

FAQs About Being Interviewed for a Job

What concerns you about being interviewed? One of Dr. Luebke's summer interns' assignments is to answer that question. She responds to them individually and offers her advice, drawn from 35 years of interviewing job candidates, being interviewed for jobs herself and talking with media professionals. This summer, for the first time, she compiled student concerns and her comments. She would be happy to hear from you (bfluebke@mail.uri.edu), either with other concerns or additional advice for students.

Most-expressed concerns

- **blinking out on tough questions**

Train yourself to respond to ALL questions the same way: taking a few seconds to think about what you want to say before you begin talking. If you do this for ALL questions, you won't feel as if you are "going blank" when a tough one comes along. And if you truly are stumped by a question, be honest. You can say something like, "Wow, that is a really good question that I haven't thought about. Give me a few seconds" In buying a bit of time for yourself, you are more likely to be able to begin to answer.

- **saying "like" or "um" too much.**

Once is too much. These are speech patterns all too common in your generation. They can be eliminated with practice and attention. I think the key is deciding, "I'm not going to talk like this in any situation." Then be conscious in each and every conversation of talking in complete sentences without the "likes" and "ums" to connect thoughts. It is ok to have brief pauses; no need to fear short silences.

- **talking too much, coming on too strong**

Practice. Practice. Practice. And not just for an interview. Work on correcting bad habits in all situations, such as speaking with family and friends. In other words, be conscious of talking just for the sake of talking, being "afraid" of silences and yakking to fill them. Listen to questions and work to answer them, no more no less. Train yourself to respond to ALL questions the same way: taking a few seconds to think about what you want to say before you begin talking. If you do this for ALL questions, you will be concentrating on the answer you want to give and pulling your thoughts together.

- **being too quiet or nervous**

I dare say that everyone is nervous when they are being interviewed. After all, we put ourselves in that position because it is a step we need to take to get something we want or may want (a particular job). So we have something riding on the outcome of the interview. That makes even experienced professionals nervous, even if they may not admit it.

Usually, nervousness goes away, or at least diminishes, as the interview goes along. And a skilled interviewer will put someone at ease quickly. If you have a nervous habit, e.g. you tap your foot, work to get over it. At the least, in that case, you might find a way to sit so that you cannot tap your foot.

As for being too quiet, that should not happen. A good interview is a good conversation; it should be enjoyable. It should challenge you, and teach you things. It requires you to be a good listener and a good answerer. It's to be too quiet in that circumstance.

- **blinking on interview questions**

I suggest that you practice the habit of taking a few seconds to compose yourself before answering all questions -- those that you are very ready for and those that give you pause. A few seconds to think can make all the difference in the world. And practice interviews can do nothing but help. Then, if you really do not have an answer, be honest. You can always preface it with something like, "I've not been asked that question before and at the moment I am not sure what I would say."

- **talking too fast**

If you are a fast talker, you must practice slowing down. And do it in all situations, not just interviews. Do it on the phone, with your family, with your friends. It will take work, but you can change.

- **not setting myself apart from the rest of the applicants**

Sometimes you won't because sometimes you won't be the best applicant, or the applicant with skills that are different from others. So it goes. We seldom know who else is being considered for a job we are interviewing for. All we can control is our interview, so concentrate on doing the best interview you can and the rest will take care of itself.

- **What is a good asking amount for salary when starting a job?**

This one is impossible to answer, because it depends on the company, the job, the geography. You can do some research to have an idea, for an example, of what an entry-level reporter in South Dakota is earning. Then at least you know, when the offer comes, if the salary being offered is reasonable. Remember, too, that benefits are important. All things considered, if you have two offers, one higher salary but no benefits and one lower salary but with health insurance, perhaps some kind of 401-K match, life insurance . . . take the job with benefits. Most important, you seldom will find yourself asking for a salary; rather, the job offer will come with an offered salary. I don't recommend trying to negotiate much on entry-level, but if you think a couple thou more will lead you to say yes, what the heck, go ahead and ask.

Other concerns, many shared by at least two interns

- **While I have rapidly been accumulating experience, what I still do not have is the experience of a full-time reporter. Part-time is great, but if asked about the pressures of meeting deadlines or my ability to work under the gun, my answer may seem a bit contrived, as it probably will be without the necessary full-time reporter experience.**

You have done a good job in providing your own answer. That is exactly what you would want to say. But you can also point to the experiences you DO have in meeting tight deadlines, e.g. on a recent timesheet you cited a 7-midnight bloc where you went to a council meeting and then immediately wrote the story for a morning deadline. That shows you can do it under pressure!

- **introduction and small-talk to get to know the interviewer**

Take your cue from your interviewer. If they jump right in, so be it. If they chat, listen to what they are talking about and respond accordingly. The key is in the listening. Also, if you spend time in a waiting room or conference room, look around. There might be visual clues as to interests, or something to ask about. Also, you may have picked up on things from your research on the company.

- **looking good**

Get to any interview early enough so you have time for a stop at the men's (women's) room, where I assume there will be a mirror. So you can check that your shirt (blouse) is tucked in, buttons buttoned, tie tight and straight, tags are still not on your new jacket (that happened recently with one of my students!), hair is combed, etc.

- **arriving properly dressed**

When in doubt, ask a "professional" woman. But in general, I'd say business dress does the trick: dress and jacket, suit with skirt, suit with pants. Shoes with heels that are not too high. No flashy jewelry. No cleavage. Hair clean and neat. You don't have to look like you are going to a funeral, but you shouldn't be dressed for a night of clubbing, either.

- **giving a firm handshake**

Practice. Practice. Practice.

- **making sure it is a good fit for employer as well as employee (how will I know?)**

Going in, you should have some idea about this, having done your homework about the company et al. And you certainly should get a sense of "fit" during the interview. Did folks make you feel comfortable? Did you like what you heard about the company? About the job? About those who would be your co-workers? Did you get to tour the place, and if so, what were your impressions? Would you feel comfortable there? In the end, you need to trust your "gut" sometimes. And once you are on the job, it will take some time for both you and employer to KNOW if the hire was a good one.

- **being well-spoken**

Practice. Practice. Practice. And not just for an interview. Work on correcting bad habits in all situations, including speaking with family and friends.

- **career track (is this a job that will allow me to continue through my career path or is this a side step?) / will there be room for advancement**

I think these are related. Examine the job closely. Before you even apply, give some thought to these concerns. Don't apply for a job out of desperation. And when in an interview, ask about room to grow etc. You want this information, but it also demonstrates to a potential employer that you are career-minded, not just job-minded.

- **being asked questions that are too personal**

This is difficult to respond to because I do not know what questions you would consider to be too personal. But in general I would counsel that if a question makes you uncomfortable, you should say so.

- **having an interview outside of an office; I don't have much experience with dinner etiquette**

With luck, you have good table manners and know the basics: putting your napkin in your lap, how to use utensils correctly, not talking with food in mouth, etc. Beyond that, don't worry too much. Take your cues from those around you. Order modestly and food that is not messy to eat (no ribs, for example). Don't try new things (not the time for your first Oysters Rockefeller, for example). And don't drink alcohol (even if others are).

- **Do I take notes during the interview?**

At most, minimally. If you are trying to write things down, you won't be making eye contact with your interviewer. And you probably will not be listening as well as you should because you'll be concentrating on writing. But sometimes having an open notebook (small) in one's lap provides a bit of relaxing or comfort. Jot down key words, either of something important re: the job or to remind you of a question you want to ask.

- **answering the "what are your weaknesses" question**

Be prepared. Before every interview, you should think about the questions that might be asked and plan your answers. I don't mean memorize answers, because then you will sound forced in the actual interview. So this question is no different. Especially as a beginner, you can at least answer "my inexperience. But I don't see that so much as a weakness as a fact." Further, think about your work habits and personal habits. If you have really bad ones, e.g. you have a difficult time meeting deadlines or you crack your knuckles when nervous, start now to fix them. Save a lesser one to cite as "a weakness." The Scout motto of always being prepared is key. FYI: When executives and other leaders face questioning, they always prepare and practice. (May not help George Bush much, but he does it. :-))

- **trying not to be repetitive when answering questions**

Sometimes you will repeat yourself because the questioner asks things that are closely related. When that happens, try to add something new; you also can say, "In addition to what I said earlier . . . I think" And again, if you don't just jump right into an answer, you are less likely to repeat because you will have taken some time to prepare an answer.

- **not presenting myself in a professional manner**

I am not sure what you mean here, but I'll take a stab at it. To my mind, professional has to do with dressing appropriately, "carrying" yourself confidently and speaking well. Being aware of one's surroundings and purpose for being in the interview help.

- **talking with my hands**

I don't think there is anything wrong with being expressive. Many folks do this, and I just don't see it as a bad thing. UNLESS you cannot move your mouth without also moving your hands. That you can practice to control.

- **first impression (am I what they are looking for?)**

Be yourself. Sometimes you won't be the best applicant, or the applicant with skills that are different from others. So it goes. We seldom know who else is being considered for a job we are

interviewing for. All we can control is our interview, so concentrate on doing the best interview you can and the rest will take care of itself.

- **not smiling enough**

Practice. Practice. Practice. But you don't have to be smiling all the time, just appropriately.

- **fumbling on words**

It happens. But practice interviews help. They give you confidence.

- **travel and relocation concerns**

I am not certain what you mean here, but if you have questions, ask them. It is pretty easy these days to research a city to see if it is a place you might want to live, what it costs to live there, etc.

- **fear of being rejected**

I daresay everyone shares this concern. Sometimes you won't get the job because sometimes you won't be the best applicant, or the applicant with skills that are different from others, or the best match. So it goes. We seldom know who else is being considered for a job we are interviewing for. All we can control is our interview, so concentrate on doing the best interview you can and the rest will take care of itself. And, hard as it is, try not to take it personally, because most often it is not YOU being "rejected" but what you have to offer vis a vis skills, abilities, experiences.

- **I sweat. A lot. It's embarrassing, and its personal, but the fact is, whether its 90 degrees in August or 20 degrees in February, I sweat, which no doubt, does not look good on an interview. This is not a joke, I am completely serious.**

You are not alone in having this problem. First, if you have not talked with your doctor about it, you should. There may be something that can be done to help. You might also talk with a pharmacist, who might be able to recommend an OTC product that would help. Specifically re: interviewing, one thing you can do is choose your clothing carefully, e.g. sweat shows more on dark clothes. A t-shirt under dress shirt might also help. You have probably noticed that newsrooms tend to be fairly informal places, so when interviewing, more often than not you would not be out of place with shirt and tie but no jacket. And if your hands get sweaty, try keeping a cloth handkerchief in your pocket, where you can unobtrusively reach in to dry off, i.e. before shaking hands.

- **learning curve (am I going to know how to do tasks or is everything going to be new to me?)**

It's an entry-level job, so expect to know how to do some things (remember, your resume pointed to your skill set, your letter expanded on some of that and your interview even more. So potential employer ought to know what she/he is getting!). And you should expect (welcome the opportunity) to learn lots of new things, which will take you to your next job. Then you are the newbie all over again.

- **contractual agreements**

If you will be signing a contract, make sure you read it closely. Ask questions. Be sure you understand what you are agreeing to. However, in my experience it is unlikely in a first job.

- **one-on-one interview vs. multiple people interviewing me**

Be prepared. Shake hands. Make eye contact when you listen and when you talk, not just to the person asking but to all. If you get a chance to ask questions, try to ask something of each person (assuming there are two or three people).

- **being too prepared where my answers sound memorized**

I don't think you can be too prepared. And answers are unlikely to sound memorized unless they have been memorized. Make it a habit to pause a few seconds before answering any question . . . so that you are thinking about what you want to say IN THIS SITUATION, even though you are drawing on your research, other times you've been asked the question, etc.

- **not being prepared enough**

Don't let that happen. Do your homework.

- **not finding the location (being late)**

Give yourself plenty of time to get where you are going. Anticipate late buses, traffic jams or whatever. Take a test drive or subway ride, if need be, so you are sure where you are going. A story: Way back when, when I was coming from Connecticut to interview at URI, I did a practice trip. Then on the morning of my interview, I took the wrong exit off the interstate. But because I had given myself plenty of time for the trip, I had time to correct my mistake and got here in plenty of time.

- **arriving flustered**

See above. Get there early and give yourself time to NOT be flustered.

- **being obviously nervous**

Practice not showing your nervousness, e.g. not tapping your feet, twirling your hair or whatever you do when nervous.

- **not making a good impression**

See answer re: not standing out.

- **not being myself**

If you are comfortable in the interview, you will be yourself. You also will be yourself if you don't try to force yourself to be a certain way in an interview. Yes, the stakes are high. But there is not just one right first job for you, so try to relax and enjoy a conversation with the person/people interviewing you. And if it does not result in a job, the interview will teach you something and help you prepare for the next one.

- **not appearing confident enough**

I dare say that everyone is nervous when they are being interviewed. After all, we put ourselves in that position because it is a step we need to take to get something we want or may want (a particular job). So we have something riding on the outcome of the interview. That makes even experienced professionals nervous, even if they may not admit it.

- **not knowing enough about the company**

This one is easy. Don't put yourself in that situation. The internet makes it quite easy to quickly learn a lot about a company. Do your homework. If you know someone there, talk with her or him.

- **putting too much pressure on myself**

Don't! Yes, the stakes are high. But there is not just one right first job for you, so try to relax and enjoy a conversation with the person/people interviewing you. And if it does not result in a job, the interview will teach you something and help you prepare for the next one.

- **Sometimes when I get a question and if I'm not sure how to react to it, I always wonder if my facial expressions put the interviewer off before I can give a response to the question.**

I suspect your facial expressions are less pronounced than they might feel to you. But the "fix" is twofold, I think: being aware, so that you avoid showing an obvious expression such as puzzlement or disdain; and practicing keeping a "straight face" in the light of certain kinds of questions.

- **Sometimes I wonder if the crowd interviewing me is more relaxed in dress and attitude than me.**

I think your experience at . . . was out of the ordinary. That level of casualness was a first for me, and I have been doing this a lot of years. You were dressed appropriately for the interview (for most any interview). Once you have a job, you dress to "fit in," which in the media world tends to be casual if you know for certain you will be in the office all day, but more spiffy if you'll be out and about.

- **I am afraid that my age will turn off a potential employer because they may assume I am too young to effectively carry out required job tasks or that I won't fit in with other employees.**

If you are applying for an entry-level job, or job whose requirements are supported in your letter and resume, age generally will not matter. After all, if I am looking to hire someone for entry-level, I should be expecting "young" applicants more than experienced ones. Further, how you handle yourself in the interview (and perhaps interactions with those with whom you might be working) will demonstrate that age is not an issue.

- **might not be qualified**

Most important, don't apply for a job that you are not qualified for. Pay close attention to the ad/job posting and what the requirements are. If they want some experience/skill you do not have, either directly or in some other way, don't apply.

- **I am afraid that while interviewing a potential employer may ask me what I could contribute to their company and I will not have a persuasive answer.**

See answer on not standing out. Also, give some thought now to how you identify your strengths and what you can say to demonstrate them. Practice answering the question with specifics. Examples of how you have achieved/accomplished are important. It is not enough, for example, to say "I am hard working." You need to demonstrate, e.g. "When we were on deadline to finish the annual report, I volunteered to stay late to work on blah blah blah."

• I assume that the more interviews I acquire, the easier they will become. My interview preparation requires a little more work to gain more confidence in presenting myself to potential employers.

I agree that confidence is a key, and it comes with practice. But practice does not have to be "real" interviews; rather, you can rehearse with a friend, or try videotaping yourself to see what others are seeing.

• I want to seem interested in the job, but I don't want to appear desperate.

In my experience, candidates who seem desperate come across as trying too hard to sell themselves, saying directly "I really want this job" or "I think I am a perfect fit for you" etc. By applying for the job, you have expressed interest. By going to the interview prepared, e.g. knowing something about the company, paying attention to the requirements of the job, etc., you have expressed interest. So as long as you don't overdo it, gush, in the interview, you should be on target.

• If I am offered the job on the spot, but I already have other interviews lined up, or I'm waiting to hear back from another place, what do I do?

This one always is a bit tricky, I think. First, I'd be wary of anyone who offers you a job and expects an answer on the spot. Indeed, unless you know you are the last person to be interviewed, I'd be wary of being offered a job on the spot (this is less true, I think, for later jobs; indeed, I once was offered a job before all had been interviewed.) It's good for everyone, employer and potential employee, to have chance to sit back, ponder, and decide. Having said all that, my conclusion is trust your gut. If the interview went really well and you really want the job, take it. If you really want something else that you are waiting on, ask for a week to think about it. If you have other interviews, ask for a week to think about the offer. But for a first job, I don't think you need to say why you are waiting. Then, if in that week, the other job comes through, contact the place and tell them you have decided not to accept their offer. Face it, for most entry-level jobs there are likely more candidates qualified and ready to take the job.

• Do I need to be focused on a specific aspect of the newspaper, or is it ok for me to be open to many options?

If you are asking pre-interview, should you be applying only for one type of job, I'd say that depends on you. If you want to be a reporter, then look for a job as a reporter. Don't "settle" for something else just so you have a job. If, during an interview, they ask if you would be interested only in the reporter job, but there is also, e.g. an editing job you are qualified for, be honest. If you would be interested in both, it's ok to say so.

• If they ask, are you applying for other jobs, is it ok if you are?

I think it is unrealistic for any potential employer to think someone is NOT applying for other jobs, so I don't know why they would ask. But if they do ask, be honest. Because I do not think you ever want to lie about anything in an interview (or elsewhere, for that matter). You can, however, couch your answer something like, "Well, yes, I am. But this is the job I really want because"

- **saying too much**

Practice can help. You want to answer what is asked; you want to provide details and specifics when necessary. You want to answer completely. But you don't want to talk just for the sake of talking. In a recent situation I heard both interviewees who were quite terse and others who talked endlessly, to the point of annoyance. Then there were those whose answers were short but direct and others whose answers were more expansive but also direct.

- **being underqualified for the position I'm applying for, *not* knowing so and then having that fact thrown in my lap.**

I have a difficult time imagining this; I think your experience in this regard will prove to have been unusual. If you have been chosen for an interview, there would seem to be belief that you at least minimally meet the job requirements, which would be based on what you said in your letter and resume. If those were honest, and supported with concrete examples, and then you were found to be unqualified, I'd question the interviewer. And if they had more in mind for the position than they asked for in the ad, it's also their problem.

- **I will forget to ask about following up at the end of the interview**

On your list of questions that you want to ask, have a last note to yourself to remind you to follow-up, e.g. with When do you expect to make a decision? Will I hear from you if I am not chosen for the job?

- **Can I get out enough information out about myself. There are certain qualities and things I've done that I want to be known. I get nervous that I won't be able to really sell my good qualities.**

Give some thought now to how you identify your strengths and what you can say to demonstrate them. Practice answering the question with specifics. Examples of how you have achieved/accomplished are important. Again, practice. Think and plan about the characteristics you want to emphasize and the "evidence" you want to talk about. Listen closely to questions, so you can figure out where/when/how to work in that info.

- **incorporating my portfolio into the interview**

This will depend on the questions asked. If the opportunity presents itself, you can say that you have examples of such and such in your portfolio; would they like to review? OR at end of interview, you can offer to leave examples of your work (never, never leave your original portfolio because you do not want to risk not getting it back.)

- **crafting questions of my own**

I think it is OK to bring a list of questions you want to make sure are answered. These may be general, or specific to the company, based on your research. You don't need to have a lot of questions, but you'll want a couple, if for no other reason that to demonstrate you have thought about the job, the company, the opportunity -- and done some homework.

• Choosing which stories will be most useful/ relative/ impressive for my interview. I feel like I have so much to talk about, but am worried I will go overboard on the information.

A perhaps-unsatisfactory answer, but one I believe: Be prepared by practicing. Be prepared with specifics. Listen closely to a question, take a moment to compose an answer and then answer directly, not wandering off on tangents.

• I have been very lucky with my internship to work in my hometown. If questioned about the local municipalities of other local towns, I may not be so knowledgeable, and it may be a weak point on my interview.

I do not think an editor interviewing you would expect you to be knowledgeable. But you can do something to walk in with a bit of background, and that is make sure that you have read some recent issues of the newspaper you are interviewing with. The internet makes this fairly easy to do, or you can revert to the trick I had to use as a young journalist and that was call to buy a week's worth of papers. You can learn a lot by reading a few days of news. And you will demonstrate initiative and a true interest in the job.