How to prepare for interviews

What to expect at interview
If you are invited for interview you have already shown in your application that you meet the job’s key requirements.

The basic principle of an interview is for the recruiter to find out whether you:
- are genuinely interested in and motivated by the position and the organisation
- can demonstrate that you have the appropriate skills, knowledge and experience required to be successful in the job.

You can expect questions on a range of topics including:
- Why you have chosen your degree and what you have gained from it
- What you have gained from your time at university, including extra-curricular activities
- Your reflections on relevant work experiences
- What attracts you to the position and the employer
- What you know about the job and the company
- Your strengths and weaknesses
- Examples of when you have demonstrated particular skills, including technical skills if relevant (ie applications for IT, engineering, economics, etc.)
- Your career goals
- Your questions for the interviewers.

Remember, the interview is also an opportunity for you to find out more about the company, and decide whether it will really suit you, so make sure that you think about some questions to ask. There are some ideas given later in this information sheet.

In order to prepare responses to questions on topics such as those listed above, it is vital to research the organisation and position, and reflect upon how you can use your experience to demonstrate that you are a suitable candidate.

Preparing for an interview
1. Research the position and company/organisation:
   - Be clear about what the job will involve and research as much as you can about both the company and the sector it operates in
   - Use the York profiles and mentors (www.york.ac.uk/careers/profiles) to see if there are career profiles from alumni who work in a similar role to the one you are applying for
   - Look at reviews from current and former employees of the company on www.glassdoor.co.uk
   - Make sure you know what the main product or service is, who they work with/for, and who their competitors are. Consider what makes the company stand out and what attracts you to work there.
   - Ensure your research is up to date. Look at the company website and use social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter
• Use professional journals (in the Information Room in Careers and Placements) for more detailed sector news and online directories to research company performance
  o BBC Business: www.bbc.co.uk/news/business
  o Morningstar: www.morningstar.co.uk
  o Financial Times: www.ft.com
  o Yahoo Finance: http://finance.yahoo.com
• Come to any on-campus employer presentations, fairs and skills sessions that the employer is attending.

2. Review your strengths in relation to the job
• Read through your application form/CV/covering letter and review the examples you have given to demonstrate how you fit the person specification
• Think about other examples you might be able to use at the interview. Remember, employers are looking for evidence of skills and personal qualities
• For jobs which require specific technical knowledge you may be asked questions to test this.

3. Prepare for tricky questions
• You might be asked about your strengths and weaknesses. For strengths, consider what you need to be good at for this particular job. For weaknesses, be honest but don’t select something which is a key requirement for the job. Remember that the important thing is to say how you are addressing the weakness to turn the negative into a positive
• Disclosure of health problems: it’s important to be clear on your rights and what support is available to you. When and how you disclose is up to you, but it’s best to think about it and prepare beforehand, rather than worry about it and hope it doesn’t come up. There is a lot of useful information on the following websites and you can also make an appointment with a Careers Consultant (via Careers Gateway) to talk through any concerns or book a practice interview:
  o www.york.ac.uk/services/careers/vle/interviews
  o https://www.york.ac.uk/students/work-volunteering-careers/student-groups/careers/
    (information for students with disabilities)
  o www.gov.uk/looking-for-work-if-disabled

4. Practicalities
• Confirm your attendance for interview by whichever method the employer asks for
• Check you know where you are going for your interview and how long it will take to get there, allowing plenty of time for travel on the day. By arriving early you will not only have a chance to calm your nerves, but also the opportunity to talk to the reception staff about the organisation, or read any literature on display
• Get your interview clothes ready the night before. Dress smartly but ensure you will be comfortable. Think about the sector and organisation you are applying to when selecting clothes but remember that even in sectors where employees wear casual clothes to work, you would be expected to dress more formally for interview (unless advised otherwise)
• Have a file ready with your CV, the job advertisement, copies of your letters, and literature/research you have on the organisation etc. to take with you for last minute checks. A pen and a small A5 notepad for notes may also be useful
• Make sure you have something to eat beforehand – you might find an empty, rumbling tummy distracting or even embarrassing!
Types of Interview

- **One to one interviews** - Could be with a Human Resources representative or your potential line manager.
- **Panel Interviews** - Panel interviews feature a number of interviewers who each ask questions and who may have different specialities or roles within an organisation. You should direct your responses to include all of the panel members, not just the one who asks a question.
- **Group Interviews** - Group interviews allow the interviewer to assess how you interact with others, whether you are able to work as part of a team, persuade, lead, motivate, negotiate, and avoid power conflicts.
- **Second interviews** - Some companies use second interviews to gain a further insight into your abilities and motivations. They are often very rigorous and in-depth. They may form part of an assessment centre, alongside other exercises. You should be given an idea of what to expect prior to the assessment centre. Typical activities include:
  - group exercise
  - written task
  - in-tray or e-tray exercise
  - giving a presentation
  - aptitude tests
  - one-to-one or panel interview

For more information on this, use the Careers and Placements Information Sheet: Preparing for an Assessment Centre.

- **Telephone/Skype Interviews** - These are used increasingly in the early stages of assessment, sometimes by agencies working on behalf of an employer. Successful candidates will then be invited for a face to face interview. They are also used for occupations where a large part of the job will involve talking to people over the phone such as telesales, market research, or surveys. They will usually be arranged in advance so make sure you select a quiet location where you won’t be disturbed to take the call.

- **Automated video interviews** - This is a type of screening interview you complete yourself using a video/webcam at a time and place to suit you. The interviewer inputs their questions online and sets a date by which the interview has to be completed. You then receive an invitation to log in, read the questions and record your answers. Practise using the interview guide in the VLE. Interviews can be structured in a variety of ways (see above), and you should prepare for them in the same way as a face to face interview. The disadvantage is that you will not be able to pick up on the interviewer’s body language and non-verbal cues but the advantage is that you could have notes and a copy of your application available. Skype interviews are often used if the employer is in another country. Consider what to wear and what the employer will be able to see behind you (messy room/posters etc) and try to look at the camera (not just the interviewer’s face) to make a good impression.

Interview Formats

- **CV/application form based interviews** - In this type of interview, questions are based largely around the information you included in your CV or application form and could vary from candidate to candidate.
- **Competency based interviews** - Also known as structured or situational interviews and used by most graduate employers. The company will usually have a defined set of competencies (skills or qualities) which it believes are necessary to have in order to do a specific role. Questions are designed to encourage candidates to give evidence of skills and personal qualities needed to perform the job for which they are applying. Generally, all candidates are asked the same questions (e.g. Describe a situation where you had to...
make a valuable contribution to a team). For these questions use the C-A-R model to structure your answers:

- **Context**: briefly outline the situation – who, what, why, when, where
- **Actions**: The main part of the answer. Describe what you did, focussing on your actions not those of other people
- **Results/Reflection**: describe the result or outcome of your actions. Be prepared for follow-up questions asking you to reflect on your actions

There are some good examples of questions at [www.newleafsearch.com](http://www.newleafsearch.com) under ‘Candidates’ and ‘CV & Interview Advice’

- **Strengths based interviews** - The idea behind this relatively new interview format is to identify candidates whose strengths and preferred working style matches the job role, therefore trying to ensure higher motivation and performance in successful candidates (eg what makes a good day for you?). It is very difficult to prepare your responses in the way you can for competency based interviews. The questions are more personal and interviewers will ask a rapid series of questions that switch focus quickly in order to prevent candidates using prepared answers. Interviewers are looking for quick and enthusiastic responses

- **Case-study based interviews** - Most commonly used for business related positions, especially consultancy or public service such as youth/social work and Teach First etc. Candidates may be evaluated on their analysis of a given problem (case-study), assessing how the candidate identifies key issues, pursues a particular line of thinking, develops their analysis, and presents their solution/ideas

- **Technical interviews** - Generally used for jobs in areas such as engineering, IT, science, economics, or languages. It may be a separate interview or form part of the standard interview. The aim is to allow interviewers to focus on your subject specific skills and knowledge relating to the post you have applied for. You may be asked about project work you have undertaken, your understanding of specific techniques and processes, or to work through case studies of real/hypothetical technical problems in order to assess not just your technical knowledge but how you analyse and approach problems. If a job involves using languages, part of the interview may be in the appropriate language(s) to test your understanding

- **Portfolio based interviews** - For jobs grounded in arts, media or communications you may be asked to bring your portfolio, while the interview questions will likely centre upon the works you include.

**Questions for you to ask at job interviews**

You will often be given the opportunity to ask questions of employers (usually towards the end of your selection interview). It is useful to prepare a few appropriate questions which you might ask. Think of questions to which you genuinely want to know the answers. Consider whether, if you were offered the job and told to start next week, you would be absolutely clear about all aspects of the job.

Do make sure that you are not asking for information which you could or should have already found out for yourself (e.g. through the company website; from employees you may have met on the day of the interview; from recent press articles or other media coverage). This might include details of the training programme, the position of the company within the sector, a typical working day etc. Some companies/organisations will provide a lot of detail on these issues; others may provide very little.

Remember that the questions you ask are also part of the selection process and should be used to demonstrate your genuine enthusiasm for the role/company. Reserve all questions about salary, conditions, benefits etc. until you have been offered the job, at which time it may be appropriate to enter into negotiations.

Below are a few examples of possible questions you might consider asking. Make sure your questions are appropriate for the situation and for the person who is interviewing you, as well as ensuring that they are questions you feel comfortable asking.
• Training and development
  o What is the company’s policy on attending seminars, workshops and other training opportunities?
  o How does the company support personal and professional growth?
  o Is there a structured career path?
  o What sorts of thing do your graduate recruits go on to do after their period of training has ended?
  o Could you tell me about how my progress will be monitored and evaluated during my probationary period?
• The role
  o Can you give me an idea of the typical day and workload I might expect?
  o Can you tell me more about the proportion of time that would be spent on different activities?
  o Can you tell me how the role relates to the overall structure of the organisation?
• The organisation
  o How would you describe the culture of the organisation?
  o Can you describe how the company balances work and personal life issues?
  o How are decisions made here?
  o At this level, what differentiates people who succeed from those who don’t?
  o What are the most enjoyable aspects of working in this organisation?
  o What is the organisation’s plan for the next five years, and how does this department/division fit it with that?
  o How would the management structure work for this post?
  o What are the main channels of communication?
  o Can you talk about the company’s commitment to equal opportunities and diversity?
• Performance review
  o In what way is performance measured or reviewed?
  o How does the company handle recognition for a job well done?
  o How does the company evaluate team performance?
• Personal
  o What do you enjoy most about the work/working for the company?
  o What do you see as the biggest challenges of your job?
  o How do you deal with the stresses and pressures of the job?

Resources in Careers and Placements
We have books and DVDs in the Information Room to help you with your interview preparation. They include:
  • Books such as ‘Great answers to tough interview questions’ and ‘How to succeed at an assessment centre’
  • DVDs such as ‘At the assessment centre’ which follows candidates on a selection day, and ‘Making an Impact’ which shows a selection of recent graduates being interviewed by Enterprise Rent-A-Car, KPMG and Winning Moves creative agency, and also shows an example of a graduate telephone interview

Online resources
  • Interview guide on the VLE: www.york.ac.uk/services/careers/vle/interviews
  • Profiles of York graduates in the sector you’re interested in: www.york.ac.uk/careers/profiles
  • Related information sheets on presentation skills and assessment centres: www.york.ac.uk/careers/infosheets
  • Interview tips and advice from Prospects: www.prospects.ac.uk/interview_tips.htm
  • Interview advice and video examples from PWC: http://elearn.pwc.co.uk/interview/
  • Guide to interviews, including dealing with nerves, from Assessment Centre HQ: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/interviews-the-ultimate-guide/
• Advice on case study interviews from Bain & Company: www.bain.com/careers/interview-preparation/index.aspx
• Feedback from real interviews: www.whatwilltheyask.co.uk/

Careers Sessions
• Go to a Recruitment process event, which cover all aspects of the recruitment and selection process, including interview skills and assessment centres: www.york.ac.uk/careers/events
• Book a mock interview with a Careers Consultant, bookable through Careers Gateway: www.york.ac.uk/careers/advice
• Attend a Skills session, often delivered by or with employers, including mock interviews, mock assessment centres.

Tips to help you to perform well during the interview:
• Listen well to the interviewer and to what you are saying in response
• If you don’t understand a question ask for further clarification
• Avoid giving unhelpful one-word answers but don’t talk too much! Make sure that what you say is relevant, to the point and concise
• Use concrete examples from your own experiences to illustrate your knowledge and skills.
• Be aware of your body language. Look attentive and interested; make eye contact. In a panel interview concentrate on the person asking the question, but include others from time to time.
• Be positive. Don’t make negative statements about yourself or others. Don’t use phrases such as “it was only shop work”.
• Don’t criticise a past employer. It will leave the interviewer aware that you could make similar comments about their organisation in the future, damaging their reputation
• Try to avoid using abbreviations that employers may not recognize eg LFA, YSIS.

When things go wrong
Here are ten reasons why employers reject candidates:
• lack of career planning and ill-defined aims
• poor level of knowledge in specialist field
• inability to express thoughts clearly
• insufficient evidence of achievement
• no real interest in the organisation
• overbearing, arrogant and conceited
• no questions asked about the job
• evasive about unsatisfactory performance
• general lack of confidence
• poor personal appearance

After the interview
If you are unsuccessful, contact the company for feedback on your performance. Even if this is not possible, it is worth reflecting on which questions went well and which ones you struggled with and will need to prepare for next time.

Please note: The websites listed here are not intended to represent a comprehensive list. Careers and Placements cannot be held responsible for the content of external website.

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