

Interviewing

<http://www.students.vcu.edu/careers/>

Interview Research

Before your interview, conduct some research on your career field, the employer who will be interviewing you and the position for which you will be interviewing.

Career Field: Know current trends in your chosen field. Newsletters and web sites of professional organizations related to your field can be excellent resources. Wetfeet.com, Rileyguide.com and Vault.com are just a few of the web sites devoted to career field and employer research.

Employer: Read the employer's printed materials and web site. Become familiar with the mission of the organization. Be prepared to talk about why you want to work for that particular organization.

Position: Know the position description like the back of your hand. Be prepared to talk about your interest in the position and how you are qualified for the position.

Interview Formats

One-on-one: One-on-one is the traditional interview format where one interviewer interviews one applicant. You may have a series of one-on-one interviews with several different interviewers.

Panel: In a panel interview, the candidate is interviewed by a panel of interviewers at one time. When answering interview questions during a panel interview, be sure to make eye contact with each interviewer to include them in the discussion, and end your response by making eye contact with the interviewer who asked you the question.

Group: A group interview is a less common format, and involves multiple candidates being interviewed by a panel of interviewers. The purpose of this unusual format is to see how candidates interact with each other, and some questions may even require the candidates to work together to solve a problem. This can be an opportunity to be gracious to your "competition" and to demonstrate your ability to be an effective team player.

Lunch: Interviews conducted over a meal are becoming more and more common. If you know that your interview will involve a meal, brush up on your dining etiquette by attending a business etiquette dinner, browsing through the etiquette books in the VCU University Career Center's Resource Library, or scheduling an appointment with your Career Consultant. Remember that the purpose of the meal is to continue the interview, not to eat. You may find yourself talking much more than eating so make sure you eat before the interview. The conversation may become more informal during a meal, but don't forget that you are still being evaluated – maintain your professionalism and stick to appropriate topics of conversation.

Tour: Your interview may include a tour so make sure you wear comfortable, yet professional shoes. If the opportunity arises, ask relevant questions during the tour that demonstrate your interest in the company and the position.

Information Session: Your interview may include an information session on the company, which may include other candidates. Be prepared to interact with other candidates and use this opportunity to demonstrate your respectful and gracious attitude toward your "competition."

VCU CAREER CENTER

Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Services

907 Floyd Avenue • P.O. Box 842007 • Richmond, VA 23284-2007 • (804) 828-1645 FAX: (804) 828-2060

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Behavioral Interviewing

Behavioral interview questions have become quite popular among recruiters. The premise of behavioral interviewing is that *the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar situation*. Behavioral interview questions ask you to provide an example of a time you were in a particular situation or encountered a specific challenge. These questions often start with, “Tell me about a time when...” or “Give me an example of...”

Tell the interviewer about a particular situation rather than providing a general response. Keep your answer succinct and focused, while providing enough relevant detail. Preparation and practice is essential. Use the list of common behavioral interview questions below to brainstorm examples and practice answering questions so that your memory is refreshed regarding your experience and achievements.

The STAR Technique

To effectively and completely answer behavioral interviewing questions, use the **STAR** technique.

S – Describe the **Situation**

T – Describe the **Task** presented

A – Describe the **Action** you took (not the action the group took if describing a group interaction)

R – Describe the **Result** of your action (if negative, what did you learn from this experience?)

Sample Behavioral Interviewing Questions:

- Give me an example of a time when you had to deal with a difficult co-worker or fellow student on a project. How did you handle the situation? What were the outcomes?
- Tell me about a time when you had to persuade someone to see your point of view. What tactics did you use? What were the outcomes? What did you learn?
- Tell me about a time when you had a list of things to do and your supervisor/instructor came to you and said “I need this project/assignment completed by 5 o’clock.” How did you handle the situation?
- Tell me about a time you were involved in a project with a group.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to supervise someone.
- Tell me about how you keep yourself organized so to meet deadlines or goals.
- Give me an example of a time where you failed to meet a goal. What did you fail to do? What were the consequences? What was the outcome?
- Give me an example of a time when you used creativity to complete a project, work with someone else, or develop a new idea.
- Describe a time when you were a team leader. Who did the team consist of, and what did you do to help your team be successful?
- Describe a time when you were assigned a task but were provided little direction for how to complete the task. What steps did you take to complete the task? What was the outcome?
- Describe a time when a co-worker or student approached you and criticized your work. How did you handle the situation? What was the outcome?
- Provide me with an example of a time when you had to motivate others. What were the outcomes?
- Tell me about a time when you had to make a difficult decision that affected those with whom you worked. What was the outcome?

Common Interview Questions

Listed below are some common interview questions with tips for answering them. As you prepare for your interview, it is not necessary to memorize answers; rather, practice talking about yourself, your skills, and your experiences so that you are prepared to answer a variety of questions.

Personal Questions: These questions target your interests, qualities, goals, strengths and weaknesses.

Tips for answering:

- Whenever discussing weaknesses or failures, be honest and give examples of real weaknesses. Focus on how you work to compensate for or improve those weaknesses, and what you have learned from your failures.
- When telling an employer about yourself, focus on relevant information. Think about your qualities, experiences, skills, and achievements that will be important to the employer.

1. Tell me a little about yourself. (Keep your answer career oriented.)
2. What are your strengths? Weaknesses?
3. What causes you stress and how do you handle it?
4. Give me three adjectives that describe you.
5. What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?
6. Who is your role model and why?
7. Who have you been a role model to and why?
8. What do you like to do in your spare time?
9. Why are you interested in this position?
10. Where do you see yourself in five years?
11. How do you define success?
12. How do you feel about working nights and weekends for special events and activities?

Employer Information: These questions are about your knowledge of the employer and your interest in the organization.

Tips for answering:

- Do your research beforehand!

1. What do you know about our company/organization?
2. What do you know about this position?
3. Why do you want to work in this field/for our company?
4. What are the most important features you are looking for in a job/supervisor?
5. What type of steps do you take to stay informed of new developments within your career field?
6. What can you contribute to our organization?

Education: These questions focus on your classes and campus involvement.

Tips for answering:

- Anticipate difficult questions. Do you have a withdrawal or failing grade on your transcript? If so, be prepared to explain those. Take responsibility for your grades. Focus on what you learned from the situation and discuss how you have improved your study skills and ability to prioritize.
- Be prepared to elaborate on anything on your resume. Don't include a student organization on your resume if you did not have meaningful participation in the organization.

1. How did you decide on your career/field/major?
2. What classes have you enjoyed the most/least during college and why?
3. How have the activities that you have been involved with during college influenced you?
4. Do you have future plans of furthering your education?
5. What campus activities were you involved with?
6. Explain... (a poor grade or another failure).

Experience: These questions allow you to discuss your work experience, volunteer and community service experiences, leadership roles, student organization involvement, or any other experience that is relevant to the position.

Tips for answering:

- Use specific examples to support your answers.
- Avoid talking negatively about previous employers or supervisors.
- Think broadly about your experience. Classroom experiences provide you with relevant skills and can provide some great examples that will support your answers.

1. Tell me about a time when you had to influence someone to accept your idea.

2. Give me an example of a time when you had to make an important decision and how you came to that decision.
3. What type of supervision do you prefer?
4. What is your personal style of supervision?
5. Tell me about a time when you had to work with a difficult person and how you handled it.
6. Tell me about your position with _____ and the valuable skills you learned.
7. Please give me an example where you demonstrated the ability to be an effective member of a team.
8. Give me 3 reasons why I should hire you.
9. How would your co-workers/supervisors describe you?
10. What did you like the most and the least about your last place of employment?
11. What relevant experience do you have?

Case/Technical Questions: These questions usually involve a business scenario or logic problem, to which you are asked to respond. There may even be role-playing involved, with the interviewer role-playing the client.

Tips for answering:

- If you don't know the answer, demonstrate your resourcefulness. What resources would you use to solve the problem? How would you find the answer?
- Ask for a moment to gather your thoughts before you answer.
- Ask questions. Business case studies should be interactive discussions.
- Your thought process is more important than the end result so talk them through your approach to solving the problem.

1. What would you do if...?
2. Could you tell us about what steps would you take to develop a plan of service to meet the client's social, health, emotional and economic need? (for a counseling or social work position)
3. You have a three liter bucket and a five liter bucket. How will you measure out exactly 4 liters of water? Assume you have an endless supply of water and no markings on the buckets. (this is a logic problem)
4. Estimate the market for light bulbs in Australia. (focus on the process, not the result)

Atypical Interview Questions: Employers occasionally add unusual questions to see how well interviewees are prepared to think on their feet.

Tips for answering:

- Don't spend too much time preparing answers to these questions. They are unusual and hard to predict.
- Be flexible and don't act surprised.
- This is your chance to be creative and show your (professional and appropriate) sense of humor!

1. If you were a fork, knife, or a spoon, which would you be and why?
2. Why are manhole covers round?
3. Sell me something in this room, anything.
4. If you were a tree, what kind would you be and why?
5. If the tables were turned, how would you interview me?
6. What did you do poorly in your last position or on your last project?

Common Interview Mistakes

- Mistaking stiffness for professionalism
- Not developing rapport
- Talking poorly about past employers
- Trying to take over the interview
- Forgetting/not using names
- Not listening
- Appearing arrogant/know-it-all
- Providing general, rather than specific answers
- Behaving too casually during lunch/tour/less formal parts of interview or with someone you know
- Sounding rehearsed/memorized
- Ruminating on poor answers
- Not treating every interaction with employer as part of interview
- Not communicating your excitement and motivation
- Not sending a thank you note

Questions to Ask Your Interviewer

Be prepared to ask questions at the end of your interview. Asking questions shows genuine interest and enthusiasm for the job and the company you are applying to. This is also your opportunity to “interview” the interviewers so as to determine your own fit for the position.

Research the company ahead of time to develop some ideas for questions. Avoid asking questions that are answered on the company’s website or in company literature. Your questions should demonstrate that you have prepared for the interview and done your research.

Plan to ask three or four questions, but prepare about ten questions since some of your questions may be answered during the interview. Be respectful of the interviewer’s time by asking a few thoughtful questions, rather than many superficial questions. Wait to ask your questions until the end of the interview, or until asked by the interviewer if you have any questions. Remember to let the interviewer run the interview.

Ask Questions About:

- Culture and philosophy of the company
- Technology used by the company
- Communication within the company
- Social, work/life balance
- Training and learning environment
- Leadership development
- Mentor programs
- Vision or future growth of the company

Sample Questions to Ask:

1. How would you describe the culture of the organization?
2. What do you like best about the company/organization environment?
3. What qualities do people seem to have who have done well in this department/organization?
4. What opportunities exist for advancement?
5. What is a typical day like in this position?
6. Is there anything else I should know that would help me understand the position?
7. Why is this position available?
8. How many people have held this position in the last three years? (If it seems like there has been high turnover, ask for an explanation.)
9. Do you most often promote internally or externally?
10. Does this organization encourage personal and professional growth? How?
11. What are the opportunities you see for this department/organization in the next year?
12. What are the typical hours of this position? Will overtime, night or weekend work be required?
13. What new tasks or responsibilities do you see someone in this position taking on?
14. What are the challenges that need to be faced? What types of challenges does this particular position offer?
15. What type of supervision would I receive in this position?
16. How did you start with the company/organization?
17. What do you like about working for this organization? How would you compare it to others you have worked for?
18. What are the greatest strengths of this company?
19. What would you change about this organization if you could?
20. How well do departments interact with each other?
21. Will the company continue to be competitive? How?
22. Is your organization quick or slow to adopt new technology?
23. What type of growth do you foresee in the next few years? Why?
24. Where in the company do you hope to be in five years? (A good way to sense potential growth.)

Illegal Questions

Questions about any of the following topics are illegal and should not be asked during an interview.

- Age
- Race
- Disability
- Gender
- National origin
- Religion or creed
- Family
- Relationship issues

Most interviewers (especially Human Resources) are aware of illegal questions and hopefully you will not encounter these questions. If you are asked questions about any of these topics, it is probably because the interviewer has not been appropriately trained to know that these are illegal questions. **You have several options for responding...**

Option 1: Refuse to answer or ask for the relevance of the question. The risk of refusing to answer is the possibility of embarrassing the interviewer and negatively impacting your candidacy.

Option 2: Answer the question. The decision to answer the question is a personal one. Consider your comfort level with the question, as well as the implications of answering the question.

Option 3: Answer the *real* question behind the question. This is not always easy to identify. By asking if you plan to have children, perhaps the employer is trying to assess your commitment to your career by determining what other responsibilities you have. Rather than responding to the direct question, you could assure the interviewer that you prioritize your career and have been successful at balancing your career with your other responsibilities.

Ask yourself what the question tells you about the workplace. Did the motivation behind the question just seem like a genuine effort to get to know you better? Did the question make you uncomfortable enough to cause you to question the values and culture of the company? If so, this is valuable information as you make your own assessment of the fit of the position.

Phone Interviews

Many employers will conduct phone interviews or “phone screens” prior to in-person interviews. If you are conducting a long-distance job search, you may also be more likely to experience phone interviews.

- Prepare for your phone interview just as you would prepare for an in-person interview. A phone interview is just as important as any other interview. This is the employer's first impression of you.
- Sit in a chair at a desk for your phone interview. You don't have to dress professionally, but don't get too relaxed. Your environment, and the way you dress and sit will set a professional tone for the interview. Make sure you have copies of all paperwork: resume, application, cover letter, previous correspondence, company literature, and your list of questions to ask.
- Notify your roommates of your phone interview so that they will allow you to answer the phone, and ask them to remain respectful and quiet during the interview.
- Typically, only one part of our communication is verbal. Body language usually accounts for a large part of what we communicate. During a phone interview, body language is taken out of the equation. Verbal communication and tone of voice is, therefore, very important during a phone interview.
- Write down each interviewer's name as they introduce themselves so you can write them a thank you note afterwards.
- Listen very carefully. Because body language is not playing a part, your verbal communication skills, both speaking and listening, are very important during a phone interview. Ask for clarification or for the interviewer to repeat a question, if necessary. Let them know if you are having trouble hearing or understanding, which can occur with a bad connection or during teleconferencing.
- Smile when appropriate. It will come through in your voice. Watch those nervous giggles, though. They will give an impression of immaturity and lack of self confidence.
- Give succinct, articulate responses. Speak clearly and at an appropriate rate so that you will be understood. Be extra careful of using filler words like, "umm," "like," and "you know." Again, your verbal communication is the only method of communication available to you during a phone interview.
- Don't talk too much. It can be easy to get carried away since you don't have the non-verbal feedback of your interviewers to let you know when it is time to wrap up.
- Don't be afraid of silence or pauses, which may seem exaggerated when you are on the phone.

Your Professional Image

Professional Appearance

Your professional appearance is an important part of the first impression you will make on the interviewer. Being appropriately dressed demonstrates that you are professional and well prepared to transition from an academic to a business environment. If you come to an interview dressed professionally, you will feel a sense of confidence and others will sense your self-assurance.

Each industry has its own dress code. Fields such as law, banking and accounting frequently have a stricter set of guidelines than advertising, retail and sales, which allow more casual dress. Even though suggested guidelines of professional dress may seem more formal than you would have imagined, remember that you should dress more formally for the interview than you would dress once you are in the job. Expect to be more formally dressed even than your interviewer. The level of formality you project shows that you understand the importance of the situation and respect the person you are meeting. When in doubt, making a conservative clothing choice for your interview is usually the safest.

Women	Men
Conservative, dark suit (knee length skirt or pants). Avoid low riding pants and tight clothing.	Conservative, dark suit (navy, black or gray; pinstripe or solid).
Collared, button-down shirt or modest scoop neck top. Avoid camisoles or low cut tops.	Ironed shirt in a conservative color (white or blue) and tie with understated patterns.
Comfortable shoes – flats or low heel. Wear plain, non patterned hosiery if wearing a skirt. Bring extra hose if wearing a skirt.	Matching belt and shoes, dark socks to mid-calf. Conservative, lace-up dress shoes that are clean and polished.
Conservative makeup and nails (clear nail polish only). Minimal jewelry (avoid dangling or large earrings; studs are best).	Hair cut, shaven, well groomed, remove jewelry.
Avoid perfume or scented lotion.	Avoid aftershave or cologne.
Can bring a padfolio and a small purse.	Can bring a padfolio.

Preparedness

- Before the interview, review your resume, cover letter and any correspondence with the employer.
- Know directions and parking. Do a dry run beforehand, if possible.
- Get enough sleep the night before, eat breakfast and arrive early. Avoid drinking too much caffeine if you are nervous.
- Bring professional padfolio and pen, copies of your resume and references.
- Turn off your cell phone or leave it behind. If you forget to turn off your cell phone, do *not* answer a call or text message during your interview. If your phone rings, turn it off and apologize.
- Leave bags behind (except purse).

First Impression

The employer's first impression of you is strongly influenced by your non-verbal behavior.

- When the employer greets you, smile and make eye contact. Offer a firm handshake, web-to-web with one pump. Avoid the four pitfalls of handshakes! – the limp, dead fish handshake; the bone crusher; the vigorous shaker; and the pincher.
- During the interview, sit at the back of the chair so that you are comfortable and have the support needed to maintain good posture throughout the interview.
- Use people's names. It creates rapport, as well as helping you to remember their names. Always use titles (Ms., Mr., Dr.) until invited to use first names. Err on the side of being too formal, rather than too casual. Use "Ms." for women (instead of Miss or Mrs.), unless asked to address them otherwise.

Thank You Letters

- At the very least, send one! Thank you letters following interviews are an expected courtesy; however, many applicants fail to send them. Simply sending a thank you letter will make a positive impression on the employer.
 - Send a thank you letter within a day or two after every interview for any kind of job or graduate school. Send individual letters to each person who interviews you.
 - Express appreciation for the interviewer's time and consideration of you as a candidate.
 - Refer to aspects of your discussion during the interview that further confirmed your interest in the job and/or company or that increased your confidence that you are a good fit for the position.
 - Reiterate your interest in the position. Employers will not assume that you are excited about the opportunity. It is your job to tell them that you are.
 - Continue to address the employer formally (e.g., Ms. Wyatt) unless you are invited to use their first name. Signing an e-mail with a first name only is an invitation by the employer to address them by their first name. Signing an e-mail with both first and last names is *not* an invitation to use the person's first name. Err on the side of formality. It demonstrates respect and good manners.
 - If your previous correspondence with the employer has been via e-mail, it is appropriate to send a thank you letter via e-mail. A handwritten thank you note on a note card, or a typed thank you letter is the most professional and courteous method of sending a thank you; however, it is better to e-mail a thank you letter than to not send one at all.
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Sample Thank You Letter

James Dalious
838 Marian Way
Chapel Hill, NC 27599
(919) 555-1959

November 15, 2007

Dr. Joan Nagle
Technical Design Group Director
Casey Engineering Systems Inc.
81796 Gulick Road
Charlotte, NC 28235

Dear Dr. Nagle:

I want to thank you very much for interviewing me yesterday for the associate engineer position. I enjoyed meeting you and learning more about your research and design work.

The interview strengthened my enthusiasm for the position and interest in working for Casey. I believe my education and cooperative education experiences fit nicely with the job requirements, and I'm certain I could make a significant contribution to the firm over time.

I would like to reiterate my strong interest in the position and in working with you and your staff. You provide the kind of opportunity I seek. Please feel free to call me at the telephone number listed above if I can provide you with any additional information.

Again, thank you for the interview and for your consideration.

Sincerely,

James Dalious

Interview Anxiety

Anxiety related to the job search process in general, and to the interview process in particular, is to be expected. A little anxiety can be helpful. It can give you energy and keep you motivated. It also shows interviewers that the interview is important to you. The last thing you want to do is to appear arrogant and unconcerned about the interview. So don't worry about sweaty palms or flushed faces. Remember that the interviewer has been in your shoes!

Anxiety Obstacles

If anxiety is paralyzing you instead of motivating you; if it is hindering your ability to answer questions, ask yourself...

- When does anxiety hit? Before the interview or during the interview? This is important to know so that you can prepare yourself to deal with it.
- What are you saying to yourself before or during the interview? We all have internal dialogs. You may be saying "This is not going well," "I'm not going to get the job," "I'm not prepared," or "I'm never going to find a job." These kinds of thoughts influence our stress levels, our self esteem and our motivation. Become aware of these negative thought patterns so that you can replace them with positive thoughts (see "positive self talk" below).

Anxiety Management

Practice methods of coping with anxiety

- **Interview practice and preparation** – Being well prepared is the best way to interview well in the face of your anxiety. Preparation will allow you to answer the questions well even though you feel very anxious.
- **Healthy eating, sufficient sleep and exercise** – A lot of the manifestations of anxiety are physical. Preparing yourself physically with a healthy breakfast and plenty of sleep will assure that you are physically and mentally on top of your game. Regular exercise can help reduce anxiety and tension, and improve the quality of your sleep.
- **Prescribed Breathing** – balanced breathing can help you physically relax and mentally focus in preparation for your interview.
 - Sit comfortably but erectly with your feet firmly planted on the floor just slightly in front of your knees, hands resting on your lap.
 - Inhale for 3 seconds, hold for 12 seconds and exhale for 6 seconds. Repeat 5 times for a total of 6 cycles.
 - At the end of the sixth cycle, exhale explosively and sit quietly, allowing your breathing to return to normal.
- **Positive Self-talk** – Replace your negative thoughts with confident, positive thoughts like, "I'm well prepared for this interview," "I am a strong candidate for this job," "I can interview well despite my anxiety because I am well prepared." With awareness and practice, you can replace these negative, detrimental thoughts with positive, motivating thoughts.

Resources: The Ultimate Stress Buster, by Sarah Brewer; Write Your Own Prescription for Stress, by Kenneth B. Matheny, Ph.D.; Healthy Habits, by Dr. Judith Pearson

VCU University Career Center – Interviewing Resources

InterviewStream

Virtual mock interviews enable you to practice your interviewing skills at an interview kiosk that facilitates and records your practice interview. Located in the University Career Center, the Interview Kiosk digitally records your practice interview and streams it into your online student account, making it accessible from any computer with an Internet connection. Visit the VCU University Career Center's web site (www.students.vcu.edu/careers) to schedule an appointment.

Mock Interviews & Career Counseling

Schedule an appointment with the Career Consultant assigned to your major for a mock interview or to discuss interview preparation. Visit the VCU University Career Center's web site (www.students.vcu.edu/careers) to view a list of Career Consultants by major.

Behavioral Mock Interviewing Program and Preparatory Workshop

Participate in the annual Behavioral Mock Interviewing Program, which is typically held for three days in March of each year. Several weeks prior to the event, you can log-in to CareerConnections/eRecruiting and sign up for a mock interview with an employer. Your session will consist of a 30 minute mock interview, as well as 30 minutes of verbal feedback and written feedback on your interview skills, attire and resume. The three day event begins with a Preparatory Workshop featuring an employer guest speaker. Visit the VCU University Career Center's web site (www.students.vcu.edu/careers) for more information.