

Graduate Career Services

The Graduate School and Division of Student Affairs

Interviews

Congratulations, you've been offered an interview! This is your chance to show your future employer that you are a great fit for their organization. "Fit" is the alignment of your interests, skills, and values with the firm's cultural values and desired skill set. With a little preparation and practice, you can turn an intimidating process into a confident conversation. Here are the main elements of interview success.

How to Prepare:

The single most important thing you can do to increase your chances of success and reduce interview anxiety is to prepare by researching both yourself and the company. Think of (and write down) all the experiences and skills you bring to the table. Were there unique classes you took? What classes have you taught? What challenges have you overcome in the lab? What professional situations have you been in? For the company, look at their mission, history, product lines, services, and news items. Their website is a great place to start. Also, what is the status of their industry in general? How are their competitors doing? What innovations have popped up recently? Who is merging or going out of business? Your goal during the interview will be to place the stories you share about your background into the context of the company you will be working for so they understand how you fit in.

Your answers should be clear, concise, and confident, and that's where your preparation comes in. The more familiar you are with your background and how that fits with the company, the easier it will be to give well-organized answers with confidence. If you're trying to remember the details of an experience on the spot, you will fumble around until you get there.

Prepare stories. Think about times when you:

- Solved a problem
- Overcame a challenge
- Made a mistake
- Worked as a leader
- Worked in a team
- Did something interesting/unique

While you don't want to make your answers sound memorized, the stories and information should be very familiar so you can discuss them in different ways depending on the unique questions you are asked.

*Do Your Research!
Researching the organization achieves two goals: it shows the interviewers you are serious about the job, and you will give better answers by placing your background in the organization's context.*



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What to watch out for:

#1 Introductory Questions *"Tell me about yourself/Tell me more about your background"*

Answering this question is similar to giving your elevator pitch, but focused on the unique aspects related to the position you are interviewing for. Provide a brief overview to peak the interviewer's interest. Keep it short (30-60 seconds), and consider including these elements when relevant to the position or industry:

- The basics of your program and year
- Information about how you became interested in your field initially and what brought you to Notre Dame
- Highlights of your experience so far, including research, leadership roles, related courses you taught or took, and other professional experiences
- A description of what interests you in the position and organization.

#2 General Questions *"What is your biggest strength/What are you most proud of?"*

When answering general questions, it is essential to avoid responding only with general information. Instead, always include a specific story or example of a time when you used that biggest strength in a successful way. Interviewers relate to stories, and the example helps substantiate your claim.

#3 Self-Reflection Questions *"What is your biggest weakness/What is something you are trying to improve?"*

This can be one of the most difficult questions for candidates, primarily because they don't understand what employers are looking for. Avoid trying to make it sound like a positive (I'm a perfectionist). Employers want to see some genuine self-reflection, and most importantly they want to see some problem-solving skills. Pick something that you are actively trying to improve but is not centrally important for the job, acknowledge it, and then focus on 2-3 specific strategies you are applying to develop or grow in that area. Spend 25% of your answer identifying the weakness, and 75% discussing your improvement plan.

Example: John does not have much experience using Microsoft Excel, but is actively trying to learn it. He is applying for a job that does not directly require Excel skills. He could answer by saying: "I realized recently that one program I have not yet had the chance to learn is Microsoft Excel, but I know it can be a helpful and important professional resource. To gain an initial understanding of the basics, I reviewed the Microsoft tutorials in the help menu. I have also found a number of helpful video walk-throughs online for some of the more advanced features. Finally, one of my colleagues has been using Excel extensively for her dissertation work, and I have established monthly meetings with her to discuss the various ways she has incorporated into her own research. I'm still not an expert, but will continue to follow these steps to refine my skills further when utilizing Excel in the future."

Hint:
It is difficult to overcome negative personality traits and bad habits such as time management, organization, or punctuality, even if you are actively trying to do so. It is easier to learn new knowledge or develop a new skill than to change who you are.

Note: Prepare today for future interviews by actively working to develop new skills through multiple strategies.

#4 Behavioral Interview Questions *"Tell me about a time when..."*

This is where the stories you have prepared will come in handy. Employers are looking for very specific examples of things you've previously done that were successful.

Use the STAR approach to guide your answer: **Situation – Task – Action – Result**

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First step, if they say “tell me about a time when” then tell them about the time. What was the situation you were in? What task were you facing? It’s all background information, so if you prefer “BAR” give them background info, or “CAR” give them context. Without that they won’t understand the rest of your answer. Most of your answer should focus on your action. What steps did you take in that situation to be successful? Finish by including the results. Employers need to see that you had success.

Odd Scenario 1: If you can only come up with an example that featured a negative result, be sure to say what you learned from that experience and how you have applied or would apply what you learned in the future.

Odd Scenario 2: If you have never had an experience that fits a question, you have two options. You could offer to say what you would do hypothetically if it came up, or you could offer to talk about something similar but not quite the same. In both instances the important aspect is to offer. Say “Well to be honest I have never had the opportunity to do that before, but have done something similar. Would you like to hear about that?” or “...would you like to hear how I would handle that situation if it comes up?” That way the employer can move on if they only want to hear about actual things you have done.

#5 Wacky Questions *“Tell me a joke/ Sell me this pen/ What kind of animal would you be?”*

A general theme of interviews is to expect the unexpected. You really can't know exactly what is going to happen, and employers may throw you a curveball from left field to see what happens when you're out of your comfort zone. You can prepare for other questions, but you can't prepare for these. It might even be something tricky like “why does a curveball curve?” Sure, you might have a physics background and be able to come up with something about air pressure, but in reality many of the weird questions they could ask might not even have one right answer. They just want to see how you handle a little stress, and if you can process information to come up with something that sounds reasonable. Take a moment to think about it and analyze the information. Employers need to know that you will get through a tricky spot on the job if something comes up that you're not prepared for.

Sample Additional Questions to Expect:

- Can you tell me a little about yourself?
- What do you know about our organization?
- Why do you want this job?
- Why should we hire you?
- What is your greatest professional strength?
- What is your biggest weakness?
- What is your greatest professional achievement?
- Tell me about a challenge or conflict you've faced at work, and how you dealt with it.
- Where do you see yourself in five years?
- Why are you leaving academia/your current job?
- What's your management style?
- Tell me about a time you had to step up as a leader.
- Tell me about a time you disagreed with a decision that was made at work.
- How would your boss and co-workers describe you?
- Why was there a gap in your employment?
- Can you explain why you changed career paths?
- How do you deal with pressure or stressful situations?
- What would you do in the first 30, 60, or 90 days to ensure your success in this role?
- What are your salary requirements? For help, see: <http://www.glassdoor.com> & the [GCS website](#).
- What are your hobbies outside of work?
- What do you think we could do better or differently?
- What questions do you have for us?

NOTE: Do not prepare answers specifically for these questions. Interview questions can take many forms. Prepare stories and information that relate to questions like these so you won't feel stuck if asked more unique questions.

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What Questions to ask:

Always be prepared to ask open-ended questions at the end of an interview. Prepare more questions than you might need so you never have to say "you already answered all my questions." Basing the questions on your company research is always good, and all of your questions should help you determine if this is a great position and organization for you. At the very end, always remember to ask for information about the rest of the interview process, which will confirm your interest and help guide your follow up.

Questions about the job

Ask questions that will help you determine if you would actually like the job and be able to do it well.

- What can you tell me about this job that isn't in the description?
- What is the key to success in this position?
- What are the prospects for growth for the person in this role?
- What is a typical (day, week, month, or year) for a person in this job?
- What is the biggest challenge facing me in this position?
- How will success in this position be defined and measured?

Questions about their process and the next steps

The answers to these questions will help you understand how their hiring process works and how soon you should expect to hear from them.

- What does the rest of the interview process look like?
- How will you get back in touch with me (telephone, email, or something else)?
- When do you anticipate the person in this position will start?
- Who should I follow up with (get name, job title, and contact information)?

Questions about the organization

Do not ask Q's that could be answered by a quick search of the employer's website or Google.

- What can you tell me about this organization that isn't widely known?
- What is the key to success in this organization?
- How many people are in this group (department, office, and/or company)?
- How do you define (or measure) "success" here?
- How would an employee know if they were considered a success or not?
- How does senior management view this group?
- Where do you see this group in five years?
- When and how is feedback given to employees?
- I read that one of your company values is [value]. How is that integrated into the daily operations of the firm?

Ask about anything else from your preparation that raised questions for you.

Questions about your interviewer

Particularly if the person will be a co-worker or your manager, understanding what motivates them will give you more insight into both them and the job. If you know who your interviewer will be ahead of time, you can search for some of these answers on LinkedIn or other online sources.

- How long have you worked here?
- How long have you been in this job?
- What do you enjoy most about working here?
- What has contributed to your success here?

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How to dress

How you present yourself to potential employers is an important part of the interview process. Here are some tips to help you be prepared. Your goals in wearing appropriate interview attire are to make a positive first impression, feel confident about your appearance, and project a professional vision that aligns with the position responsibilities and cultural expectations of the company.

NOTE: If you have questions about any of the attire recommendations below, please contact a Graduate Career Consultant at gradcareers@nd.edu to discuss.

Recommendations for Women

- **Outerwear:** Conventional business pantsuit or skirt and jacket. A modest dress in dark colors or beige can also work. Skirts should end at or below the knee. Avoid clothes that are too clingy or too loose.
- **Shirts and tops:** Can provide a touch of color, but avoid plunging necklines and excessive patterns, frills, and decorations.
- **Shoes:** Closed-toed pumps with heels no higher than 2 inches. Align the color with your other clothes, and make sure they are clean and polished.
- **Purse:** Not required, but if desired make it small or medium and align the color with your other clothes.
- **Jewelry:** Choose either a subtle necklace or one earring in each ear. Avoid large or distracting jewelry.



Recommendations for Men

- **Suits:** Dark blue or gray are recommended. Pin-stripes are ok but must be subtle. Dark brown or black can also work. Quality suits made of wool or other natural fibers are most professional.
- **Shirts:** High quality button-down dress shirts in white or blue are most common and accepted. A subtle stripe can also work. Always iron your shirt, especially when traveling for the interview.
- **Shoes:** Dress shoes should be brown or black, and can be lace-up or slip-on. Ensure they are clean & polished.
- **Ties are REQUIRED:** High quality silk works best. Avoid bright colors and bold patterns. The tie should complement your shirt and suit.
- **Facial hair:** Clean shaven or neatly trimmed/groomed.



Recommendations for Both Women and Men

- Hair should be trimmed and well-groomed
- Bathe with soap and wear deodorant
- Cologne and perfume should be avoided or lightly applied
- Nails should be clean as well as trimmed or manicured
- Remove facial piercings and cover tattoos if possible.
- Be sure to SMILE, it's your #1 accessory

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Business Casual Attire

Business casual is not the same as casual. For men, business casual means either a dress shirt or polo shirt and non-denim slacks in khaki or dark blue. A sport coat can complete the look, and ties are optional. For women, choose a shirt, blouse, sweater, or knit top, and non-denim pants or knee-length skirt that complement it. Consider adding a stylish jacket as well.

NOTE: Business Casual Attire is generally not professional enough for an interview. For more tips on professional interview attire, check out our Pinterest page: <http://www.pinterest.com/ndgradcareers>

What to bring to an Interview

Bring along a carry-on bag, briefcase, or computer bag which includes a padfolio containing information you may need, such as:

- Copies of your resume or CV
- Application materials and job announcement
- Examples of teaching materials (sample syllabi, list of classes you have taught, etc.)
- Dissertation abstract and research plan
- Papers you have published
- Notes about your interviewers (who they are, what they do)
- Paper and pen

Make sure to include emergency items such as:

- Non-perishable snacks – you don't want your stomach growling if you haven't been able to eat much at lunches when you are doing most of the talking
- Umbrella – it is hard to be yourself if you are self-conscious about soaked hair or clothes
- Back-up items that will help you get through the trip without any major issues (e.g., alarm clock, ear plugs, mini sewing kit, individual stain removers ("Shout Wipes"), band-aids, extra contact lenses, glasses, tissues, allergy medications, eye drops, etc.)

Other things to consider

- Arrive at least 10 minutes early for your interview
- Leave your cell phone in the car, or turn it OFF completely (not on vibrate)
- Don't assume the employer or committee has read your CV or resume
- Make eye contact with people you meet, and have a firm handshake
- Make polite conversation/chit chat at the beginning of the interview
- Don't apologize about your background or lack of experience
- Be yourself but always stress the positive

Thank you notes:

- Make sure to thank the hiring manager or search committee chair for his/her time and effort
- Thank specific committee members, graduate students, and administrators with whom you might want to follow-up with
 - Although they may not expect a thank you note, this may help when you become a future colleague
- Keep notes professional but friendly
- If you learned something about the position that fits your qualifications particularly well, be sure to mention it
- E-mail the message or send via mail within 24 hours of the interview



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Phone Interviews

Phone interviews are very similar to in-person interviews, with the primary difference being the inability to utilize non-verbal communication. All the interviewer has to go on is what you say and how you say it. A few tips can help.

Attire: Even though they can't see you, dress like you would for an in-person interview (i.e. business professional). This can put you in a professional frame of mind and prevent you from slipping into an overly informal tone.

Don't forget to smile: It actually affects how you talk, and they can hear the difference in your voice.

Notes: Since the interviewer can't see you, you can have notes in front of you. Just don't rustle them, take too long finding your information, or read them word-for-word.

Vocal clarity: Many times the interviewer will be on speaker phone, so speak more slowly and over enunciate so you don't get distorted. This is especially true if English is not your (or their) primary language.

Visual aid: While it seems silly, having something in front of you like a stuffed animal, mirror, or picture can actually help you feel like you're having a real conversation and not just trying to imagine some faceless person on the other end of the line.

Environment: Make sure you go to an area free from noise and other distractions. No kids or pets running around or roommates watching TV.

Video Interview Tips

- Make sure you have a plain background with nothing distracting or inappropriate behind you
- Avoid sitting in front of a window or other backlighting, or else your face will be in shadow
- Remember if you want to make eye contact you need to look at the camera not the screen, so when they look at your eyes you'll be looking at them
 - When they talk you can go back and forth so you get some visual cues from their facial expressions, but anytime you want to make eye contact look at the camera not their face.

Confidence Tips:

A sense of confidence should permeate the interview. Not just in how you answer the questions, but in how you carry yourself walking into and out of the interview and in your posture.

Here are seven tips for projecting confidence:

- Stand (or sit) tall – use good posture so that your muscles and frame are supporting your weight, not the chair arms and back
- Maintain good eye contact – don't stare at the interviewer, but the more you break eye contact or look around, the more indecisive or shy you will seem
- Stay still – fidgeting is a key indicator of nervousness and low confidence
- Speak slowly and clearly – practice articulating your words to avoid speaking too quickly
- Be comfortable with short silences – don't start talking as soon as every question is asked, but rather give some thoughtful consideration to show you are listening and are confident in your speaking abilities
 - If you will need a longer-than-normal pause, feel free to say "that's an interesting question, may I have a moment to think about that?"
- Take bigger, slower steps – walking with short, frantic steps may betray your nerves

Power Poses:

Harvard researcher Amy Cuddy has found that "power poses" (those with open, expansive postures) can reduce stress and increase confidence. Holding a power pose prior to entering an interview helps you to maintain your composure, overcome nerves, articulate more compelling stories, and project more confidence.



For more information about this research, view her Ted Talk: http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are

Practice, Practice, Practice

The more prepared you are, the better. Set up a one-on-one practice interview with your Graduate Career Consultant by contacting us at gradcareers@nd.edu.