

INTERVIEW PREPARATION GUIDE



Middlebury College
Center for Careers and Internships

INTERVIEWING

Interviews provide an opportunity to present your qualifications and experiences while relating them to the needs of an organization. An interview gives you a chance to confirm that the opportunity is a good fit for both you and the employer. Preparation and practice are keys to a successful interview.

PREPARE

Congratulations! You've been invited to interview for your dream job. Here's a "to-do" list to make sure you are well prepared.

1. Verify the names and positions of those who will be conducting the interview(s), as well as dates, times, and location.
2. Determine who will bear the costs of transportation, meals, and overnight lodging associated with the interview.
3. Research the organization thoroughly. Become familiar with recent events affecting the organization's industry. The Middlebury libraries provide a variety of excellent research tools at **middlebury.libguides.com/biz**.
4. Analyze the position. How does the position fit your professional goals? Be prepared to do the following:
 - a. Give a 90-second pitch outlining what has led you to this opportunity and why you're a good fit.
 - b. Discuss your qualifications, strengths, weaknesses, and fit for the position and organization. Your responses should reflect your self-confidence, ability to communicate effectively, and interpersonal skills.
 - c. Practice telling relevant stories and providing specific examples from your experiences. Recruit your friends to help you practice and videorecord your answers. You may also schedule a practice interview with a CCI advisor.
 - d. Review your application materials (résumé, cover letter, and anything else you might have submitted). Be prepared to talk about all of it.
5. Prepare questions for the interviewer(s).
6. Plan your attire. Dress for the job you want.

PROFESSIONAL DRESS GUIDELINES

Workplaces vary considerably in terms of acceptable dress. The guidelines below reflect a conservative approach to interview attire that applies most of the time. If you are interviewing in a creative field—such as advertising, public relations, fashion, graphic design, theater, or film—you can probably wear something less formal or be more creative with your outfit. Consult with a CCI advisor for advice regarding your attire choice.

- Dark-colored suits or dresses with conservative hemlines, neatly pressed and not wrinkled.
- Clean and polished conservative dress shoes. Match shoe and belt colors.
- Conservative ties and other accessories, minimal jewelry.
- Well-groomed hair; avoid unusual styles or colors. If you have long hair, it is appropriate to pull it back neatly.
- No visible body art; cover tattoos with clothing, if possible.
- Conservative makeup.
- No body odor; avoid cologne or perfume.
- No gum, candy, or other objects in your mouth.
- Portfolio notebook and professional purse or bag—no backpack.

COMMON INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General/Personal Questions

- Tell me about yourself; walk me through your résumé.
- What do you consider your strengths to be?
- What is your greatest weakness, and what have you done to overcome it?
- Tell me about something in the news that you find interesting.

Education

- What was your major? What determined this choice?
- What were your overall grades? Do you think your grades are a good indicator of your ability to succeed?
- What are some things you like to do outside of the classroom?

Questions About the Interviewing Company/About the Position

- What do you know about [insert employer name]? Why do you want to work for [insert employer name]?
- Explain to me what you think this position includes.

Role Specific Questions

- Describe a project where you demonstrated your analytical capabilities.
- Please provide specific examples where you used time management skills to complete a project ahead of schedule. What was the project and how did you prioritize tasks?
- Describe your experience leading a team, including at least one challenge you faced as a team leader.
- Describe your leadership style and give an example of a situation when you successfully led a group.

Ethics Questions

- How do you deal with a policy or process with which you don't agree?
- If you heard that a classmate had access to an exam for your class, what would you do?

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Depending on the industry culture and job function, you may have one or several interviews as part of the hiring process. Interviews typically fall into the following categories:

Screening Interview

- Typically brief (20 minutes to one hour), and may be held on campus, via phone or video call, or through a Web-based platform that bundles your answers to prerecorded questions.
- Conducted by a recruiter, search committee, or possibly Middlebury College alumni.
- Questions are usually about your past performance and skills.
- The interviewer will appreciate candidates who communicate well, connect prior experiences to the position offered, demonstrate knowledge about the organization, show enthusiasm for the position, demonstrate poise, ask good questions, and are dressed appropriately.

Phone/Video Call Interview

- Never take an interview call "on the go." Find a private setting where you can give the interview your full attention. If you are in your room, ask your roommates not to enter the room during the interview. Contact CCI to reserve a private interview room.
- If possible, ask beforehand if you will be speaking to an individual or a group.
- We recommend you wear interview attire for phone and video interviews. It is easier to have the proper mindset when dressed appropriately, and you'll feel more alert, professional, and at the top of your game. This energy will translate through the phone!

- Pay extra attention to your rate of speech, and be sensitive to pauses and breaks in the conversation. Keep your energy up by standing, smiling, and even making gestures while looking in the mirror. It may feel silly, but it makes a big difference in your enthusiasm coming through.
- It is important to convey energy through your voice; if you are soft-spoken, be sure to speak up.
- Take advantage of the fact that you are not “seen” by having your notes in front of you so that you can refer to them during the interview. This includes your résumé, cover letter, job description, and brief interview notes you have prepared. Have the interviewer’s name in front of you and end by thanking them by name.

Second Interview/Site Visit/Super Day

- Typically held at the site of the organization and lasting anywhere from one hour to all day, depending on how many people you meet with and the level of the position.

Lunch or Dinner Interview

If a meal is part of your interview day, remember that this time is still a critical part of the interview (it may feel like a social event but it is not). You should not become too casual. You are still “on,” regardless of whether you are having dinner with a senior manager or lunch with a peer-level employee of the organization. Here are some tips for the dining experience:

- Be sure to turn off your phone before arriving at the restaurant.
- Before sitting down, ask your host where she/he would like you to sit.

- Look over the place setting when you are being seated. Which bread plate is yours? Which glass is yours? (Remember: plate—center; knives, spoons, and glasses—right; forks and bread plate—left.)
- Place your napkin on your lap when seated. If you leave the table during the meal, place your napkin on your chair. Your napkin goes back on the table only at the conclusion of the meal.
- Use the proper utensil to eat. Begin with the one farthest from the plate.
- Ask for items out of your reach to be passed to you. Pass items requested by other diners.
- Order an easy-to-eat meal (avoid messy sandwiches, spaghetti, lobster, etc.). Order a moderately priced item.
- Take small bites and chew with your mouth closed. Do not speak with your mouth full. Pace yourself with the host and other guests.
- Maintain good posture—bring your food to your mouth, not the other way around.
- Do not drink alcohol (beer, wine, etc.), even if your host does. You want to be at the top of your game and alert during the meal and conversation. If your host offers you a drink, politely decline and instead order a soft drink, iced tea, water, etc.
- Be courteous to the waitstaff. Do not be demanding; say “please” and “thank you.” Also, remember that they serve food from the left and remove food from the right.
- At the end of the meal, thank your host for a wonderful lunch or dinner.

Case Interview

Case interviews are used by many consulting firms and other businesses to assess your problem-solving abilities. The interviewer will ask you to address a business case and evaluate you on the structure and logic of your thinking as well as your creative problem solving, all under time constraints. This type of interview requires extensive preparation and practice. Middlebury Consulting Group, a student organization, provides opportunities for students to learn how to work through cases. In addition, alumni volunteers are frequently willing to help with practice case interviews. Though the scenarios will vary widely, you can practice and improve upon the logical thinking and time management common to each case.

Behavioral Interview

“Tell me about a time when . . . ” or “Describe how you . . . ” are how most behavioral interview questions begin. This provides you with an opportunity to tell a relevant “story” that highlights your skills or how you have demonstrated competency in an area of importance to the position you want.

We strongly recommend you use the STAR framework (page 9) to clearly and concisely communicate concrete examples from your past experiences. Think through examples of situations where you have demonstrated certain behaviors or qualities for which the organization is searching (e.g., teamwork, analysis, creativity, etc.) and practice telling your story.

The STAR Framework

- S Situation** Describe the background (position, organization, time frame).
Example: I was hired as a summer intern by Vermont Insurance’s Investigations and Prevention team.
- T Task** Explain your task, responsibilities, or challenges you had to overcome.
Example: Our objective was to identify fraud patterns and develop detection mechanisms.
- A Action** What action did you take to handle the tasks or address the obstacle?
Example: I researched more than 500 client and healthcare provider records, and synthesized and analyzed large amounts of data to reveal fraud patterns. I also met with a focus group of employees who would use new fraud detection software to define and rank criteria for building the new detection training. Finally, I compiled information summarizing the time and resources devoted to this project and prepared a PowerPoint presentation for the general counsel to submit to senior management.
- R Result** What was the outcome? What did you learn or accomplish? What impact did you have on the situation? Quantify or qualify your results if you can.
Example: Senior management used this presentation as the basis for the development of companywide policies that maximized company savings and recoveries.

PERFORM

Professional Conduct/Etiquette Tips

- Arrive 10 to 15 minutes early; that is what “on time” means.
- Turn your phone off before you walk into the building.
- Carry a portfolio with a pad and pen.
- Be sure to have several extra copies of your résumé with you.
- Visit the restroom. Catch your breath, check yourself in the mirror, and put your best face on!
- Greet the receptionist warmly. Treat everyone you meet politely. The minute you set foot in the employer’s space (building, campus, etc.), you are “on.”
- Spend your waiting time focusing and taking in your surroundings.
- Greet your interviewer with a smile and a firm handshake; make eye contact.
- Maintain an alert but relaxed posture during the interview.
- Take your cue from the interviewer as to when the meeting is over.
- Shake hands firmly, smile, thank your interviewer for this opportunity to meet, and reaffirm your enthusiasm for the position. Ask for a business card.
- Make sure you have contact information for everyone you’ve spoken with, and send thank-you emails or notes within one day (preferably on the same day).

Questions to Ask the Interviewer

Five or six thoughtful questions will demonstrate your interest in the position. Never ask about salary and benefits during the first interview. Consider selecting a few from these choices:

- What are the day-to-day responsibilities of this position?
- Do you have a formal training program? If so, how long is it, and could you describe the type of training provided?
- How will my performance be evaluated, and how often?
- What would be a typical career path for an employee like me entering your organization?
- To whom would I report? Under whose supervision would I be assigned?
- What are your plans for expansion in terms of product lines, services, new branches, etc.?
- How would you differentiate your company from your major competitors?
- What do you consider to be the major problems facing the industry today?
- May I talk with present and previous employees about this job and organization?
- What do you like about working here?

Handling Improper Interview Questions

When you interview for a job, your prospective employer is supposed to ask job-related questions. The focus of interview questions should address your qualifications and abilities to perform the functions of the job.

In the U.S., employment law prohibits employers from discrimination on the basis of certain “protected classes.” In federal law, these categories include race, sex, disability, age, religion, national origin, and military/veteran status. Additionally, some (but not all) states also have laws that include sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes. It is unlawful for employers to ask questions that might be used to discriminate based on any of these protected categories.

What should you do if you feel that the interviewer is asking an improper (and possibly unlawful) question? You have a few options:

- You are free to answer the question. However, keep in mind that if you provide this information and give the “wrong” answer, you may jeopardize your chances of getting hired. There may be legal recourse available to you if you feel that you have been discriminated against, but this is not the preferred outcome for most job applicants.
- You can refuse to answer the question. Unfortunately, depending on how the refusal is phrased, you run the risk of appearing uncooperative or confrontational, and losing the job. Again, there may be legal recourse, but this is hardly an ideal situation.
- You can examine the question for its intent and respond with an answer as it might apply to the job. For example, if the interviewer asks, “Are you a U.S. citizen?” or “What country are you from?” you have been asked an improper question. You could respond, however, with “I am authorized to work in the United States.”

FOLLOW UP

After you interview for any position, you should send a thank-you email or note to those who took the time to meet with you. It allows you to express your gratitude for the opportunity to interview, gives you a chance to share any information that may not have been discussed in the interview, and sets you apart from other candidates.

- Send the thank-you message within one day of your interview. If you know the employer will be making a decision right away about the position, email your thank-you note or drop it off in person the next day. You can always send an email and follow up with a handwritten note, but do not write the same thing in each message.
- Send individual notes to each person with whom you interviewed. Each message does not need to be completely different; however, you should always try to personalize something specific to your direct conversation.
- Thank the interviewer for taking time to talk to you and mention how much you enjoyed the meeting. Make sure to specify the date you interviewed and the position for which you are a candidate.
- Mention something that made an impression on you during the interview and reiterate your interest in the position.
- Restate why you are an excellent candidate for the job.
- Share any relevant information (e.g., awards, research opportunities, etc.) that you forgot to mention or did not have a chance to share during the interview.
- Offer to send any additional information (e.g., references, writing sample, etc.) if appropriate.

FINAL TIPS

Tip #1: Ambiguous questions are not an invitation to ramble on without direction.

Stay focused; before beginning your response, identify two or three key points that support your qualifications for and/or compatibility with the job, and stick to these points.

Tip #2: Know your résumé inside and out.

Be prepared to discuss anything you have included on your résumé. Connect the skills/experiences from your résumé to specifics in the job description, the company website, and the company's mission, culture, and products/services.

Tip #3: Respond positively to questions.

Communicate clearly; use concrete examples whenever possible; demonstrate lessons you've learned from your experiences; know your "marketable" assets (strengths); and take advantage of questions that allow you to integrate points that strengthen your candidacy in your response.

RESOURCES

- Schedule a practice interview via Handshake
middlebury.joinhandshake.com
- Job Interview Questions
www.jobinterviewquestions.com
- Behavior Interview Questions Generator
www.da.ks.gov/ps/subject/bei
- U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission:
Prohibited Employment Policies/Practices
www.eeoc.gov/laws/practices/index.cfm
- Employment Background Checks: A Jobseeker's Guide
www.eeoc.gov/laws/practices/index.cfm

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