

The Interview

The interview is a conversation with the employer where you have the opportunity to discuss your skills, accomplishments, and experiences and relate them to the needs of the organization for which you are interviewing. It is also a chance for you to learn more about the position and organization and consider whether the opportunity will be a good fit for you. If you approach the interview as a two-way street where both you and the employer are learning about each other, you may be less nervous, more prepared, and therefore more confident!

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Depending on the level of position and type of organization, you may have one or several interviews as part of the hiring process. The various types of interviews typically fall into the following categories:

Screening Interview

When an employer's hiring process involves multiple interviews, the first interview is typically a screening interview. Although it is typically brief (20 minutes – one hour), it is an important first step!

Many screening interviews are held over the phone, by video call, or on campus. These interviews are conducted either by a member of the search committee, a personnel officer, a recruiter, or even UMass alumni who work there. The questions are generally about your past performance and skills. Interviewers are looking for candidates who communicate well, demonstrate leadership, initiative and maturity, and have a genuine interest in the organization.

Phone or Video Call Interview

Many screening interviews are carried out by phone or video call such as Skype or Google Hangout. They are also utilized by employers who need to interview candidates who live far and wide, either across the nation or around the world. It is rare for an employer to hire a candidate without any in-person contact but sometimes the circumstances dictate that the process takes place entirely over the air. These conversations can be more difficult if you are not a "phone person" or need a lot of context to help you pick up non-verbal cues. Make sure to create the physical space you need to be successful (i.e. little to no background noise, using a private space that has a simple uncluttered backdrop, sitting or standing somewhere you feel comfortable, etc.) Use notes with talking points if it's helpful but do not *read* your notes or your responses will sound canned.

Phone Interview Tips

Without the context of non-verbal cues, building rapport takes more work in a phone interview.

- Keep your energy up by standing, smiling, and even making gestures while looking in the mirror. It may feel silly but it makes a big difference in your enthusiasm coming through.
- Never take an interview call "on the go" – you will both be distracted by sounds in the background. Find a quiet and private setting where you can give the interview your full attention.
- Make sure you have good phone service – if you want to use a landline, Career Services may have a room available.
- Have the interviewer's name in front of you and thank them by name at the end

Second Interview / Site Visit

If you have been successful in the screening interview, then you may be invited for a second interview. This interview is typically held at the site of the organization and may be anywhere from one hour to all day, depending on how many people you meet with and the level of the position.

Case Interviews

Case interviews are often used by consulting firms and other businesses to assess your problem solving abilities. At a case interview you will be asked to address a business case and evaluated on the structure and logic of your thinking as well as your creative problem solving, all under time constraints. The major consulting companies have case interview prep sections on their websites. Alumni also regularly provide guidance on preparing for case interviews.

Practice is the key to a successful case interview, even more so than for interviewing in general. Though the scenarios can and will vary widely, you can practice and improve upon the logical thinking and time management common to each case.

INTERVIEW PREPARATION

The most important part of the interview process is to prepare. No matter how competent you feel you may be during an interview, you can always do better! Your competition *will be* prepared for their interviews so in order to stand out from the rest, you need to do your homework.

Learn to market yourself

The focus of the interview is you, so you should be able to clearly articulate your skills, interests, abilities, and goals.

- Review the job description and think about how your skills and experience match the qualifications sought by the employer.
- Be ready to expand on everything listed in your resume or cover letter.
- Prepare concrete examples of tasks, responsibilities, or experiences that demonstrate transferable skills.

Research the organization

Learning more about the organization is your chance to decide whether or not the position is a good fit for you.

- Read about the organization's history, mission, programming, products, geographic locations, clientele, and plans for growth. Check their LinkedIn company page and the career section of that page to learn the information and themes that they are emphasizing to candidates. Speak their language!
- Prepare a list of questions that demonstrate your interest in the company or position and also what you have already learned from your research that led to additional questions. There is a list of sample questions later in this guide.

Practice!

- Practice reciting answers to questions outlined in this guide with a friend, in front of a mirror, or into a tape recorder.
- Use the STAR technique (later in this guide) to keep your answers short and to the point.
- Schedule a mock interview at Career Services to practice in a more realistic situation and receive feedback prior to the interview.

Did you know?

Career Services offers mock behavioral (not case) interviews so that you can practice your interview skills in a low-stakes environment.

COMMON INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The questions the interviewer(s) ask will vary widely depending on their own position within the organization and the nature of the industry. Fortunately, there are some very common general questions that many employers tend to ask:

General Questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why did you choose UMass Amherst?
- What skills or interests have you developed during your time at UMass?
- What kinds of jobs or internships have you held?
- Where would you like to be in five years?
- Why do you think you'd like this particular job?
- Do you prefer working alone or with others? Why? How do you build trusting relationships?
- What is a pet peeve of yours?
- What are your major strengths/weaknesses?
- Define success. Define failure.
- How do you spend your free time?
- What do you know about our organization? Why do you want to work here?
- What is your ideal work environment?
- What is your greatest accomplishment?
- If you were to come to work here, what's one thing you want us to know about you?
- How do you feel about relocating to _____?
- Why should I hire you?
- Other relevant questions based on the position, field, or organization. Interview Stream and Vault are resources on our website that offer more field-specific questions.

Did you know?

Only about 7% of what an interviewer remembers from an interview is what you said! The rest is a combination of your tone of voice, body language, and how you made them feel.

Behavioral Questions

These situational questions are based on the concept that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance. Interviewers will ask questions about your experience and how it might relate to your role in the position for which you are applying.

- Give me an example of a situation in which you succeeded/failed.
- Describe how you deal with criticism.
- Tell me about a recent challenge or mistake and how you handled it.
- Tell me about a time you had to use your writing skills to make an important point.
- Describe a leadership role you've held and tell why you committed your time to it.
- Give me an example of a recent good idea you had and what you did with it.
- Describe a situation where you had to use your creative abilities.
- Tell me how you would work as part of a team.
- What would you do in your first day on the job?
- Tell me about a time you've had to work under time constraints.
- Other relevant questions based on the field, position, or company. The Kansas Dept. of Administration, Human Resources page is a great resource where you can select the skills or abilities listed in the job posting and it generates relevant behavioral/situational questions.

Read more later in this handout about the *STAR* technique for answering behavioral questions through examples and stories.

Your Questions

You must have questions for the interviewer(s)! They will almost always give you the opportunity. One recruiter says, "It's always disappointing to any interviewer when you get to the end of an interview and you ask, 'Do you have any questions?' and they say, 'Nope, I think you answered them all' and that's the end of it." It's also a lost opportunity to continue to engage and impress your interviewer. Asking a question or two at the end of the interview demonstrates enthusiasm for the opportunity. The questions should be thoughtful, not canned. Another recruiter comments, "I hate it when people have a list of generic questions."

Did you know?

You should always prepare a list of questions about the position or organization. This shows you are interested and prepared and the responses will help you learn more about whether it's a good fit.

Orient your questions towards information that will help you better understand the organization and the work that you would be doing. This is your chance to determine whether the position or organization is a good fit for you. Don't ask things that you could have found online. Don't put your interviewer on the spot. Avoid asking questions about salary, vacation time, and employee benefits until after you are offered the position.

- Is this a good position to learn about this industry?
- Is this a new position? If not, how long has this position existed?
- What would be your highest priority for me to accomplish if you hired me?
- Why did you join the organization? How long have you been here? What do you like about working for this company?
- What is your greatest source of job satisfaction?
- Will I be attending a training program? Is a mentoring program available?
- How will I be evaluated?
- Is there a formal job description? Can I see it?
- Who will be my supervisor? To whom would I report? Can you tell me about their/your management style?
- Who would be the other members of my team?
- Describe the typical responsibilities of the position.
- How will I be evaluated?
- What are the most challenging aspects of the position?
- Can you describe the work environment? Can you tell me about the culture here?
- What are the current problems facing the organization/this department?
- When can I expect to hear from you?

GENERAL INTERVIEW TIPS

Prior to the Interview

- Clarify travel arrangements prior to your visit. Some organizations will reimburse your travel expenses, and some will not. Confirm your flight, rental car and/or hotel reservations.
- Ask your contact at the organization for an agenda for the day.
- Obtain specific directions to the site.
- Do your homework on the organization.
- If possible, contact an Amherst alumnus/a who works at the organization who may be able to help you prepare for the interview.
- Know the salary range for this type of profession.
- Bring extra copies of your resume and use either a briefcase or professional-looking portfolio. Bring paper and pens too.
- Practice a good, firm (but not bone-crushing) handshake. Make good eye contact!
- Get a good night's sleep before the interview and eat breakfast in the morning. Don't eat anything in the morning that you are not used to.
- Arrive early at least 15-20 minutes early.
- If you have a phone or video interview, find a quiet space. If you have a video interview, make sure you are comfortable with the technology required. Dress appropriately.

During the Interview

- Remember that the interview begins even before you arrive. How they perceive you during all your communication or walking in from the parking lot counts.
- If lunch is part of the agenda, decline any alcoholic beverages and order something easy to eat.
- Remember, almost everyone you meet, including the receptionists or administrative assistants, will have some part in your evaluation.
- Make note of your interviewer's name and title. Collect business cards if possible.
- Before leaving, clarify the next step in the process. Restate your interest in the position.
- If you have a phone or video interview, do not eat or make other distracting noises.

After the Interview:

- Promptly write thank you notes to your host and, if appropriate, to others who interviewed you.
- If you do not hear from the organization within the previously specified amount of time, call and ask about the status of your candidacy. Talk with your host if possible.
- If you receive an offer, it's often best not to accept immediately. Express your interest in the position and confirm a date when you will be expected to inform them of your decision. Some organizations will have some flexibility in waiting, but don't expect more than two weeks. Career Services has a policy with employers who post on Quest that they will give you a certain amount of time to consider an offer.
- If you want to accept the position, you should negotiate the compensation package you are offered.
- If you are not extended an offer, it is acceptable to ask for feedback on your performance.

Did you know?

You should always send a thank you note to your interviewer(s) after you speak or meet with them. It can be an email or hand-written note. See the Thank You Note handout for more information.

10 MOST COMMON INTERVIEW MISTAKES

1. **Failure to research the company:** Recruiters say that they expect candidates to spend at least one hour doing research on their web sites and reading about their companies via other web sites.
2. **Lack of clarity on which job you are interviewing for:** Become familiar with the job description so you can explain how your experiences, talents, strengths, and abilities will connect with company needs. Highlight how you're suited to that particular job.
3. **Not marketing yourself:** Define yourself. What makes you different from other job candidates? Know your major strengths and accomplishments as they relate to the job and the company.
4. **Asking silly questions:** Prepare at least three or four intelligent questions to ask the recruiter. It's OK (it actually leaves a positive impression with the recruiter) to have them written down in advance and to reference them at the appropriate time.
5. **Dressing inappropriately for the interview:** Professional attire and attention to detail count. Remember that your appearance, your tone of voice, and your conduct contribute to the impression (positive or negative) that you make.
6. **Trying to wing the interview:** Practice! Get a list of general interview questions, a friend, a tape recorder, and a mirror and conduct an interview rehearsal. Practice until your delivery feels comfortable, not canned.
7. **Not being yourself:** Be yourself and be honest! Don't pretend to understand a question if you don't. It's fine to ask for clarification.
8. **Listening poorly:** Focus on the question that is being asked and don't try to anticipate the next one. It's OK to pause and collect your thoughts before answering a question.
9. **Offering too little detail:** When answering case questions or technical questions or solving technical problems, "talk through" your thought processes. Recruiters are interested in hearing how your mind works and how it attacks a problem. Interviewers consistently place a high value on students who articulate their problem-solving process.
10. **Lacking enthusiasm:** Maintain eye contact, greet the interviewer with a smile and a firm, and show common courtesy. Don't be afraid to display your passion for the job/industry and to show confidence.

Dress for Success

First impressions say a lot about a person, so chose your interview attire carefully. Some fields tend to be more conservative than others (like business), but to be on the safe side, better to dress up than dress down.

- Dark colored suits or dresses, neatly pressed and not wrinkled
- Clean and polished conservative dress shoes
- Conservative ties and other accessories. Minimal jewelry.
- No visible body piercing or tattoos beyond conservative ear piercings for women
- Conservative, professional make-up
- Well-groomed hair. If you have long hair, it is appropriate to pull it back neatly.
- Clean and trimmed fingernails
- Well-brushed teeth and fresh breath
- No gum, candy, or other objects in your mouth
- No body odor and avoid cologne or perfume

THE *STAR* TECHNIQUE

There are certain interview questions that are best answered by using an example to illustrate your point. Most behavioral questions begin with “Tell me about a time when...” or “Describe how you...,” and this is your chance to tell a relevant “story” that highlights your skills or how you handled something in the past. For some general questions you may also choose to answer by giving an example. These *brief* stories are much more compelling and memorable than a traditional answer. However, they must be relevant and speak to the interviewer’s questions. Do not tell a story just for the sake of telling a story! Think through examples of situations where you have demonstrated certain behaviors or qualities for which the company is searching (i.e. teamwork, analysis, creativity, etc.) and practice sharing this situation or experience. If you’re having a hard time thinking of examples, use your resume as a guide and try to recall situations from past internships, summer jobs, class projects, campus activities, community involvements, and work experience.

The STAR technique will help you communicate your situation clearly and concisely and hit the main points without dragging out your story too long.

- S** **Situation**....describe the background (position, organization, timeframe)
- T** **Task**.....explain your task, responsibilities, or challenges you had to overcome
- A** **Action**.....what action did you take to handle the tasks or address the obstacle
- R** **Result**.....what was the outcome? What did you learn or accomplish? What impact did you have on the situation? Quantify or qualify your results if you can.

STAR SAMPLES

STAR #1

Situation: I was hired as a summer intern by Safety Insurance’s Fraud Investigations and Prevention team.

Task: Our objective was to identify fraud patterns and develop detection mechanisms.

Action: I researched more than 500 volumes of client and health care provider records, analyzing and manipulating large amounts of data to reveal fraud patterns. I also met with a focus group of employees who would use new fraud detection software to define and rank criteria for building the new detection training. Finally, I compiled information summarizing the time and resources devoted to this project and prepared a PowerPoint presentation for the General Counsel to submit to senior management.

Result: Senior management used this presentation as the basis for the development of company-wide policies that maximized company savings and recoveries.

STAR #2

Situation: I worked with three other students and an independent film company to create a short, professional documentary the summer between my freshman and sophomore years of college.

Task: We were given four weeks and all of the professional equipment we would need, but nothing more. I was appointed “producer,” meaning I oversaw all phases of the filmmaking process, with the specific responsibility of initiating and leading preproduction. We had one week for preproduction, in which we had to choose and research a topic, secure subjects interviewees, and schedule all future filming.

Action: I brainstormed with everyone I knew to come up with potential ideas for the documentary. I explored these potential leads to gauge their feasibility, and my group eventually agreed on a topic: competitive Rubik’s cubing. Then, I exhaustively researched the subject matter to learn all of its “ins and outs.” Once I had an understanding of the subject matter, I contacted everyone in the Rubik’s cubing community that I had learned about through my research. I also posted announcements online advertising for our documentary and requesting interested subjects.

Result: My research and persistent pursuit for “ins” within the community finally paid off: my emails and announcements attracted numerous interested subjects. I continued to correspond with promising subjects and successfully scheduled interviews with over ten people. In only one week, I led the group in effectively preparing for the next two weeks of production during which we obtained over 100 hours of footage with 11 different subjects. The documentary was selected for showing in the Southwest by Southwest and Tribeca Film Festivals.

STAR #3

Situation: Last spring, I worked with five other college student volunteers to run a weekly Spanish Club for elementary school students. The aim of the Club is to teach the kids beginning Spanish through interactive 45-minute sessions.

Obstacle: The program was only in its second year and needed a lot of development. We had no lesson plans, no materials, and little teacher assistance.

Action: We met once a week before the sessions to agree on a lesson plan for the week, brainstorm and plan activities, gather the needed materials, and delegate responsibilities for the coming session. I was in charge of brainstorming and planning lesson plans and activities. I outlined the semester so that we would cover one topic per week, such as greetings, colors, letters, numbers, animals, verbs, etc. Most of the activities I planned incorporated music (sing-along songs), movement (dances, hand signals, etc.), games (Spanish duck-duck-goose, etc.), and snack food (animal crackers for animal vocabulary, fruit loops for learning the colors, etc.).

Result: The sessions were a huge success! The activities engaged and entertained the kids, while educating them about basic Spanish vocabulary and phrases. The weekly lesson plans built upon one another, and the kids definitely improved as the semester progressed. The parents were grateful too; we received extremely positive feedback on parental evaluation forms. The program is now in its third year and has expanded in the number of students involved (now over 40), the number of volunteers (now 15), and the breadth of subject matter covered.