of the experience being highlighted that gives reflection on how things could have been done better/ differently. For this reason, when preparing anecdotes to use before an interview, it is recommended that candidates use **STARE** over **STAR** where possible.

Before an interview, think about the duties of the job or professional requirements that interviewers are most likely to focus on and prepare several anecdotes from your past experience that connect with **each of them** using the **STARE** framework. The more you prepare your talking points with interviewer anchors in mind, the higher your responses will be ranked by interviewers.

## SECTION 4: QUESTION RESPONSE STRATEGIES

### **Response timing/ length**

When delivering responses to interview questions, one of the things that can leave interviewers with a negative impression (even if an answer has great content) is rambling. Paying attention to the length of your response is an important aspect of delivering answers that come across as confident, efficient, and to the point. Yes, it is important to make sure the content is there, but as a very general rule of thumb from the interviewer's perspective, it becomes difficult to follow a response fully if it starts going beyond 3 minutes.

As an example, record a response that runs for 3 or 4 minutes without stopping and play it back – you'll understand why brevity and content should be the keys to a good interview answer.

With advance preparation of talking points and STARE anecdotes, interview candidates should be able to confidently respond to a good number of open or behavioral questions in less than 2 minutes. So, why is brevity valued by interviewers?

Interviewers have limited time with each candidate and have a set list of questions they need to ask in order to compare everyone equally. If a candidate takes too long on one question, it increases the likelihood time will run out before all questions have been asked, which can affect an interviewer's ability to compare like for like. Additionally, responses that don't ramble mean all sides have the chance to be constantly involved in the conversation, rather than one side dominating. Quick verbal exchanges help a conversation to flow smoothly, giving participants a better chance to bond.

### **Two Minute Drill**

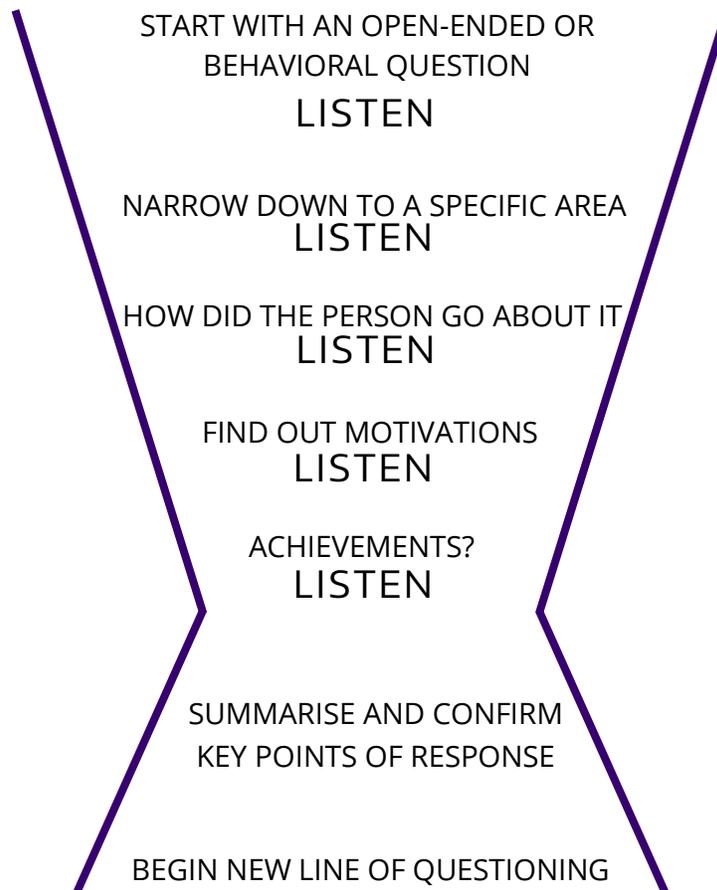
A lot of interviews start with a variant of the question, "Tell us about yourself." This open-ended question might require a two-minute answer. A two-minute answer gives you time explain who you are and where you're from, what schools you've attended, your work experience, leadership traits, why you're interested in the position and what attracted you to the industry in the first place. Don't feel pressured to spend an entire two minutes on the answer, but make sure your answer isn't abrupt or impersonal. Something you say might spark the interviewer's interest and lead to follow-up questions. Keep the content professional.

### **Less Than a Minute**

Closed or technical interview questions that have factual answers can usually be answered in less than a minute. If the interviewer asks you about your educational degrees, projects you've completed, work experience, certifications or specialized skills, you can often answer in less than 60 seconds. When providing factual details, short, fluent responses are best. Talk in complete sentences and answer the questions directly, without going on tangents that don't directly relate to the question.

## SECTION 4: QUESTION RESPONSE STRATEGIES

### Interviewer tool: The funnel



The key to preparing great interview responses is understanding what interviewers are looking for. Similar to the behavioral anchors table on page 16, candidates should remember that the funnel is a commonly used interviewer tool – if you can prepare answers based on following the above prompts, the conversation will move more efficiently and interviewers will be more satisfied with the answers given.

### Body Language/ demeanor

In addition to brevity and content that hits key interviewer response anchors, a critical component of a good interview response is the use of appropriate body language coupled with an enthusiastic, positive demeanor.

This starts right at the beginning of your interview with your entrance and introductions. A smile, a strong (but not vice-like) handshake, and an enthusiastic “it’s nice to meet you” for all involved is a solid foundation to start your interview from.

## SECTION 4: QUESTION RESPONSE STRATEGIES

### **Body Language/ demeanor (continued)**

Posture: When the interviewer offers you a seat at the start of the job interview, sit upright but not too stiffly in your chair. This indicates that you are comfortable and feeling confident. Hunching down in your chair gives the impression of nervousness and low self-esteem. A sloppy posture indicates a careless attitude and a lack of energy. Sitting on the edge of your chair can come across as being nervous and tense - relax and lean towards your interviewer. This gives the message that you are both interested and involved. Leaning back makes you appear too casual.

Mirror: It is important to pay attention to the posture of your interviewer. You can establish rapport by adopting a similar posture as the other person. This is called mirroring. If they have adopted a more formal posture do the same until you see that the interviewer has relaxed and become less formal. Don't attempt to copy every movement at all times - be subtle about it.

Hands: If you are unsure of what to do with your hands, rest them, loosely clasped in your lap or on the table in front of you. Control your hands by being aware of what you are doing with them. Having your hands above the neck, fiddling with your face or your hair, is unprofessional and conveys nervousness and anxiety. Keep your hands away from your face. Avoid folding your arms across your chest.

Eye contact: If the interviewer is talking and you want to show that you are actively listening, you need to instigate direct eye contact and maintain it. Avoid appearing as if you are staring aggressively by blinking at regular intervals and moving your head every now and then, such as giving a small nod. Remember that when delivering a response, you should make eye contact with all interviewers to make sure they feel included in your response.

Voice control: Speaking in a clear and controlled voice conveys confidence. Avoid speaking in a monotone by varying your tone and pitch, however don't overdo it and come across as overly excited or emotional. Avoid casual language and slang. Breathe and pause before answering a question, this gives you time to react in a considered way and it ensures that the interviewer has finished the question.

Remember to read your interviewers body language and maintain outward enthusiasm for being there to compete for the opportunity. Interviewers are subject to personal biases, and when faced with two equally qualified candidates, will choose the one that showed they were more enthusiastic about the prospect of working there.

## SECTION 5: THINKING ABOUT HOW INTERVIEWERS RANK

An interviewer's job during the selection process is simple: determine each candidate's qualifications for the position being recruited for and choose a top candidate. Trained interviewers will typically use a pre-determined rankings system rather than just discussing with colleagues because a ranking rubric can help interviewers to avoid generalized assumptions or stereotyping.

While it's difficult to know exactly what kind of ranking rubric interviewers are using, it's a good bet that they will want to compare to what extent each candidate addresses the basic and desired requirements listed in the job description, and how their previous skills and experience connect with the job duties that would be performed if hired. When preparing for an interview, try to predict what criteria candidates will be evaluated on and try to build answers that will rank you as high as possible in each category. A basic sample interview rubric to get started with:

### **INTERVIEW RUBRIC: PROGRAM ASSISTANT**

**3= Superior 2= Satisfactory 1 = Acceptable 0 = Missing/ Not Sure**

<b>Evaluation Criteria</b>	Candidate 1	Candidate 2	Candidate 3
Communications Skills			
Exp. Working to deadlines			
Exp. Proofreading			
Attention to detail			
Commitment to service			
Appreciation of diversity			
Ability to work with others			
Motivation			
Time Management/ Prioritization skills			
Computer Skills			
<b>TOTAL</b>			

## SECTION 6: PHONE SCREEN AND VIDEO INTERVIEW TIPS

While every situation is different, phone screen interviews are typically shorter than in-person interviews and are designed to try and confirm that a given candidate is qualified and worth considering for a full interview. Phone screen interviews are designed to yield basic information about multiple candidates and help interviewers make initial judgments about personality, temperament, communications style, salary expectations, and more. For phone screen interviews specifically:

**Tip No. 1: Be prepared to explain every job transition.** An interviewer will likely want you to take the through your résumé. Why did you make this or that choice of career direction? Why make that lateral move, or how did you get that promotion? And what about those short job stints or gaps between jobs? Be sure to have a copy of the same materials you submitted next to you and/or on your screen in front of you before the interview begins. It's also OK to have your response notes in front of you along with a copy of the position description.

**Tip No. 2: Be prepared to explain everything on your application.** Any bullet point on your application might pique the curiosity of your interviewer. Be prepared to give more detail, but don't take too much time on any one answer. After a few sentences, ask: "Is this what you were after, or would you like me to go in a different direction or provide greater detail?"

**Tip No. 3: Understand that the interview isn't just about questions and answers.** Your interviewer is likely trained to glean from your conversation your level of self-confidence, personality and ability to communicate effectively. Don't rush your answers and keep an even but enthusiastic tone in your voice. Showing some of your personality is important given the lack of visual cues available in a phone screen.

**Tip No. 4: Do your research and prepare solid questions to ask.** You will likely be given an opportunity to ask questions. Use that time to further demonstrate your enthusiasm, ask about particular aspects of the job that might be unclear, or ask about how you would be able to use X in your background to do Y. Never use this as an opportunity to ask about their salary, benefits or anything else they can do for you.

**Tip No. 5: Control your environment.** Always arrange to be in a quiet room free from distractions. Have the relevant materials easily readable in front of you and remember to pause before answering so you avoid rambling and keep your responses structured/ to the point.

## SECTION 6: PHONE SCREEN AND VIDEO INTERVIEW TIPS

A lot of these tips in this guide apply equally to video interviews, but some points that are unique to video interviews include:

**Tip No. 1:** Remember the dynamic of eye contact changes in a video interview. Where possible, in order to maintain eye contact you need to look at the camera, not at the interviewer on screen. This isn't intuitive because we naturally focus on what's on screen, but by doing this (periodically breaking your glance to check your notes or for visual cues on screen), you keep your eye contact away from their chest.



**Tip No. 2:** Try to make sure your face is close (but not too close) to the camera, that your voice can be clearly heard (test your volume levels), and that the background behind you is neutral/ free of decoration or pictures. They should be focused on you, not the furniture.

Being in a big room and having too much depth behind you can be distracting. It's best to position yourself a few feet from a wall, and remember to bring the camera up to eye level (or as close as possible) to avoid "looming" over the screen and the dreaded double chin. Consider using books or other props if you are using a camera that is integrated into a laptop.

**Tip No. 3:** Make sure that lighting is in front of you, not behind or above you. Natural lighting is best, and try to avoid having light sources too close to you – they will throw starker shadows.

**Tip No. 4:** Think solid/ bright colors where possible – patterns are less flattering on video because they can come across as fuzzy and distracting. Solid colors that pop on camera, go with a variety of outfits but don't overwhelm include royal blue and emerald green.



## SECTION 7: CONCLUSIONS & FURTHER RESOURCES

Whatever the situation or career field involved, preparing for an interview by thinking about the following is the most important aspect of “interviewing well”:

1. **Properly analyze the position description** to determine interviewer priorities; this includes the duties, requirements, and desired sections of the position description.
2. **Thoroughly research** the company AND the department to understand goals, mission, shared values, current projects, and where you would fit into the big picture.
3. Go through your application and **prepare talking points** for every aspect of your experience and your skillset – make sure these can be directly tied to the priorities listed in the job description.
4. **Prepare potential responses** for questions you think you will be asked, focusing on different response style for closed, open, situational, and behavioural interview questions
5. Take interviewer thought processes into account and use the **STARE** method for structuring responses to make sure you can deliver responses that “answer the question” and leave interviewers excited and comfortable about your candidacy. Always frame responses with the theme of what you can do for them, not what this opportunity would do for your career.
6. **Pay attention** to body language, voice tone, length of answers, and enthusiasm.
7. **Remember to properly plan interview logistics** – what you need to pay attention to will vary between in-person, phone screen, and video interviews.
8. **Ask substantive questions at the end of the interview** that connect you with your interviewers and demonstrate that you’re already thinking about what you can do to prepare for the role. Where appropriate, confirm the timeline for decisions.
9. **Remember to follow up and thank your interviewers** for their time to make sure you stay current in their minds.

Good luck! Remember, if you have been offered an interview it means that you are doing something right with your application materials. If they didn’t want to talk to you and weren’t interested, interviewers wouldn’t contact you! Every interview, successful or not, is a chance to become more comfortable with the system and analyse what answers work and what answers don’t. This experience is invaluable and will contribute to getting the job offer you want.

## SECTION 7: CONCLUSIONS & FURTHER RESOURCES

### **Sample/ Practice Interview Questions**

#### **Personal**

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Why did you choose to interview with our organization?
3. What can you offer us?
4. What do you consider to be your greatest strengths?
5. Can you name some weaknesses?
6. Define success. Failure.
7. Have you ever had any failures? What did you learn from them?
8. Of which three accomplishments are you most proud?
9. How does your college education or work experience relate to this job?
10. What motivates you most in a job?
11. Have you ever had difficulty getting along with a former professor/ supervisor/ co-worker and how did you handle it?
12. Have you ever spoken before a group of people? How large?
13. Why should we hire you rather than another candidate?
14. What do you know about our organization (products or services)?
15. Where do you want to be in five years? Ten years?

#### **Education**

16. Why did you choose your major?
17. Do you think you received a good education? In what ways?
18. In which campus activities did you participate?
19. Which classes in your major did you like the best? Least? Why?
20. If you were to start over, what would you change about your education?
21. What job-related skills have you developed?

#### **Experience**

22. What did you enjoy most about your last employment? Least?
23. Have you ever quit a job? Why?
24. Give an example of a situation in which you provided a solution to an employer.
25. Give an example of a time in which you worked under deadline pressure.
26. Have you ever done any volunteer work? What kind?
27. How do you think a former supervisor would describe your work?

#### **Career Goals**

28. Do you prefer to work under supervision or on your own?
29. Would you be successful working with a team?
30. Do you prefer large or small organizations? Why?
31. How do you feel about working in a structured environment?
32. Are you able to work on several assignments at once?
33. How do you feel about working overtime?

## SECTION 7: CONCLUSIONS & FURTHER RESOURCES

**UW Interview resources:** Includes behavioural interview tools, interviewing guidelines, and a collection of open-ended questions.

<http://www.washington.edu/admin/hr/roles/mgr/hire/interview-select/index.html>

<http://www.washington.edu/admin/hr/roles/mgr/hire/interview-select/behavioral.html>

**UW Phone Screen template:** Sample questions and rubric recommended for UW interviewers.

<http://www.washington.edu/admin/hr/roles/mgr/hire/interview-select/phonescreen.html>

**Behavioral Interviewing tips:**

<http://jobsearch.about.com/cs/interviews/a/behavioral.htm>

<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/behavioralinterviews/a/-top-behavioral-interview-questions.htm>

<https://www.theladders.com/career-advice/acing-behavioral-interview/>

**Case Interviewing Tips for Consulting Positions:**

<http://www.caseinterview.com/look-over-my-shoulder>

**UW Career Center Mock Interviews:**

<http://www.careers.uw.edu/students/mockinterviews>

**UW Career Center Streaming Interview Workshops:**

<http://www.careers.uw.edu/students/workshopsandclasses#successfulinterviews>



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