

MSU Career Services

Interviewing Guide

The following guide outlines how to prepare and execute skills and strategies for a successful job, internship, or graduate/professional school interview. We recommend participating in a mock interview with one of our Career Education Coaches. To schedule an appointment, please call 406-994-4353 or stop by the Allen Yarnell Center for Student Success, located in Strand Union Building 177.

Interview Preparation

Research the Organization

- Study the job description and organization website so you can articulate why you want to work there and how your strengths and skills lend to the position.
- Read articles, press releases, industry journals, and information on LinkedIn. Be prepared to discuss industry trends.

Know Your Skills

- Take a thorough inventory of your interests, skills, accomplishments, experience, goals, and values.
- Review and study your resume and LinkedIn profile.
- Know what makes you a unique candidate and how to communicate this effectively to the prospective employer.
- Have at least three stories/examples that demonstrate your knowledge, skills, and abilities and your understanding of how you will fit within the organization.

Be Prepared

- Ask human resources or the hiring manager what to bring and expect on the day of the interview.
- Schedule a mock interview with a Career Education Coach at MSU Career, Internship & Student Employment Services

Interview Basics

Location and Arrival

- Ensure you know your route and expected travel time to the interview location.
- Arrive no more than 5-10 minutes in advance.
- Bring a pen and legal pad or leather-bound portfolio with 4-7 hard copies of your resume.
- Do not take your backpack or other unnecessary items to the interview.
- The interview starts when you arrive. Assume someone is always evaluating you.

Appearance and Dress

Consider the job/internship, organization culture, and industry norms when planning attire for your interview. For example, is business casual acceptable or is the organization dress code and norms more formal? Ultimately, it is better to “overdress” for the job interview. Even if business casual is acceptable for everyday attire while working at the organization, it is acceptable, and sometimes expected, that you will dress more formally for the interview.

- **Business Casual:** Dress pants/slacks or skirt, button-up collared shirt (with or without tie) or blouse.
- **Business Formal:** Dress suit (pants or skirt, dress shirt with tie or blouse, with matching coat/blazer).
- Avoid bright, loud colors.
- Avoid suggestive/revealing clothing.
- Make sure your outfit is wrinkle-free and without holes or stains.
- Try on your clothes prior to the interview to make sure they fit and that they are comfortable. If needed, have your clothing tailored.

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Other Appearance Considerations

- **Scent:** A “neutral” scent is best. In other words, be sure to practice good hygiene before the interview, but avoid cologne/perfumes and strong deodorants.
- **Facial Hair, Body Piercings, and Tattoos:** Research the organization’s policies and norms. Perspectives on facial hair, body piercings, and tattoos in interviews and the workplace vary depending on the organization, role, and/or industry. Use your best judgment when considering facial hair, body piercings, and tattoos. Ask yourself: *Does this project professionalism for this organization and role?*

During the Interview

Body Language

Your body language, like facial expressions and posture, will communicate a wealth of information to the interviewers. In addition to focusing on what you say, pay close attention to how and what your body language communicates.

Consider the following as you prepare your message:

- **Facial Expressions:** Remember to smile and pay attention to your facial expressions throughout the interview.
- **Nervous Habits:** Pay attention to nervous tells, like shaking your foot, clicking a pen, or touching your hair. These can be distracting to you and the interviewer.
- **Eye Contact:** Consistent eye contact is key to effective communication. Focus your attention on each interviewer to indicate your attentiveness.
- **Posture:** Avoid defensive (e.g., crossing your arms) and passive (e.g., slouching in your chair) positions. Sit up straight in your chair. This will help you feel and appear confident and professional.
- **Tone:** What is your tone of voice communicating? Depending on your tone and inflection, the same words can have different meanings.

Answering Questions

In addition to the content, understanding the questions and delivering your responses with confidence is crucial.

- **Pace:** Speak clearly at a moderate pace. Some people tend to speak faster when they are nervous.
- **Filler Words:** Avoid filler words such as “like” and “um”. This will allow a smoother delivery of content.
- **Listen:** Do not start your response until the interviewer has finished speaking. Listen to the entire question to ensure you answer the question being asked.
- **Take Your Time:** Prior to answering the question, you can take a short time to formulate your response (1-2 seconds is appropriate). Once you have decided on your response, answer with confidence and sincerity.

Outlining Common Interview Questions

While it is important you practice your responses, don’t script them. Below are some common interview question types with tips for what to include in your responses.

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Tell me about yourself

Tell the interviewer about yourself as it relates to your career field, the position for which you are interviewing, and how you will contribute. Your response to this question will typically be 2-3 minutes. When examining how to structure your response, consider:

- Why did you pursue your occupation or career of choice? Is there a brief example or story that would help illustrate this point?
- What strengths and skills have you developed that will make an immediate impact within the organization?
- How do your interests and values align with the organization's mission?

Behavioral Questions

These are questions that usually begin with “Tell me about a time when...” or “Please provide an example of...” While you cannot prepare a response for every behavioral question you might be asked, you should prepare 5 examples of work situations which address some of the more common behavioral questions. In some cases, these examples can be used to address multiple behavioral questions. By studying the job description, you can also anticipate behavioral questions specific to the position. Take time to think about examples from your experience that can be used to address those.

Common Behavioral Questions:

Tell me about a time when you...

- solved a tough problem;
- overcame a challenge;
- made a mistake;
- had a conflict with a teammate/boss/roommate;
- had to make an unpopular decision

To effectively respond to behavioral questions, use the STAR method. This acronym can be used to structure your response in a concise and detailed manner. Each part of this method is detailed below. An example in the far-right column demonstrates a response to a common behavioral question using the STAR method.

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STAR METHOD		Example: Tell me about a time you overcame a challenge.
Situation and Task	Situation and Task can be combined, because this part of your response explains the situation or task at hand. It will be the shortest part of your response.	<i>When I worked as a Resident Assistant in the dorms in college, it was challenging for me at first to talk with the residents about rules and their conduct.</i>
Action	The Action part of your response addresses your response to the situation. Explain how and why you acted in this way in this particular situation. You can also incorporate specific skills and abilities you used when taking this action.	<i>To overcome this challenge, I sought advice and counsel from the Head Resident about what helped him as a new RA and how he learned to work with the residents in productive ways. We practiced those conversations together, and we would debrief after I had conversations with actual residents. He provided me feedback on what I did well and what I needed to improve.</i>
Result	In the Result part of the response, you will describe the result of the action you took in response to the situation. This part of your response addresses how your skills, abilities, and/or judgment affected the outcome. You should also address what you learned from this example and its relevance to the position.	<i>Over time, I became skilled in engaging the residents in necessary conversations about rules on the floor and behaviors that would lead to more favorable outcomes for them socially and academically. In turn, I also mentored new RAs in this area. While it wasn't always comfortable, I learned how to lean into an important task outside my comfort zone. As a result, I have proven my dedication to skill development for the benefit of an organization and the people it serves.</i>

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Strengths and Weaknesses

- **Strengths:** In preparation for your interview, you should identify and practice explaining your strengths. If you are not asked directly about your strengths, you will still want to articulate these as part of responses to other questions. Additionally, for each strength, prepare examples of how that strength was developed and/or demonstrated.
- **Weaknesses:** It is also important that you identify your weaknesses, as you may be asked directly about weaknesses or areas in need of improvement. To respond to this question, provide a genuine weakness or area you are working to improve. The ability to identify your weaknesses and development of plans for improvement is itself a strength. Share an example of recent progress or a victory related to your identified weakness. It is also important to consider how you phrase your weaknesses. For example, there is a big difference between “I am not very good with time management” vs. “I am currently working to improve my time management skills.” Both statements recognize a weakness, though the later includes a solution-oriented approach.

Situational Questions

The interviewer will provide details of a situation and ask you how you would respond or approach the situation. Situational questions typically assess your knowledge of industry and professional practices and standards, ethical decision-making skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and professional judgment. Consider the following when responding to these questions:

- Articulate a clear action and why you would act in that way.
 - What other details or circumstances might factor into your decision?
 - How/why would you approach or address the situation in a certain way?
 - What do your actions say about your problem-solving skills, values, ethics, and/or professional judgement?
- Consider the industry norms or expectations for how this type of situation should be handled.
 - What are best practices for how to address the situation?
 - What does your professional code of ethics state about this?
 - Do local, state, and/or federal laws inform how one should handle the situation?

Your Questions

Asking thoughtful questions will demonstrate your interest in the position and your preparation for the interview. Your questions may also provide useful information you may take into account when considering whether or not to accept the position. Have 3-5 questions prepared. You may not have time to ask all of them, and some of your questions may be answered during the interview.

Examples of appropriate questions:

- “Could you please describe a typical workday at the office?”
- “Does your organization have a defined career ladder or clear path of progression for the next five to ten years?”
- “What do you like best about your organization’s culture?”
- “What do you enjoy most about your work or organization?”
- “What advice do you have for a person starting in this position?”

Examples of inappropriate questions:

- “How many days off a year can I expect?” (Save for negotiation)
- “What will my salary be?” (Save for negotiation)
- “Can you tell me more about your organization?” (Demonstrates you did not research)
- “How long can I expect to work for you before I receive a promotion?” (Does not show commitment to the current position)
- “I have observed there is a lot of employee turnover. Why?” (Too strong for interview)

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Virtual Interviewing

Confirm Date and Time

Be aware of time zone differences. If you are interviewing from a different time zone, be sure to account for the difference and confirm the time with the interviewer.

Test Your Technology

Always make sure your microphone and camera are working prior to the interview. Ensure you are able to access the software (e.g., WebEx, Zoom) being used for the interview. Even when you test your technology prior to the interview, things can go wrong. If technology doesn't work, keep your composure and find a solution.

Mitigate Distractions

To ensure your interview will not be interrupted, let your roommates or family members know you will be in a job interview. Make arrangements for your pets and find a space without background noise. Turn off notifications on your computer and place your cell phone out of sight.

Background and Lighting

Close any open doors in the background and remove any distracting items (e.g., posters). Choose a space with plenty of light. Close blinds or shades on windows to avoid issues with lighting and distractions from outdoors.

Audio/Visual Considerations

Always turn on your camera and place your computer/camera so your entire head and shoulders are visible. This will help you not appear too close or too far from the camera. Sit up straight and look at camera. Looking directly at the interviewers on the screen may make it appear you are not making eye contact. Speak clearly and enunciate your words to ensure you are heard correctly through the microphone and speakers.

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After the Interview

Thank You Letter

Write a brief, thank you note (handwritten or email) to anyone with whom you interviewed. Include a proper salutation, the position title, a sentence or two about your interest, and a professional closing and signature.

EXAMPLE THANK YOU EMAIL

Subject Line: Thank you from Josie Severson - 5th Grade Position at Longfellow Elementary

Dear Ms. Blackmore,

Thank you for the time you spent with me today. I really enjoyed meeting you and exploring how I might be able to enhance the community at Longfellow Elementary as a 5th grade teacher. After our conversations, I am even more confident that I would enjoy this position and make valuable contributions to your school. I am particularly excited about working with your STEM focused curriculum as I am passionate about science and mathematics education. I look forward to hearing from you regarding the next steps in the hiring process. In the meantime, if there is any additional information you need, please let me know and I will forward it immediately.

Sincerely,

Josie Severson

Post Interview Communication

If you have not heard from the organization within a week, you may inquire about the status of the candidate search, either by phone or email. If you are informed that you will not be offered the position, ask if they would provide you feedback on your interview and application. You may also send an email to the hiring authority and committee stating your interest in future opportunities at the organization.

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Example Questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- How would you describe yourself?
- How do you think a supervisor who knows you well would describe you?
- Why did you choose the career for which you are preparing?
- What led you to choose your field of study?
- Why did you select your college or university?
- What college subjects did you like best? Why?
- What college subjects did you like least? Why?
- Do you have plans for continued study? An advanced degree?
- Do you think that your grades are a good indication of your academic achievement?
- What do you know about our organization?
- Why do you want to work for us?
- Describe your most rewarding college experience.
- What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- How do you determine or evaluate success?
- What are your long-range and short-range goals and objectives? When and why did you establish these goals, and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?
- What do you see yourself doing five years from now? Ten years from now?
- How do you plan to achieve your career goals?
- What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
- Please describe a time you succeeded and what you learned from that experience.
- Please describe a time you failed and what you learned from the experience.
- Please describe a time you solved a problem.
- Please describe a time you went beyond the call of duty.
- Tell me about a time when you had a challenging interaction with a coworker or customer. How did you handle it?
- Tell me about a time when you were given constructive criticism and how you responded.
- Tell me about a time when you have worked as a “team player”.
- What qualifications do you have that will allow you to be successful in this position?
- What do you think it takes to be successful in an organization like ours?
- In what ways do you think you can contribute to our organization?
- What qualities should a successful manager possess?
- Describe the relationship that should exist between a supervisor and those reporting to him or her?
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- If you were hiring for this position, what qualities would you look for?
- How do you work under pressure?
- What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
- What criteria do you use to evaluate the organizations to which you apply?
- How do you keep up with the latest information in your field?
- Do you have a geographical preference? Why?
- Are you willing to relocate?
- Are you willing to travel?
- Why do you think you might like to live in the community in which our company is located?
- Why should we hire you?