The Job Interview

You should feel positive about being invited for an interview because it means that you have already passed the first hurdle and your application so far has captured the employer’s interest. The interview is an opportunity to convince the employer that you are able to do the job you have applied for and that you want to do it. You need to impress the interviewer by showing that you have thought about what you can offer them and that you have researched the organisation and the role.

How can I prepare for an interview?

Careful preparation is crucial to success. So here are some tips:

- **Review your application** and know what you can offer the employer in terms of your relevant skills and previous experience. This will help with the “Why should we employ you?” type question.

- **Read the person specification and job description**, then think of examples you can use from your own experience to match the employer’s criteria. This is good preparation for competency type questions when employers ask for an example of a time when you have used a specific competency. See our Presenting your Skills to an Employer – Be guided by the STARS leaflet for more help with structuring your answers available from: [www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/leaflets/index.htm](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/leaflets/index.htm).

- **Understand the role you are applying for** and what you find attractive about it. This will involve researching the job role in more detail and identifying specific responsibilities which appeal to you and why. You will then be able to answer the “Why are you interested in the job?” type question. The Prospects website [https://www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles](https://www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles) has excellent occupational profiles on most graduate level jobs.
• **Research the organisation** and look at different sections of their website. What do they do? Who are their clients? What are their values and ethics? Who are their competitors? What new developments are taking place? Think carefully about how your own aspirations and values match theirs. This will prepare you for the “Why do you want to work for us?” type question.

• **Research the sector**: What are the key issues facing the sector? Most employers like to know that you have been reading relevant resources such as journals, newspapers, websites, or using social media and business networking sites such as LinkedIn. Professional institutes and associations also have very useful websites for researching their specific sector.

• **Plan your journey**: Leave extra time for cancelled trains/buses or traffic jams. Know the name of the person you should ask for before you get to the reception desk. Make sure you have their contact details with you in case you need to let them know that you are going to be late.

**What should I wear?**

An interview is a formal occasion so dressing smartly is safer than dressing casually. For men this usually means wearing a suit and tie. For women it could mean wearing a suit or a smart top with trousers or a skirt, or a smart dress. You would probably dress differently for a job in the fashion industry to a job in a firm of solicitor’s but the general rule is always to be smarter than you would if you were just going to work.

**What interview formats can I expect?**

Knowing what to expect beforehand is important for your self-confidence. Normally an employer will let you know in advance what the format of the interview will be, but if you don’t know it is quite acceptable to request this information.

• **Face to face** – This type of interview could be just a single one to one interview or it could be several such interviews following each other with different key people in the organisation. Often there is a panel interview with three or four people, where each member of the panel asks questions in turn. Try to maintain eye contact with the person who is asking you the question and you can always quickly scan the faces of the others from time-to-time.
- **Telephone interview** – This is generally a first interview which is followed by another face to face interview or an assessment centre day. It is usually at a pre-arranged time and is structured in the same way as a face-to-face interview. You should make sure that you take the call in a quiet room with your CV/application in front of you and a pen and paper to write notes. You may also want to have some bullet points of facts and examples that you want to use during the interview. If you can’t hear a question, don’t be afraid to ask the interviewer to repeat it. Make sure you speak clearly and not too quickly. Sometimes international students find telephone interviews more difficult, but you can always book on to one of our Interview Skills Workshops available from [www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/whatson/index.htm](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/whatson/index.htm), or book a practice interview in the Employability and Careers Centre and watch the AGCAS video The Telephone Interview available from [www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/videos/](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/videos/), which includes an example of a telephone interview. Other tips to help self-confidence are - to smile whilst talking, to stand up and to dress formally during the interview.

- **Skype/live video interviews** – Make sure that you have your equipment already set up beforehand so you are ready for the call. You may wish to arrange a test call particularly if it’s an international call. Avoid speaking over anyone by making sure that the person has finished speaking before you answer their question. Once you’ve set up your webcam position, consider turning off the box on the top right which shows your own image as this can become distracting and lead you to glancing off in a different direction. It is better to focus on looking at the camera rather than the main screen. You can find more useful tips on: [www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/1252/job-interviews-by-skype/](http://www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/1252/job-interviews-by-skype/) [https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interview-types/323749-expert-performance-tips-for-skype-and-video-interviews](https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interview-types/323749-expert-performance-tips-for-skype-and-video-interviews) [www.allaboutcareers.com/careers-advice/interview-tips](http://www.allaboutcareers.com/careers-advice/interview-tips).

- **Video-taped interviews** – These are becoming more popular with employers. Candidates are all asked the same set of questions and employers can review and rate the interviews online. You will be sent a link where you access automated questions online and are given a time limit to respond to each question. You would need to dress appropriately as you would for a face-to-face interview. It is also worth practising so that you get used to answering automated
questions without seeing a human being, you will be given a set time limit to answer each question. Be aware of your surroundings, including the lighting and make sure you are in a quiet place with no interruptions. Look at the camera and not at other parts of the screen or down at the desk or table. Make sure you prepare as carefully as you would for a face-to-face interview. For more information see:

http://theundercoverrecruiter.com/video-interview/
https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interview-types/323741-how-graduate-recruiters-use-video-interviews

Interview techniques on the day

- At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer may offer to shake your hand. Try to reply with a firm, but not bone-crushing handshake. It’s not a grip contest but a limp handshake may give the impression that you are not interested or unassertive.
- Take a seat when invited to do so. Try to sit up in a comfortable but alert position without folding your legs or arms as this can be seen as defensive. Try not to fidget.
- Maintaining good eye contact with the interviewer is important and the occasional smile will make you appear friendly.
- Employers are looking for enthusiasm and this is often conveyed by body language and posture as well as by good positive answers.

What type of interview questions should I expect?

There are different types of questions such as:

- **Warm up questions** – these usually occur at the beginning of the interview around subjects that you are familiar with. For example “Why did you choose to study a degree in psychology?” Another general opening question could be “Tell me about yourself.” The employer does not want your life history, but a brief and relevant snapshot about you, which is delivered in a clear, confident and concise way.
• **Competency based questions** – your answers will give employers an indicator of how you have reacted and dealt with different situations. You need to research the competencies for the role you have applied for, using the job description and person specification. You will be asked to give an example of when you have used the competency for example: “Describe a time when you had a difficult problem and what you did to resolve the issue.” Your example can be from any aspect of your life including - academic, work experience, or social. Practise structuring your answer using the STAR technique. See our leaflet Presenting your Skills to an Employer – Be guided by the STARS available from [www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/leaflets/index.htm](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/leaflets/index.htm).

  **S** = Situation  
  **T** = Task (your objective)  
  **A** = Action (how you did it)  
  **R** = Result

• **Strength based questions** – This approach concentrates on what you are good at and what you enjoy doing and some employers such as Aviva, Standard, BAE Systems, Ernst and Young, Unilever, Microsoft and Barclays International, now use this form of interviewing. Strength interviewing has its foundations in positive psychology. The theory is that by recognising your strengths you will be able to perform better in your role and enjoy it more. Employers are using strength based approaches because they feel candidates are over rehearsed in competency interviews. Strengths based interviews are more difficult to prepare for, other than taking time out to reflect on your strengths beforehand. Questions are asked at a quick pace and your tone of voice and body language will be assessed to sense your enthusiasm. Questions might include – “When are you at your best?” “What things motivate you?” or “What would your best friend say are your greatest strengths?” For more information on these types of interviews refer to: [www.assessmentday.co.uk/strengths-based.htm](http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/strengths-based.htm).

• **Technical /Specialist questions** – These are questions which will test your knowledge, interest and commitment to the job and the industry for which you are applying. Sometimes you may be given a technical interview as well as a more general interview. The possibilities for different questions are endless so you may
not be able to revise for them all but it is always important to attempt an answer so that the interviewer can see how your mind works. Examples include: “Describe the physical processes on X-ray interaction with tissue.” Or “Tell me your views on current legislative standards affecting the Tax profession.” Or “How do you think we can attract more customers to buy X?” These questions may be used to test your commercial awareness, so make sure that you have read up about current trends in the sector and have thought about the company’s clients and ways of meeting their needs. You can increase your commercial awareness by regularly reading the business pages of newspaper websites or looking at the business section of the BBC News website www.bbc.co.uk/news/business/.

- **Creative/crazy questions** – This could be something like “If you were an animal what animal would you be?” Or “What makes you get up in the morning?” These questions may seem silly, but the interviewer is trying to find out more about your personality and motivation, so try to think what is behind the question and make a considered response.

- **Difficult questions** – Often candidates dread questions like “Can you tell me where you feel your skills are weakest?” This is because they are afraid of saying something which will be detrimental. You don’t want to give an answer, which will make the employer wary of you such as “I tend to miss deadlines on a regular basis” or “I tend to be a perfectionist.” Neither do you want to give a weakness which is core to the job. The question is really aimed at assessing your self-awareness and your commitment to personal development so focus on a real weakness but talk about how you overcame this. Always aim to finish on a positive note even when talking about a negative experience which you have faced.

### What about asking them questions?

There is nearly always an opportunity to ask them questions at the end of the interview. There may be genuine questions which have occurred to you during the process and this is your chance to ask them. Alternatively you can generate some potential questions before you go such as asking about training opportunities, or about the culture of the organisation, or about how they see the company developing...
in the next few years. You could even ask the interviewer a question about their background. Be careful not to ask about anything which is included in the information you have been given or could easily have found on their website. Try not to ask about salary or annual leave, because it can appear as if these are your main priorities, so either research these beforehand or ask after you have been offered the job.

What happens after the interview?

At the end of the interview always make sure you thank the interviewer for their time and say that you look forward to hearing from them. Take your cue from the interviewer in terms of shaking hands and remember to give them a parting smile. You may wish to send them a follow up email to thank them again for seeing you and to reiterate how interested you are in the job. It is a good idea to make a note of the questions that you were asked for future reference.

If you are not successful don’t forget that the experience will have been good practice for future interviews and that success often lies just beyond failure. You can ask the employer for feedback by email or by phone and say that you would like to learn from the experience in order to do better next time. You may be pleasantly surprised at the positive feedback you receive and this will help your confidence for next time.

Further help and resources

- Watch the Interview videos available on the Employability & Careers Centre website at www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/videos/.
- Attend workshops on interview techniques- see the What’s On? section available from www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/whatson/index.htm section of our website.
- The Glassdoor website www.glassdoor.co.uk/index.htm is a careers community where past and current employees share information about companies including interview questions.
- The AllAboutCareers website www.allaboutcareers.com/careers-advice/interview-tips has useful tips on various different types of interviews.
• Interview skills advice and sample questions: https://www.how2become.com/resources/interview-skills/

• The Assessment Day website www.assessmentday.co.uk has useful advice on interviews and other Assessment Centre exercises.

• Targetjobs has useful information about companies and the types of interviews they conduct https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interview-types

• Graduate-jobs has information about employers, which could be useful for preparing for interviews www.graduate-jobs.com/gjs/js101.jsp

• For information about Assessment Centres see our leaflet Assessment Centres available from www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/leaflets/index.htm and a series of Assessment Centre videos available from www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/videos/.

When you hear that you have an interview you may wish to book a mock interview with a careers adviser. Call in or phone the Employability & Careers Centre to book a time Tel: 01483 689001.