Intro (video clip 1)

An interview is a structured conversation between you and an employer in which you ask each other questions in an attempt to determine whether you are a good fit for the job and the company, and whether the job and company are a good fit for you. In this module, you’ll learn what employers are looking for, what makes an interview go well, how to prepare, and how to answer the different types of questions you may be asked.

In this module, we’ll refer primarily to job interviews; however, we know that some of you may be preparing for other types of interviews, such as graduate school interviews. Be aware that although we’ll use terms like “jobs” and “employers,” the same information still applies for other types of interviews. If you have questions about how to apply any of the information to your specific situation, contact the Career Center.

The Successful Interview (video clip 2)

When preparing for an interview, many students tend to focus exclusively on the interview questions, and put a lot of pressure on themselves to deliver flawless answers. While your answers to the questions are certainly important, they actually only make up about 50% of the overall impression you make during an interview.

The purpose of the interview is to determine how well you fit the job and the company. Employers want to determine not only if your skills fit the company’s needs, but whether YOU fit the job and company. How do your interests, passions, and values fit with the position and the mission, goals, and values of the company? How well do you fit in with the company’s culture? Can they visualize you in the position? Can they see themselves working with you?

An interview is not an interrogation, or even a test. A successful interview is a two-way conversation. By inviting you to interview, the employer is saying, “Hey, let’s chat and see if we’re a good fit for each other.” To be successful, you don’t necessarily have to answer every question perfectly, but the successful interviewee IS prepared, professional, friendly, engaged, and gracious. You’ll learn more about each of these things next.

The 5 “Be’s” (video clip 3)

So how do you make a good impression? It comes down to the 5 “be’s.”

1. Be Prepared. Study the job description and know the expectations of the position. Research the company – know their products and services, mission and goals, and culture. Know what information you want to share about yourself, know the topics you might be asked about in the interview, and be comfortable answering the standard types of interview questions using this information. Prepare your questions for them. Find the interview location ahead of time. Bring your materials – copies of your resume, a pen and paper, the questions you want to ask, a professional folder or binder, and anything else you were asked to bring.

2. Be Professional. Make sure your dress and overall appearance are professional and appropriate for the job you’re interviewing for – which usually means up a level or two from what you would be expected to wear if hired, and of course, practice good personal hygiene. Show up on time... not even one minute late! Treat everyone you encounter, from the receptionist to the custodian, as if they were the interviewer. Turn your phone OFF. If you have to wait, make conversation instead. Greet everyone with a firm, confident handshake.
3. Be Friendly. *Smile... a lot!* (This may be one of the most frequently overlooked tricks to a successful interview.) You can take the interview process and the questions seriously while still being yourself. The employer wants to get to know you... and determine if you’re someone they want to spend 40+ hours a week with! Be relaxed, comfortable, and confident.

4. Be Engaged. Maintain good eye contact with each person in the room. Pay careful attention to everything that is being said, and convey interest through your body language and other non-verbal cues. Ask questions!

5. Be Gracious. Genuinely appreciate the time and effort the interviewers have invested in considering you for this job, and thank them – several times! Collect business cards or contact information during the interview and send a thank you note – or email, or LinkedIn message, immediately afterwards.

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**Video Slide 1**

*Harry Gefre, Target:* “The interview actually starts really by the voice inflections, so, you know, the person has to have excitement and enthusiasm for the position that they’re applying for. I immediately look at that person when I meet them, even when I’m introduced to them right off the bat. I see their energy, I really, again look for someone who can relate to others right off because you’re not going to be successful if you do not have that buy in from the people around you. So it really starts by that person having that warm smile and really having that feeling of approachability, almost that magnetic personality. So for me, it’s really, no matter what the position is, whether it’s construction, whether it’s working in retail, whether it’s working in a call center; it really is all about how does this person relate to people around them because that will indicate to me that person is going to be successful. I even look at it like would I want to work with this person? If I came to work on a daily basis, would I be excited to be meeting this person? So it’s really all about how that person comes across, almost immediately.”

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**How to Prepare for the Interview: Active vs. Passive Interviewing (video clip 4)**

Interviewing isn’t something that you can just wing, but most people aren’t really sure how to effectively prepare for an interview. After all, you usually won’t know the exact questions you’ll be asked ahead of time, so how can you ever really be prepared?

There is more to interview preparation than crafting answers to common questions. To be more fully prepared, you need to take a step back and look at the big picture of what points you want to get across in your interview.

Most people tend to interview in a passive way. Passive interviewing is when you are simply reacting to what is happening rather than taking control of the situation. The information you share during your interview is determined entirely by the questions you are asked and the answers that come to mind for those questions. Therefore, the information the interviewer gets may be choppy, disorganized, and incomplete.

Active interviewing, on the other hand, involves determining ahead of time what information you want to share during your interview, and looking for ways to work that information into the questions that you are asked. Rather than focusing on the goal of nailing each individual answer, your goal should be to leave the interview feeling like you successfully communicated to the employer everything you wanted them to know about why they should hire you.

To prepare yourself to be an active interviewer, start by assessing yourself in the context of this position. Why do you want this job, and why should they hire YOU over your competition? What are your relevant skills, abilities, experiences, strengths, and weaknesses for this job? What are your professional goals, and how does this job and this company fit into those goals?

As you’re assessing yourself, you will need to learn as much as you can about the company and the position you’re interviewing for so that you have a solid understanding of what their needs are, the role of this position in addressing
those needs, and how you, in this role, will be effective in meeting those needs. Thoroughly review the company’s website, search for articles about them, check out their social media, and sit down with any contacts you have at the company for informational interviews to learn more about the company’s culture, goals, and challenges.

The information you gather as you assess yourself and how you are the right person to meet the company’s needs is your interview content. Consider creating an outline of all the information you want to make sure you share with the employer during your interview to convince them that you are, in fact, the right person.

Now, all you have to do is learn how to incorporate this information into the types of questions you’ll be asked, and practice doing it so that you become comfortable. Familiarize yourself with the standard types of interview questions and at least think through how you would want to structure your answers to those questions, and also anticipate questions you may be asked based on what the job is. Finally, practice in a variety of ways, which can include answering questions aloud and recording yourself with your phone or a webcam, having a friend ask you questions you haven’t seen ahead of time, or participating in a practice interview at the Career Center.

Video Slide 2

Michelle George, Idaho State Police: “When I work with candidates and when I work with students I say look, you just need to know straight up that the competition is fierce. And the reason it’s fierce is because somebody has put it all together. They put the attire together, they put their examples together; you need to go in and feed the employer. And what I mean by that is that you need to make sure that not only are you going to answer their questions, you’re ready to give them an example. People usually aren’t ready. They’re like, ‘Well I’ll answer every question you ask me.’ No, you’re going to be the bright shiny penny, as I call it. You’re gonna come in and say ‘I’ll answer your question, but in addition, let me tell you about something that I’ve achieved that really is very similar to what you’re looking for.’”

Video Slide 3

Jessica Bretón, Enterprise Holdings: “I would say my best piece of advice for students who are preparing for their first interview is to research the company. Now with technology there is so many different avenues that students can go out and look at what the company’s values are, what the company’s about, what type of people the company is hiring for, what other people are saying about their experience working at that company. There are so many online resources that students can use, so whether that be just the direct website, or it could be LinkedIn or Glassdoor. Just to get some more information about what the culture is because ultimately as an employer we’re looking for people who are going to fit in with our company, who share those same values and want that same career path that we have to offer. Definitely researching the company, if there is any opportunity to network with people before the interview, so at a career fair or if you hear that the company is going to be on campus doing an information session or on campus interviews. Any way that you can connect with the employers beforehand, before that interview just to get a little bit more of a background of what they’re looking for, I think it will prepare you for the interview. At the end of the day we’re looking for people who have that experience and desire to go and work for Enterprise.”

The Interview Questions (video clip 5)

Most interview questions fall into one of four categories: basic questions, behavioral questions, scenario questions, and stress questions. We’ll talk about each, but remember that for ANY question, the following things are helpful:

Always decipher the question before answering, or in other words, think through why the employer is asking the question and what it is they hope to learn about you by asking it. It’s fine to pause and think before beginning your answer. Keep the information you share relevant to the job you’re applying for. Elaborate on your main points, and give examples whenever possible to support the points you’re making. Talk about everything (including previous experiences
and supervisors) in a positive light, and remember to keep the main focus on what you can do for them, not what they can do for you.

**Basic Questions (video clip 6)**

The “basic questions” category consists of fairly straightforward questions about you and your qualifications. Some examples include: “What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?” “Why are you interested in this job?” and “Why should we hire you?”

Most of the questions in this category can be answered using this basic structure: Present your main idea first, then elaborate on your main idea, and support it with an example.

Next, you’ll have a chance to review some of the most common basic questions and how to answer them.

Keep in mind, though, that the sample questions you’ll see in this module represent question TYPES more so than specific questions, and that’s how you want to prepare – for common TYPES of questions you may get. For example, “What’s your greatest weakness?” may take many forms in an interview, from “What would your previous supervisor say was your biggest area for improvement?” to “If hired, what would the most challenging aspect of this position be for you?” So in other words, you better just be prepared to talk about the things you don’t do as well as other things!

**Video Slide 4**

*Justin Doi, Boise State Student:* “So, one of the first things you really need to know about me is that I am a very passionate person. One of the reasons I applied for this job was so I would be able to act on that passion which is to help others and improve their lives for the better. I was able to do that this past year as President of my Hall Council, helping to improve the lives of my fellow peers and students that lived in Chaffee Hall with me and now I would like to apply those same skills to the position of Orientation Leader; helping to really improve the lives of new students coming into Boise State University.”

**Video Slide 5**

*Justin Doi, Boise State Student:* “Well, I know the mission of this office is to really help ease the transitional process for students coming to college and prepare them for life here at Boise State and I think that is something I want to help be a part of. You know, when I went through my orientation process I made a lot of new friends and really felt prepared to start college here at Boise State and that is the same kind of experience I want to give to new students coming into Boise State University.”

**Video Slide 6**

*Justin Doi, Boise State Student:* “I would say my greatest weaknesses are really my high expectations and high standards for the work that I do on a team. Sometimes these high expectations can cause me to be easily disappointed when other team members can’t perform to the level I expect, but in recent experiences I’ve had with working on a team, what I’ve really focused on is identifying people’s unique contributions and strengths so that we can organize ourselves and really capitalize on what we all do well in order to get the job done.”

**Video Slide 7**
Justin Doi, Boise State Student: “Well, I think I have a lot of unique skills and ideas that I would be able to bring to this team and help to bring innovation and improvement to the work you guys do. What really sets me a part from other candidates I feel like is my dedication to always going that extra mile and always putting in 110% into everything I do, and I would love to bring those skills to this team and help to do the work that you guys do.”

Behavioral Questions (video clip 7)

You may not recognize the term, but if you have ever interviewed before, you’ve probably been asked a behavioral question. Here’s a hint: they frequently start with “Tell me about a time when…”

Behavioral questions are so popular that you may even have a “behavioral interview” that consists only of this type of question, but at the very least, you will probably have at least a couple of these in any interview.

In a behavioral question, the interviewer asks you to tell a story or give a specific example of something. While they may sound straightforward, it’s really important to decipher what the employer really wants to know so that you can make sure your answer focuses on relevant and useful information. Employers ask these questions because they believe that your past performance will predict your future behavior. They are really just basic interview questions in which the interviewer instructs you to skip straight to the example part of your answer.

For example, take the question: “Tell me about a problem you encountered at work and how you solved it.” What the interviewer wants to know is how you approach solving problems that come up at work. They believe they’ll get a more realistic answer if they ask for an example of a problem you solved than if they were to just ask you about your problem solving skills… to which you’d probably respond that you are GREAT at solving problems, of course!

The good news is that all behavioral questions can be answered using the same formula, referred to as the STAR method. You will begin with a little bit of background information to give your example context. You will then identify the task or problem you were dealing with, and talk in detail about the action you took to accomplish the task or solve the problem. Be very thorough in this part of your answer, including details like the factors you considered and the specific steps you took. Always finish your answer with what the outcome was, keeping in mind that in most cases you should select an example with a positive outcome.

The most challenging aspect of behavioral questions is simply thinking of a good example to use… on the spot, when you’re probably nervous! The best way to prepare is to consider TOPICS the employer is likely to want to ask about, and think through a few stories that relate to each of these topics. Going through your past experiences, identifying as many stories as possible that would work well, and refreshing your memory of these events will increase your chances of not only being able to come up with a story that will work for the question you were asked, but being able to tell that story the way you would want to.

Video Slide 8

Michelle George, Idaho State Police: “What we’re hoping to gain, and pretty much typical behavioral based interviewing, is the best predictor of future performance is what you’ve done in the past. You want to always have, I’d call it like a one page bulleted list. You want to put things on there that were maybe tough for you to achieve, maybe difficult to do, because every employer knows the canned. We know those responses. But you’re looking for questions like, I’ll give you a good one, ‘Tell me a time you worked with a difficult coworker or customer. What was the situation and how did you resolve it?’ There’s a big difference between an answer that would look like ‘Well you know I find that when people don’t like me and I don’t like them then they can stay in their own space. I don’t have to deal with that.’ Versus ‘You know, I find that within any work environment there’s always different personalities, what I need to make sure I do is that I’m open and that I’m flexible, and let me give you an example of a time when I did…’ Show them what you did, because that’s huge.”
Kristin McGee, Simplot: “So a piece of advice that I have for preparing for behavior based interviews is to start early. So every year in college you should keep track of stories and situations that you’ve been involved in - group projects, multitasking, coming up with new processes and procedures, and after four years you should have a dozen stories ready to go. So when you go into that first interview, you’ve already done the work. You already know what the situations are; you just need to practice them.”

Justin Doi, Boise State Student: “So in my last job I encountered a setback with another co-worker who really wasn’t even contributing to the team at all, and as a result the rest of us on the team had to work extra hard to make sure we got the job done. Now, this wasn’t necessarily fair to everyone else on the team so I made sure I talked with him to try and resolve the issue. I made it very clear to him that his contributions were essential to achieving our team’s goals, and I also made sure that he knew the impacts his job had on the rest of our team members, and after making it clear to him that his contributions were not only important but also very well appreciated, he became more motivated and as a result continued to help us as a team to get the job done.”

Scenario Questions (video clip 8)

A scenario question is one in which you are given a hypothetical situation and asked what you would do in that situation. These questions are asked to gauge whether you have the appropriate skills needed for the job, and therefore, the scenario you are given will most likely be something that could actually occur on the job.

There are a few strategies to use with these questions. To prepare, use your internship experiences and other experiences in your field to anticipate the kinds of challenging situations that may arise. Research and ask your supervisors or mentors about appropriate ways to handle any types of situations you haven’t encountered yet. When answering the question, don’t just jump straight to what you would do, but instead walk them through your thought process first so that they understand your reasoning and see your ability to logically work through challenges you may encounter.

Angie Fisher, Ada County: “I think with scenario questions several of my hiring managers that I’ve worked with in the past ask those questions to get an idea of what the thought process is behind their answer, how they come about that, looking for how they would handle a situation kind of being put on the spot. So it’s that thought process and kind of getting at that behavior and how they would handle that situation, helps us understand maybe how they are going to interact or react in our work environment.”

Richard Gines, Hewlett-Packard: “The top thing is not whether they give the right answer. If they can give the right answer, that’s a bonus. The top things I’m looking for in scenarios is - what process are they using to resolve that situation, to solve that problem. Are they thinking through what can be done and what are those steps to help come to a solution? And even if they don’t come to the solution in that discussion, are they approaching it the right way? The second thing that I look for that’s very important to me is - are they honest when they don’t know the answer? If I have someone that doesn’t know the answer, and tries to BS their way through it, if you will, then that’s a red flag for me.”
because in the real world, if you don’t know your answer, it’s okay. You have to go out and find the right answer and we rely on people being able to say ‘I don’t know that, I’ll go find out.’ And so in the interview, I’m looking to see are they someone that’s going to tell me ‘I don’t know that but I’ll go find out.’ or are they just trying to make stuff up and hope that it passes?”

**Stress Questions (video clip 9)**

A stress question is designed to see how you perform or solve problems under pressure. These questions can take a few different forms. You may be asked to do something unexpected on the spot, you may be asked a seemingly obscure question that tests your reasoning ability, or the interviewer may simply behave in an unexpected way to see how you respond. Stress questions are fairly uncommon in most fields, with computer science and sales being notable exceptions, but it’s good to know how to answer them in case you do encounter them.

In any stress question, it’s important to do your best to remain calm, and remember that it’s ok to take a few seconds to think before beginning your answer. When answering a seemingly obscure or critical thinking focused question, be aware that getting the “correct” answer is usually not the objective. The employer is assessing your ability to reason through a problem, so think aloud as you work through it. In some cases, it may be helpful to ask yourself, “If I HAD to make an educated guess, what factors would I consider, and how would I come up with that guess?”

**“Do you have any questions for us?” (video clip 10)**

The final question you’ll be asked in most interviews is “Do you have any questions for us?” This one DOES have a correct answer, and it is always YES! Many interviewees make the mistake of not asking questions, and few employers are willing to hire a candidate who didn’t ask questions. Remember, the interview is a conversation, and its purpose is for BOTH parties to assess fit. They have asked their questions; now it’s your turn.

Prepare questions to ask while you’re preparing for the interview. As you’re conducting your research, write down questions you think of and bring them with you (you don’t have to memorize them!). The best questions to ask are those that reference something you have already learned about the company or position through your research, and then ask for more in-depth information on that topic. This type of question shows that: 1. You’ve done your research, 2. You’re interested enough to want more information, and 3. You’re serious about evaluating whether this company and opportunity is the right fit for you. However, don’t get too caught up in preparing “impressive sounding” questions – consider what you’re legitimately curious about and what you actually need to know to evaluate whether this is the right opportunity and a good fit for you (excluding, of course, questions about pay and benefits – these are usually better saved for later and can be negotiated after they offer you the job).

**Video Slide 8**

*Michelle George, Idaho State Police:* “Go in also with three questions that you’re going to ask them and have it not be ‘What does this position pay, when does it start, and when can I promote?’ Those are off the table. Those are questions that can be asked, but I think that would be more of a job offer stage. You’re wanting to say ‘Hey, I saw something new and innovative. Your company just earned this award, that’s wonderful. I see a very similar project that I worked on.’ Again, you want to have them see you already in the culture.”

**Video Slide 12**

*Richard Gines, Hewlett-Packard:* “The first thing is – it’s got to be authentic and you know, a lot of times you’re given questions; here’s a good question to ask. A good example is a couple weeks ago I was in Seattle and it was an intern-specific career fair and so every person I talked to asked me what project they would be working on. And in my case, I
hire for a large organization so I have no idea what project they’re going to work on. So every person I talked to, I had to answer the same canned question and give an explanation of why I don’t really know exactly what they’re going to be working on but here’s some of the types of things. Even though it was a good question, because of the way it was just canned without understanding the situation then it became a distraction. So you have to keep it authentic, you have to know who you’re talking to. Are you talking to someone that’s hiring for ten different positions and maybe doesn’t know what organizations they’re in yet? Or are you talking to someone that’s hiring for a specific position and if so, what’s that? Take the time to find out as much as you can about that, and sometimes that’s hard. But if there is a way for you to find out, even if you find out who the hiring person is and can ask them some questions first. Find out more about it so that the conversation is authentic, and the more authentic it is, it helps both. Because for one – you want to find a job that matches you, and fits you, so you’ll be successful in it. We want to find someone that matches and fits our needs and if it’s not an authentic conversation than neither one of us is finding that. And they might even be the right person, but without having a real conversation and really finding out ‘What are you really interested in? Where would you fit?’ then we may miss them.

Closing (video clip 13)

Remember that the Career Center is here to help! Visit our website and access the Interviewing handout for more information, and come see us if you need assistance. We offer workshops and individual appointments during which we can help you prep for an interview or conduct a practice interview with you. See our website for information.

To maximize your future employability, connect with us early in your time here at Boise State. Come see us, connect with us on social media, visit our website, and let us help you Make College Count!