

# Interview Tips

Interviewing can be awkward for students and new grads because the conversation is different from our daily exchanges. So how can you set yourself apart in an interview?

Do your homework, prepare actual stories from your experience and above all, practice!

## Develop your strategy

What do you think interviewers will ask? Think about your interview from the following perspectives to help guide your preparation.

### Common questions:

These questions can be asked at any company for any position. Examples are included later in the document. Consider different ways the same question can be asked, such as "why should I hire you?" and "what makes you a unique candidate?"

### Field/industry specifics:

What skills or attributes are important in your career area? For example, social services may emphasize interpersonal skills or ethics, whereas engineering may focus more on project management and problem solving.

### Job posting:

This is your biggest clue to what employers might ask you, and it may overlap with the field or industry questions you've thought about. What skills did the employer list? Can you come up with examples of how you demonstrated those skills?

Once you have a topic or theme identified, brainstorm the different questions or prompts interviewers could ask. Here are some examples.

### Teamwork

- Tell me about a challenging time when you worked with a group.
- Tell me what role you typically take in a group or team.
- What was the most successful experience you had working with a team?



## Conflict

- Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with a client or customer.
- Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with a supervisor or professor.
- How do you handle conflict?

Create an agenda to guide your answers to ensure you can communicate key points about yourself. For example:

- Your relevant skills and experience
- What differentiates you from other candidates?
- Knowledge of the company/industry and how that fits with you and what you can offer

## Practice

- Use BigInterview to find sample questions and practice answering
- <https://mcmaster.biginterview.com/>

**Tip:** Make a list of skills noted in the job posting and identify your most relevant example(s) to prove you have that skill. This will help you identify examples to share if they ask about the skill. You can also find ways to integrate some of these within your answers (i.e., to showcase strengths and experiences).

## Example:

| What they want:             | What you have (skills, experience, knowledge):                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Group facilitation skills   | At X company, initiated, created and facilitated 3 workshops for groups of 5-100 participants                                                        |
| Commitment to public health | Long term volunteer for health cause in the Hamilton community.<br><br>Co-ordinated fundraising effort resulting in raising \$200 for x organization |

## Common Questions



Tell us about your experience and interest in the position.

(An alternative to tell me about yourself).

- Briefly describe your experience, skills, accomplishments, goals and personal qualities. Tell a story to help them understand the context.
- Talk about your interest in the company and how you plan on making a positive contribution.
- Discuss your educational qualifications; elaborate on the classes you took that are relevant to the position.
- Relate specific experiences and how they have prepared you for this opportunity.

What would your current manager say is your biggest area(s) of improvement?

(An alternative to asking about weaknesses, but is asking for the same information).

- Be specific, and honest.
- Avoid giving an area for improvement that is a primary function of the role.
- Avoid negative language (weakness vs. working to improve).
- Talk about the efforts you have already made to improve in this area.

What are your goals in the next 5 years?

- Be able to articulate a plan for your future.
- May include a career/education path, the environment you anticipate being in, roles you would like to hold and contributions you would like to make.
- Important to include how this opportunity/job aligns in with your plan.

### Other Commonly Asked Questions to consider:

- Describe your ideal job.
- Take me through your decision making process.
- Why did you choose your major?
- What do you do when you are not working/studying?
- What is your definition of success?
- What do you know about our company?
- Why should we hire you for this role?

### Behavioural Questions

These questions are based on the assumption that your past behaviour is a good predictor of how you will act in the future. Your interviewer will ask questions to determine if you have the



skills/traits that are considered vital to the organization's success. Your knowledge of the organization and job will help you predict what qualities/characteristics are most valuable. Behavioural based questions are likely to begin with "Tell me about a time when..." or "Give an example of ..."

How do you answer a behavioural question?

- Decide ahead of time which experiences are the most relevant (refer to your research of organization and job); share your stories within the context of the opportunity.
- Share experiences that involve positive outcomes; or demonstrate lessons learned when sharing challenging circumstances.
- Draw on experiences from school, work, extra-curricular involvement, volunteer, study-abroad, internships and field placements, etc.

Use the STAR formula as a framework for your stories or examples:

Situation (outline the situation)

Task (briefly outline the problem/obstacle/task that you were faced with)

Action (describe the specific steps that you took to approach the situation)

Result (what was the outcome and what did you learn)

### Sample question: Give me proof of your persuasiveness

Sample Answer: During my summer internship I was assigned the task of conducting a benchmarking study for all of the communication expenditures for a major utility (SITUATION). I had to get the consensus of employees in several different departments. Unfortunately, they were cautious about following the lead of a summer intern (TASK). I had to schedule individual meetings with every employer and persuade each one that what I was doing would be ultimately beneficial to the department and to the company (ACTION). After a challenging month I finally got everyone's cooperation, the project went smoothly, and I met a very tight deadline. In addition, I was able to prove my communication skills within a professional environment – very different from a classroom (RESULT).

Tell me about a time when you were put in a situation and had to get up to speed quickly.

- Define the situation and illustrate obstacles or challenges that were overcome.
- Demonstrate your perseverance, initiative and measures taken to exceed expectations.



Describe a time when a project you were working on did not go according to plan?

- Focus on the process of how you handled the negative (or less than desirable) outcome, how you made the best of the circumstances, or resolved the situation.
- Assume responsibility for the situation without making excuses or blaming others.
- Share the lessons learned.

Tell me about an experience where you excelled as an individual contributor.

- Discuss the situation and define the scope of the task.
- Highlight the challenges encountered and the results or impact your actions had.

Give me an example of a successful project you were a part of.

- Highlight the team's objective and your individual role.
- Demonstrate your initiative; provide evidence of your contributions.

Tell me about your least favourite manager or professor?

- Be cautious when answering this question; choose an example that is not too negative.
- Be brief in providing your answer and focus on what you learned; include the parts of the experience and/or relationship that benefited you.
- Use "I" statements rather than making it about the person; remain tactful and respectful.

### Other Behavioural Based Questions to consider:

- Tell me about the most difficult customer service experience that you have ever had to handle.
- Describe the system you use for keeping track of multiple projects. How do you track your progress so that you can meet deadlines? How do you stay focused?
- Give me an example of something you've done in previous jobs or school that demonstrates your willingness to work hard.
- Tell me about a recent experience that you would describe as a real learning experience.
- Tell me about a time when you anticipated potential problems and developed preventative measures.



## Situational Questions

Interviewers may also ask hypothetical questions (“What would you do...”), and usually pertain to their work environment. You can supplement your answer with concrete examples of how you have handled similar situations in the past, if applicable. Examples include:

- What would you do if your shift was ending and you were not finished a project that your manager was expecting before you leave?
- How would you handle a customer that came in to complain about a product?
- What would you do if you saw your co-worker stealing money?

## Stress Questions

Interviewers commonly pose ‘stress’ questions to assess how candidates react when put under pressure. More specifically, they allow the interviewer to gain further clarity about how you think and behave when facing uncertainty. Questions you may face:

- If you were a novel, what would the summary on the back of the book say?
- What would be your instant reaction if you realized you had lost something important and could not get it back?
- If you could be any kitchen appliance, what would you be?
- Why is your GPA not higher?
- Why were you not more involved in extra-curricular activities while at university?

To prepare for these kinds of questions:

- Be aware that these questions may come your way in the middle of a Q&A interview.
- Remain professional, positive and focus on highlighting your skills.
- Do not take the questions personally, make excuses or become defensive.
- Often there may not be a correct answer; therefore, the logic and assumptions you present to support your responses are very important.
- “Stress” may come in the form of the interviewer’s manner rather than a specific question. If an interviewer comes across as unfriendly, maintain a professional and friendly demeanor yourself.

## In Person Interview Tips

Bring the following to your interview:

- Several copies of your resume, a notepad and pen (ask permission to jot down a few notes while the interviewer provides details of the opportunity), a typed list of professional references.



## Virtual Interview Tips

- Find out if your interview will be on the phone, Skype, Zoom, or another virtual platform.
- Some companies may send you a link to record your interview.
- If it is a video interview, find out how many chances you have to answer each question and if it is a timed response.
- Take down the contact information – this will come in handy should any technology glitches occur during your interview.
- Be yourself. Remember to smile. This will project a positive tone in your voice.
- Speak slowly and enunciate clearly. Take a couple of seconds before you respond in case there is a lag in the technology.
- Be prepared for technology glitches and don't panic.

## Environment

- Choose a quiet space where you will not be interrupted.
- Ensure your background is professional.
- Centre your head in the screen and practice using the technology to ensure it works and that the volume and picture quality is good.

## Preparation

- Research the company and review the posting like you would for an in person interview.
- Dress as you would for an in-person interview – from top to bottom!
- Have a copy of your resume and key organization/industry facts within reach for easy reference.
- Have a pen and paper handy for note taking (e.g. recording next steps). Limit typing as this can be distracting for the interviewer.
- Practice talking into the camera, not to your screen and, ensure the camera is at eye level so you are not looking up or down.
- Check your lighting to ensure it is not too bright or too dark.
- Turn off your phone/tv and ensure you minimize all distractions. If you are on a computer, turn off notifications for email.

## General Tips

### Practice

- Listen carefully and take your time! It is okay to take a moment to collect your thoughts.
- Keep a glass of water handy. Do not chew gum or eat throughout the interview.



- Use BigInterview to find sample question and practice answering:  
<https://mcmaster.biginterview.com/>

## Delivery

Think about someone who has compelling delivery; what attracts you to them as they speak? It may include the following behaviours or traits:

| Verbal Factors                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Body Language                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice how you will greet people, express thanks and say good-bye</li> <li>• Pace yourself</li> <li>• Include pitch variations in your answers</li> <li>• Choose words/phrases you are comfortable with</li> <li>• Be enthusiastic</li> </ul> | <p>Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make eye contact with your interviewer</li> <li>• Sit up tall and lean slightly forward to show interest</li> <li>• Smile</li> <li>• Dress professionally</li> <li>• Carry your belongings in your left hand so you do not have to shuffle to shake hands</li> <li>• Wait to be seated until directed to do so</li> </ul> |
| <p>Avoid:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of slang</li> <li>• Use of fillers such as 'like', 'you know' and 'umm'</li> <li>• Repetitive words or phrases</li> </ul>                                                                                                                | <p>Avoid:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hunched posture</li> <li>• Chewing gum</li> <li>• Folding arms</li> <li>• Twiddling with paper/pens</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

## End of Interview Questions

Usually at the end of an interview, you'll be asked if you have any questions. The questions you ask can be as important as the answers you have provided up until this point. If you don't ask something, it can be taken as a sign of disinterest.

Have a list of prepared questions. If you have done your homework (research of organization and industry), questions will suggest themselves to you!

## Do ask:





### Job/Organization/Industry Related Questions:

- If the responsibilities of the job are not clear, ask for clarification.
- How will success in the role be measured?
- How has a current event/market conditions impacted the department/organization?
- What is the workplace culture like in this company?
- What does a typical day look like?

### Process Related Questions:

- Be sure you know what the next steps are after the interview.
- Are they going to contact you? Would they prefer you to follow up with them?

### Don't ask:

- About salary or benefits (vacation, holidays, sick days, etc.) in the first interview; wait until an offer is presented.
- About information you should already have obtained through your research into the job and the organization (e.g. the organization's mission, the basic tasks associated with the job).
- Personal questions about the interviewer (if you happened to find the interviewer's personal social media, keep this to yourself).
- Condescending questions (questions that begin with 'why' can be viewed as demanding).

## Accommodation and Disclosure

Disclosing a disability is a personal choice. Factors to consider when deciding include: impact to your work, if you require accommodations, or for health and safety. If you require an accommodation for the interview itself, you should consider disclosing at the time of application or when you are called to set up an interview. You do not need to disclose diagnosis at any time.

## Remember to thank the interviewer

Sending a thank you letter or email is part of interview etiquette. Thank you letters should be brief, personalized and sent within 24 hours. In your letter you should:

- Express your appreciation for the opportunity to interview



- Articulate your continued interest and enthusiasm for the position
- Recap your strengths
- Mention something interesting from your meeting (a new product or system you discussed)



## Tips for Managing Stress and Anxiety During Interviews

Courtesy of Dr. Nathan Cooper, Psy. D., Psychologist

Preparing for interviews can be a daunting process, especially if you get so nervous that you forget some things you practiced. Spending time to learn how to cope with nervousness, stress and/or anxiety during interviews is also an important part of your interview prep process.

The more proactive you are ahead of time, the more you will strengthen your coping mechanism during the interview. Invest some time in preparing your mind well before you have an interview.

Below are some tips we hope you find helpful.

### Before your interview

- Use visualization techniques to imagine a successful interview. Sit still, close your eyes, breathe, and create a picture in your mind of you conducting an interview in a way that makes you feel good.
- Write positive affirmations on your interview notes to focus on your strengths and capabilities, and to evoke feelings of confidence and calm.
- Practice mindful breathing, counting in and out to focus on your body. Try the 4-7-8 method (Breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds and breathe out for 8 seconds. Repeat).

### While waiting for your interview

- Practice breathing techniques to help calm your heart rate and clear your mind.
- Use imagery – visualize yourself in the position that you are interviewing.
- Meditation can help clear your mind and help you focus.
- Be aware of where you hold your stress (stomach, shoulders, jaw) and try to relax those areas.

### During your interview

- Don't rush yourself through an answer or start answering before understanding the question.
- Ask for a moment to think about the question before answering.
- Jot down keywords from the question to help you process the question.



- Plant feet on the ground to stabilize yourself, and sit up straight to allow for proper breathing.
- Concentrate on your breathing and remember to smile!

### After your interview

- Reflect on the interview with a growth mindset. Consider what you can learn from the experience.
- Reflect on the process – what strategies helped? What aspects of the interview made you nervous?
- Which strategies did you use to manage your stress and anxiety? Did they work? What could you do differently?
- Try a new strategy for reducing stress if the one you attempted didn't work for you. Sometimes it is trial and error.
- Book an appointment to debrief with a career and employment professional.
- Keep practicing your mindfulness strategies; like a muscle, it takes time to get stronger.

### Be proactive in your interview preparation and check these additional resources:

- [wellness.mcmaster.ca/topics/mindfulness-and-relaxation/](https://wellness.mcmaster.ca/topics/mindfulness-and-relaxation/)

