

University of Surrey

Careers Service

<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers>

The First Interview

What's it like?

Most first interviews involve meeting an employer and answering questions about your application form or CV. Fundamentally, the interviewer will be checking two things - can you do the job you've applied for and do you want to do it.

How long do they last?

Anything from 15 minutes to one hour though most tend to last about 30 - 40 minutes.

What should I wear?

Dressing smartly is safer than dressing casually. For men this usually means wearing a suit or jacket and trousers, and a tie. For women, a suit or a smart top with trousers or a skirt are all acceptable.

Are they always with just one interviewer?

Usually, but not necessarily. If you are faced with more than one person, the trick is to answer each questioner as if they alone were interviewing you - though occasional glances at the other interviewers are a good idea.

What sort of preparation should I do?

It's important to get hold of a job description if you can. This is a summary of the tasks you would be required to perform. Job advertisements often include this information as well. You should ask yourself how you would convince an employer you would have the appropriate skills or experience demanded by each task. You may have acquired these from your degree, your leisure or community activities or from any work experience you might have had. Prepare for questions such as "Can you describe a situation in which you demonstrated a skill which the job demands?".

What if I can't do something which the job requires?

Fortunately, you probably wouldn't have been asked to the interview if the employer thought there was a major deficiency in your application. Nevertheless, it's always better to say something productive than nothing at all. For example, if the job required managing people and you had no direct experience of this you could say "..... however, I was Captain of the Fencing Club for two years and this often involved delegating jobs to other people and generally co-ordinating their activities."

Is there any other preparation I should do?

Yes, it's also very important to find out as much as you can about the organisation you've applied to. The employer's website will contain information about the company. As a *minimum* read their graduate or careers section but try to read the other sections too. It's also worth searching the national newspapers or the BBC Business and Money site <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business> for references to your employer.

How do they start?

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer will normally offer to shake your hand. Try to reply with a firm, but not bone-crushing, handshake. Anything less than firm could give the impression that either you didn't want to talk to them, which you can't risk conveying even if it's true, or that you have a weak or unassertive personality.

What happens next?

Try to take your cues from the interviewer. They will normally invite you to sit down. It will help you to relax if you adopt a comfortable, but alert seating position. From then on it's important to look the interviewer in the eye as much as possible. Failure to do this could give the impression you are hiding something. They will usually want to help you relax by starting with an easy question about your journey to the interview or something like that. After that they will tend to ask you lots of open-ended questions prompted mainly by the job description and what you have written on your application form or CV.

What exactly is an open-ended question?

Most interviewers are trained to ask questions which cannot be answered simply yes or no. Questions which start with "why", "how", "tell me about" and "could you describe" are designed to get you to talk freely. By the way, if the interviewer should ask you a question which allows a yes or no answer, it's not a bad idea to volunteer extra information if you think it could help your case. For example, in answer to the question "do you read a newspaper"? you could reply "yes, I buy a quality Sunday paper every week because I find it provides a good overview of the previous week's news and also has excellent commentaries on current issues".

Are there only ever right or wrong answers?

No, but some are better than others! As you compose your answer it's important to relay two messages to the interviewer. The first is to make sure that what you say, as far as possible, is relevant to the job you are applying for. The second, is to convince them you really want the job.

I've heard that interviewers sometimes ask ridiculous questions

They may seem a bit silly, like "What makes you get up in the morning?", but there's method in their madness. That particular question is designed to find out what drives you. An answer along the lines of "I find every day a challenge because you never know what problems you're going to face" is better than "I hate getting up for a 9 o'clock lecture". One way to prepare for difficult questions is to plan how you would answer them before you even get to the interview. Try working your way through some on the back page of this leaflet for example. Better still, write out a list of all the questions you would hate to be asked and try composing answers to them. If one of them pops up in an interview it's very reassuring to know you've met it before and at least have the gist of an answer in your head.

What if they ask me something I haven't prepared for?

Whatever you do, don't just blurt out the first thing that comes into your head. It's OK to pause while you collect your thoughts. You could even buy a bit of time by saying something like "that's a good question" or "do you mind if I have a moment or two to think about it"? It may be that you have found the question difficult because you think your answer will mean saying something negative about yourself. If that is the case you could try using the "yes - but" technique. It goes something like this: "Yes, I did struggle with GCSE Maths but since then I have worked hard to improve my numeracy, particularly through". This technique enables you to finish on a positive note.

How can I convince them I really want the job?

It's all about what you say and how you say it. To illustrate the first point, consider these two answers: "I'd be interested in working here" and "I'd love to work here". The second answer is much more positive and could make all the difference if other applicants didn't sound so keen. It's more difficult to illustrate the second point because it's all about sounding enthusiastic about the job. In other words, do they think you really mean what you say? Don't be afraid to show a bit of passion and emotion! And, by the way, it's OK to smile!

What about asking them questions?

If something crops up during the interview which you really haven't understood, it's perfectly OK to ask them to clarify things. There is nearly always an opportunity to ask questions at the end of the interview as well. If you have genuine questions to ask, now is the time. Alternatively, you can generate potential questions before the interview by imagining yourself doing the job you've applied for. As you are unlikely to have done precisely that before, this should throw up all sorts of questions such as "how exactly will I be trained?" "What will my working environment be like?" "Who will I be accountable to?" "Where could I expect to be in five years' time?" "What do you see are the potential areas of growth for your company over the next few years?" and so on. By the way, it does help to have something to say even if it's only "thank you, but I've found the whole selection process has been so informative that all my questions have been answered".

Should I raise the subject of salary?

Tricky one this. If you think there might be other stages in the selection process such as further interviews, it's probably wise to raise it towards the end of those. If it's a single interview, on the other hand, and you're genuinely concerned to know what they will pay you, you will need to ask. Hopefully, the subject will already have arisen during your conversation so there won't be a problem. They may, of course, ask you how much you expect to earn. To prepare for this it's helpful to do some research before the interview. The employer brochure might give some idea. Careers staff could also help by giving you an indication of the average salaries paid for the type of job you are interested in. The Prospects website www.prospects.ac.uk also has typical salary information for about 400 different jobs. Suggesting a salary range in your answer such as £16,000-£18,000 rather than £16,975, for example, will give the employer room for manoeuvre.

Any final tips?

You may feel towards the end of the interview that you haven't really sold yourself to them. At the point where they ask you if you've got any questions you could say "Actually I've no further questions but I wondered if I could just say how much I'd enjoy working here if I'm given the opportunity". Their parting memory of you will be one of a confident, enthusiastic person who is keen to do the job. At the end of the day that kind of impression could make the difference between success and failure.

How will the interview finish?

You'll need to take your cues from the interviewer. They're likely to say something like "Thank you for coming along today, I'll be in touch within a week or two to let you know the outcome". At this point they'll probably stand and offer to shake your hand again. Try to end as confidently as you started. Thank them for their time and say you'll look forward to hearing from them.

What about telephone interviews?

Large employers are increasingly carrying out a preliminary interview over the phone. Your preparation for this should be the same as if you were meeting them face-to-face. As with a normal interview, make sure you are comfortable right from the start. At least you have the choice to stand if you want to! Also, do all you can to avoid being disturbed while you are on the 'phone. They may start by asking you for some biographical information. Plan to have a copy of your CV or application form to hand for quick reference to important dates, qualifications etc. Thereafter, the interview is likely to progress much as described in this leaflet. However, one useful tip is to try smiling while you are talking. This has been shown to have a positive effect on the interviewer and is likely to help you to feel more relaxed and confident.

Common questions

Why have you applied for this position?

What attracted you to this organisation?

What do you know about us?

Tell me about your course.

Can you describe a situation where you solved a problem, made a difficult decision, etc

What are your best/worst subjects? Why?

Why did you choose to read for a degree in.....?

Why did you choose to go to University of Surrey?

What do you think you learned from your Professional Year/vacation/part time job?

More difficult questions

Tell me about yourself.

What are your weaknesses?

What has been your greatest achievement?

What is your view on (e.g. current news issue)?

What would you do if you did not have to work for money?

How would your best friend describe you?

Why were you not more involved in University life?

How do you see your career developing?

What has been your most difficult decision to date?