

# Job Interview Guide

- **Sample Questions**
- **Interview Dining Etiquette**
- **Last-Minute Tips**
- **Dress to Impress Advice**
- **Phone and Skype Interview Advice**

SUNY Cobleskill

## Student Success Center

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## The Job Interview

Winning in the job interview is the single most important aspect of the job search. In fact, it is often the best interviewee who gets the job offer over seemingly more qualified candidates.

- This handout makes a number of suggestions for your preparation. **Do not stop here**; read everything you see regarding the job interview and prepare extensively in order to become the best candidate an interviewer will see for the job you want.

## The Three Things You Should Know Before You Start Your Interview

The better prepared you are before your interview, the better you will do. Waiting until the night before the interview is not recommended! You should know something about these three topics before you start your interview:

### 1. Know yourself:

- What are your strengths/weaknesses?
- Why do you want to work in this field?
- What are your goals? What do you want to be doing in two years and in five years?
- Why should this company hire you?

### 2. Know the company/organization:

- Why do you want to work for this company? Have a reason why.
- Are you familiar with their products or services they provide?

### 3. Know the job:

- What are the job requirements? If possible, ask for a detailed job description.
- How do you meet the requirements listed in the job description?
- What skills/experience do you possess that will help you succeed at this job?

## Be Ready to Sell Yourself

You are the product and the organization is your prospect. It is okay to be confident in your abilities/skills and share them with the employer.

- If you don't sell yourself – who will?



***As part of your interview preparation, prepare a summary of the major points you want the interviewer to know about you. These points can help you organize your answers to various questions, keep the interview focused and enable you to provide an oral summary of your qualifications at the end of the interview.***

- The second part of your research has to do with the organizations with which you have scheduled interviews. Interviewers are not looking for candidates interested in any job, but rather those interested in working specifically for their organization.

## Sources to Use in Your Research

- Ask the interviewer/contact person to forward any appropriate materials in advance of the interview.
- Search for information on the company's website, or through a general search engine.
- Talk with people in the organization or who know about the organization.
- Look for articles written about the organization in daily, weekly and monthly publications.

### ✓ What You Should Know Before The Interview

- Size of Organization/Industry
- Number of Plants/Stores
- Potential Growth
- Training Program
- Annual Sales
- Career Path in Your Field
- Product Line/Services
- Location of Home Office
- Industry Competition
- Recent News Items
- Organizational Structure
- Geographic Locations
- Key Organization Personnel
- Name of Interviewer(s)
- Salary Range Offered

## First Impressions

No interviewee is given a second chance to make a first impression. Planning your image begins well in advance of the personal interview and includes all correspondence, resumes, telephone conversations and informal visits. If not done well, you will have much more to prove at that first face-to-face encounter.

Your interview image must be impeccable. Every detail about your appearance, behavior and attitude are included—such assessments begin even before you open your mouth to speak. The interviewer will be concerned about your “fit” with the organization, whether your image is appropriate, whether you are likable and how confident and comfortable you are with yourself; sometimes even more important than having extensive work experience is how you project your ability to work well with others, and your openness to learning and sharing new ideas.

### Appearance

- Dress professionally, feel good about the way you look
  - Determine the typical clothing style for that particular job, and dress **one step above** that for the interview (i.e., business-casual at work, means a nice suit at the interview). When in doubt, it is safer to be overdressed rather than underdressed.
- Carry a portfolio/folder with pad, pen and extra copy of your resume and references
- Avoid carrying extra items such as a purse or tote bag (but remember your keys!)—carry only what you really need for that interview. (If meeting with Human Resources, you may need your driver license, social security card, etc.)
- More “Dress to Impress” information is available on pages 14 & 15

### Behavior

- Arrive early (10 minutes prior to interview)
- Arrive ALONE to the interview
- Carry yourself proudly. Stand up straight and avoid crossing your arms
- Use a firm handshake

- Maintain good eye contact
- Use a controlled voice and reasonable volume
- Smile
- **Avoid:**
  - Smoking or chewing gum
  - Fiddling, scratching, twitching
  - Excessive attention to office environment, windows...
  - Uncontrolled laughter

### Attitude

- Project confidence and enthusiasm
- Show sincerity, commitment and interest in the job

## Face-to-Face

The variety of interview formats and questions is endless. Every interviewer has their favorite questions and a different rationale for conducting the interview in a specified way. Preparing, then, is a matter of knowing yourself well, learning to think on your feet and feeling comfortable meeting and talking with new people.

**Practice** is important, whether it is rehearsing answers to typical questions, role-playing with friends or participating in mock interviews with counselors, advisors, friends or family; **you may make an appointment for a mock interview at the Student Success Center.** Tape recorders and video equipment can enhance your preparation and should be used whenever possible.

- There are several different types of interviews: screening interviews; telephone interviews; one-on-one interviews; and committee interviews.
- An interview could be 45-minutes long or day-long where a meal is included.
- If possible, ask for a copy of the agenda ahead of time.
- They could include typical questions, situational questions, or require a brief presentation. Again, practice and researching yourself and the company is the best way to prepare yourself for any interview situation.
- Every interview and interviewer is different, but the questions on the following pages will help you to organize your thoughts and better articulate the skills you have to offer.

## E-Portfolios

E-Portfolios are an effective tool to show the employer examples of your work and help you stand out in the candidate pool. Please refer to the College Central Network handout on how to set-up and create an effective e-portfolio. Some items to include are:

Special projects  
Thank you letters  
Writing samples

Awards or certificates  
Newspaper articles  
Photos & videos to showcase work examples or projects

## Frequently Asked Questions

Write some examples that you would give if asked the following questions. Remember to keep your answers **JOB RELATED** and **BE POSITIVE!**

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- Why do you want to work for this company?
- What do you know about the company?
- What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- What interested you about the products or services the company offers?
- Why do you think you would like this job?
- What specific goals, other than those related to your occupation, have you established for yourself for the next 10 years?
- What do you see yourself doing five years from now?
- What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?
- Why did you choose the career for which you are preparing?
- Which is more important to you--the money or the type of job?
- How would you describe yourself?
- How do you think a friend or professor who knows you well would describe you?
- What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
- How has your college experience prepared you for a career?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our company?
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- What college subjects did you like best? Least? Why?
- Do you think your grades are a good indication of your academic achievement?
- What part-time or summer jobs have interested you the most?
- What criteria are you using to evaluate prospective employers?
- Are you willing to travel?
- Will you relocate? Does relocation bother you?
- How would you describe the ideal job for you?
- If you were hiring a graduate for this position, what qualities would you look for?
- What have you learned from your mistakes?
- Why should I hire you?



## Interview Etiquette

A good way to blow an interview is to do something that offends the interviewer. Here are some tips to follow when interviewing:

- **Be on time!** You should enter the office 10 minutes before the interview is scheduled to start. Make sure you have the interviewer's contact information and your cell phone. If something happens that will prevent you from being on time, call and let them know your situation. This should only be done as a last resort. Give yourself extra time to get there on time.
- **Turn off your cell phone.**
- **Don't carry extra baggage.** Travel light. Only take what you absolutely need into the interview: a portfolio with extra copies of your resume, list of references, a list of questions, pen and business cards. Things to leave in the car: water bottle, purse, hat, gloves, sunglasses, food, gum, etc.
- **Be polite to everyone you meet.** Remember to use "please" and "thank you". Always refer to people by their last name unless you are told to use their first name.
- When you enter the interview room, **don't sit down until asked to do so.**
- **Listen!** A good interview is well balanced. **Follow the 50/50 rule:** You should listen and observe as much as you talk.
- **Remain positive!** Sometimes it is tempting to do so, but never bad mouth a current/past employer or company.
- **Never ask about the salary or benefits.** Wait until the interviewer brings-up the topic.
- **Don't be too familiar with the interviewer.** Even though you hit it off with the employer and you think you've made a connection, remember to maintain a professional persona.
- **Remain neutral.** There are some topics you should try to avoid: politics, religion, sports, gossip. If these topics are brought-up, try to remain neutral. The employer may be testing you to see if you know how to appropriately handle these types of situations.
- If you are taken to a meal, **demonstrate proper dining etiquette!** If you know ahead of time you will be eating with the interviewer, brush-up on dining etiquette rules. This manual has a section on it. When in doubt, follow the interviewer's lead.
- **Always thank the interviewer for his/her time.**
- **Don't forget to follow-up.** Always write a thank you note to the interviewer(s). Hopefully you remembered to ask for business cards at the end of the interview so you have the person's full name, title and address.

## The 20 Most Difficult Interview Questions

Some interview questions are tougher than others, especially when you don't have a "perfect" work history. There may be unexplained time gaps or negative work experiences you may feel uncomfortable about explaining. **Remember:** Always stay positive and relate your answers to the job for which you are applying for. Talk about what you are doing/have done to improve yourself. **Present a personal weakness as a professional strength** (i.e., "I'm a perfectionist" or "I'm a real stickler for punctuality").

**How would you answer the following questions?**

- Why did you get fired?
- Why is your salary so low?
- Tell me about yourself.
- Why do you want to leave your current position?
- What are your greatest weaknesses?
- Tell me about your most important achievements.
- Why have you made so many job changes?
- What mistakes did you make on your last job?
- How did you get along with your boss?
- Why were your grades so low?
- What features of your previous jobs have you disliked?

**If you have questions about how to handle a specific item in your work or personal history, consult the Student Success Center.**

## Questions to Ask the Interviewer(s)

In addition to questions the interviewer will ask, you will have the opportunity to inquire about aspects of the organization or position that concern you.

**Prepare questions in advance**, but only questions that genuinely interest you. Don't ask questions about issues already covered during the interview or in the organization's materials, and **do not ask about salary in the initial interview**. However, if the employer raises the issue of salary, then you are free to pursue it. As a general rule, wait until the second interview (if these are held) or until you are offered the job to discuss and/or negotiate salary.

Keep the list in your portfolio/folder to refer to. Finally, **LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN** and **build questions based on topics raised by the interviewer**.

## Questions to Ask the Interviewer(s), Continued

**Training:**

- Can you tell me more about your system of training?
- Can you describe the process whereby I am assigned to a particular “job” in your organization or firm?
- How many people will be in the training program with me? Will we all work independently, or will there be some opportunity for group interaction.
- What are some typical first-year assignments?

**Supervision:**

- How closely will I be supervised either in the training program (if applicable) or in a particular position? Will I have more than one supervisor?
- To what extent will I be working independently or as a team member?

**Atmosphere of the Organization:**

- How would you describe the work atmosphere? What is unique about it?
- What do you enjoy about working here?

**Criteria for Hiring:**

- **What are the qualities you are looking for in a candidate? This is a great question!** Listen very closely to the interviewer’s response and see if there are any skills/characteristics you possess that haven’t been previously discussed. Now is the time to reiterate you have that skill:

“I am happy to hear you are looking for someone with strong interpersonal skills. I believe that is one of my strong points. This is another reason I believe I can do this job well.”

**Substantive Questions:**

- Are there any immediate plans for expansion in your organization, new office, new market areas or new fields? In what direction are you moving?
- How are you responding to the problem of (latest trend, competition, etc.)?

**Other Questions:**

- What is the history of this position?
- Do you anticipate having second interviews?
- What kind of professional development opportunities exist?
- When do you hope to make a decision regarding this position?





## COMMONLY MADE TABLE MANNERS MISTAKES

- Putting your napkin on your lap when you sit down, rather than waiting until everyone at the table has been seated.
- Blowing on soup or stirring it, rather than allowing it to cool naturally.
- Chewing your ice cubes.
- Beginning to eat when your food has been served to you, rather than waiting to begin until everyone at the table has been served.
- Talking with food in your mouth.
- Chewing with your mouth open.
- Eating a larger than bite size piece of food.
- Blowing your nose at the table.
- Applying lipstick (or other make-up) or brushing your hair at the table.
- Pushing your plate away from you and stacking dishes when you have completed your meal, rather than leaving them in the same place as they were served to you.
- Don't ask for a "doggy" bag.

When in doubt, watch what the employer does and follow their lead. Also, don't forget this is still an interview. Don't let your guard down and become too familiar with the employer. You may want to eat something before going so that you are not overly hungry; you may be doing a lot of talking during this dinner and won't have time to eat.

## HOW TO EAT DIFFICULT FOODS

**Bread, Rolls, Muffins, Danish** – Break a small piece of bread or roll and butter it. If muffins or Danish are hot, cut into halves or quarters and butter, then eat a bite at a time.

**Chicken** – It is not appropriate to eat chicken with your fingers. Chicken should be eaten with a knife and fork.

**Spaghetti and Other Pastas** – Spaghetti and other pastas should always be eaten by twirling the strands around the fork and securing them with the assistance of a spoon. Never cut pasta.

**Soup** – Use a soup spoon away from you rather than toward you. When eating vegetables or meats in soup, use the spoon towards you. It is appropriate for oyster crackers to be placed in soup. Other crackers – Saltine or Ritz should be eaten with soup.

**Corn-on-the-Cob** – Eat corn-on-the-cob "typewriter style." That means buttering and salting a few rows at a time, and nibbling across. Then continue to eat from the same side you left off.

**French Fries** – Use a fork to both cut and eat them. Place ketchup on side of plate.

**Peas and Other "Hyperactive" Vegetables** – When you get down to the last few bites, you may use your knife to assist in placing them on your fork. Before you use the fork to eat, place knife on plate.

**Berries** – Use a spoon for most. If the berry is large, use a fork and knife. If berry has a hull, hold the hull and bite.

**Chops** – Use knife and fork. If you can't get at all the meat, you must leave it on the bone.

**Garnishes** – These are edible finger foods.

<b>Last Minute Tips</b>
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- Every employer or graduate school is looking for the best candidates—they want to feel that you can be a wonder worker; you have skills that will benefit their needs, and that you have a sense of where you are going and why.
- Realize that the interviewer's impression of you is based upon yourself!
- Bring a **typed** copy of the names, titles, mailing addresses, phones numbers and email addresses of your references to the interview.
- Be positive! You are getting an interview because they are very interested in you.
- Be sure to provide JOB RELATED responses to questions, rather than inappropriate personal information.
- Remember to be pleasant to secretaries at all times! Ask them their names, and say hello and good-bye. They are important people!
- Be sincere and direct. **Act naturally, not rehearsed.** Be your best self. Remember that the interviewer empathizes with you and is actually a little nervous meeting a new person, too!
- Listen attentively, speak clearly; be open about yourself, but be careful not to give too much personal information.
- Stay cool. Think before you speak. Be brief but informative.
- Display your knowledge of the company and its goals.
- Keep an interested posture! Sit back in the chair—at ease, but attentively! (Demonstrate physically that you are the right person for the job.)
- Be aware of the interviewer's body language. Tapping on a table and/or looking at the clock implies that you are spending too much time answering a question.
- Establish and maintain eye contact. If you have a choice of seats, sit with your back to a window so that you don't get distracted.
- Practice saying self-descriptive, assertive and concise statements about yourself—use action verbs.
- Be prepared with carefully considered answers for questions about past changes, performance and motivation. Answer only what is asked. If you are confused by a question, politely ask the interviewer to repeat the question or ask them to explain what he/she means.
- If you are sincerely interested in the job, let the interviewer know.
- Send a very nice thank you letter to the interviewer(s). Consider making a follow-up call in a few days to emphasize your interest.

<b>Dress for Success</b>
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- Your appearance makes a HUGE impact on the employer's impression of you.
- What you wear can affect your confidence!
  - Wear clothes that are comfortable and fit properly. You don't want your clothes to be a distraction (sleeves or pants that are too long or short, shoes that have high heels or are uncomfortable, etc.)
  - The night before the interview spot check to make sure there are no wrinkles, stains or lint.
    - When choosing your outfit, choose garments that don't wrinkle easily. Something with polyester in it is a good choice. Avoid linen, rayon and cotton.
- Have an emergency kit in your car (lint roller, spare pantyhose, shoe cleaner, umbrella, wrinkle release spray, etc.)
- Be subtle!!! Less is more. Avoid overdoing anything; make-up, jewelry, accessories, and cologne/perfume. The goal is to have the interviewer focus on you and what you are saying, not what you're wearing.
- Appropriate colors are: black, navy blue, grey, and white.
- Cover any tattoos and remove all body piercings.
- Hair should be neat and professional.
- It is better to overdress than under dress. Once you are hired, find out what the dress code is.

### Tips for Women

- The best choices are a skirted suit, conservative dress or pantsuit.
  - Make sure it fits properly.
  - Skirts should be knee length or longer.
- Don't wear blouses with low necklines or that are too tight.
- Arms should be covered.
- Always wear pantyhose.
- Carry a briefcase or portfolio. Don't carry your purse.
- Wear comfortable, conservative (no open toes), low heeled shoes.
- Remove all piercings except single earrings.
- Limit accessories.
- One ring per hand.
- Earrings should be posts.
- Jewelry and accessories should draw attention to your face.

### Tips for Men

- It is preferred for men to wear a suit (gray, black or navy blue).
- Either a white or light blue (when appropriate) shirt is best.
  - Sleeves should always be long (to the wrist). It is not appropriate to fold them up.
- Don't forget the tie! It should be color coordinated. Avoid wild patterns.
- Hair should be neat and trimmed. Facial hair should be limited (don't start growing a beard shortly before the interview). Any facial hair should be neatly trimmed.
- Shoes should be comfortable, clean, polished and lace-up.
- Don't wear white socks. Always wear dark socks with dress pants.
- Earrings and necklaces should be removed. Cover any tattoos
- Use very little cologne.

## Dressing Professionally on a Tight Budget

- Start assembling your outfit now. **DON'T** wait until the night before the interview!
  - By shopping early, you can buy your outfit a piece at a time, for example, invest in a good jacket and build the outfit from there.
  - Commit to buying a piece each month.
  - Look for sales or check clearance racks.
- It may be necessary to invest \$100 - \$200 for a classic, well made interview outfit.
- A good conservative outfit can be used for all your interviews.
- In the long run, it is a good investment.
- Good places to shop:
  - JCPenny's
  - Sears
  - Macy's
  - The Men's Wearhouse
  - Label Shopper



When shopping for an interview outfit, **ask for help!** The sales people are a valuable resource. They will be able to suggest appropriate colors, styles and fabrics.

## Three Types of Interviews

Individual

The interview is conducted by one person.

-Maintain appropriate eye contact. Don't stare, but don't look down too often.

### Group

More than one person conducts the interview.

- Shake hands with everyone.
- It is important to make good eye contact with everyone present.
- Speak loud enough so everyone can hear you.
- Ask interviewers for their business cards. This will help you when you write your thank you notes.

### Behavioral Interview

The interviewer is trying to gain insight into you, your skills and work ethic by seeing how you handled situations in the past. The premise is: **The most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar situation.**

The questions are developed to see if you have the specific skills needed for the job. When preparing for the interview, **review the job description** and look for **required and preferred skills**. Make a list of situations where you have had to use these skills to solve a problem in the past. Break it down into three categories:

1. The situation.
2. The action that was taken to resolve the problem.
3. The outcome or result of the action.

It is a good idea to have at least 10 examples ready. Write them out in bullet form. You can use examples from many different experiences:

- Past jobs
- Past internships
- Classes
- Major past accomplishments (running a marathon, being an exchange student, driving cross country, entering a competition, etc...)
- Club activities
- Community service
- Team involvements

Practice how you will answer questions. Use your bulleted sheet to refer to if you get stuck. Avoid reading off the sheet during the interview, but have it handy to refer to if you go blank.

## Examples of Behavioral Interview Questions

Using the types of questions below, employers will be looking for answers that demonstrate skills in: Communication, Time Management, Leadership, Organization, Flexibility, Decision Making, Coping, Listening, Problem Solving, Teamwork, Assertiveness, etc.

- Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
- Think about a time when you felt overwhelmed or stressed out. How did you handle it?
- Describe a significant or creative project that you completed.
- Give an example of a time in which you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.
- Give me an example of an important goal which you had set in the past and tell me about your success in reaching it.
- Tell me about a time in which you had to use your written communication skills in order to get an important point across.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Describe an instance when you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.
- Give me an example about a conflict with a fellow employee and how you handled it.
- Tell me about your last experience with an unhappy customer. What did you do?
- What has been the most difficult situation you have had to deal with? How did you handle it?

**Remember!!! Be prepared. Know yourself and your skills. Have specific examples of how you have used your skills in the past.**



**Phone Interviews**

The biggest mistake people make with phone interviews is they don't prepare for it as they do for a face-to-face interview. Employers use phone interviews to narrow the candidate pool to the top 3-5. Don't take it for granted.

- Treat a phone interview as if the person is sitting in the room with you. Do your research and have your materials laid-out in front of you.
- Make sure you remove all distractions. Turn-off the TV, radio and make sure no one will interrupt you during the interview.
- Stand-up. Your voice will come across as stronger and more confident.
- You need to rely on your voice to convince the person on the other end that you are excited about this opportunity. Smile – they will hear it in your voice.

## Skype Interviews

- Double check your technology. Practice with a friend to make sure you can be heard clearly and your webcam is working.
  - Check the lighting – is it flattering?
- Do a background check of the room. What will the interviewer see in back of you? Also keep outside noise to a minimum.
- Have your notes (resume, job description, summary of qualifications, etc.) close-by – out of sight.
- Dress for success – dress as if the person is interviewing you in person.
- Don't move around too much – limit hand gestures. Due to the time delay, this can cause a blurry distraction.

## For More Information

### Excellent Internet Resources:

- [www.Cobleskill.edu/ssc](http://www.Cobleskill.edu/ssc) : The Student Success Center website has many useful job search resources
  - College Central Network (found on the Student Success Center website): Offers job search advice through podcasts, articles and webinars
- Purple Briefcase is available on the SSC's website. It has hundreds of short videos related to job search advice
- <http://www.agcareers.com/info.cfm?task=narticles>



**Good  
Luck!**

## Interview Check List

Before you show up for your interview, there are some things you should do to help prepare for it. The more prepared you are, the more confident you will be and the better you will do!

- \_\_\_ Review the job description and know the requirements. On a piece of paper, list the job requirements on the left hand side. On the right hand side, list how you meet those requirements. Take this with you to the interview and view it if you have breaks.
  - \_\_\_ Think about what your strengths and weaknesses are. Think about what actions you are taking to address and improve your weaknesses.
  - \_\_\_ Find out as much as you can about the company you are interviewing with:
    - Look at their web site.
    - Talk to people who work there.
    - Ask the person who is setting-up the interview to send you any appropriate materials.
  - \_\_\_ Think about what you are wearing ahead of time. Refer to the Interviewing Guide for suggestions.
    - Make sure your outfit is free of wrinkles and stains. Polish your shoes.
    - BE SUBTLE. Less is more (less make-up, cologne, piercings, tattoos...)  
You want to be remembered for what you said, not what you wore!
  - \_\_\_ Put together an emergency kit and put it in your car:
    - Extra pair of panty hose (if applicable)
    - Lint brush/roller and wrinkle release
    - Umbrella
    - Breath mints
    - Cell phone as well as the company contact person's phone number
  - \_\_\_ Make sure you have directions and know where you are going.
  - \_\_\_ Allow plenty of time to get there. You should arrive at the office 10-15 minutes early. You can arrive to the building earlier and wait in the parking lot.
  - \_\_\_ Take a padfolio/folder with:
    - Copies of your resume and list of references.
    - A list of questions.
    - The list of job requirements and how you meet them.
  - \_\_\_ If possible, get a copy of the interview agenda ahead of time (you can ask the person who is setting up the interview). It is a good idea to know the following:
    - How many interviews will you be having that day?
    - Will you be meeting with more than one person?
    - Approximately how long will the interview last?
- The type and length of the interview can vary a great deal. You may have a half hour interview with one person or six. You could have several interviews with different people and be at the office for several hours. You also may be taken to lunch or dinner.
- It is important for you to have a general idea of the length of the interview and who you will be meeting with. This will help you be better prepared.
- \_\_\_ Most important of all – RELAX!!! Remember to make good eye contact, have a good handshake and SMILE!