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Cooperative
Education and
Careers Division



UL Interview Skills

Competency based interviews - Strengths based interviews
Tricky questions - Phone/Group/Video interviews & more

UL Interview Skills

This booklet takes you through most of the common scenarios at graduate recruitment interviews and gives you advice on how to prepare for and do your best at interview. Once you have secured that all important interview, be sure to book an appointment with a Careers Advisor, to ensure that you are fully prepared for your interview.

Best of luck!

UL Cooperative Education & Careers Division

Contents:

Interview Preparation	1
Types of Interview	3
Group Interviews	8
Strengths Based Interviews	9
Video Interviews	10
Anticipate the Questions	11
Typical Interview Questions	12
Competency Based Questions	14
Tricky Interview Questions	16
Tricky Interview Situations	18
Questions to Ask	18
Questions to Avoid	18
Ending the Interview	19
Top Tips for Interviews	20
Interview Checklist	21

Interview Preparation

People often find the idea of an interview very daunting. The key to successful interviewing is to prepare well in advance and to get in touch with the Careers Service to arrange a practice interview and get some feedback on your answers. If you get called for an interview you should think positively; your CV has convinced the employer that you can do the job and now it is time for you to follow this up with a good interview. You should know your CV or application form inside out. Anything that you have included on your application could form a question in the interview so be sure you bear this in mind when preparing. Don't get caught out by a question about something that you have outlined on your CV.

Research the Company

Find out everything there is to know about the company you are interviewing with. Do not just look at their own website but search for press coverage on recent developments, including job announcements or new products. Being armed with this information will highlight that you have done your research and will also give you some material to ask any questions you may have about the company. When you're invited for an interview, try and find out who you will be meeting with. Do some background research on LinkedIn on your interviewers, as having an insight into their background might give you an idea of the potential questions they might ask. If you know someone in the company, you should get in contact with them and ask them a few questions about the role and the company. This information can be invaluable and could give you the edge in the interview.

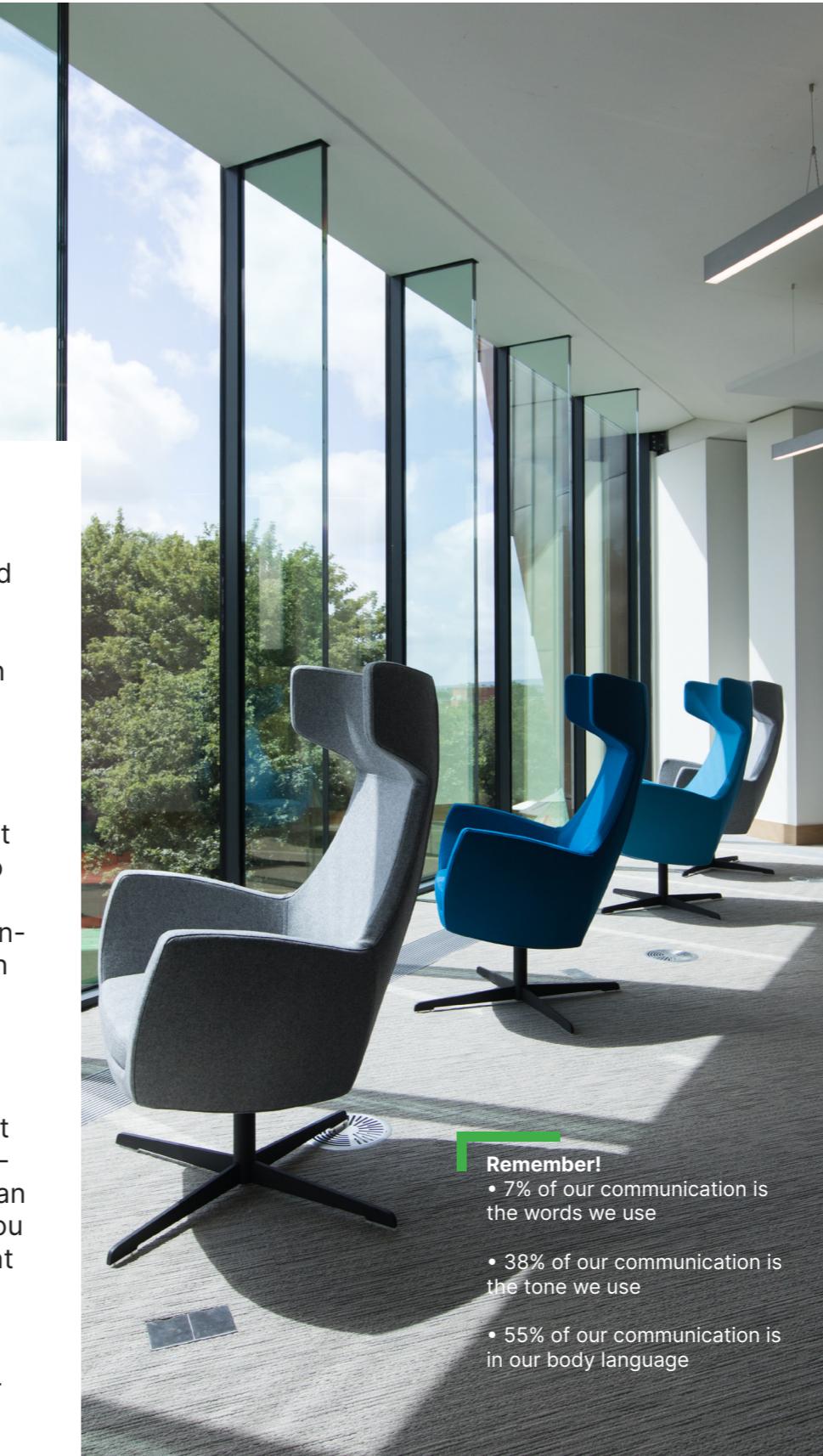
Interview Practicalities

Be sure that you know where you are going and give yourself plenty of time to get there. If possible, go to the interview venue the evening before just to make sure

you know exactly where you are going. Getting lost on the way to an interview is a sure fire way of getting you flustered which could have a negative impact on your interview performance. Bring the name and contact number of the person you are meeting with. You should arrive at the interview venue early and ask for the person you are meeting. Remember there may be numerous interviews happening on that day so it is important that you are clear on who you are meeting to avoid confusion. Avoid being late for an interview, but in the event of an emergency, if you have the contact details, call in advance and let them know you may be delayed.

What to Wear

There are no hard and fast rules on what you should wear to an interview. However, you should dress to impress with clean neatly pressed clothes. The company you are interviewing with will determine what you should wear: for example, if you are interviewing in a professional services company such as a law firm or an accountancy practice it would be usual for employees to wear suits and you would



be expected to dress formally for this interview process. Other companies have a much less formal dress code and something less formal could be appropriate in this instance. If you are in doubt about how to dress it is a good idea to err on the side of caution and dress smartly. You do not want to be too casual as you want to make a good impression and show the employer that you are taking this process seriously and that you are very interested in the company and the role.

Introductions, Nerves & Body Language

Pay attention when you are being introduced to your interviewers. Shake their hands and repeat their names back to them as you are being introduced. Have a good firm handshake and make eye contact with each interviewer. It is natural to be nervous at the beginning of an interview but good interview preparation will keep these nerves at bay. Find ways to manage your nerves in advance such as breathing and relaxation exercises. Sit well back in the chair and do not be tempted to fidget with notes or your hair etc. as this can be off-putting and distracting for the interviewers. Make eye contact with interviewers when they are asking questions but also engage the other interviewers by directing your answers to the group. Use your hands to emphasise your points and be sure to ask for a glass of water at the beginning so that you can take a drink throughout the interview if needed.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Practice answering questions out loud in advance of the interview. Consider videoing yourself to see how you look and sound.

Types of Interview

Interview can vary according to the nature of the job, the recruitment stage, and the organisation. There are some standard formats however and some basic principles to follow which will help you perform well in any situation

This section will help you to:

- distinguish between different sorts of interview
- think about interviews for different purposes and for different organisations
- prepare for different types of interview

Competency Based Interviews

Competency Based Interviews are also known as 'Structured Interviews' or 'Behavioural Interviews'. These interviews are made up of a number of targeted questions that ask you to describe your performance in specific tasks or situations. They work on the belief that the best indication of future performance is past performance. Make sure to highlight the key competencies or skills you have used previously and ensure you can match these to the key competencies required for the job (leadership, initiative and teamwork etc).

- Typically you will be assessed against a number of different competencies which are usually listed in the job specification or on the company website. An example of a competency would be "Communicating with others". A typical question could be "Tell me about a time when you had to present ideas to a group of people? Talk me through your approach? How did you feel during the situation and what was the outcome?"

Competency based interview questions will be dealt with in further detail on page 14

Panel Interviews

Some interviews involve a panel of assessors. Most interviews are conducted by two people but some have a panel. In panel interviews you have a variety of people to talk to and make eye contact with.

You might face a panel interview:

- when applying for public sector jobs, including education and local government
- when applying to join some larger 'blue chip' companies
- at an assessment centre

Panel members might include:

- a chairperson to coordinate the interview
- your prospective line manager
- a more senior member of the company or institution
- a prospective co-worker
- someone from HR

What will they do?

The chairperson will usually welcome you and introduce the panel members, who will take turns to ask you a question or questions. Try to direct your answer at the relevant panel member or the person who asked the question. They may make notes when you answer, as they will most likely be interviewing a number of candidates. You will normally be invited to ask questions at the end. Take this opportunity to find out more about the job and what it has to offer you. Asking a question will also demonstrate your interest in the post.

Telephone Interviews

Telephone interviews are becoming increasingly popular with employers. They are used to screen out candidates at an early stage and to follow up speculative applications.

Why are they used?

They can be a quick, easy and inexpensive way for employers to gather candidates for a final interview. More candidates can be reached, and from a wider geographical area. They are also less time consuming than face to face interviews. Some larger recruiters use agencies or consultants to handle telephone interviews so you may not talk to the employer at all at this stage.

When will they happen?

A company may:

- arrange a suitable time with you in advance
- call without notice
- give you a telephone interview there and then if you have called speculatively

A telephone interview requires as much preparation as any other. Your interviewer will tell you his/her name. You can make a note of this and use it to make the contact more personal. But don't use their first name unless invited to do so.

You won't be able to read the interviewer's facial expressions or body language, but you can listen carefully for any verbal clues. Keep your answers brief and to the point, unless the interviewer prompts you for further information. Short responses are more powerful than long, rambling sentences. It can be useful to make notes, if that doesn't distract you.

If a question is difficult to answer, jot it down and repeat it back to the interviewer for clarification. This will also buy you time to think calmly.

Demonstrate your interest in the post and the employer by asking a few well thought out questions at the end, and thank the interviewer for their time.

Tips for telephone interviews

- If possible, avoid doing a phone interview on the spot, say that the time is not convenient for you and arrange an alternative time to give yourself a chance to prepare.
- Make sure that the message on your voicemail is professional.
- Have all the relevant information to hand when the call comes in. Keep details of all the jobs you have applied for and the related research you have done in separate folders near the telephone.
- Inform your housemates/family/partner/children that you are expecting a call. Ask them to be polite and to take a message if you are not around.
- Smile. It will affect your tone of voice and help you come across as enthusiastic and confident.
- Stand. It will make you more alert and focused.
- Avoid distractions. Don't look at or fiddle with your PC.
- Switch off the TV and radio, and do not smoke or eat.



Second Interviews

A second interview will establish the candidates who were successful at the first stage and have the skills and qualities needed for the job. Some second interviews are conducted by telephone, however most second interviews are the final and more formal interview, and therefore held face to face.

If you've made it to the second stage, your first interview was successful, so you can adopt the same approach again here.

Thinking again about the first interview:

- What questions did you find difficult?
- Were you weak on any one area? If so, be prepared for further questions.
- In what areas and ways do you think you impressed? Don't be afraid to sell these strengths again.

The first interview may have been more generic, the second will be more closely related to the nature or sector of the organisation. Revisiting your research on the job and company will help you be informed and confident.

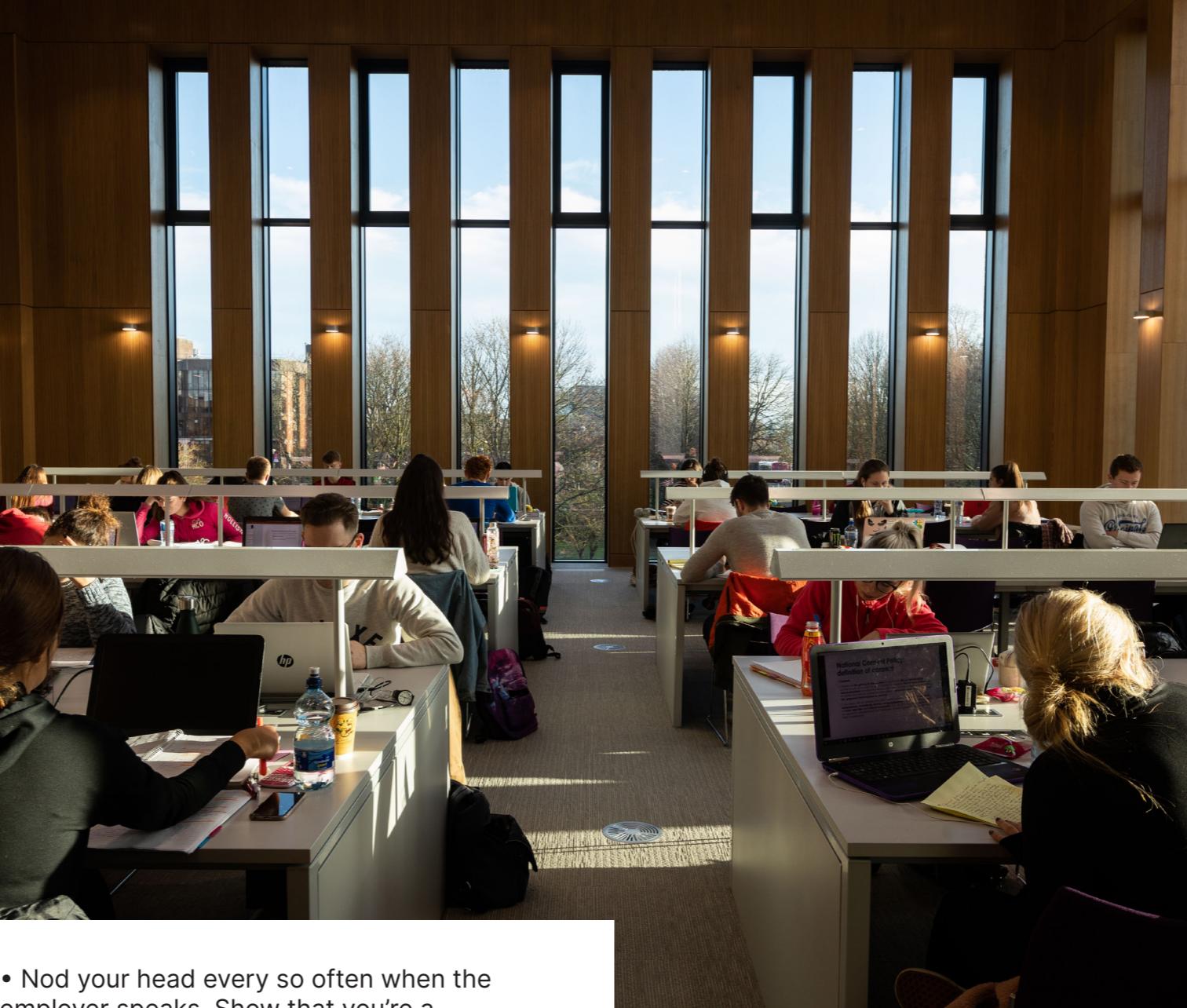
Group Interviews

In this type of interview, you are being evaluated on several areas e.g.:

- Your leadership qualities
- Your team player attributes
- How you communicate with others
- Your ability to influence

Follow these guidelines on how you can do well and stand out in a group interview:

- Have a mini-introduction of yourself ready. Most of the time in group interviews, the employer will break the ice by having everyone tell a little bit about themselves. What you say is important and will determine how you stand out from the rest of the candidates.



- Nod your head every so often when the employer speaks. Show that you're a good listener and can take in information quickly. A simple head nod shows a lot of courtesy.

- Be the first to speak a few times. Don't be afraid to speak up first and give your best response but be aware of dominating the conversation. Others can tell if you are trying too hard.

- Do not interrupt another candidate while they're speaking. Being in a group means that you give others a chance to talk. This is an important team quality that employers are evaluating about you. If you've already spoken up first a couple of times, let the others take their chance. Again, you don't want to appear over eager.

- Thank each manager for their time with a handshake at the conclusion.

Strengths Based Interviews

A strengths-based interview focuses on what you **enjoy** doing rather than what you can do, so it's quite different from a competency-based interview. Be clear though, that while you're talking about activities you enjoy doing, the interviewer is learning what you're good at (and very likely, what you're not so good at).

By identifying your strengths and matching them to the role you applied for, the idea is that you'll be happier in the job, perform better and stay with the company for longer.

Strengths interviews are more personal than competency-based interviews. They allow interviewers to gain a deeper insight into the candidate to see if they would be a good fit for the company

Examples of Strengths Based Questions

- What are you good at?
- What do you enjoy doing?
- What does a good day look like for you?
- What energises you?
- What motivates you?
- How do you feel about deadlines?
- What activities do you find draining?
- What did you enjoy studying at university?
- What didn't you enjoy?
- When did you achieve something you were really proud of?
- How do you feel about deadlines?
- What are your weaknesses?
- Are you a starter or a finisher?
- Do you think this role will play to your strengths?

Tips to prepare for a strengths-based interview
Read the job description and person specification to identify what strengths and qualities the company is looking for. Make a list of your own strengths. Include your academic, work and social activities and achievements. Think about when you are at your best, what kind of things motivate you? What activities do you enjoy doing, what subjects have you enjoyed learning? What about things you don't like doing? What are your weaknesses? How could your strengths be used to the advantage of the organisation you're hoping to work for?

How to answer strengths-based interview questions

There are no right or wrong answers in a strengths-based interview, but you need to answer all questions honestly. Being yourself is key. You'll need to have examples to back up your answers. These can be from all areas of your life: college, work, extracurricular activities, volunteering etc.

When you're answering questions, interviewers will be taking note of your body language and tone of voice, which can provide clues to your sincerity. If you're genuinely describing something you enjoy, you'll be animated, and your enthusiasm and motivation will shine through.

Video Interviews

Video interviews are becoming much more common in graduate recruitment. They can be more cost effective for many employers and can help to streamline the recruitment process. Video interviews can be either live or recorded.

Live video Interviews

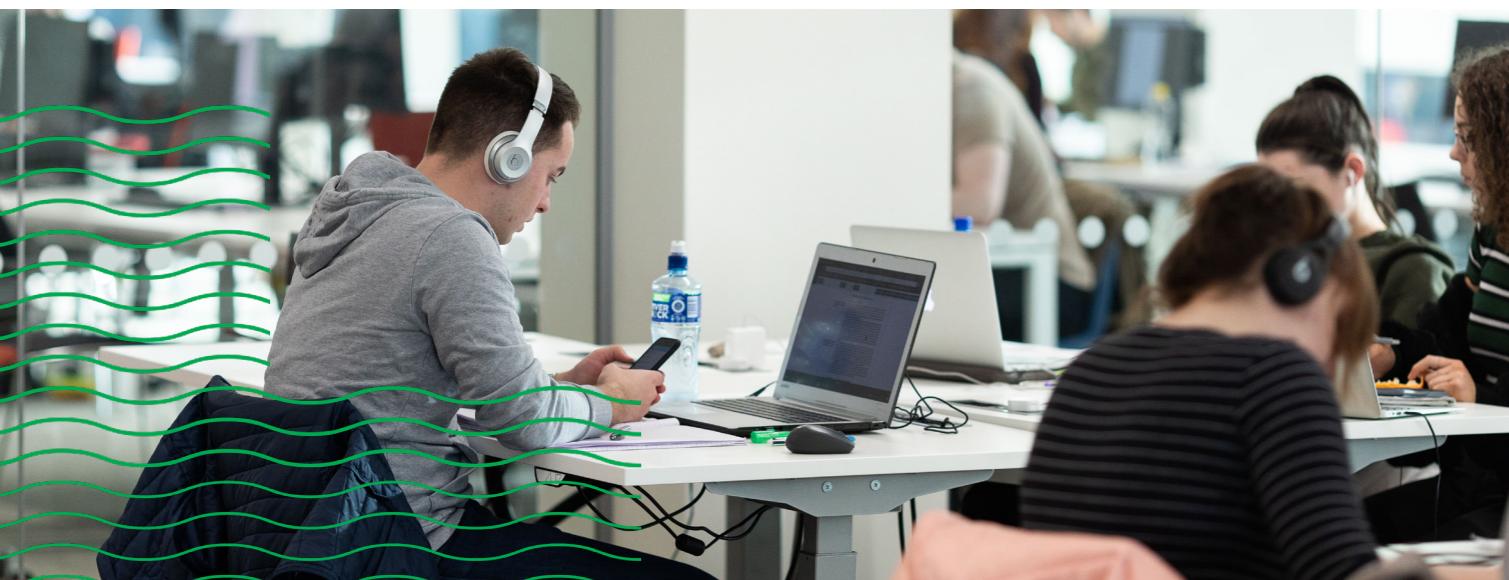
This kind of interview is very similar to a face-to-face interview and might be conducted on familiar platforms such as skype, zoom, or any other video conferencing software. You should prepare for this type of interview the same as you would a face-to-face interview.

Recorded interviews

You may be asked to log on to an on-line interview platform such as Sonru or HireVue. In this format, the employer will give you instructions on how to join the interview. Instead of being interviewed by a person, you will be asked to answer pre-recorded interview questions which appear on the screen. This will be recorded for the recruiter to review later. The questions are timed, you will normally have about two minutes per question and you may only have one chance to answer the question. Many candidates describe this type of interview as feeling unnatural and daunting. However, we suggest that you try and treat this type of interview like a conversation and remember to smile.

Tips to prepare for a video interview

- Think carefully about where you are going to do the interview. It should be quiet, private, well-lit and free from distractions.
- Ensure your internet connection is stable.
- Check that your phone or computer's audio and camera are working.
- Test the video conference platform in advance.
- Check the position of your camera, your head and shoulders should be visible, and you should be looking at the camera straight on. Ensure the lighting is correct and there are no shadows. Your background should be neutral.
- Dress as if you were attending a normal interview.
- Try to come across as natural; when listening, nod and smile to show you are engaged.
- Use hand gestures where appropriate.
- In a recorded video use the opportunity to do the practice interview questions first.



Anticipate the Questions

You should go through the job specification or advertisement and underline the key competencies and skills that are required for the role and make sure you have an example prepared for each of these areas to outline your suitability for the role.

There are a number of 'typical interview questions' but one of the first questions that you should expect to be asked is the typical opening question – "tell us a bit about yourself" or "take us through your CV". When preparing for this question you should aim to keep your answer relevant to the job on offer; the interviewer really means "tell us a bit about yourself in relation to this role". Keep your answer relevant by talking about your qualifications, work experience and skills that make you a suitable candidate for this position.

Be clear about why you want to work for the company and what you have to offer them.

Typical Interview Questions

This page goes through some very common interview questions. This is not an exhaustive list but it will give you an idea of the type of questions you can expect at interview. You should plan answers to these types of questions in advance of the interview.



Questions about you

- What type of a person are you?
- What has been your greatest achievement so far?
 - What do you do in your spare time?
 - What are your long term career goals?

Questions about the job/sector

- Why do you want to be a ?
- Which other careers have you considered?
- What are the most challenging issues currently affecting this sector?
- How do you keep up to date with developments in this sector?

Questions about the organisation

- Why do you want to work for this organisation?
- What do you know about this organisation?
- What prompted your application for this organisation?
- How does our graduate training scheme compare with our competitors?

Questions about your education

- Why did you choose your degree?
- What was the most challenging part of your degree course?
- Which parts of your degree are most relevant for this vacancy?
- Were there any subjects you struggled with?
- How did you approach your final year project/thesis?

Questions about your work experience

- What have you gained from your previous work experience/internship/placement/voluntary work?
 - How relevant is your work experience for this vacancy?
- What has been your greatest achievement in the workplace?
 - Talk us through your most relevant experience to date?
- How has your work experience increased your business awareness?

Competency Based Questions

Competency based questions usually ask you to describe a time when you displayed a certain skill or a situation you found yourself in.

Examples:

- When have you used your communication skills to influence other people's behaviour or opinions?
- Describe a situation when you worked in a team to achieve a goal. What was your contribution to the team's success and what would you do differently in a similar situation in the future?
- Describe how you analysed a complex issue or problem to reach a decision. How did you evaluate the decision you made?
- When have you had to deal with an unexpected or changing situation? How did you cope with this uncertainty?

How do I know I'm being asked a competency based question?

These questions are easy to spot as they generally start as follows:

- Tell me about a time when you had to....
- Can you describe where you have had to....
- Give me an example of...

When answering competency based questions you should aim to:

- Have an example ready
- Focus on your role and what you did.
- Use the STAR model (outlined below) to answer these questions.



STAR Model

The STAR model is a useful framework for answering competency based questions. Using this model helps to keep your answers structured, clear and to the point.

- **(S/T) – Situation or Task.** This is the introduction or opening information. Here you describe the event. It's important to bring the event to life. Numbers work well here to create a clear picture. For example – instead of stating "a busy reception switchboard" you could say "transferring over 50 calls an hour".
- **(A) – Action.** This is what you did, or the body of the story. It's where you provide details about actions you took and how you behaved during the situation. It's important to avoid sweeping statements and to provide plenty of detail. The most common mistake at this stage is to use the word "We" instead of the word "I" when describing actions. Doing this will dilute your contribution.
- **(R) – Results.** This is where you state the outcome of the situation. Another useful tip is to highlight what you learned from the event/situation at the time and how, if it was a negative event, you have made steps to prevent a reoccurrence.

Once you have given your answer the interviewer may probe a little by asking things like

- Why did you take that approach?
- Would you do anything differently in hindsight?
- Did you find that situation difficult?

Don't worry - this is a normal part of the competency interview process, it does not mean you have given a bad answer.

Tips to Prepare for a Competency Based Interview

- Be clear on the competencies and skills required for the role.
- Write out examples of where you have developed each of these competencies, be creative with your approach, and use examples from different areas such as college, placement, part-time work, volunteering, or your roles in clubs and societies.
- Practice your answers out loud using the STAR technique. You can arrange an appointment with a Careers Advisor for a trial run before your interview.
- When you are in the interview let your personality come through.
- Try to be enthusiastic and confident.

Tricky Interview Questions

There are always questions you would prefer to avoid. Prepare answers to a few e.g. if you repeated an academic year or do not have any relevant work experience. Do not volunteer anything negative about yourself, former colleagues, or any organisation where you have previously worked.

Depending on your personal circumstances you may need to prepare answers to address the following:

- Gaps in your CV - e.g. explain the reason for a year out - maybe family required you to be at home, travel, personal reasons (which you don't have to elaborate on). Try to present the year out in a positive way - what you learned from the experience, maybe you refocused on your return, etc.
- Poor grades in exams - e.g. maybe a subject that didn't interest you as much as others (only use this if the subject isn't a critical one for the job!); it took a while to settle in college etc. Always talk about learning from the experience, the positive aspects of getting a poor grade.

Questions on your Weaknesses

- This question is often asked at graduate recruitment interviews. The best approach is to try and give a real example and focus on what actions you have taken to address the weakness.
- You may be asked directly "what are your weaknesses?" or the question could be framed slightly differently such as "what is the one thing you would change about yourself?" or "what is the one thing you would need to focus on in order to perform effectively in this role?"



Some tips for handling these unexpected questions:

- Do not say the first thing that comes into your head, it is perfectly acceptable to take a moment to gather your thoughts.
- If it is a hypothetical question do not be afraid to take a light hearted approach as this is a good way to build rapport with your interviewer.
- Remain calm, they are looking for someone who takes a logical or creative approach to problems so it is important to maintain eye contact and answer these types of questions confidently.
- Don't be tempted to give up when asked one of these questions as you might think the interview is going badly but the interviewer could well be impressed with the way you formulate your answers.

Note: – You have rights

You should not be asked, nor are you required to answer, any questions regarding: race, religion, gender, marital status, family status, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation, membership of the traveller community or age.

Tricky Interview Situations

What happens if you go blank?

Take a minute to think about an appropriate answer, do not say the first thing that comes into your head. Taking a sip of water can give you a little time for this.

What happens if you don't understand a question?

It is best to paraphrase the question back to the interviewer to clarify what they are asking rather than attempting to answer a question that you are not sure of.

You understand the question but do not know the answer?

It is best to be honest in this situation and tell the interviewer that you are not familiar with this area. You could mention similar areas that you are familiar with as an alternative if this is applicable to the situation.

One of the Interviewers is not paying attention.

If this happens in an interview try not to let it distract you. Focus on the individuals who are engaging with you. You could also try to make eye contact with the interviewer who is not paying attention but the most important thing is not to let it affect your answers.

Questions to ask

Your research of the company should help you come up with questions to ask in the interview, the following are some examples of areas for appropriate interviewee questions:

- next steps in the process
- what typical career paths there are within the company
- what the interviewers enjoy about working in the company
- development opportunities in the company
- recent company developments (new products, recent acquisitions etc.)

Questions to avoid

There are a few areas that should not be brought up at an interview. Some examples include:

- avoid asking about salary (particularly in a first round interview) negotiations about salary can wait until there is a job offer on the table
- it would be best not to ask about holidays
- do not ask about sick leave or similar policies as this will sound alarm bells for the Interviewers



Ending the Interview

It is important to end the interview on a high note. Most interviewers will ask you "why should they hire you" or "do you have anything you would like to add" at the end before the interview is wrapped up. This is your cue to hit them with the three reasons why you should get the job. You should have this planned out in advance and it is ok to repeat something that you have said already earlier in the interview. It is a really good idea to take this opportunity to end the interview on a strong positive note; it shows that you have confidence and belief in your suitability.

At this point it is also a good idea to restate your genuine interest in the role on offer and in the company. You can end the interview by thanking the interviewers for their time, shaking their hands and using their names if you can. Remember, the interview is not over until you have left the building!

Top Tips for Interviews

Research the company

- Use websites, LinkedIn, and any contacts you may have, to find out as much as you can about the company and job, before the interview occurs

Read the job description thoroughly

- Identify the specific skills and experience the employer requires and match them with your own

Have examples ready for the interview

- Have specific examples ready of work and projects that you have completed, to show you have the relevant experience and skills required

Use the STAR method to answer questions

- Prepare to be asked about times in the past when you used a specific skill. Use the STAR method to structure your answers: **S**ituation, **T**ask, **A**ction and **R**esult

Familiarise yourself with different types of interviews

- You could be asked to attend any of the following:
- Phone interview, Video interview, Skype Interview, Traditional Interview, Competency Based Interview, Strengths Based Interview, Panel Interview, Group Interview.
- Find out in advance of your interview and prepare accordingly

Know how to answer tricky questions

- You may be asked some tough questions during the interview. Usually it's to find out some important information about you or to learn more about your thought processes. Try and prepare as much as possible for unexpected scenarios; ask a friend or Careers Advisor to ask you some difficult questions and give you feedback. At the interview itself, you can also ask for a moment to come up with your answer

Practice your answers

- Practice your answers out loud with a friend or a Careers Advisor. You'll become more confident as you speak. It's also a good opportunity to get some feedback before the 'real thing'

Prepare your questions

- Interviews are a two-way street. Think of it as a conversation with a specific purpose. You'll probably be expected to ask one or two questions at the end of the interview. Think carefully about what you'd like to know about the company and or job and prepare questions. Don't ask about salary or benefits at this stage

Interview Checklist

Yes **No** **N/A**

Have you a detailed job description? (If not, contact the employer)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you a copy of your CV/Application form?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you know what type of interview it is going to be? (If not, contact the employer)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you know who is going to be interviewing you? (If not, contact the employer)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you researched the company/job?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you reached out to someone in the organisation to ask about the company/job?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Create a list of skills and competencies the employer is looking for (base this list on the job description and job research).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on the above, create a list of questions you might possibly be asked.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Practice your answer to these questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you used the STAR technique when structuring your practice questions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Practice your introduction, handshake and your answer to: 'Tell me about Yourself'.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Plan your outfit (head to toe).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Plan how you are going to get to the interview (parking/public transport /traffic).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If it is a video interview, test the technology and ensure your setting is appropriate (background, lighting, noise and distractions).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have the interviewer/ employer contact details? Make sure your mobile phone is on silent.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Notes:

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Best of luck!

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