

Tips for a Successful Interview

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Consumer Series | Finance

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You've just applied for college admission, a major award or a new job. You have been invited to come in for an interview next week. Your resume, cover letter and good use of networking contacts have brought you this far. Now do your research, rehearse and relax. If you've had interview experience through 4-H youth development or school, you're ahead of the game. Here are some tips to help you make a good impression.

Interview Preparation

Do Your Homework

Learn as much as you can about the opportunity and the interviewing organization. Evaluate your own knowledge, skills and abilities and think about how you qualify for the opportunity. Find out information about the organization ahead of time.

General Questions

- What is the name of the interviewer(s)?
- Where will your interview be conducted? When and for how long?

College or University

- Is it public or private? State or municipal? Land grant? What majors are the most popular? How many students attend? Can you study online?
- Do you know any students who attend? If so, ask them how they like going there.
- What is the rate of admission? Of graduation? What scores do students usually need for acceptance? What is the rate of employment upon graduation in your field or area of interest?
- What are the expectations? Do you need to have a laptop when you arrive? Will you be traveling during breaks?

Award

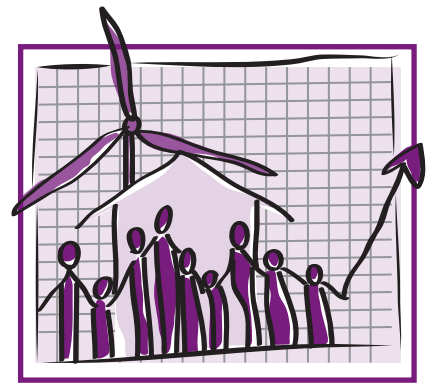
- Is this award given every year? How is it funded? How many winners will be selected?
- Do you know any previous winners? If so, talk to them about their experience as an award winner.
- What are the criteria and qualifications for selection? Do they offer other awards similar to this one for which you might apply?
- What are the expectations? Will you be writing a report or making a presentation about your experience as the winner?

Employment

- How long have they been in business? What goods or services do they provide? How many employees do they have?
- Do you know any people who currently work there? If so, ask them how they like working there.
- What will the responsibilities be? What skills and knowledge will you need to do this job? Are there opportunities for increased responsibility or advancement?
- What are the expectations? Is this a full-time or a part-time job? Is the schedule flexible and will it fit your other responsibilities?

Interview Styles

Be prepared for a variety of interview styles. Some interviewers simply ask questions from a list, some use a conversational style, and others may just say something like, "Tell me about yourself and why you want this opportunity." You may be asked to give a graphic representation of yourself in words or symbols on a chalkboard or flip chart. You could use one or more of the following types of visual aids: bar graph, freehand drawing, pyramid steps or resume outline.



Quick Facts

- To make a good impression at an interview: Do your research, rehearse, then relax.
- Practice ahead of time with sample questions and different interview styles.
- During the interview, be tactful, courteous, sincere, polite and knowledgeable about the organization and what you have to offer it.
- Always send a follow-up thank you letter to the interviewer.

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Before the Interview

- Learn as much as you can about the opportunity and the organization.
- Prepare for different interviewers' styles.
- Plan what you will wear ahead of time.

Appearance

Plan how you will look. Don't try a new haircut or style, but do get a haircut about a week before your interview. Makeup and jewelry, if worn, should be moderate. Dress conservatively and comfortably, about one level above what you would wear to work. Being clean and neat is most important. Plan ahead so that you don't have to scramble at the last minute about what to wear. Have a backup outfit ready just in case. No denim and no backpack.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Practice answering questions. List your skills, talents and experiences that directly apply to this opportunity, as well as any hobbies that relate to it, so you can tell the interviewer(s) about what you can do.

Plan and practice some answers to typical questions. Practice in front of a mirror, or record your practice interviews on an audio- or videotape. Watch for nervous gestures and eliminate any slang or other inappropriate language. You will be expected to speak in the language of work and school. Enlist the help of others to ask you questions and evaluate your answers and presentation. Look on the Internet for sites with practice interview sessions.

Practicing for the Interview

- Review the sample questions and write down your answers to them.
- Ask others to help you practice the interview.
- Tape yourself and study the tapes.

Typical Questions

Tell us something about yourself.

Sample answers:

- I am a team player with experience in solving problems.
- I try to make healthy lifestyle choices and to be a responsible citizen.
- I am an excellent communicator and enjoy working with others.

My answer:

What skills have you gained in your 4-H youth development experience that you would like me to know about?

Sample answers:

- My projects required keeping records. I learned the importance of setting goals and using resources wisely.
- People depended on me to be prepared. I know the value of responsibility.

My answer:

What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Sample answers:

- Managing my time is a strength because it helps me do many things I like to do. It can be a weakness because I tend to be overorganized and I might appear less friendly or fun-loving than I really am.

My answer:

During the Interview

- Arrive early.
- Calm your nerves.
- Greet the interviewer with a firm handshake.
- Answer questions clearly and completely.
- Thank the interviewer at the end.

Where would you like to be in five years?

Sample answers:

- I hope to be the most I can be wherever I am. I want to continue learning.
- I want to use the skills I've learned, including critical thinking, communication, teamwork and self-discipline.

My answer:

Why are you qualified for this opportunity? Why should we select you for this opportunity?

Sample answers:

- I know how to work. I have demonstrated I am a responsible and dependable person.
- I know you emphasize team work. I cooperate and share well with others.
- I have leadership skills and experience. You can count on me to follow through.

My answer:

Do you have any questions for us?

Sample answers:

- When do you plan to make your decision?
- What do you like the most about this organization?
- Describe the environment here.
- What are the characteristics of the successful applicant here?

My answer:

The Interview Itself

Arrive early, about 10 to 15 minutes before your scheduled time. Make sure you know how to get to the interview. If you are unsure of the location, make a trial run. Know where to park and if you need change for a meter.

Calm your nerves by taking deep breaths. Maintain a positive attitude no matter how you think the interview is going. Smile. Bring an extra copy of your resume, a fresh notepad and a pen.

Greet the interviewer. Offer a firm handshake. Listen carefully for the interviewer's name and title, if you don't already know them. Make and maintain eye contact. Be friendly but not too casual. Speak in complete sentences, and use a formal vocabulary. Don't fidget, chew gum, smoke or use slang during your interview.

Answer questions. Above all, be honest. You do not have to offer negative information, but be sure you don't lie if asked directly. Answer clearly and completely with enough information. Take a moment to think before you respond

After the Interview

- Make notes right away to help you with your next interview.
- Send a follow-up or thank you letter.
- Take advantage of other opportunities to interview.

to difficult questions. Organize your thoughts so you don't ramble. Remain calm no matter what question is asked. Be tactful, courteous, sincere, polite and knowledgeable about the organization and what you have to offer.

Conclude the interview. Thank the interviewer for the time spent with you. Ask when a decision will be made, if that hasn't already been indicated.

Interview Follow-Up

Make notes as soon as you leave. Jot down the name of the interviewer, questions you answered well, questions you might have answered more effectively, and questions you would like to have asked. Keep a file of notes from your interviews that you can use to prepare next time.

Send a follow-up or thank you letter. Type it on good quality paper, or write it by hand. Don't think you can skip it — interviewers expect it. Express your thanks for the interview and restate your interest in the opportunity. You can even answer a question you may have missed during the interview.

Take advantage of opportunities to interview through 4-H youth development and at school. Every interview can be a learning laboratory for you, and you will be ready for your next important interview.

Resources

Hendricks, P.A. (1998). Targeting Life Skills Model. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Extension.

Sample Follow-Up or Thank You Letter

123 West First Street
Anytown, State 01234
Today's Date

Dr. M. I. Interviewer
9876 East First Street
Anytown, State 43210

Dear Dr. Interviewer,

Thank you for the interview today. I am more interested than ever in your [college or university, award, job] and appreciate the time you spent with me talking about it. It was especially exciting for me to hear about your goals for the next few years.

I think your [college or university, award, job] offers just the right match for my skills and interests. During the interview, I didn't mention my community service work through 4-H Youth Development, but wanted you to know that I respect your organization's efforts to be a good corporate citizen. I would be proud to participate with you in helping others.

If you would like any additional information or references, please contact me at (123) 456-7890 or kstudent@myaddress.net. I am very interested in this [admission/award/job] and look forward to hearing your decision.

Sincerely,

(Use blue or black ink for your signature.)

Kirby A. Student

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