Interviews: Format, answers, and questions

Congratulations on your interview! Whether you are confident, or not so confident, in your interview skills please keep in mind these confidence building thoughts:

- **Interviews are conversations** about your skills – the best answers are based upon specific examples not generalities.
- **You were selected** for this conversation and many were not therefore, by getting time with an employer it means that they like your background and believe that you are one they could potentially hire.
- **It is in their best interest to make candidates comfortable** – they do want to know you and the only way candidates can answer questions is if they feel calm.
- **Speak in terms of what you accomplished** – Clarkson students are great in teams but employers also want to hear what you specifically did, even within team environments (it’s about the “I” and not always the “We” in interviews)

Interview resources and services:

- **Mock interview** – A Career Center representative or alumnus/a from Clarkson can conduct a full practice interview. Questions will be representative of what you will encounter. Feedback will be provided at the conclusion.
- **InterviewStream** – An online service through the Career Center that allows students to tape themselves answering interview questions. Most industries and career fields are represented. Student may send their interview via a link to Career Center representatives and/or contacts of their choice (please note link is good for 60 days).

**TYPES OF INTERVIEWS**

1. **Telephone** – Most often, these are initial screening interviews that last from 10 to 20 minutes. The goal of this interview (for the employer) is to cover your interest in the position, your strengths, overview of your experiences, and for the employer to describe the position in greater detail.
   - Why are you interested in this position and/or organization?
   - Tell me about yourself.
   - Describe your greatest attributes and provide an example. They may even ask you to describe a specific experience or role from your background.
   - What questions do you have? *Candidate should have some prepared in advance and be sure to ask a couple, otherwise it appears as if you are not interested.*
   - Tips –Have your résumé, a few examples of accomplishments, pen and paper for notes, and speak slowly.
   *If this interview is scheduled to last 30 to 45 minutes, please review the “4 Phases” part of this handout since a longer phone interview will be more closely aligned with an on-site interview in terms of questions.*

2. **On-site / Company Visit** – This interview may last one hour or up to a full-day. If the latter, it generally means that you will meet with someone from Human Resources, hiring managers, senior employees, and coworkers. Even full-day interviews with a company are broken up into a number of 30 – 45 minute interviews with various employees. It is common to feel that you are answering similar questions from each person/group.
   - **Travel** arrangements will likely be discussed with you in advance, with the organization paying for airfare, hotel or reimbursing you after the visit (a company is not obligated to pay your expenses but generally does); it is appropriate to ask about expenses in advance if the organization does not bring it up.
   - **Itineraries** are usually provided to candidates but they vary in the amount of detail provided.
   - **Meals** – If a full-day, lunch or dinner with a team of representatives is common. Varies by position/industry.
   - **Salary** – May arise during an onsite interview. Let the company bring up the subject but be prepared with an appropriate range based upon education, region, etc. *Consult the Career Center for specific information.*
   - **Test** – Not common but not unusual. Be prepared for technical questions that apply to your discipline.
3. **Group** – A small group of representatives conduct one interview with a candidate. One tip is to include each member of the group in your answer, while making eye contact with each person as you answer (“putting your head on a swivel”). Groups are advantageous because they provide candidates with a chance to impress more than one person.

### INTERVIEW PROCESS & FORMAT

**ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION** – The vast majority of interviews begin with questions pertaining to a candidate’s interest in working at their organization and why the position is of interest. Below represents some topics that candidates can learn about/research prior to the interview. *Be able to discuss these topics in terms of their importance/interest to you and/or how they fit your background.* Use your knowledge about a company to demonstrate why it fits you!

- Why did you apply to our organization?
- What about the position interests you (why did you apply)?

**Examples of topics to review (just select those that interest you)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative size of firm in the industry</th>
<th>Competitive products</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential growth for the industry</td>
<td>Organizational structure (if readily available)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Array of product line or services</td>
<td>Competitive organizations</td>
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<td>Present price of stock &amp; recent trend / sales growth</td>
<td>People you know in the firm</td>
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<td>Current customer base</td>
<td>Formal versus on-the-job training</td>
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<td>Company or organizational culture</td>
<td>Typical career path in your field</td>
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<td>Name of recruiter / other contacts</td>
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<td>Geographical locations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Various price points in product or service line</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Type of training program</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Potential new markets, products, or services</td>
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**ANSWERING QUESTIONS** – After discussing your interest in the company and position, the interview will transition to questions about your specific skills and behaviors as they relate to a position. Candidates ought to be specific when answering questions by providing an example or illustration.

Employers most often use the STAR technique when evaluating skill/behavior questions. Their questions will begin with “Tell me a time when...” or “Describe a time when...” Or “Give me an example of when you...”

**STAR technique – how to answer using this method of example driven answers**

- **Situation or Task:** Provides the background information of who, what, when, where, etc. or the task that needed to be accomplished. Describe a specific event or situation. Provide enough details for an interviewer to understand. The situation/tasks can be from any experience (job, internship, co-op, club, volunteer). For instance, if describing a class or work project, say which class it was and what the project objectives where specifically.

- **Action:** This is where you describe the role you played or the action you took to complete the tasks. For group examples, describe what you did...not the team (unless specifically asked about team skills).

- **Result:** The outcome of what happened, what you learned, and what you accomplished.

### APPEARANCE & ATTITUDE (basics)

While many companies have adopted a “business casual” dress code, it is still recommended that for interviews students wear a suit. Dark colors (charcoal, navy, black) are best. Fit is most important, not cost. Shoes ought to have a slight shine.

**Men** - Shirts should be conservative in color with white or light blue being best; ties ought to be conservative; socks should be dark and coordinate with the suit (i.e. black socks for charcoal or black suits); no jewelry outside of a watch and/or ring

**Women** - blouse colors can be of a wider range than men; close-toes shoes with moderate heel/pump; minimal jewelry

Be sure to bring a padfolio that contains a pen, extra resumes, and your questions prewritten out on the pad. Padfolios are generally black and have a pad on one side with a slot for files/documents on the left.

### CLOSING & NEXT STEPS

After an employer has asked their questions, they will provide you with an opportunity to ask questions.

Candidates should always have questions, otherwise it appears as if they are not interested. Sample questions to ask may include those listed below. Ask questions that are of interest to you and always ask about the next steps in the hiring process or when a decision will be made. Always be sure to send a thank you note!
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Although it is difficult to know exactly what you will be asked during an interview, the questions below or something similar will likely be covered. In addition to these more general questions, the Career Center staff can offer customized and more industry-specific questions through the following resources.

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COMMON INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What about this position interests you? Why did you apply? Why are you a good fit for this role? (one of the three)
3. What are your long-term career goals? Where in two to five years?
4. Why do you feel that you will be successful in.....?
5. What supervisory or leadership roles have you held?
6. What have been your most satisfying and most disappointing experiences?
7. What are your strongest (weakest) personal qualities?
8. Give me some examples that support your stated interest in.....
9. Describe a time when you held a leadership role.
10. What courses did you like best? Least? Why?
11. What did you learn or gain from your part-time and summer job experiences?
12. Which geographic location do you prefer? Why?
13. What can you do for us now? What motivates you?
14. How did you choose your major and other academic pursuits?
15. Explain your academic grade performance levels.
16. Tell me about your activities and interests outside work and school.
17. Give me examples of how you demonstrated leadership.
18. Tell me about a time you solved a problem, worked as a team or used communication skills.
19. Tell me about a time when something didn’t go the way you planned?
20. Give me an example of a creative idea of yours that was implemented at work.
21. Share a situation in which you had two tasks of equal importance but had to prioritize them. How did you prioritize your time to accomplish both?
22. Describe the most difficult decision you’ve ever made.
23. Tell me about a time when you dealt with a stressful situation (at work or at school).
24. Give me a specific challenge or problem and how you handled it. How was it resolved? Result?
25. What motivates you in a job?
26. Why did you choose your major?
27. Tell me about a team that you were on. Role? Function? Successful? Change?
28. Describe a difficult situation that involved a co-worker or student. Handled? Outcome?
29. Recall a time when you were assigned a complex project. What steps did you take to prepare for and finish the project? What would you have done differently?
30. How do you think a former supervisor would describe you?
QUESTIONS TO ASK EMPLOYERS

Students often find themselves in situations (networking events, professional conferences, guest speakers, interviews, etc.) where they have an opportunity to engage with professionals. These situations provide students with a chance to obtain valuable information. However, some students may not know what to ask or how to approach them. The questions below, broken down by category, may provide an excellent starting point. Also, at an interview, candidates will be asked if they have questions. Potential candidates must ask a few questions otherwise the interviewer may feel a candidate is not truly interested.

About an Employer
1. Why did you choose to go to work for _____?
2. What is the culture like at _____? or The website describes the culture as _____, how would you describe it?
3. Does your company encourage or require further education?
4. How is performance evaluated? How and when are reviews given?
5. What products or services are in the development state right now?
6. Do you fill positions from the outside or look to promote from within first?

About a Position
1. What kinds of assignments might I expect the first six months on the job?
2. Is this a new position or am I replacing someone?
3. What is the largest single challenge facing your department right now?
4. Are projects team-oriented or focused more independently?
5. What skills are important for someone in this position?

Networking & Background (for events, workshops, conferences, fairs, etc.)
1. What brought you to this program (or event, etc.)? – not an interview question; ask at a networking event
2. Can you tell me what your positions is and some of your responsibilities?
3. How did you decide that you wanted to get into __________?
4. What was your college major? Why did you chose it?
5. If I wanted to get into ______, what would you recommend?
6. What do you like best about your position and/or company?
7. What is your single greatest challenge that you have encountered within your profession?
8. What are the typical entry-level job titles and function?
9. What do you find unique about your career field?
10. What courses proved to be the most valuable to you in your job?