

Employability & Careers Centre

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The Job Interview

Congratulations on securing an interview! The employer likes what they've seen on your application and would like to find out more. The interview is your opportunity to convince the employer that you're able to do the job and that you want it. In this tip-sheet we focus on preparing for the interview, what format the interview might take, techniques to use on the day and how to tackle those difficult questions.

Before the 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**, what are the key skills and qualities the role needs? 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 leaflet **Presenting your Skills to an Employer – [Be guided by the STARS](#)** for more help with structuring your STAR stories.
- **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> 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.

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- **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.
- **List some questions you think you might be asked:** You can use Websites such as [Glass Door](#) and [WikiJob](#) to research questions others have been asked and use some questions from the list at the end of this leaflet, then create example answers and practise saying them out loud.
- **Plan your journey:** Where is the interview taking place and how will you get there? 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 with a jacket. Consider your appearance from head to foot to make sure you are neat and tidy, including polished shoes. 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

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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](#), watch the AGCAS video [The Telephone Interview](#) which includes an example of a telephone interview and/or book a mock interview with a careers adviser. 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/

<https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interview-types/323749-expert-performance-tips-for-skype-and-video-interviews>

www.allaboutcareers.com/careers-advice/interview-tips.

Recorded and Digital Video interviews –These are becoming increasingly popular with employers who receive a high volume of applications.

You will be sent a link where you access automated questions and are given a time limit in which to answer them. You will have approximately 15-30 seconds to consider your answer and 60-100 seconds to answer. All candidates are asked the same set of questions. Dress and act as smartly as you would for a face to face interview. You will be assessed on your body language and tone of voice as well as the content of your answers. Remember to keep looking at the camera. Consider your surroundings and lighting and choose a quiet space where you won't be interrupted.

For more information including a light-hearted look at how to tackle digital interviews see:

<https://www.hirevue.com/blog/build-blog/how-to-prepare-for-your-hirevue-digital-interview/>

<http://theundercoverrecruiter.com/video-interview/>

<https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interview-types/323741-how-graduate-recruiters-use-video-interviews>

www.businessinsider.com/10-ways-to-not-screw-up-your-video-interview-2012-9?IR=T.

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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.

Types of interview questions

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](#)**

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.

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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 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.

- **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, or what they like about their job. 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.

Potential Interview Questions

The following list of questions can help you with your preparation.

Warm Up Questions

- *Tell me about yourself.*
- *What are your key strengths?*
- *What are your weaknesses?*
- *Tell me something about yourself that I wouldn't know from reading your application.*
- *What have you gained from your previous experiences that would make you useful to us?*
- *What about yourself do you want to improve?*

Team Work and Interpersonal Skills

- *What would your team mates say you needed to improve about yourself?*
- *Give me a specific example of something you did that helped build enthusiasm in others.*
- *Give an example of when you had to work with someone who was difficult to get along with. Why was this person difficult? How did you handle them?*
- *What qualities do you have that make you an effective team member? Can you give me examples?*
- *Can you tell me about a situation where building strong relationships with people was important in achieving your goals.*
- *Can you describe a situation where you have had to resolve a conflict within a team?*

Prioritising and Organising

- *Recall a time when you had to complete a complex project. What steps did you take to prepare for and finish the project? How happy were you with the outcome? What would you have done differently if given the chance?*
- *Describe a situation in which a number of things to be done at the same time. How did you handle it? What was the result?*
- *Give me an example of when you set yourself a goal that took a lot of organisation on your part to achieve it.*
- *Can you tell me about a situation in which you anticipated a problem early on that saved a lot of work later?*
- *Tell me about a situation in which your plans for something went wrong. Why did it happen? What did you do? What could you have done to prevent it?*
- *Describe a decision you have made in which there were a number of variables to take into account.*

Problem Solving, Analysis and Creativity

- *Describe a difficult problem you had to deal with. How did you approach it?*
- *Can you give me an example of a situation in which you have had to analyse complex information in order to make a decision? How did you approach it?*
- *Tell me about a situation in which you had to perform background research before solving a problem. How did you use the research? How did you ensure you hadn't missed something important?*
- *Describe a situation in which you had to change the way you approached a problem in order to solve it.*
- *Describe a time when you came up with a creative solution to a problem.*

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Decision Making and Judgement

- *Can you give me an example of a complex decision you have had to make and how you went about it?*
- *What is the worst decision you ever made? Why did you make it? What would you do differently now if you had to make the same decision again?*
- *Can you give me an example of a time when you found it hard to make a decision about something? Why was it difficult? What did you do?*
- *Describe a time when you had to make a very quick decision and it went wrong. What did you learn?*
- *If you could go back and change a decision you made in the past, what would it be and why?*
- *Can you tell me about a time when you have had to make a decision with incomplete information?*

Drive and Determination

- *Describe a task that you completed that you didn't enjoy. How did you motivate yourself?*
- *Give an example of a situation in which you had to demonstrate determination in order to succeed.*
- *Tell me about a situation in which you have had to cope with various setbacks.*
- *Tell me about something you gave up on. What else could you have done to succeed?*
- *What sort of tasks do you normally put off doing whenever you can?*
- *Give me an example of when you delivered more than was expected of you.*

Adaptability and Initiative

- *Describe a situation where you had to change your approach to a task in order to complete it.*
- *Can you give an example of a situation when you have had to adapt to an unexpected change?*
- *Can you give me an example of any tasks or projects you started on your own?*
- *Tell me about when you completed a task without all the resources that you would have ideally needed.*
- *Tell me about a time when you improved something using your own initiative.*
- *Tell me about a time when you have used your free time to gain new skills or knowledge in order to be better at something.*

Commercial Awareness and Customer Focus

- *Tell me about a recent business news story that you found interesting. Why?*
- *Can you give me an example of when you have done more than your duty in order to provide a good service to someone?*
- *What attributes do you have that would instil client confidence? Tell me how you have used them.*
- *What do you think will be the most important issues facing this sector in the next five years?*
- *Can you give me an example of when you have sought to understand someone else's job in order to do your job more effectively?*
- *Are there things that our competitors are doing that we should be worried about?*

Leadership

- *Describe a situation in which you took responsibility for achieving something.*
- *What skills have you developed that will make you a good leader?*
- *Describe a time when you had to change your leadership style.*

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- *How would you describe your leadership style? Can you give me an example of it in practice?*
- *Tell me about a time when you have spotted and utilised other people's talents.*
- *Tell me about a time when you had to give feedback to someone on their performance in a task.*

Professionalism and Diligence

- *What does professionalism mean to you? Can you give me an example of when you put it into practice?*
- *Can you think of an example that demonstrates your commitment to integrity and honesty?*
- *Tell me about something you have done in which it was important to pay attention to detail over a long period. How did you maintain your accuracy?*
- *Can you describe a task which required a great deal of concentration?*
- *Give me an example of when you have spoken out against something which you didn't think was right.*
- *Can you describe a task in which you have had to follow very stringent procedures?*

Critical Thinking and Brain Teasers

- *What is the best shape for a manhole cover? Why?*
- *Approximately, how many baby's nappies were used in the UK last year?*
- *How many hairs are there on a dog?*
- *How many table tennis balls will fit into a 747 aeroplane?*
- *What is the angle between the hands on a watch when the time is 3:45?*
- *How many different ways can you think of to find a needle in a haystack?*

Further Help and Resources

- Watch the **Interview** videos available on the Employability & Careers Centre website at www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/videos/. You need to use Internet Explorer not Chrome
- 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>

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- 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 68900**