

Guide to...

# Preparing for Interviews

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# Contents

Introduction	3
How will I know what to expect?	3
Planning	3
Types of interview format	4
Types of questions	9
Other common interview themes	13
What questions should I ask them?	15
Ending positively	16
Coping with nerves	16
Not getting to interview stage?	17
Getting to interview stage but not getting offers?	17
Further resources	18
Further support from Bath Spa Careers	18

## Introduction

Interviews are a crucial part of the recruitment process for most organisations – this might be for a job, work experience, placement, internship, or a place on a postgraduate course. Their purpose is to give the selector a chance to assess you and for you to demonstrate that your abilities and personality ‘match’ what they are looking for. It’s also an opportunity for you to assess them and to make sure the organisation and position/course is right for you.

The recruitment process for most organisations follows a common theme: applications/CVs are received and then candidates are shortlisted and invited for interview. The interview format can vary considerably and may include an assessment and/or tests. The number of interviews also varies; some selectors are satisfied after one interview, whereas others will want to recall a further shortlist of candidates for a second (or even third!) interview. It is always worth remembering that if you weren’t deemed suitable for the course, training or job, on paper – then you wouldn’t have been invited to an interview!

This guide explains what you can expect at interviews and top tips for effective preparation and performance.

## How Will I Know What To Expect?

If there is anything that you are not clear about, don’t be afraid to make contact with the selector before the interview. Finding out as much as possible not only helps with your preparation but also puts your mind at ease. Sometimes the information they provide you with in advance is detailed and specifically outlines the format of the process/day, but sometimes it might be quite brief with very little information. To help you prepare as fully as possible, it may be appropriate to ask questions such as:

- Are you able to provide any additional details about the format of the interview?
- Can you tell me how long will the interview last?
- Are there any group exercises, other tests or selection methods being used?
- Is there anything else I need to prepare in advance?

The selector may be in a position to reimburse your travel/accommodation costs (particularly if travelling long distances). If this is not made clear you may want to contact them in advance to ask this question – but beware, smaller organisations are less likely to agree to this and in the majority of instances you should expect to cover your own costs.

If you have a disability, you may wish to ask about any reasonable adjustments that can be made during the interview process. See the Bath Spa Careers **‘Guide to Disability and Work’** for further details.

## Planning

There are a few basic essentials that will enable your interview day to go as smoothly as possible, most of this is likely to be common sense – but you would be surprised how many people make these simple mistakes, adding to the pressure of the day.

- Know how to get to the venue and how long the journey takes, have maps, train times, etc. in advance and check for any planned disruptions to road or rail services. Leave plenty of time so you are not rushing.

- Take with you: the interview invitation, with the name(s) of the interviewer(s), the organisation's address and phone number, a copy of your CV and/or application form, a note of the key points you want to make and any questions you want to ask.
- Organise what you are going to wear, dressing appropriately for the position for which you are being interviewed. Some companies have a much more relaxed approach to dress than others but, if in doubt, go smart and wear a suit. You're unlikely to be criticised for being too smart but employers will notice if you walk in wearing a pair of jeans and a t-shirt!
- Ensure that you maintain impeccable standards of personal grooming and hygiene (e.g. clean and tidy hair, avoid using overpowering deodorants/aftershave/perfume).

## Types of Interview Format

Interview format is determined by the nature of the organisation, but there are various categories that you can expect interviews to fall into:

### 1) Face to Face

An in-person meeting between the candidate and the interviewer(s) is still the most popular form of interviews. The actual number of interviewer(s) present can vary, anywhere from 1-4 individuals is possible - you may receive confirmation of this in advance. For panel interviews it can be quite a formal process; there could be a chairperson to co-ordinate the questions, a specialist who knows about the job/course in detail and possibly a representative from the Human Resources (HR) department - although this will depend on the type of organisation and/or their individual approach to interviews. Please note this format is standard in the public sector, including education and local government.

### 2) Telephone Interviews

These are popular with many different types of employers as a method of initial screening, but some use them as far down the line as the third or fourth stage in the recruitment process. The majority of selectors will pre-arrange a time/date with you, but you should also be prepared for those who just ring, so make sure your voicemail is suitable! If you do receive a call from a recruiter and it is really inconvenient, ask if it's OK to phone back when you're in a quieter, calmer environment.

Remember – it's just as important to make a good impression on the telephone as with face-to-face interviews; you should prepare as you would a face-to-face interview. The questions you're asked in this situation are likely to be aimed at sorting out serious candidates from those less committed. Prepare to be asked questions about why you have applied, why you want the job and how your experience, skills and abilities match up to their requirements and what you know about the organisation.

Try rehearsing with a friend so that the first time you experience a telephone interview you have simulated the experience already - this will help with the nerves - and make sure you have enough life in your telephone battery left – interviews can take up to an hour! Be aware that your conversation could be recorded and analysed by the selector at a later stage.

In a face-to-face interview, lots of cues and signals are given by non-verbal communication. On the telephone, you will not have this additional method of communication and will have to rely on the interviewer's responses to your answers to help gauge how well you are performing. If you are unsure if you have answered the question with enough detail then don't be afraid to ask "does that answer the question?" for clarity and reassurance.

### Top Tips:

- Practise answers to typical interview questions. Record your own voice and play it back;
- Have your CV/application form in front of you as you're likely to be asked questions based upon it;
- Keep a list of your job applications with you in case of unexpected calls (plus a pen/paper);
- Choose a quiet environment where you won't be disturbed or distracted. If you know your mobile network is unreliable in certain areas, use a landline number;
- During the call, jot down key words to remind you of what has been asked;
- Avoid talking too quickly, using the same phrases repeatedly, saying 'um' or 'you know' too often;
- Keep your voice upbeat, but not excitable. It is said that a smile can be 'heard' down the telephone, so see if you can communicate your enthusiasm and friendliness this way;
- Remember to LISTEN carefully to the questions you're being asked - help the interviewer by giving as full answers as possible, but don't ramble, and ask for the question to be repeated or for further clarity if necessary;
- If you have a hearing impairment or an impairment that means you would find it difficult to have a telephone conversation, then you may have to let the recruiter know that a telephone interview is not appropriate. Suggest alternatives e.g. Typetalk, email, text phone or a face-to-face interview with the services of an interpreter/lip reader if applicable. You should be prepared to explain the alternative methods, as recruiters may not be familiar with them;
- Have your diary with you in case the recruiter wants to arrange a further interview with you.

### 3) Group Interviews

Some selectors are keen to observe candidates interact with one another, and may ask you to participate in a group discussion, role play or group activity as part of the recruitment process. In the main, selectors are looking for your interpersonal skills, but depending on the task could also be looking for evidence of your planning and problem-solving skills, the creativity of your ideas, your individual contribution to the team and leadership qualities, as well as your verbal communication.

Remember that good team working is not always about getting your ideas taken forward but listening to, and using, the ideas of others too.

#### Top tips:

- As with any group activity, get involved (however silly you consider the task to be);
- Get a good grasp of any information you are given;
- In light of the information given, decide objectives and priorities make a plan and follow it;
- Be assertive and persuasive, yet diplomatic;
- Remember that the quality of what you have to say is more important than the quantity;
- Actively listen to what everyone has to say, through nodding, smiling and eye contact – try to get the best contribution from everyone (don't assume that quiet members have nothing to contribute);
- Find a balance between advancing your own ideas and helping the group to complete the task set;
- Keep your cool and use your sense of humour, where appropriate;
- Make sure the group keeps to time – you could volunteer to be timekeeper.

Try not to be distracted if a member of the group dominates the conversation - the worst way to deal with this is to try and compete by shouting over them. A good way of dealing with the situation is to listen to their views and then suggest that other members may have input too. Even if this doesn't stop them, the selectors will have picked up on your efforts to try and include all members of the team, which will reflect well on you.

#### **4) Video Interviews**

(N.B. Video interviews are different to Skype interviews. Read more about Skype interviews in point 6 further down.)

The use of video interviewing is becoming increasingly common amongst graduate recruiters, as it's more cost effective. Depending on the approach of the organisation you could be invited to log into an online portal such as Sonru or LaunchPad and asked to answer a series of set questions, by recording your responses in video format, and sending them to the recruiter to review at a later time. All candidates get asked the same questions, and there is likely to be a set time limit for each response. The recruiters can replay or review anything that catches their eye, which makes this different to a live connection with the interviewer, such as Skype.

Video interviews are just like face-to-face interviews but without the non-verbal feedback you'd expect from a person-to-person experience, so it can feel a little strange - especially if you are not used to recording yourself. However, on the plus side it does mean that you can record the session at your own convenience, without having to travel or take time off from work or other responsibilities.

You may be sent guidance to help you prepare for the types of questions that might be asked, but it is unlikely that you will be told the actual questions and will not (usually) have the option to re-record your answers, so you are advised to prepare fully. However, you can expect to be able to record test answers (to check for sound and visual quality) and to practise using the software, which you can then watch back to help you improve your performance before recording the real thing.

Each question will usually have a set time limit for you to read the question and then answer; try not to be phased by the timer counting down if there is one. You will also have a deadline by which to complete the task, so be sure not to miss this, as this will likely result in your application being declined at this stage.

Top Tips:

- As far as possible, you should treat video interviews in the same way as traditional interviews;
- Dress as you would for a conventional interview;
- Address your answers enthusiastically to the interviewer with a smile (at the camera rather than the display screen);
- Listen carefully to the questions and instructions, and speak loudly and clearly;
- Pay special attention to setting an appropriate 'stage' – check if the backdrop is professional and appropriate (i.e. not your messy bedroom), whether the lighting works well enough so that your face can be clearly seen, and that the location private and you will not be interrupted.

#### **5) Video Applications**

Similarly, selectors are also asking candidates to submit videos as part of the application process, for example, by asking you to film yourself presenting back on a theme or topic relevant to the post you have applied for, or to address a set of specific questions, but not necessarily using specialist software. If permitted, a good tip is to consider using visual aids, props or slides on a screen to help illustrate the key points you are making.

Here is an example brief (Cisco Systems):

*Congratulations, you have been recommended for the 2nd round interview for the Associates Sales Representative position. You are being asked to submit a 2-minute YouTube video interview response addressing the following questions: Why do you want a career in Sales? You should also include a brief introduction of yourself (first and last name/surname, position applying for, university attended and degree title).*

Here is an example video presentation (GENeco): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLLcd6RuWjo>

## 6) Skype Interviews

You should treat this interview like any other, making sure that you prepare well beforehand. Think about questions that you are likely to be asked based on your application and prepare some answers. As well as preparing for questions about you (e.g. your skills in relation to the job, previous experience, your motivation), make sure you research the company; find out what their mission statement or objectives are, look at their history, what issues are they currently facing, who are their competitors etc.

Top Tips:

- All the same preparation goes into a Skype interview as you'd do for one face-to-face;
- Arrange a test call, particularly if it's an international call;
- Avoid speaking over anyone, it's important to allow people to finish speaking, otherwise you risk missing information;
- Once you've set up your webcam position, consider turning off the box in the top right which shows your own image. It can get very distracting and lead to you glancing off in a different direction.

## 7) Presentations as part of the interview process

Presentations are now a common feature of the selection process – in most occurrences you will have advance warning of the presentation brief, and on average you will be asked to speak for 10-15 mins. In this short period of time presentations can provide employers with a great deal of information about you.

Here are some of the key points that employers will look for:

- Preparation: have you done your homework? Read up on the company? Answered the brief? Prepared good visuals/handouts?
- Find out about the company/the job: use the presentation as an opportunity for you to demonstrate your knowledge of the company, its products/services and the environment in which it operates. Include details from their literature or website if appropriate, but be prepared to answer any questions about the content of your presentation at the end.
- Answer the question: it sounds obvious, but it is surprising how many people really don't answer the question they are set. Discuss your interpretation of the brief with other people, and if you are not sure what the question is getting at, contact the company to check.
- Visual aids: keep slides as simple as possible. Make sure the audience can read them, four to five points maximum on each slide. Use animation carefully and use images to help explain the point. You may want to provide each audience member with a copy of the slides, so they can make notes as you go through the presentation, or as a useful backup should technology fail on the day.

- Content: has your talk been interesting? Do your arguments make sense? Have you provided enough/too much information? Have you covered the key points? Did you answer questions well? Was your talk pitched appropriately for your audience?
- Audience: try to find out who will be listening to your presentation so that you can pitch your talk at the right level. For example, you might be presenting to a Human Resources Officer who is not familiar with technical accounting terms, so be prepared to explain any difficult terms or concepts to any non-specialist in your audience.
- Presentation style: Did you appear confident/relaxed or nervous? Did you make good eye contact? Were you enthusiastic? Was your verbal communication good? Was your body language open or closed/defensive? Did you inspire them?
- Structure: Does your presentation have a clear beginning, middle and end? Have you leapt straight in without preliminary introductions? Did you keep to the time allowed?

The structure of your presentation is very important. You want to make it simple for your audience to follow, so make sure you include the following:

- Introduction: introduce yourself, the topic you are going to talk about, the time it will take, and tell them when they can ask questions. Explain the structure of your talk.
- Body of your talk (middle): the main content of your presentation should be clearly structured, and your arguments should be logical and clear.
- Conclusion: remind them of the main points of your talk, thank them for listening and invite questions.

Do also be mindful of the following when giving a presentation:

- Delivery: the delivery of your presentation is just as important as your preparation. Remember you will be nervous, so practise your presentation beforehand and use the prompts that suit you.
- Smile: you may be nervous, but a friendly smile gives the impression of confidence. Remember that your audience wants you to do well and appreciates that you may feel nervous, so take a few deep breaths and go for it.
- Make good eye contact: practise your presentation sufficiently so that you don't have to rely too heavily on scripts. Reading a presentation word for word does not make a good impression, as it restricts you from making eye contact with your audience. You will not be expected to make your presentation completely prop-free, but try using cue-cards, or a copy of your slides as a prompt.
- Tone of voice/pace: try not to rush through your presentation, speak at a medium pace. Inject some enthusiasm into your voice and avoid becoming monotone. If you stumble over a word, or forget what you were saying, don't worry. Just collect your thoughts and carry on. Use pauses, as this can help make a point and will enable you to collect your thoughts.
- Physical barriers: be careful that you don't obstruct anyone's view of your slides by standing in front of the screen. You don't have to stay rooted to the spot, but pacing around too much may be distracting. You also don't have to stay behind a table. Stepping out from behind barriers and getting closer to your audience once in a while can give the appearance of confidence – but don't get too close, or you might make them feel uncomfortable.



# Types of Questions

## 1) Competency-based (also called structured or behavioural)

This is one of the most common type of interview question used today. Every job can be described in terms of the key competencies, or the behaviours, necessary to carry out the role - although there are typical competencies the majority of employers will be looking for e.g.

- Communication - the ability to communicate effectively with a wide range of people
- Team working - the ability to be an effective team leader or team member
- IT skills - most jobs these days need some IT or digital skills
- Good attitude - hard worker, honest, polite, co-operative
- Problem solving - using your initiative to identify solutions
- Enthusiasm - employers like someone with a positive attitude and approach to work
- Quick learner - so you can take on new tasks
- Determination - shows you are focused on achieving goals
- Flexibility - doing a variety of tasks to achieve a common goal

Each question is designed to target the specific skills or competencies an employer is seeking for a particular job, as detailed in the person specification/job details (e.g. using your initiative, successful team working, negotiation skills etc.). The chances are you will have focused on these in your application, so the good news is you may already have done most of the preparatory leg-work! If you've been granted an interview on the back of a speculative application then try to anticipate the questions that might be relevant.

Competency-based questions are usually phrased in a similar way, making it clear that you are being asked to provide an example of how you have demonstrated this in the past.

Example questions:

- *Describe a time when you dealt with pressure in a work situation.*
- *How have you provided great customer service in the past?*
- *Give an example of when you've worked as part of a team.*
- *Tell us about a difficult problem you've had to solve.*
- *Describe a project you've had to plan or been involved in.*

These types of questions can also sometimes be quite 'wordy' and ask for multiple competencies to be addressed e.g.

- *Give an example of a time when you adopted a new approach to a task. Please give details, including what prompted the idea, the issues faced in implementing the approach and what the overall impact was.... (Competencies assessed – innovation, initiative, and motivation.)*

The trick to answering these types of questions is to be **specific** with your answer – by describing a moment in time that **proves** the competency they are looking for. This might be harder than you think - especially if you have not prepared fully in advance of the interview. Our ability to re-call past events with the necessary detail is quite limited and we have a tendency to answer with broad sweeping statements about roles or experiences, rather than describing a specific 'time when'. BUT, there is some more good news...the most effective approach to answering these types of questions is to use the STAR technique, which stands for:

- **Situation** - What was the situation and when did it take place? (10%)
- **Task** - What was the task and what was the objective? (10%)
- **Action** - What action did *you* take to achieve this? (70%)
- **Results** - What happened as a result of your action? (10%)

This useful acronym provides you with a model to map out your specific examples for the competencies the selector will be assessing – during your interview preparation aim to revise at least two STAR examples per competency, OR identify a number of recent, competency rich examples which you can then use in your answers depending on the question asked. Draw from all aspects of your life. Store them safely and update your examples as you go through your degree/career.

### Here is an example of how to use STAR in interviews:

*Tell me about a time when you used your initiative to resolve a complex problem. What was involved and what actions did you take?*

**Situation** = Soon after joining my last company, where I worked as a team leader for a car parts retailer, I discovered that the average time taken to complete a refund was 14 days.

**Task** = This seemed like an unreasonable time for customers to be waiting and also meant that employees' time was not being spent most effectively as they were having to deal with being flooded with a large volume of negative customer calls and emails. This was giving the company a bad reputation and ultimately affecting sales, so it was essential to solve the problem quickly and I was tasked with reducing the turnaround for refunds down to 2 days.

**Action** = The first thing I did was create a detailed brief that both analysed the problem and outlined the potential benefits of the newly proposed process. I devised a new process for dealing with refunds and presented my recommendations to the senior management team for consideration. They were happy to take my recommendations forward, so I organised a project team whose task was to implement this new system. Using Google Docs and email I set up a shared system for internal and external feedback and communication, ensuring that everyone involved was on board and up to speed. I hand-picked four software companies who specialise in the system we needed and, after having demonstration and hands-on testing, selected our preferred supplier. Throughout the project's entirety, I successfully managed the team members, updated and revising project milestones as necessary and in the end delivered a system that performed as expected.

**Results** = I overcame every obstacle I encountered, improvised when necessary, and successfully implemented the new system on schedule and under budget. This new system allows the team to respond to and process customer refunds within the 2 day deadline. Even more pleasing was the fact that the Board of Directors awarded me a prize for top performing team leader as a result of this project.

See the Bath Spa Careers '**Guide to Using the STAR Approach**' for more detailed advice and additional examples.

## 2) Situational/Scenario-based questions

These cannot always be anticipated but in many ways mirror the approach of competency-based questions (above). Try to think beforehand what situations you might have to face in the job you're applying for e.g. how would you deal with a difficult customer, what would you do if a member of your team was under-performing, how would you persuade someone to buy this product?

If you're asked a situational question "what would you do if.....?" ask for a moment to think about it and then give your considered answer, explain your rationale and draw on examples where you have done this or something similar in the past (STAR).

Example questions:

- *What would you do if you a customer complained to you about another member of staff?*
- *How would you cope with the pressures of multiple deadlines?*
- *How would you deal with an expected problem?*
- *How would you describe your approach to dealing with clients?*
- *If we are introducing a new product how would you go about forecasting the demand for the coming year, what information would you look at, and why?*

### 3) Strengths-based questions

A strength-based approach to recruitment is becoming increasingly popular, as it's argued that competency-based questions can be easily prepared for. A savvy candidate can prepare a number of well-structured examples to evidence the competencies specified by an employer, but strength-based questions are harder to predict, so applicants come less prepared and are more authentic.

A strengths-based interview is all about understanding what energises and motivates you, as well as what you do well. It's difficult to fake enthusiasm when describing something that isn't genuinely a personal strength. Organisations use strengths-based questions to find out what candidates love to do and do well. They are focused on making sure that the people they select are the right people for the right role, who will enjoy their jobs, perform well and stay with the organisation.

Applicants need to have well developed self-awareness in order to answer these questions effectively - this is something that is necessary for success in the work place and can't be done in a rush the night before an interview! There are 'no right or wrong answers', just answers that indicate whether an applicant is a 'good fit' for the role and organisation. These questions tend to be more personal than a typical competency based one e.g. *what activities come naturally to you? What tasks on your 'to do' list are you likely to enjoy most?* However, they should still be supported with an example that is structured using the STAR approach.

Example questions:

- *As a student, were you easily distracted from finishing assignments? What do you think helped you to keep going on a task?*
- *Do you find it easy adapting the way you speak and behave, in order to better relate to different people? Tell me more.*
- *How do you develop and deepen relationships over time? Can you give me an example of what you last did this?*
- *What is your biggest disappointment, how do you feel about this?*
- *What is your greatest achievement, why is this so?*
- *Which tasks do you get the most satisfaction from?*
- *What motivates you to get up in the morning?*

Top Tips:

As you prepare for your strengths-based interview, think about:

- What your friends and family know you for - how would they describe you to a stranger?
- What you enjoy doing, and what you are like at your best;
- The achievements you have made and how you made them;

- What a 'great' day looks like for you - when did you last go home energised, and why was that?
- Activities that you do not particularly enjoy, and why.

#### 4) Chronological/Biographical/Unstructured questions

These questions feel more like a conversation, as they are often more open but are still relevant to what the selectors are looking for, designed to give them a clearer impression of you as an individual, your personality and your interests. Alternatively, selectors might choose to work chronologically through your CV/completed application form.

Example questions:

- Tell me about yourself...  
Summarise your qualities and experience in a way that will attract the recruiter, focusing on 3-4 main points that are closely aligned to the job description and person specification.
- Why do you want this job?  
Describe experiences, which show you have knowledge of the work and explain why you would be good at the role. If you don't have much work experience, describe other life experiences which show your ability to learn a job quickly and your keen interest and enthusiasm. Sentences such as 'I know I would be good at this job because...' and 'I would be able to make a contribution to this organisation because...' help to instill confidence in the recruiter that you are confident about yourself. You could also explain why you are particularly interested in working for the organisation.
- Tell me about your vacation or part-time jobs/previous experience.  
Describe what was involved in your previous jobs, including the skills you used, any responsibilities you had, people you dealt with, equipment used. Emphasise the particular relevance to the job you're applying for. Remember to mention relevant voluntary/unpaid work that you have done.
- What qualities/skills do you have which you consider valuable to our organisation? Or, what are your strengths?  
The secret to answering these types of questions is twofold: know your strengths and mention ones that are relevant to the job you're being interviewed for. Be aware of the most prominent skills/attributes/personal qualities they have stated in the job description/person specification and then be confident about explaining how you know that these are your strengths by quoting examples of when you used them; it's not enough to just say you have them. e.g. "I'm a good organiser, and I plan everything in detail. I demonstrated this when I was given a new project while working in my part-time job as a cinema sales assistant. I was asked to plan a new induction training programme for new members of staff..." etc. (STAR Approach).
- If I were to speak to your family/friends/boss, how would they describe you? Or, what three adjectives would you use to describe yourself?  
By asking personality questions, the employer wants to know how self-aware you are. Having self-awareness means you can look at yourself critically, and know what you're good at and where you could improve. A good answer would follow a similar pattern to the question above.
- What are your weaknesses?  
If you're asked about weaknesses, don't list many - only mention one! Choose a minor flaw that isn't essential to the job. Turn it into a positive, such as how you've worked on the weakness. Or you could present it as an opportunity for development e.g. 'Sometimes I'm too enthusiastic when working on a new project. But I've learned to adjust to everyone else's pace, and not go charging ahead.' Also, be prepared for them to ask for another weakness, after you have given your first answer – selectors are trying to eliminate the 'scripted' nature of responses to typical interview questions such as this!
- What motivates you?  
By finding out what motivates you, the interviewer can find out which environment you'll perform well in. Try to think of examples of when a work task excited you e.g. "I like problem solving - that point you

reach in a project where you come up against something unexpected, and you have to think creatively to come up with a solution.”

- What was the last film you saw or the last book you read?

When it comes to your interests, the employer wants to know you're an active citizen, who tries to get the most out of life, but don't be fooled – your answers to these questions can still showcase your attributes in a positive light e.g. “In my personal life I'm always organising everybody. People look to me for ideas and plans - I guess in some ways that shows I'm a natural leader.”

## 5) Technical and Knowledge-based Questions

If you have applied for a job or course that requires technical knowledge (e.g. positions in IT, science, publishing, graphics, media etc.) it is likely that at some stage in the selection process you will be asked technical questions, or have a separate technical interview, or task as part of the interview/assessment day to test your knowledge on that topic. For some employers this might also include questions that determine how familiar you are with their specific products or services. You should be prepared to prove yourself but also to admit to what you don't know (whilst stressing that you are keen to learn).

In a similar vein they might also like to test your knowledge of what you think the job entails in your own words. The interviewer wants to know if you fully understand what the job will involve and why you think you'd be good at it. To answer this question well, make sure you read the job description thoroughly and research how the organisation operates e.g. “The main task is to supervise a team of sales staff to ensure they exceed sales targets. It's my responsibility to motivate them and pass on my sales experience to enable them to achieve more.”

Example questions:

- *What will the main tasks and responsibilities be in this job?*
- *What do you think the main challenges will be?*
- *What would you do in the first day/week/month/year?*

## 6) Case Study

Used largely by consulting firms, these can range from a straightforward brainteaser to the analysis of a hypothetical business problem. You will be evaluated on your analysis of the problem, how you identify the key issues, how you pursue a particular line of thinking and whether you can develop and present an appropriate framework for organising your thoughts. There is no perfect way to solve each problem and how you reach your solution is often more important than the solution itself.

## Other common interview themes

### The company

Selectors are usually keen to test your knowledge of the organisation and desire to work for them. You might want to showcase your knowledge of the company by having some facts and figures at the ready, such as:

- the size of the organisation, last year's turnover figures
- what the product or service is, key competitors
- latest developments in the field, challenges of working in the sector
- their history, plans for the future, ethos and philosophy

When talking about why you want to work for the employer, focus on what you can do for them, not on what they can do for you (i.e. training/bonuses/travel) and demonstrate that you've chosen to apply to them for a good reason.

Example questions:

- Why have you decided to apply to us?
- What do you know about our company?
- What do you think of our application form/brochure?
- Who do you see as our major competitors?
- What do you consider to be the main difficulties facing our organisation?

### **Career Plans**

Selectors are often interested in your career ambitions. This is your chance to show how enthusiastic you are to get on - you should avoid sounding too aggressive and over-ambitious: "I want to become managing director in three years". Conversely, you should avoid sounding unenthusiastic and passive: "I'm not sure - I'll see how it goes". Instead, you could talk in terms of short-term and long-term goals.

Remember you are at the interview for that particular job - so your short-term goal should be to get that job for the time being. Then you can start talking about moving on higher e.g. "My immediate aim is to get a psychology assistant position, then to work through to become a qualified clinical psychologist."

Example questions:

- Why have you applied for this type of work/career? This is your opportunity to show you have exactly the right skills needed for the job. Think about how you could add value to the organisation. Make brief but telling comparisons between the job description and your ability to meet their needs. State what you can offer and back up anything you say with evidence and examples.
- What do you see yourself doing in 5/10 years? Or, what are your goals? Thinking about your future is seen as being positive because it shows you're committed to the work. It's a good idea here to research future progression within the organisation and consider responsibilities you would like to take on.
- Where else have you applied? This will show you how well you have researched and thought through your chosen career area. If you just list a long series of unrelated graduate roles, it will cast doubt on your motivation. However, if you show you have made a few well researched applications and reiterate the reasons again for applying to the recruiter, it will show you are career focused and committed.
- What salary would you expect to receive? Normally you will be told the salary in exact terms. If the salary is negotiable, think about it beforehand and be prepared to negotiate firmly but within reason.

### **Work History**

Selectors might also be interested to hear about your work history. When talking about previous jobs, focus on the positives. Even if you think your previous or current job wasn't very demanding, if you jot down the tasks and responsibilities it will sound more impressive than you think. You will have learned something, so mention it. Focus on the skills and experience that are relevant to the job you're being interviewed for. Don't bring up negative things like having a dispute with a colleague or your boss, or criticise previous employers.

Example questions:

- *Why did you leave your last job? e.g. "In my current job I have developed my knowledge of computer software packages. But now I'm ready for a new challenge, and want to use these skills in a more customer-focused role."*
- *Tell me about a typical day in your current/previous job*

- *What experience have you got from previous jobs?*
- *What do you enjoy/dislike about your current role?*

### **Current Affairs/News**

Whatever the position you are applying for, don't be surprised if you are asked for your views on current affairs and issues of the day, you should have a general idea and understanding of what is going on in the world at large.

### **Unusual questions**

You probably won't have prepared for this, so the interviewer is seeing if you can think on your feet. Take your time over this question, and think of something that generally reflects you, but also has positives you could apply to the world of work. There is no 'good answer' but just be prepared for this sort of question.

Example questions:

- *If you were a biscuit, what type of biscuit would you be?*
- *If you were an animal, what type of animal would you be?*
- *If you could invite any 3 people to dinner, who would you choose and why?*

### **Challenging questions**

Think of all the questions you would least like to be asked. Is there a gap in your CV? Have you had some poor academic results? Were you ever fired? Prepare an answer to each one. Answer as honestly as you can, without being defensive or blaming anyone. Try to turn your answer into a positive statement with a successful outcome. Show how you overcame any difficulty and what you learned from it.

Sometimes you may wonder if a question has been designed to antagonise you. Questions such as this are designed to test your emotional intelligence, i.e. will you just react or provide a calm and insightful response? Finally, if you are asked a question that you feel you can't answer ask to return to it later and, if still unable to attempt it then, say so.

### **Personal questions**

Recruiters must not discriminate on grounds of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, age or disability. If you feel uncomfortable about any question then say so. If you feel unsafe or very uneasy, end the interview politely and leave. See our Bath Spa Careers "**Guide to Equality & Diversity and Work**" for further advice.

## **What questions should I ask them?**

Remember that the interview is also a chance to find out more about the role and the organisation so that you can make an informed decision if you are offered the job. At the end of the interview they will usually ask if you have any questions for them and this can be a good opportunity to reveal positive aspects about yourself that the interviewer's questions may not have elicited.

Good questions to ask are those that demonstrate your eagerness to develop within the organisation, to take on responsibility and progress, but make sure these are relevant (saying you would like to be managing director as quickly as possible in a small company of ten people is not realistic and may put an interviewer off). Questions about training and development opportunities are also positive.

This is also a good opportunity for you to demonstrate your research into the organisation by asking questions about expansion plans, or relevant articles you may have read, for example: "I read in the

newspaper last week that you are expanding into Europe. Is the company thinking of expanding into any other markets?”. You should also avoid asking questions for the sake of it or asking very basic questions that you should already know the answer to.

Prepare up to five questions that you would really like answered. Whilst this is over preparing, as you are only likely to want to ask 2-3 during the interview, but allows for back-up questions just in case they cover some of your questions during the interview.

Top Tips:

- Show an interest - ask about the job, organisation, employees, products and processes;
- Don't ask about pay, pensions or other perks – it is not appropriate at this stage;
- Don't ask questions that have been answered in any literature sent out with the invitation to interview.
- Prepare your questions beforehand and take them in with you.

Example questions:

- *I understand the role includes a lot of researching, could you tell me more about the traditional methods currently used to conduct this research and how this contributes to the success of the business?*
- *What do your most successful people find most satisfying about their roles?*
- *I am keen to learn and develop with my next role; can you tell me about the types of training opportunities you offer?*
- *How would you describe the organisational culture here?*
- *I would be interested to hear more about the contribution I could make to the department aims and objectives, should I be successfully offered this position...*
- *Will I have my own project or area of responsibility?*
- *Do you have any doubts about me that I can clear up now before I leave?*
- *What do you enjoy most about working here?*
- *What is the next step in the process – will there be a second interview?*
- *How will this role fit into the wider team structure?*
- *Who does this position report to? If I am offered the position, can I meet him/her?*
- *What are the prospects for growth and advancement?*

## Ending positively

If the interviewer does not tell you, at the end of the interview ask when you should expect to hear news of their selection decision and, if you are successful, what the next stage of the process will be. End the interview on a positive note, smile, shake hands and thank the interviewer reiterating your enthusiasm for the job for which you have applied.

## Coping with nerves

The majority of people will get nervous about interviews; being in a situation where others are watching and judging can be intimidating – perhaps the first rule of coping with nerves is to acknowledge that you will feel nervous, and this is OK!



Sometimes we can add pressure to ourselves by having unreasonably high expectations of what we should achieve, particularly if this is the first time we have been interviewed. Going through the experience and seeing that we can survive intact will help us build up our confidence for next time.

The key to success is to think positively; and ensure that you are as prepared as possible in advance to help reduce the stress of the day, by following the 5 'R's':

1. **Research:** the organisation/sector, come across as knowledgeable and committed;
2. **Re-read:** all documents (your application, job description etc.), so that you can build on what you have already told them at interview;
3. **Revise:** as you would for an exam (pre-empt what questions you might be asked and what questions you want to ask them), lessen the chance of surprises!;
4. **Rehearse:** practise saying your answers out loud, enlist friends and family to practise on or book a mock interview with Bath Spa Careers;
5. **Review:** interview instructions, plan your journey, parking, what to wear, what to take etc.

On the day:

- Try deep breathing exercises that help you to relax
- Slow your speech down; it helps you feel in control
- If you feel yourself blushing, ignore it - you are not likely to be marked down for turning pink!
- If you make a mistake, don't let it drag you down, nobody is perfect. Park it and move on.
- Fake it till you make it - act confident even if you don't feel it and consciously replace any negative thoughts with "I can do this!"

## Not getting to interview stage?

If you are not being invited for interview, you should critically review your CV, application forms and covering letters. Are you making it clear that you know what the jobs you have applied for involve? Have you a clear picture of the sort of person employers are seeking? Are you being unduly modest about your accomplishments? Are you actually addressing the criteria in the person specification?

You cannot change your history but you can:

- Review, expand, rearrange or alter the emphasis of your applications;
- Get more relevant experience by taking part in work shadowing, work experience placements, voluntary activities, temporary jobs, or through further study;
- If recruitment in your chosen profession or industry operates through a network of contacts, you may have to consider starting at a more junior level than you would normally expect in order to find out about potential openings.

## Getting to interview stage but not getting offers?

If you are getting invited to interviews you can assume that, on paper, employers consider you capable of doing the jobs for which you have applied. However, once at interview, their opinion has either been changed or they have not been convinced enough to appoint you or, quite simply, another candidate scored higher in the interview process or was a better organisational fit. After each interview it is worthwhile making some notes of your own about areas in which you did well at and areas where, in retrospect, you could have done better.

Ask yourself - are you able to substantiate in person the messages given in your applications? Are you presenting a professional, confident image at interview? Look again at the sections in this guide and ask yourself whether you have been making adequate preparation.

It is always worth asking an organisation for feedback after an interview; at worst they will say no and at best you will receive a critique of your performance that allows you to make future improvements. You might also like to book a mock interview with Bath Spa Careers to identify how you might improve your interview technique.

## Further resources:

- <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips> - Prospects Interview Tips
- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interview-techniques> - TargetJobs Interview techniques
- [www.mindtools.com/pages/article/ThinkingonYourFeet.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/ThinkingonYourFeet.htm) - Importance of body language and confidence boosters
- [www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCDV\\_75.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCDV_75.htm) - Advice when re-interviewing for your job in restructuring
- [www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/FirstImpressions.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/FirstImpressions.htm) - Advice on making that important first impression and what to wear
- [www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21334710](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21334710) - Skype interviews: Is it more tricky to be grilled by video?
- [www.theguardian.com/careers/careers-blog/strengths-based-job-interviews](http://www.theguardian.com/careers/careers-blog/strengths-based-job-interviews) - Strengths-based job interviews: what are they and how do they work?

## Further Support from Bath Spa Careers

If you would like further support from Bath Spa Careers & Employability go to **[bathspa.ac.uk/careers](http://bathspa.ac.uk/careers)** to see the ways in which you can access our service, including workshops and events, appointments and to access our extensive range of resources.

You can also contact Careers Reception on 01225 875525 or at [careers@bathspa.ac.uk](mailto:careers@bathspa.ac.uk).

Please note that Bath Spa Careers does not endorse particular organisations.

(This guide was last updated in Summer 2019).

# GET A HEAD START

We're here to help you get a great start to your career. We're open all year round, so come and visit us in the Careers Space, book an appointment, or get in touch.

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01225 875525

[www.bathspa.ac.uk/careers](http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/careers)

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