How to Prepare for a Job Interview

Lecture notes · Getting Hired · Module 1: Interviews

Learning objectives

O1	Research an employer and match your experience to the job.
O2	Answer common interview questions, including 'Tell me about yourself'.
O3	Use the STAR method to give clear, convincing examples.
O4	Handle body language, your own questions and the follow-up.

Prerequisites: None. Having a real or imagined job advertisement to practise with helps.

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1. What an interview is really testing

An interview answers three questions for the employer: can you do the job, will you do the job well, and will you work well with the people already there. Every answer you give should help them answer at least one of those questions with a confident 'yes'.

The employer has already read your CV, so the interview is not a memory test of your history. It is a chance to show evidence: examples, results and the way you think and communicate.

Preparation matters more than talent. Most strong candidates are not naturally confident; they have simply practised their key stories out loud until they come out clearly.

2. Researching the employer and the role

Start with the job description. Mark every requirement (skills, experience, qualities) and every responsibility. These are the questions you will be asked, in disguise.

Then research the organisation: what it sells or provides, who its customers are, its size and locations, its stated values, recent news, and its competitors. Use the official website, its social media, annual reports or news articles, and reviews from employees, while remembering that reviews are opinions.

Finally, research the people where possible: the interviewer's role (from the invitation or a professional networking site) helps you predict what they will care about. A team leader cares about daily work; a director cares about results and strategy.

The evidence table is the most useful preparation exercise. Left column: each requirement. Right column: a real example that proves it. Gaps in the right column tell you where to find a new example, or how to explain how you would learn quickly.

3. Practical preparation

Remove every avoidable uncertainty: date, time and time zone, address or video link, the interviewer's name, the format (one-to-one, panel, test, presentation) and how long it will last.

In person: plan the journey and arrive about ten minutes early. Online: test the link, camera, microphone and lighting the day before, use a quiet room and a neutral background, and keep a phone number to call if the connection fails.

Bring or have ready: copies of your CV, the job description, a pen and a few notes, and the questions you want to ask. Notes are acceptable to glance at; reading full answers is not.

Dress: neat, and usually a little more formal than what people wear in that workplace every day. When unsure, ask the recruiter; this is a normal question.

4. Common questions and what they are really asking

'Tell me about yourself' asks for a short professional summary of about a minute, not a life story. Use present, past, future: what you do now, what you have done that is relevant, and why you want this role.

'Why do you want this job?' and 'Why us?' test your research and motivation. Connect something specific about the organisation to something specific about you.

'What are your strengths?' needs a strength that matters for this job, plus a short example as evidence.

'What is your greatest weakness?' tests self-awareness. Choose a real but non-essential weakness, and show what you are doing to improve it. Avoid fake weaknesses such as 'I work too hard'.

'Why are you leaving your current job?' needs a positive, forward-looking reason. Never criticise a previous employer.

Behavioural questions ('Tell me about a time when...') ask for evidence of what you actually did. Answer them with STAR.

5. The STAR method

Situation: the context, in one or two sentences. Task: what you were responsible for, or the problem to solve. Action: what YOU did, step by step: this is the longest part. Result: what happened, with numbers where possible, and what you learned.

Say 'I', not 'we', when describing actions. The interviewer is hiring you, not your former team.

Keep each STAR answer to about one to two minutes. Prepare five or six stories that together cover the main requirements; one good story can often be adapted to answer several different questions.

A strong result is specific ('waiting times fell from 9 to 4 minutes in six weeks') rather than vague ('things improved'). If a story ended badly, add what you learned and what you would do differently.

6. Body language, your questions and the follow-up

Body language: sit upright, lean slightly forward, keep your hands visible and relaxed, and make natural eye contact (on video, look at the camera when you speak). Pause before answering difficult questions; a short silence looks thoughtful, not weak.

Your own questions show interest and help you decide whether you want the job. Good topics: what success looks like in the first months, the team, training and development, and the next steps in the process. Questions about salary and benefits are important, but in many places it is best to wait until the employer raises them, or until you have an offer.

Follow-up: within about a day, send a short thank-you email of three or four sentences: thank the interviewer, mention one point from the conversation that made you more interested, and briefly restate why you are a good fit. Then note down the questions you were asked and how you answered, so your next interview is easier.

Other interview formats

Competency-based interviews: every question targets a listed competency (for example teamwork or problem solving). Your evidence table is your preparation.

Situational questions ('What would you do if...?'): describe the steps you would take and why, and support them with a similar real example if you have one.

Panel interviews: address your answer to the person who asked, then include the others with your eye contact. Note each panel member's name and role.

Case or practical tasks: think aloud, state your assumptions, structure the problem before solving it, and check your answer. Interviewers are often assessing the process more than the final answer.

Telephone screening: keep your evidence table and the job description in front of you, stand up to sound more energetic, and smile: it can be heard.

Difficult moments and how to handle them

You do not know the answer: say so honestly, explain how you would find out, or give the closest related example.

Your mind goes blank: ask to have the question repeated, or take a moment ('That's a good question; let me think for a second').

A question seems inappropriate or unrelated to the job (for example about family plans): you may politely redirect to your ability to do the job. Rules differ by country; this course does not give legal advice.

Gaps in your CV: give a short, honest explanation and move on to what you learned or did during the gap and why you are ready now.

Preparation checklist

Two weeks or more before: collect the job description, build the evidence table, choose five or six STAR stories.

One week before: research the organisation and interviewer, prepare your 'tell me about yourself' answer, and write your questions.

Two days before: practise out loud with a friend or a recording; time your answers; prepare clothes and documents.

The day before: confirm time, place or link; test technology; plan the journey; sleep.

After: thank-you message within a day; write down the questions; ask for feedback if you are not selected.

Worked examples

Worked example 1: building an evidence table

An advertisement for a junior administrator asks for: accurate data entry, good phone manner, use of spreadsheets, and the ability to manage several tasks. Build the evidence table for a candidate who worked in a pharmacy and organised a sports club's fixtures.

Step 1. List each requirement in the left column, in the advertisement's own words.

Step 2. Accurate data entry: entered prescriptions into the pharmacy system; no errors found in a quarterly audit.

Step 3. Good phone manner: handled about 40 customer calls a day, including complaints.

Step 4. Spreadsheets: built the sports club's fixture spreadsheet for 12 teams, with automatic clash checking.

Step 5. Managing several tasks: served customers, took calls and restocked shelves during busy Saturday shifts.

Step 6. Every requirement now has a story; the strongest (the spreadsheet) becomes a STAR answer.

Worked example 2: improving 'Tell me about yourself'

Weak answer: 'Well, I grew up in a small town, I liked football at school, then I did a business course and some different jobs, and now I'm looking for something new.' Rewrite it for a customer service team leader role.

Step 1. Present: 'I'm a senior customer adviser at a phone retailer, where I handle escalated complaints and train new staff.'

Step 2. Past: 'Over four years I've moved from the shop floor to leading a team of three on busy shifts, and I helped reduce waiting times by changing how we route queries.'

Step 3. Future: 'I'm applying because your company is growing its support team and values fast, friendly service, which is exactly what I want to lead.'

Step 4. The rewrite is about one minute long, relevant to the job, and ends by linking to the role.

Worked example 3: a complete STAR answer

Question: 'Tell me about a time you dealt with a difficult customer.'

Step 1. Situation: 'A customer came into the shop very angry because his new phone had been charged twice.'

Step 2. Task: 'I was the senior adviser on duty, so it was my job to calm the situation and fix the billing.'

Step 3. Action: 'I listened without interrupting, repeated the problem back so he knew I understood, apologised, checked the account, found the duplicate charge, and arranged an immediate refund with our billing team while he waited.'

Step 4. Result: 'The refund was confirmed in 20 minutes; he thanked me, and he later gave us a five-star review. I now use the same listen-repeat-resolve approach with every complaint.'

Step 5. Check: the action is the longest part, uses 'I', and the result is specific.

Summary

• Interviews test evidence, motivation and fit: preparation, not talent, produces strong answers.

• Build an evidence table: each requirement matched to a real example.

• 'Tell me about yourself': present, past, future, in about a minute.

• Answer behavioural questions with STAR, saying 'I' and ending with a measurable result.

• Prepare your own questions, and follow up with a short, specific thank-you message.

References

References: KN-GEN-CAR-C01-M01-T01-L01
university career-service guidance on the STAR method (Situation, Task, Action, Result), e.g. University of Reading "STAR technique" (structure; describe what YOU did rather than 'we'); UW-Madison SuccessWorks "The STAR Method"; Case Western Reserve University Career Center "STAR Strategy Examples". General interview preparation practice as taught by university career services. Cultural norms (handshakes, eye contact, formality, salary discussion) vary by country and employer: the lesson says so and advises checking local norms; it gives no legal advice on discriminatory questions beyond 'you may redirect politely'. Characters and dialogue are fictional (Ms Okafor, hiring manager; Priya, candidate). Two versions of the same candidate show ineffective (A) and effective (B) behaviour.
All references were consulted for accuracy; no text or figures from them are reproduced in the video. Verify links before publication.
Characters and examples are fictional. Interview customs differ by country, industry and employer: check local norms, and ask the recruiter when unsure.