The Interview—What Will They Ask?

Typical Questions Asked by Employers
An interview is a dialogue. It is an opportunity for you and the interviewer to learn more about each other and is not about winning the position. Focus on creating a relationship based on rapport, and on understanding and addressing the potential employer’s concerns. You will probably be observed on how you react to certain questions and how you are able to “think on your feet” when answering. Memorizing questions and answers is not the best way to impress a prospective employer. However, your preparation is essential to answer the common questions listed below.

General Tips on How to Answer Questions
Think about each question before answering. Consider what information the question is really probing you for. Pausing a bit will give you time to take a deep breath, relax and collect your thoughts. Remember, the key is to listen to what the employer is asking and answering the questions in a well thought out manner.

WHAT THEY ASK

• Tell me about yourself.
• Why did you decide to seek a job with this organization?
• Why did you choose this organization over our competitors?
• What do you know about our products/services?
• Why did you choose your particular field of study?
• There are thousands of possible careers. Why do you want to follow this particular career path?
• Why did you choose USC?
• What distinguishes you from other candidates?
• What job-related skills have you developed?
• How does your education relate to this job?
• Which classes in your major did you like best? Least? Why?
• What motivates you most in a job?
• Describe how you handle stress.
• How do you handle criticism?
• Give an example of a situation in which you worked through a problem to a solution.
• What kind of supervision gets the best results from you?
• Do you prefer working with others or alone?
• What is your experience working on a team (work or school)?
• What kind of job do you expect to hold five years from now? In ten years?
• What are your career goals—both short-term and long-term?
  • Five years ago—how would you have answered this interview question: “Where do you see yourself five years from now?” Do you think you have achieved what you wanted to?
• Describe your perfect job.
• What do you consider to be your greatest strengths?
• What personal development strategies have you used to overcome any of your weaknesses?
• Discuss two accomplishments from your college experiences.
• Why do you want this job?
• What are your salary expectations?
• How do you feel about working overtime?
• Are you willing to travel?
• Are you open to relocation?

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WHAT THEY SHOULD NOT ASK
  - Are you married?
  - When do you plan to start a family?
  - What race are you?
  - What is your national origin?
  - How old are you?
  - What is your religion?
  - Have you ever been arrested?
  - What type of military discharge did you receive?
  - What is your maiden name?

WHAT YOU SHOULD ASK
  - Can you tell me more about the structure of your training program?
  - What challenges are currently facing your organization/industry?
  - What kind of training would I be given for this position?
  - What qualities are you seeking in the person for this job?
    - Tell me about the type of projects past employees/interns have participated in.
    - Is this job an addition to staff or a replacement of a past employee?
    - Tell me about the immediate projects the person coming into this job will be responsible for.
  - What attracted you to (organization name you are interviewing for)?
  - What are the things you like most about working here?
  - What are the metrics the company/group uses to measure performance?
  - How do you define success?
  - What exciting or challenging directions do you anticipate over the next few years?
  - How do you measure an individual’s success in your organization?
  - What is the next step?
  - When will you make your selection?

WHAT YOU SHOULD NOT ASK
  - What does your company do?
  - What can your company do for me?
  - What types of benefits do you offer?
  - How much time do I get for vacation?
  - How much is the signing bonus?
Transferable Skills

In a job market where recent graduates indicate they are changing jobs four times within five years of graduation, it is important to articulate the skills you have developed as they relate to new opportunities. How portable is your skill set?

Skills can be acquired in a variety of settings. As a student, you develop technical skills related to your major. In addition, you work in teams on class projects or take on leadership positions in a student organization. As an intern, you begin to build your professional portfolio as you help your employers solve problems and meet customer needs. Make a list of your experiences both on- and off-campus and develop an inventory of skills.

What is your expertise? If you are having trouble answering this question, this tip sheet is designed to help. To be successful in the job search, you must relate your skill set to the job description and support it with accomplishments.

Each year the Career Center surveys our employers to determine the 'ideal candidate.' While this may vary among employers there are three major competencies that all organizations seek: communication, problem solving and teamwork.

Communication Skills
This includes writing, speaking and interpersonal skills. This is where Writing 140/340 translates into a valuable skill set to employers. An 'ideal candidate' has the ability to articulate their ideas in an organized and concise format. Platform skills will also contribute to your success in the hiring process. How often have you spoken in front of a group or class? Can you be persuasive in your presentation of a concept? Finally, employers are looking for someone who is engaging and enthusiastic. Your ability to connect with others as well as with the recruiter demonstrates your interpersonal skill set.

Problem Solving/Analytical Skills
Think of a problem that you encountered at USC or in your workplace. How did you arrive at a solution? Most employers derive revenue by solving problems for their clients. In recruiting for entry level positions, organizations are tapping into a new and fresh resource for creative solutions. This is where you can highlight your research experience. It is also an opportunity to describe how you go about making a decision.

Teamwork
Becoming skilled at sharing responsibility and work with others may be the most important thing you can do to add to your value. What role have you played on teams? Use examples of classroom group projects, sports teams, internships, and student organizations. What are the elements that contributed to team success? What did you learn when you failed as a team? Why do some teams succeed and others fail? This is not about building your resume to include participation in 30 organizations, but about demonstrating effectiveness and results as a member of a functional team.

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There is also a subset of skills that employers consider when reviewing resumes and interviewing prospective employees. Here are a few to consider:

**Initiative/Self-Starting**
In the past 12 months we have received more employer feedback on this skill than on any other. Employers are telling us that—to their dismay—new employees and interns are waiting to be told what to do. Demonstrate ways you have taken initiative and achieved positive results. Did you address a problem that was causing a loss in productivity? Many of you have brought your technology expertise to the workplace to streamline a variety of projects. This is an ‘energy and enthusiasm’ skill. What have you done to go beyond the job description?

**Leadership**
This was the number one requirement for a number of years. However, employers found that they could not run a successful business if everyone was in charge. As organizations collapsed their bureaucratic structures there were fewer opportunities for advancement. Teamwork became more important to the actual practice of an organization, though leadership is still important. If you have been a student leader, founded an organization or led a project team, you have demonstrated this skill. The result of your leadership is what counts. What did your group/team accomplish during your tenure as the leader?

**Flexibility**
The world of work is in constant flux. Employers are looking for people who thrive on change and are not paralyzed by it. Very often students will describe this as being ‘open minded.’ In fact, it means you are willing to change course and adapt to new rules quickly. How does your experience demonstrate your ability to adapt to change?

**Creativity**
In any organization, there is a need for fresh perspectives on existing problems. How original is your approach to a challenge? Did you color outside the lines? Do you think outside the box? Can you give a specific example of innovation?

**Willingness to Learn**
You don’t have all the answers. None of us do. You are applying to a position to add to your education in the workplace. In an interview you will convey your interest in the position. You will talk about what you bring to an organization to help them be successful. But you also want to express your interest in learning more about the field. Can you reference a previous experience that illustrates your willingness to learn?

**Attention to Detail**
This is the ‘common sense’ skill. Do you take notes in meetings? Do you ask questions to clarify directions? Do you read and follow directions? Do you proofread your e-mail, PowerPoint presentations and final papers? How committed are you to excellence in the small things? Be sure to proofread your cover letter and resume. A mistake on either will indicate a weakness in this critical skill.

Remember, when composing your resume and cover letter focus on the skills required in the job description. Utilize this transferable skill concept to demonstrate how your experience matches what the employer is seeking. The cover letter is your introduction. If you are applying for a position that is not related to your major or previous work experience include a paragraph in the cover letter that connects your transferable skills to the job description. Demonstrate to a prospective employer that you have developed an expertise based on a skill set that suits their hiring needs.
The Interview—Different Types

There are many different types of interviews. Once you are selected for an interview, you may experience one or more of the situations described below. When you schedule an interview, try to get as much information as possible about whom you will be meeting. Note that it is rare to have only one interview prior to a job offer. Most employers will bring back a candidate a number of times to be sure a potential employee will fit into the company culture.

**Traditional Face-to-Face Interview**
- Most interviews are face-to-face. The most traditional is a one-on-one conversation.
- Your focus should be on the person asking questions. Maintain eye contact, listen and respond once a question has been asked.
- Your goal is to establish rapport with the interviewer and show them that your qualifications will benefit their organization.

**Panel/Committee Interview**
- In this situation, there is more than one interviewer. Typically, three to ten members of a panel may conduct this part of the selection process. This is your chance to put your group management and group presentation skills on display.
- As quickly as possible, try to 'read' the various personality types of each interviewer and adjust to them. Find a way to connect with each interviewer.
- Remember to take your time in responding to questions. Maintain primary eye contact with the panel member who asked the question, but also seek eye contact with other members of the panel as you give your response.

**Behavioral Interview**
- The basic premise behind this type of interview is that your past behavior is the best predictor of your future actions. These types of questions may be asked in any interview format—telephone, panel or one-on-one.
- If the employer asks behavior-oriented questions, they are no longer asking hypothetical questions but are now asking questions that must be answered based on facts.
- With a behavioral question, the interviewer is looking for results, not just an activity list. They are listening for names, dates, places, the outcome and especially what your role was in achieving that outcome.
- This type of question generally starts with the words “Give me an example when...” or “Tell me about a time when...”

**Case Interview**
- In some interviews you may be asked to demonstrate your problem-solving skills. The interviewer will outline a situation or provide you with a case study and ask you to formulate a plan that deals with the problem.
- You do not have to come up with the ultimate solution. The interviewers are looking for how you apply your knowledge and skills to a real-life situation. Speak and reason aloud so interviewers have a full understanding of your thought process.

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Case Interview (continued)

- Before answering a case interview question, be prepared to ask the employer numerous questions for clarity and informational purposes. Most employers will provide responses that could result in additional inquiries.
- The more you are able to analyze and dissect the case study, the more you will likely impress your interviewer.
- This is the only interview for which it is acceptable, even encouraged, to bring a pad of paper and pencil. Most interviewers will allow you to take notes and jot down thoughts as you work through the case.

Telephone Interview

- Many organizations will conduct interviews by telephone to narrow a field of candidates. Telephone interviews may also be used as a preliminary interview for candidates who live far away from the job site.
- It is important to treat this interview as you would a face-to-face connection. Arrange for a quiet space and time to schedule the conversation. Clear a work surface to minimize distractions.
- Focus on the conversation. Listen to the questions carefully before you answer. Since your voice is key, convey energy with inflection in your voice.
- Have a copy of your resume nearby as a reference.
- Avoid using a phone with call waiting. You do not want to be interrupted during an interview.
- Try to use a landline phone or a cell phone that is not prone to dropping calls.

Group Interview

- A group interview is usually designed to uncover the leadership potential of prospective managers and employees who will be dealing with customers.
- The front-runner candidates are gathered together in an informal, discussion type interview. A subject is introduced and the interviewer will start off the discussion.
- The goal of the group interview is to see how you interact with others and how you use your knowledge and reasoning to influence others.

Lunch/Dinner Interview

- The same rules apply at a meal as those in an office. The setting may be more casual, but remember that it is a business meal and you are being watched carefully.
- Use the interview to develop common ground with your interviewer. Follow his/her lead in both selection of food and etiquette.
- Avoid messy foods and do not drink alcohol at any point in this part of the interview process.
- See the Career Center tip sheet “The Interview—Etiquette” for additional tips.

Stress Interview

- This form of interview was more common in sales positions and is rare today. However, you should be aware of the signals. The stress interview is usually a deliberate attempt to see how you handle yourself under pressure.
- The interviewer may be sarcastic or argumentative, or may keep you waiting. Do not take it personally. Calmly answer each question. Ask for clarification if you need it and never rush into an answer.
- The interviewer may also lapse into silence at some point during the questioning. This may be an attempt to unnerv you. Sit silently until the interviewer resumes the questions. If a minute goes by, ask if he/she needs clarification of your last comment.